

A BIT OF A
DRIFTER

MABEL
HODGSON
GURD

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A BIT OF A DRIFTER AND OTHER STORIES

By
Mabel Hodgson Gurd



MONTREAL, A. T. CHAPMAN
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To My Mother

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A Bit of a Drifter

I

Miss Graham and Miss Constance Graham sat together in their Kensington drawing room, and having just returned from the matinee and finished tea, were engaged upon a discussion of the play.

Miss Graham was dark and short and only escaped rotundity because she was still a young woman. Constance resembled her sister in essentials. She had a slight advantage in height and her hair and complexion were not so dark, but otherwise there was little to choose between the two. Both sisters were dressed after the same fashion, and gave the impression of having made a careful effort to be smart upon a moderate income. Their fingers were burdened with several small rings, chains hung about their necks, and bangles jingled at their wrists.

Said Miss Graham about the play, "I thought it was wonderful."

"Yes," from Constance, "Miss Currior's dress in the second act was beautiful."

"What!—Which one do you mean? Oh that grey one! But I'm not fond of grey, it's too dull."

"I was wondering," said Constance, "if I could copy it, perhaps in black. I want a new dress for May's musical next week."

"Oh not black, it's too old. Try rust red, it's so fashionable."

"Well, of course blue *is* my colour."

Mary, the youngest of the three sisters, came into the room pulling off her gloves. Mary was small and very thin. She wore glasses, and her hair was brushed back rather stiffly under her black velvet tam. She looked young, hardly more than a child, but she was really twenty-four.

"Well," she said, "is the tea cold?"

"Not quite," said Florence, "I'll give you some."

"How was the play?" asked Mary.

“Lovely! Connie’s going to copy a dress Miss Currior wore in the second act.”

“Another dress Con?”

“I need one for May’s musical next week. She always gives such dressy parties. Flo wants me to try rust red,” and then to Florence, “if I have rust red what could I wear in my hair?”

“Oh I don’t know. I should think the colour would be enough in itself.”

“I always wear something in my hair.”

“Well, tulle then, the same shade.”

A moment’s thoughtful silence and then Constance exclaimed with a note of dismay in her voice, “I couldn’t wear my jade earrings with rust red, could I!”

Mary broke into a little choking fit of laughter, and spilled her tea in her lap.

Constance looked at her indignantly, “*I* don’t know what you are laughing at,” she said heatedly, “of course we know you never take any interest in pretty things, but others *do*,” and then to even the score she added with icy triumph, “there’s a letter for you on the table. One of your manuscripts returned again, I expect.”

Mary put down her cup and crossed the room, her thin little face grown suddenly sober, and she stood with her back to the sisters holding the long envelope between her fingers.

Florence said loftily, “I’m sure I don’t know why you go on with that. How many times have you had them returned now? What use is it anyhow?” And Constance followed up, “you *do* waste your time, getting all tired out, and nothing for it. You always look half dead, and when you go out anywhere and we have company you never have anything to talk about.”

Mary flashed round upon them. Her cheeks were flaming, and her eyes behind their glasses bright and contemptuous. But she did not speak, and clutching the returned manuscript tightly in her hand, she rushed out of the door, and up the stairs to her own room. She flung her tam on the bed, and herself limply in a chair, and laying her head on the writing table burst into tears. She sobbed and sobbed and thought she would rather be dead than like those two downstairs with all their gowns, their matinees and dressy parties. “They always tell me,” she thought, “what a pleasant life they lead, and how

happy they are. I don't have so much pleasure and perhaps I'm not so happy, but thank God I'm not so ignorant."

She raised her head and looked at the manuscript crushed in her hand and now all wet with her tears, and sighed and stared out of the window at the leaden sky and the trees swaying mournfully in the wind.

"Perhaps," she said to herself, "it's silly of me to think that I can write. I haven't had any experience. I've only lived here in this house all my life, and nothing has ever happened to me. They say you can't write about things that haven't happened to you. I *do* get tired, and such dreadful headaches." She thought of how she sat up in bed and scribbled hour after hour of the night, and afterwards lay awake, often till daylight, her brain too excited and stimulated for sleep. And it was true, as Constance said, that she always looked half dead.

"I don't know why I was so sure that they would take this one, but I *was* sure, and now here it is back again. I can't think what's the matter with it." She tore open the envelope, "they didn't even write anything with it, just sent it back," and the choking sobs rose again to her throat, "but I can't give in, I *can't*. I *won't* be like Con and Flo."

She pushed the tumbled hair back from her face and drew her typewriter towards her on the table, "I'll just have time," she said to herself, "if I begin now, to finish typing this to-night," and presently her busy fingers were moving persistently over the letters spelling out the words.

Constance and Florence on their way upstairs to dress for their evening party heard the sharp metallic little clicks of the keys through the closed door.

Constance was saying, "Mrs. Weldon saw May and Henry Lord together in the tube last Sunday evening. She thinks May's mother would be quite pleased, and that she can't expect to do much better for May anyhow. She's beginning to show her age, and she dresses so badly, all those loose waisted things. But Flo, I'm not so sure about having rust red. Don't you think its got a little common?"

"Suit yourself," said Florence, "of course blue is your colour."

II

All day long Constance and Florence had bustled about the house preparing for company. Mary had caught snatches of endless debates about what should, and should not, be worn, and late in the afternoon Constance

came into her room, where she had been typing all day, and said, "Mary you will have to come down to-night. You know we are expecting May and Henry, the two Edgerton girls, Robert and Harold and two friends of theirs, and now here is a card from May, it's just come, to say that Henry wants to bring some friend of his who is in town. I don't know who he is, May doesn't say, but anyhow it makes an odd man, and it is so awkward."

"O Con, I don't want to. I'd much rather not."

"Nonsense, it'll do you good, and you can wear that white dress without the tucker, it isn't bad. I'll come in and help you freshen it up, it only needs a ribbon or something. Anyway," she added fretfully, "I don't see how we will manage unless you help us out. It's too late now to get anyone else."

"But Con, it isn't a dinner party, and surely when you are just sitting around talking one odd man doesn't make any difference."

"Of course it does," Constance loved a duet and hated a gooseberry, "now Mary," she said reproachfully, "we don't often ask a favour of you."

It was on the tip of Mary's tongue to say, "no you don't, only when I can help you out of something do you take the least interest in me," and aloud she said, "all right Con, but leave me alone just now, and never mind coming to help me dress."

Later in the evening she went down to the drawing room where the guests had already arrived and were standing about chattering, Constance and Florence in bright evening dresses with tight skirts, and a bewildering display of ribbons, paste buckles and flowers. May was there too, a sallow creature with pale hair and eyes, in a loose flowing gown of sea green, and the Edgerton girls, both very lively and loud-voiced, a perpetual smile on their fat pleasant faces.

Mary wore a prim white dress cut out a little at the neck and arms, with a skirt too discreetly long to be quite up to date. She shook hands with everyone sedately, and was introduced to the stranger, a Mr. Phillips, a tall heavy man with smoothly brushed hair, and a thin-lipped mouth, and presently Mary found herself seated beside him on a sofa at the far end of the room, while the eldest Miss Edgerton began to sing with great gusto to her own accompaniment in a high-pitched shrill soprano.

Phillips regarded his companion, "What a quaint little child," he thought, and aloud he said, "You like music Miss Graham?"

"Oh yes, I do very much. Do you?"

"I find less opportunity than I could wish for," he said. "I'm so busy most of the time. I write you know."

Mary leaned towards him ever so slightly and clasped her hands, "You write!" she breathed.

"Yes, short stories and things for the magazines." He caught the quickened glow of interest in her eyes, and saw how it lighted up all her pensive little face and made it really pretty. Her lips were parted in a sweet little way, smiling, shyly eager, and altogether appealing.

She said, "Tell me, how did you begin? What do you write about?"

"Oh one has to do something," he said in a big way as though all the world were his to choose from, "and I like writing. You can drop it or take it up, just as the mood is on, and then its so easy."

"I shouldn't say it would be easy," exclaimed Mary.

"Oh yes," he assured her, "it takes time of course, but it's easy really."

It is always pleasant to have a good listener, and Phillips, apparently a man not loth to talk about himself, held Mary fascinated for the rest of the evening.

At half past eleven May said that she must be going, it took so long to get to Earl's Court, and the Edgerton girls fluttered to their feet, giggling out what a pleasant evening it had been.

Phillips rose too and held out his hand, and Mary laid her small one in his. He bent over it in a polite and courtly way, entirely new to Mary, and looking straight at her with dark compelling eyes, he said, "Good night Miss Graham. I hope that I shall see you again one of these days. It has been so delightful to meet you."

When their guests had left the house Constance and Florence came back to the drawing room where Mary was still standing. "Oh Con," exclaimed Florence, "have you ever in this world seen anything like that *gown* of May's! Why on earth — —"

Mary slipped quietly out of the room, and as she went she heard Con's answer, "No worse than usual. But I'll tell you what I *did* see. She had much better get things settled with Henry as soon as she can. I don't believe he's any too keen."

The following morning Mary awoke feeling fresh and full of renewed activity and encouragement. She had slept very little the night before, but a happy wakefulness may often be more restful far than sleep. She lay there thinking of Phillips and all that he had told her about the art of writing and how to do it. He had said that one must have a fair education, and of course some experience, but that these were actually secondary considerations. The most important thing was to know what people wanted to read about, and that when one had grasped that secret it was all quite easy really.

His friendly facile manner was very pleasant, and Mary had longed to tell him that she too had dreams of fame, but surrounded as she was at the time, by the inane chatter and constant laughter of Con and Flo and their friends, and the noisy Laura Edgerton pounding upon the piano, it scarcely seemed a fitting moment for confidences. But now she was sorry, for it was improbable that she would meet Phillips again, and she regretted the lost opportunity.

She turned over the pages of an old manuscript wondering if something could not be made out of it, and studied the marginal notes she had added to it from time to time, and then she sat down and typed it all out with diligent care. It was lunch time when she had finished, and her eyes were tired while her head had started to ache again.

Constance came into her room wearing a new summer hat with a bright cerise ribbon wound about the crown. "You can have the one I've never liked," she said magnanimously, "you know the floppy one with the blue flowers. It never suited me."

Mary was thinking how carefree and bright Con looked, and a little envy tugged at her heart, for she was very tired, and with her headache had come again discouragement.

She thanked Constance wearily for the offer of the hat, and after lunch, too tired for further work, she put it on before her mirror, and saw with a glimmer of interest how the wide brim drooped softly over her eyes, and the blue flowers gave a touch of colour. She did not care a great deal about having it, and Constance's attitude of condescension was always irritating, for Mary had her pride. "But," she thought, "I expect Con doesn't mean it that way, and it makes a little change anyhow," and she picked up her gloves and decided to go for a walk in the gardens.

When she reached the Round Pond she saw Phillips. He was sitting in a chair lazily watching the children sailing their boats and the gulls soaring gracefully over the water. When Mary approached, he jumped up and spoke

to her. "Well what a nice coincidence!" he exclaimed, and told her that he had nothing in particular to do and they might as well enjoy the lovely afternoon, so they strolled along together and presently sat down near the water garden, and there Mary, with shy simplicity, told him that she hoped some day to be a writer.

Phillips looked down on the bent head and his lips twitched with half-suppressed amusement. But he was very kind and interested and said that if she would bring some of her work to the water garden he would be very glad to go over it with her and help her, while they could enjoy the beautiful summer days.

"I would come to your house willingly," he said, "but the atmosphere you know—. It doesn't do. Aren't you susceptible to atmosphere? *I* am. People are always coming in and interrupting. I can't bear to be interrupted, can you?"

Mary, thinking of Constance and Florence intruding and forever chattering about their gowns and the cinema, entirely agreed, while a warm little thrill of pride crept over her to hear the note of camaraderie in his voice. Now, and for the first time in her life perhaps, she was being accepted and appreciated as a personality, something more than a nonentity. He understood.

"Do you type your things yourself?" he asked, and Mary said that she did and found it hard on her eyes. That was why she wore glasses.

"But they give you quite an air of distinction," he assured her, "your hat is awfully becoming," he added. "I like it."

Mary remembered the offhand glance she had bestowed upon herself in the mirror before she came out, and what hesitation she once had felt for accepting charity from Con now fled with a passing breeze. She looked up demurely from under the large, uneven brim that cast a gentle shadow across her sober little profile.

A few days later she brought one of her manuscripts to the water garden and Phillips read through the carefully typed pages. When he had finished he gave it back to her and patted her shoulder. "Work away little lady," he said, "effort is a splendid thing."

When Mary asked him what he really thought about it he smiled and said, "It's sweet; very sweet, like you."

"But," she said, "seriously, Mr. Phillips, will it do?"

“Well, you see,” he said, “people, the general run of people, are rather commonplace after all. They don’t appreciate sweetness, not to read about it anyhow.”

After a moment Mary questioned, “What *do* they want to read about?” and he said, “Oh life, just life.”

It was very quiet and peaceful there and they talked until the twilight began to steal across the gardens. Phillips apparently had been in almost every part of the world at one time or another, and it seemed to Mary that he had seen and knew almost everything there was to see and know about.

“I love to sit here and talk to you like this,” he said. “There are so many lonely people in this great city, like you and me perhaps. You *are* lonely aren’t you? I can see that. I’ve been talking about myself all this time, but now tell me a little about you and your life.”

Mary told him how her mother had died when she was so little that she had no remembrance of her at all, and how her father’s business took him travelling most of the time. She was fond of her father but she only saw him for a few days once in every three or four months. She had been to school in Ipswich and hated it, the cross teachers, the bad food, and the girls all so stupid and silly.

“But have you no friends?” he asked, and she shook her head. “You see when I came home Con and Flo had made their own and had no time for me,” and she added with unconscious pathos, “we’ve never cared for the same things anyhow.”

“The usual story,” said Phillips, “poor child! Come and meet me here on Friday, and perhaps we could have tea somewhere. Would you like that?”

IV

On Friday morning Mary had gone to Smith’s for some typing paper, and passing Barker’s on the way home she stopped to look into the windows. Dress had never held much appeal to Mary. She thought of it as a necessity and nothing more, because she had never had the incentive to think of it in any other way. She looked at the frivolous display of laces and neck frills, the bright satins and figured voiles, and the colours seemed to her too startling. Then at the back of the window she saw a grey silk gown marked down from eight to five guineas, and she thought how pretty it was, its simple lines and white net collar and cuffs.

‘I’ll go in and slip it on,’ she said to herself, and then, ‘Oh no, that’s extravagant. What do I want with a new dress? I’d never wear it.’ But she turned in at the door, and half an hour later went home with the grey dress in a parcel under her arm.

When she walked down the path to the water garden Phillips was waiting for her. He was alive to the new dress at once, and embraced her with appreciative eyes.

“Our little lady has been extravagant,” he said, “well, well, and it does her justice too I must say. But you know you shouldn’t cover up your hair so much. It’s pretty hair. Wear it a little fuller at the side, Like this,” and he gave a gentle pull over each ear, “now that’s better, much better.”

Mary, feeling the loosened wisps of hair blowing against her cheeks, was sure she looked untidy, but she laughed and left it that way.

She had brought another of the manuscripts for him to read, and he skimmed rather hastily through a few pages, while Mary watched him hopefully. Then he folded the papers again and gave them back to her, explaining that he was a little hurried that day, and would much prefer to spend what time he had in just talking to her.

Mary was disappointed, for, spurred to excessive efforts through thinking of him, she had worked laboriously over this particular theme, and she believed that she had put so much truth into her long descriptions of how the gardens look in the spring, and the love story that began and ended there so happily, like the bud and the flower.

Soon, however, she had quite forgotten the manuscript, and it lay discarded beside her on the bench. Phillips was talking to her about beauty.

“I adore it,” he said, “above everything else. I loathe people and things that are ugly. Duty is the ugliest thing on earth. I detest the word, it’s hypocritical and false. Real beauty is to allow each one of us to follow our own desires and emotions spontaneously. That’s a life! Just take pleasure as it comes and enjoy, and when it goes never try to hold it. It is waiting for you in some other place, around the corner most likely.”

Mary, a little beyond her depth, found it difficult to follow all this, but she loved to listen to him. He had had such wonderful adventures, and she told him that she felt rather an atom beside his experience. He smiled on her with a certain affectionate intimacy, and said, “an atom, yes, but a very pretty one.”

Mary smoothed the folds of her grey silk gown, and looked at the swans floating across the sunken pools of the water garden, and a thrill of pure happiness pierced her lonely little heart.

V

For three weeks Mary had not touched her typewriter, and her eyes were now so rested that she wore her glasses only for reading. Instead of poring at night over her stories, she began to keep a diary, and every evening she wrote down all the events and her thoughts and impressions of the day.

She had grown vain and extravagant, and had bought a pair of grey suede shoes and silk stockings to match the new gown. Con and Flo were stricken with amazement, and thought that, in some mysterious way, all their taunts were at last bearing fruit, but with rather unexpected success. Flo said it was too quiet, all grey, but Con, who was if anything the more generous of the two, admitted half grudgingly that she looked quite well, and they were both in a secret corner of their narrow souls, a little envious, for Mary was fast and unmistakably blooming into a dainty attractive girl.

She met Phillips almost daily now at the water garden, and he had given her a gold bangle. He told her that he would like to give her just some little thing, and when Mary hesitated he laughed and seized her arm possessively. They walked over to Oxford Street and picked it out together, and she wore it away on her wrist. What a fine scorn she had always felt for the numberless trinkets of Con and Flo! But bangles after all could be not entirely meaningless.

They went to Rumplemeyer's and had tea, and Mary ate so many little cakes that she thought she might be ill.

"I'll be sick if I eat any more," she told him laughingly, when he pressed her to have another strawberry tart.

"You delightful little person," he said, "It's the greatest joy in the world, making you happy. *Are you happy Mary?*" And she looked into his eyes and nodded her head without a word.

Once he suggested that she should stay down town for dinner with him and go to a theatre afterwards. Mary thought it wouldn't be wise because of Con and Flo. They would wonder so and ask questions and spoil it all.

Phillips said, "Look here little girl, Con and Flo never did very much to give you a good time. Why worry?"

So Mary didn't!

He took her to the Piccadilly Grill and treated her to an exquisite dinner. The dreamy music and all the lovely girls quite bewildered Mary and intoxicated her as well. She leaned across the table towards Phillips with a newly acquired air of confident *sang froid*, an alluring little smile touched her lips while her eyes sparkled with excited pleasure. She heard herself responding to Phillips' repartee easily and rapidly with naive unexpected flashes of wit, and he told her that seriously he had never seen her look so well. Mary, knowing that this was nothing more than the truth, threw back at him a gay inviting glance.

He asked her if Con and Flo did not speak of the change in her or wonder at all, and she said that of course they noticed all her new clothes.

"But," she said, with a shrug casual and significant, "they never think deeper than clothes. They'd never look for a reason for anything."

Phillips smiled and said, "That's a far more ingenuous remark than you know, Mary mine."

They went to the Palladium where the performance was of the ordinary cheap variety. The acrobat, the one act play, a little ballet, a few songs, and the negro monologist. Mary entered heart and soul into everything, and laughed merrily at all the jokes however stale and flat, and Phillips found her fresh enjoyment very infectious.

He took her home in a taxi and held her hand in his quietly all the way, while he hummed to himself the chorus of 'Smile, Smile, I Like You Smiling.'

VI

Mary had grown lazy, and often she slept now until almost noon. She was beginning to revel in the luxury of waking up to find the late sunshine pouring in at her window, and she lay there enjoying the new indulgence of lounging. Her day only began now with meeting Phillips in the afternoon, and she whiled away the time until then with countless little vanities about her person. She occupied herself for hours with brushing her hair until it gleamed, and trying the effect of dressing it in some new fashion, with polishing her finger nails, and the buckles on her shoes, pinning a floating lace veil to her hat, and shortening all the skirts of her dresses a good three inches. One day, in an old jewel box that had once been her mother's, she found a pair of long black jet earrings. Mary had never had her ears pierced,

but she took the earrings to a small jewellers around the corner on the High street and left them to be altered so that she could screw them on, and Phillips praised the daring air they gave her.

This morning she sat up in bed, and languidly stretched her arms above her head, and looked with casual indifference at her typewriter on the table covered over with its black oilcloth. The sight of it brought back to her the thought of all her manuscripts there in the drawer where they had lain neglected for weeks, and she smiled, the careless inconsequent smile of youth, and jumping out of bed prepared for her bath.

She lingered idly over her dressing, thinking with delight of the coming evening. Phillips had suggested that they should motor out into the country and have dinner, and Mary, no longer protesting at anything he happened to propose, assented happily, and felt no conscientious scruples about the possible necessity of lying to Con and Flo.

After lunch she slipped into a new black satin gown and stood before the mirror tying the sash to the side and to the back, studying the most becoming method. When finally she had every thing fastidiously arranged to her complete satisfaction she looked astonishingly sweet and desirable, and what was more, she knew it.

But her hat! She had worn it only a few times and yet it seemed shabby, not quite the thing beside the freshness of her gown. She threw it impatiently on the bed and looked at her watch. It was only half past two, and she had not to meet Phillips till four, so she hurried down town in a taxi. A taxi was the quickest way, and she was not for thinking of expense on a day like this.

In a small shop that she knew of on Regent Street she happened upon exactly what she wanted, a little round black thing with an upturned brim. She had not sufficient money to pay for it, but she offered a small deposit, and they were very agreeable about giving her credit for the rest. Later on when she met Phillips and his eyes rested on her with obvious admiring approval, she felt she could never regret being in debt for that hat.

Soon they were spinning away from the heat of the city into the cool breezes of the country. Mary was very quiet, too utterly contented for words, and lay back against the cushions watching the beauty of the summer twilight descending slowly over the low hills, and listening to Phillips telling her that a young and beautiful girl always looked her best in black.

“But, of course,” he added with tender meaning, “she must be very young and beautiful.”

They had dinner at a delightful little Inn along the road, in a long low room, while through the open windows a cool delicious breeze blew in from the river. Afterwards they wandered into the rose garden, an enchanting spot, where a pale new moon peeped down on them through the trees. It was very peaceful and secluded, and the place seemed almost deserted, only once two people came down the path and Phillips dropped Mary's hand muttering discontentedly. However, the intruders presently vanished, and Phillips said, "thank Heaven," and swept Mary into his arms and told her that he loved her, while all her world went spinning round and round with his kisses raining down upon her lips.

Too soon the motor horn was sounding at the door of the Inn, but they lingered there another brief half hour amongst the roses and the moonshine, and all the way back to London he held her in his arms and told her over and over how much he loved her.

Con and Flo were out at May's and so Mary got safely home and to bed before they came in. Phillips had told her not to give away their little secret at once, and Mary thought, as she stood in her room her hands clasped wonderingly against her breast, that she couldn't have spoken of it anyhow, not just yet. It was too beautiful. One didn't speak of these things. One shared them with the best beloved only.

She undressed slowly in a sort of heavenly trance, feeling nothing but rapturous memories of strong embracing arms, and burning kisses, and her shining eyes saw only a rose garden and long slanting beams of moonlight.

Gradually her detachment faded and she became aware of the familiar atmosphere of her room in all its unadorned simplicity. Her dark flannel dressing gown lay across a chair and she wrinkled her nose disdainfully at the sight of it. 'That's an ugly thing,' she said to herself, 'it ought to be rose, or white like a bride,' and she slipped her bare toes into the well worn mules thinking that they too had seen their last day. Everything was old—old! Everything but the present, and Mary Graham.

Her typewriter stood beside her on the table. She put out her hand and removed the black cover and saw the letters staring up at her in a sort of mild reproach. Impulsively she slipped in a sheet of note paper and began to knock crazily on the keys ttehy sfggrtfeifeek and then a long line of derisive exclamation points. !!!!!!!

'So much,' she trilled, 'for my dreams of a career,' and she pulled the paper out, and crushing it in her hand, shot it into the waste basket.

A sequence of joyous days followed for Mary, days crowded with sweet realizations, and still sweeter retrospections, with hours of eager anticipations. She bloomed like a fragrant blossom in luxuriant soil, warmed by the caress of a life-giving sun. Her little face lost its sober lines and grew more round, while a soft and delicate colour invaded her cheeks. About her lips there hovered a frequent unconscious smile, piquant and expressive, and she went about dazed with life in a sort of wild and ecstatic dream.

Phillips took her everywhere, to tea and lunch at the large hotels, and to all the theatres and music halls, but far more often into the country for dinner, sometimes by motor, sometimes by train, and once or twice they had a whole day together at Maidenhead where they punted on the river and ate their lunch on the banks under the shady trees.

He made love to her persistently and passionately; told her that there was no one like her, and how he adored her shy little ways, and held Mary blind and breathless beneath his long ardent kisses.

Con and Flo went their unsuspecting way, and although they often exclaimed when Mary appeared in a new dress or hat, they never, as Mary herself had once remarked, questioned or searched for a reason.

Mary was falling into debt pretty heavily, for her allowance was only a very modest one, but when a thing must be done it is, and she succeeded in obtaining credit at one or two shops and did not waste a worried thought about so small a thing as an unsettled account. She would tear open the envelope with impetuous haste, glance at the inclosed bill, and then put it in her pocket or in any out of the way place that happened to be handy at the time, and immediately forget all about it. When the account was presented for the second time she would wrinkle her brow, sure that she had paid it already, and there must be some mistake, but when she found that this was not the case she made a vow to pay it off at the beginning of the month when her allowance was due. Then somehow when the time arrived there were always and forever so many trifles that she needed and had to have that she let things run another four weeks.

And so life went on dreamily and perfectly, and Mary was indeed carrying out to the very letter a recipe for happiness that Phillips had once recommended to her, 'following her own desires and emotions spontaneously, just taking pleasure as it came.'

September! And with its chilly evenings Mary's days seemed clouded too. Sometimes now she was seized with a faint and restless depression, an impatient mood that she could not altogether analyse. Phillips had lost none of his demonstrative affection, but his kisses were now more good humoured than insistent. He fell into a habit of joking, and teased Mary when she looked at him with grave perplexity. Once, when her silence reproached him for a light remark he had let drop about love, he said, "You mustn't take life too seriously, Mary, 'Smile, Smile, I Like You Smiling,'" and he caught her in his arms and held her there, laughing into her hurt eyes until she melted to a half-hearted response.

Now he seemed less anxious to have her quite to himself and no longer took her to the country, more often suggesting the theatres with their noisy amusements and gay crowds of people. One evening during a performance at the Gayety he leaned over and said to her, "There's a pretty girl over there on the second row," and Mary grew cold to see his eyes so often returning to the object of this cruel remark.

She was very silent and unresponsive in the taxi on the way home and Phillips said, "Anything wrong, little one? Come, aren't we having a good time?"

A flare of light from some street lamp shone down upon them through the taxi window, and seeing her mournful little face he burst out laughing, "Oh, that's it! Jealous is it! That girl!" And he went on laughing boisterously.

Once he did not meet her as promised at the water garden, and she waited forlornly and went home utterly disconsolate. But in the morning she had had an affectionate note from him, smoothly skimming over the situation, giving no real explanation but fixing another date. Mary reproached herself for harbouring such unworthy thoughts, and laughed at her own foolish fears, which seemed now absurd and groundless. Her heart grew light as she waited for him, radiant with the added joy of seeing him after, what seemed to her, a separation, and then for a few days she captured the old sweet enchantment.

One evening while they walked along the Serpentine in the gathering darkness, Phillips remarked that there was going to be a fog, it might be difficult to reach home, and perhaps they had better not remain down town for dinner. Mary knew that what he said was true—, and she saw the dirty brown mist settling down gloomily over the city. Then suddenly she was plunged with lightning swiftness straight into the very heart of its obscure

and brooding dejection. She felt cold and isolated, surrounded by a sadness that frightened her. She did not speak and Phillips said, "You know little girl we must be careful. I don't want to get you into trouble with Con and Flo. It's just the sort of evening we'd be held up until all hours of the night, if I know anything about fog."

So short a time ago it had been he who had flung recklessly to the four winds all fear of Con and Flo when he had urged her to stay for dinner with him at the Piccadilly Grill. And why must they be careful? How much longer did he expect to keep the secret?

When she said nothing Phillips pressed her arm, and added, "We don't want to spoil anything by being found out, do we darling? It's so delicious just having you to myself. Besides we've got days and days ahead of us." And like a miracle the tender promise that he threw into his voice softened Mary at once, and she forgot, for the moment, her morbid doubts.

He kissed her very lovingly and left her at the gates of the garden. Mary walked quickly through the dark streets fleeing from the pursuing fog, and possessed by an unusual longing to escape from her own thoughts. It was rather pleasant to be beside the fire again, where Con and Flo were engaged upon an animated discussion of what chance May had of 'getting things settled with Henry.'

"Of course," said Flo, "May has money."

"Oh well," from Con, "she'd need to have. She's got no looks."

Mary listened to them absently and it seemed to her that Con and Flo had never been so close to her. She was glad to have them there, however little she might have to say to them. They looked comfortable, safe and secure, fixed forever like the furniture. They'd never change. They'd always be Con and Flo. This was home, and she drank her tea and stretched out her cold hands to the fire.

VIII

One day early in October Mary awoke to hear the rain dripping gently and drearily from the roof. She looked out of the window and saw the dead leaves falling one by one from the trees, and tears dimmed her eyes to know that summer was over.

She moved restlessly about the house waiting for the afternoon to come, and at four o'clock she put on her rain coat and walked quickly through the almost deserted Park to the water garden. There she waited, shivering in the

dampness, with the rain falling miserably on her umbrella. She strolled up and down, hoping, with an expectant throb of her heart each time she turned, to see him coming towards her, but an hour passed and Phillips had not arrived. She waited another fifteen minutes, and then with one last despairing glance about her she turned away.

She thought, 'It was a dreadful day. He wouldn't expect me to go out in all this rain. I mustn't worry. I shall have a message from him in the morning. How my head aches! I'll go straight to bed and to sleep.'

She went to bed, but sleep did not come to her. 'Of course he wouldn't expect me to go out in all that rain,' and she repeated this to herself again and again, and tossed agitatedly from side to side. 'Am I just looking for trouble?' she wondered trying to throw off the morbid train of suspicions that tortured her. But she felt that it was not possible to fall into this state of mind without some real and fundamental reason to account for it.

Finally she got out of bed and turned up the light, and taking a book from the table she tried to read. She made a great effort to concentrate her thoughts, and force her attention upon the printed page, but every few lines she found herself wandering from the subject, drifting away again upon the old perplexing questions. The steady drip of the rain on the roof was monotonous and bothered her, and she threw the book aside.

The door of the wardrobe was standing a little open, and she saw the black satin dress hanging there. It seemed to her that its soft folds were still all crushed from his arms being round her and pressing her so closely, and now that memory brought not joy but sighs of pain. The hat too was on the shelf above and she wondered when she would be able to pay for it. Still, debt was nothing!

'Well,' she thought, 'I shall be a sight indeed if I do not sleep. Why do I worry so about a little thing like this? It's happened once before.' But somehow this time the fact was pressing on her with a new and sinister meaning.

She woke in the morning after a few short snatches of troubled sleep and jumped out of bed roused at once in a sort of fright. Something momentous had happened the day before! What was it? And then with the rain still falling against the window pane she remembered, while a long sigh fell from her lips.

She heard Con and Flo out in the hall. Sometimes Mary felt that if she could not see her sisters directly before her she would not be sure which one of them was speaking. Their voices were exactly alike, and they invariably

asked the same questions and gave the same replies. As they passed her door one of them said, "Yes, May told me herself. They're to be married in the spring," and their voices trailed away into silence as the two girls went downstairs.

Married in the spring! So May had 'got things settled with Henry.'

But of course there would be a letter for her, and she hurried into her clothes and went to breakfast with her hair only half dressed. Con and Flo were there and Flo exclaimed when she saw her, "Mary, for pity's sake, have you been up all night?"

Mary, her eyes fixed upon the side table where the morning mail was always placed, answered that she had not slept very well.

She hardly knew how she found the strength to cross the room and pick up the little heap of letters so calmly. Nothing! Nothing for her but a note pressing for an early settlement of the account for the little black hat. She smiled, wondering where she was going to get the money. Well, that was better, to be able to smile in the face of her creditors.

In order to kill time between the posts she brought out her old discarded manuscripts and read the laboured and stilted descriptions of spring and primroses and the beautiful romance of love. With the pages in her hand she remembered the first day she had taken them with such pride and hope to submit them to Phillips' criticism, and with the thought of him came anew that dreadful doubt, that sinking, and she was trembling and oh so cold.

At noon the second mail and nothing. After lunch Con and Flo went their way to the cinema and Mary to her room. She lay down on the bed, feeling too weak for further effort, and she must have slept, for she knew nothing more until she was wakened by the maid who had brought tea to her room, and with it a letter.

"It's only just been left by hand, Miss. A boy brought it," and she looked at Mary with some curiosity.

Mary said composedly, "Thank you, Jane," and when the door had been closed after the maid she heaved one long breath of tired relief, and murmured with his letter pressed against her lips, "Oh, what an idiot I am! All this worry for simply no reason whatever." She tore open the envelope and this is what she read.

"Dearest, it is frightfully hard to write you this letter, but it must be done for all that. I have been called unexpectedly out of town and I must go this evening. You know my dear I love you very much indeed. You believe that,

don't you? But I can't marry you and so I am going away. You mustn't be sad or lonely but go on with your writing and be happy. You seemed so lonely when I found you, and I only hoped to make your days a little brighter, even for a brief while. It is something at least to have done that. I want to think that I have lent to your life a touch of beauty, and given you some happy moments that you will like to remember. I know that I shall anyhow. Don't forget what I told you about pleasure, and that it was always waiting for you in some other place, around the corner probably. And believe me with much affection, Arthur Phillips."

IX

SIX MONTHS LATER

Constance was pouring tea in the drawing room, and Florence turning the pages of a fashion magazine and eating cake. Having just returned from a successive siege at the dressmakers where her spring wardrobe was in the making, she was looking very pleased, and Constance too seemed quite satisfied with the choice of a rust red poplin for May's wedding.

"I was a bit afraid of the colour, Flo," she said, "you know it's rather strong, all rust red. It has to be carried off," and she added complacently, "but it looked quite well to-day."

Florence took her cup and began sipping the tea, "The drapery of the skirt," she said, "was very effective. It makes you look thin. Oh, Mary, for pity's sake how you startled me."

Mary had come in so quietly that they had not heard her, and stood beside them a pale slim shadow in the grey dress, the suede shoes, the silk stockings and the little round hat with the upturned brim. Her eyes were large and dark and full of thoughts and dreams, but their wistful sadness was belied by a certain wise and hardened tilt of her mouth.

"Tea?" asked Constance, "we've been having a fitting, and then to see May's trousseau. Perfectly awful—things she has got, well, I don't know how anyone—" and she broke off with a shrug and went on talking to Florence, "Oh Flo, I forgot to tell you, you remember that Mr. Phillips? Well now imagine it! May told me to-day that he was married. I think she said his wife lived in Weymouth or somewhere, but anyhow May and Henry never knew anything about it, that he was married, I mean. Henry said he'd always seemed a nice chap, though he rather had the 'gift o' the gab,' as it were. You remember him I suppose Mary, you talked to him that night."

“Yes,” said Mary in an even little voice, “I remember him.”

“Well,” said Constance, “*I* think it’s nasty, passing himself off as a single man. Why, you might have fallen in love with him, mightn’t you, Mary,” and she laughed, delighted with her own wit.

“Don’t you want your tea, Mary?” asked Florence.

“No. I’m going up. I’ve been for a long walk, and I’m tired.”

Upstairs she took off her hat and put it carefully away on the shelf in the wardrobe, and stood staring out of the window where the green buds were bursting into freshness on the trees.

‘Once,’ she thought, ‘I wrote of how the gardens looked in the spring and the love story that began and ended there so happily, like the bud and the flower. It’s rather different though, actually, isn’t it? Not quite so pretty as the bud and the flower.’

Then she remembered a letter. She had picked it up from the table as she left the drawing room scarcely glancing at it. She opened the envelope and began to read the typewritten communication inside, and when she had finished, her hands, still holding the single sheet, dropped and rested on her knees.

Accepted! Her manuscript had been accepted, and here, held to the top of the letter with a little wire clip, was a cheque for five pounds.

She sat there very still remembering how one day, feeling melancholy and reminiscent, she had read through all the pages of her diary. ‘Now there’s a story, a real story,’ she had sighed, and she sat down and typed out all those pages into which she had written day by day every hope and dream of her heart. Directly and frankly she had expressed in simple words all the wonder and joy of love dawning upon her solitary little life, and with artless brevity had woven together the whole delicate fabric of every tiny trivial thing that had gone towards the awakening of her soul, the gold bangle, the becoming hat, his praise of the adventurous earrings. ‘A young and beautiful girl always looks her best in black, but of course, she must be very young and beautiful.’ The clasped hands, the warm embrace, the kiss!

Then came the saddening doubts, the ever-increasing dubiousness, and the perplexing situations with which she, too weak and tender, had not been able to cope.

It was all there! May with its promise, June and fulfillment, July and August the sweet mad dream of youth. September, its growing coldness, and

last of all, October with rain and death.

She read it through again, 'Now there's a story,' she said to herself, and cast about for a title to the pathetic little drama, but nothing suitable occurred to her.

One evening during dinner while she sat there silently, half attending to the babbling and everflowing conversation of Con and Flo, she heard, like a bolt from the blue, the name 'Phillips,' and every muscle became tense and strained in an effort to control herself. What were they saying? She went on eating, with her eyes bent upon her plate, and heard again that name 'Phillips' and then the words, "No, May says Henry hasn't heard another word, he doesn't know where he's gone. A bit of a drifter he was, I expect."

After dinner Mary went upstairs and wrote the title of her story, 'A Bit Of A Drifter.'

She put the manuscript in an envelope and addressed it to the editor of a magazine, but it was some time before she dropped it in the mail box. Somewhere in those pages she had written, 'I couldn't have spoken of it to anyone. It's much too beautiful. One shares it with the best beloved only.' And now she hesitated because it seemed too utterly horrible to share with anyone. And through all her disillusion she still clung to a curious but wholly natural desire to fold this secret to her wounded breast and cherish it, however painful, forever as her own.

Then one day she had gone out and had wandered without intention near to the water garden, and memory and the bleak winter wind together had done their work and frozen the last lingering sense of feeling. The next day the manuscript had gone.

Afterwards she thought about it through the long wakeful nights, but not with any great amount of expectation or hope. Writing and—success were trivial really. And now here was her first accepted work, and between her fingers a cheque for five pounds, exactly the price of the extravagant little hat with the upturned brim.

She recalled with a terrible distinctness every line of his letter. He had told her to be happy. She had been happy once, long ago. He hoped he had lent to her life one touch of beauty. It depended upon one's conception of beauty. He hoped he had made her days a little brighter, for a brief while. Yes, he had done that—for a brief while. She mustn't be sad or lonely, pleasure was waiting for her somewhere else, around the corner probably. Probably! He wanted to think that he had given her some moments that she would be glad to remember. Well, she would remember, glad or not.

And the manuscript! ‘A Bit Of A Drifter.’ She couldn’t quite understand it after all. Her other work, the things that she had struggled over for so long, choosing her words and phrases so carefully, had every one of them been returned. And this—just written straight off, badly written too. The thing wasn’t interesting was it! Not to other people surely! It wasn’t beautiful certainly! It was the truth of course, realism, but that was all, simply all that could be said for it. Still, that apparently was what people wanted to read about. Beastly!

She heard Con and Flo coming upstairs. Would she tell them? And suddenly she was filled with a sick disgust. To have a miserable little triumph over Con and Flo. What was that? ‘But then,’ she thought, ‘it’s all I ever will get out of it, that and the five pounds. I may as well take what I can.’

She opened the door and called to them, “girls, I’ve had a manuscript accepted.”

Constance opened her mouth and stared, and Florence exclaimed, “Not really.”

“Yes really, here is the cheque,” and she held it out to them.

Constance took it from her, “Five pounds! Mercy! For all that work! Well, I hope you feel rewarded.”

“You’ll never be able to make game of me any more, Con,” said Mary triumphant, “that’s something anyhow.”

“What’s it about?” Florence wanted to know, and Mary answered, “Oh, life, just life. What people want to read about,” and added with sage and worldly acrimony, “it’s easy really.”

She went back into her room and closed the door and stood very still by the writing table.

‘Con and Flo,’ she sighed, ‘it might have happened to Con and Flo. Why didn’t it? It wouldn’t have hurt them. Hysterical perhaps, not hurt. Rust red gowns—tulle in their hair—jade earrings—matinees and dressy parties—Oh, how I envy Con and Flo.’ She picked up the editor’s letter again and read,

Dear Madam,—

We are pleased to inform you that your manuscript, ‘A Bit Of A Drifter,’ — —

The hot tears filled her eyes but she brushed them away and threw out her hands with a movement of bitter impatience, and with cutting contempt, for herself and all the world, she thought 'What's the use! What's the use of being sentimental!'

She drew her typewriter towards her on the table and typed out a formal acknowledgment for the cheque for five pounds. She supposed that this was the correct thing to do.

The Story of Liza

I

All Liza's short life had been spent in and around her father's bird shop. She was a pretty little thing, a trifle too plump, round cheeks with a high colour, and full red lips closing over rows of even white teeth.

The shop was just off Edgeware Road, sandwiched between, and quite overwhelmed by, a small whitewear shop on the one hand, and an A.B.C. shop on the other. The window held several cages placed one on top of the other close to the glass, yellow canaries in some, green lovebirds in others. Over the door hung a sign so old that the letters were almost obliterated, "Robert Powis, Birdfancier."

Robert Powis, Birdfancier, was a little stooped man silent as the grave. Nothing ever disturbed or excited him. In a small, dim room behind the shop he sat all day, stretched comfortably in a broken-down chair which was partly covered by dingy red rep. He smoked his pipe and slept off and on, and when he was awake his watery blue eyes gazed vacantly before him.

It was Liza's mother who attended to the shop and looked after the birds as well as to the house. She was a big woman with bony red hands, a severe expression on her sharp featured face, and thin hair brushed smoothly back into a tight knot at the back of her head. She was not so silent as her husband, but she was not given to much talk. Liza had not been born until Mrs. Powis had passed her fortieth year. She accepted this long-deferred event with equanimity, she washed and clothed and fed her child, but beyond this her thoughts and emotions probably did not go. Liza had seldom had an affectionate word from her, but on the other hand few reprimands. Mrs. Powis had nevertheless a certain sense of discipline, and would not, under any pretence whatever, allow Liza on the streets, nor let her go even to Kensington Gardens on Saturdays, or on Thursday afternoons or on a holiday.

Sometimes on a summer Sunday Liza was dressed in a fresh dress and her better shoes and taken by her mother to Aunt Al's. Her father never went. Aunt Al lived in Ealing, quite a way from Edgeware Road. It took a long time, but not half long enough for Liza. She watched from the top of the bus the taxis and hansoms skimming by, and the crowds of people in gay

Sunday colours. She never thought or wondered about anything, she was content just to watch things. Sometimes when they passed a park with swarms of children playing under the trees, she would like to have joined them there, but she was not unhappy. She liked the visit to Aunt Al's. Aunt Al was a hearty apple-cheeked woman, who embraced Liza affectionately. Uncle Alfred trotted her on his knee and gave her his watch chain to play with until she grew too big for that. They had tea with penny buns and seed cake, and afterwards Liza would fall asleep on the sofa, although she tried very hard to stay awake. It was so rare a pleasure listening to Aunt Al's cheerful voice, her conversation coming in a steady uninterrupted stream, but slumber always overtook her. When they left to go home again Uncle Alfred would say, "You're a good 'un Liza," and chuck her under the chin. Aunt Al usually gave her a penny which she clutched tightly in a moist little hand all the way home.

II

Liza had attended school until the age of eleven, but she had had to go straight there and back and never linger with the other children. Her school friends had not been encouraged to come home with her and Liza often watched a group of them hanging laughing on the corner, but she had to be home at four. There was the tea to be got, the dishes to wash, and helping her mother with the birds. She was not obedient and she was not disobedient. It simply never occurred to her not to do what she was told.

Following her eleventh birthday she was taken from school and apprenticed to a dressmaker up Edgeware Road. She left home at seven in the mornings and Miss Seaman had agreed that as she was so young she would let her off at four in the afternoons, and after some quibbling set Liza's weekly wage at four and sixpence. Miss Seaman was a tall, chilly-faced person with shortsighted eyes, and straight brown hair neatly secured under a fish net. She was not very patient while Liza was learning to do bastings and buttonholes, and more than once on this account deducted sixpence or even a shilling from her wage. This did not, however, greatly depress Liza, because she was not sufficiently interested in her work. But she liked the walk there and back. There was one large shop on the way and occasionally she stopped to take a brief look into the plate glass windows, one of ladies' costumes, one of gloves and stockings, and one of lingerie. Liza read all the little price tickets, but she did not feel particularly dejected because she could never have these things for herself. She would have liked them, but she was not dissatisfied without them.

When she got home and tea was over, the dishes washed and the birds attended to, it was still early in the evening. Liza's father lay back in his chair with his mouth wide open, breathing heavily through his nose. Her mother had a sheet of an evening newspaper spread before her on the table, laboriously trying to read under the light of a fitful gas jet. Liza usually went up to her room, but there was nothing to do there. Her room was at the back overlooking the small untidy yard. The furniture consisted of a narrow black iron bed covered by a heavy grey blanket, a chest of drawers with a cracked basin and pitcher on top, one wooden chair, and a small table in the window. A strip of colourless druggeting covered the space of floor between the bed and the door, and a few pegs along the wall held Liza's wardrobe.

Liza would lie down on the bed fully dressed, and presently fall asleep, to be roused later by her mother and father coming upstairs. Then very drowsily she would undress and creep under the grey blanket, tucking her feet up under her short flannel night dress for warmth.

III

At seventeen Liza was still doing bastings and buttonholes, sometimes seaming and hemming. She had, up till now, made only one friend, Agnes Barker, a girl three years older than herself, who worked also at Miss Seaman's. They usually met one another at the corner in the mornings and walked up Edgeware Road together. Agnes was very large, blowzy and good-natured. She told Liza with great loquacity about her almost nightly trips to the moving picture palaces, and all the scandals in the royal family, the greater part of which was more or less obscure to Liza. But she liked listening to Agnes talk, and soon began to feel a little envious.

At times the evenings now seemed very long. The only people who ever came in a friendly way to the little bird shop were an old plumber who lived opposite, and who sometimes crossed the street to have a pipe with Robert Powis, and occasionally the proprietress of a second-hand clothing shop a few doors away joined them for tea. She wore a black sailor hat pinned on her stiffly frizzed hair, and a shawl about her massive shoulders. She had a loud voice, and Liza thought her breath always smelled of whiskey.

Liza went up to her room as usual, but she found it increasingly difficult to fall into that drowsy stupor that had formerly passed the evenings so easily. She stole into her mother's room which somehow she had always liked. Here was a large bed looking comfortable in spite of its many humps, a chest with a mirror hung above it, and an old rocking chair covered with horsehair. The two windows looked out upon the street, and when Liza was

a little thing she would stand on the rocking chair, and by pressing one cheek close to the glass at the very left of the window pane, she could watch the traffic on Edgeware Road.

And now Liza lit the gas and by its miserable light looked back at her features reflected in the mirror. She raised her hands and pulled her hair down on her forehead, studying the effect with wide blue eyes, and placing her hands at her waist she admired the lines of her full little figure. Standing there she felt suddenly impatient with her unbecoming black waist and cheap white collar, and in the morning when she passed the shop on Edgeware Road, her eyes, filled with a new longing, turned to the windows.

She began to feel fretful. She placed the tea dishes on the table a little abruptly, and when she washed up she wanted to drop the coarse china plates on the stone floor of the scullery. She disliked the odour of the soap and grease on her hands afterwards, and looked at her red knuckles, the corners of her mouth drawn down petulantly. When she filled the dishes in the cages with seed and water she was aware of a new sympathetic affection for the little yellow creatures flying from bar to bar and beating their wings. She listened with fresh eagerness to Agnes, and one morning, somewhat to her own amazement, found herself plotting how she might escape from home some evening to join her friend. But it seemed indeed quite out of the question. Her mother, she knew, would never consent.

Winter had come in with its damp cold and fogs, and in the evenings when she went to her room she threw herself on the bed, hearing the drip of the rain on the roof, her eyes wide open in the dark. She remembered how she had always hated that sound. As a child she had dreaded a rainy day, and would stand at the window that looked out upon the yard, the only place where she was allowed to go after school hours, flattening her nose against the pane, wishing to herself that it would stop raining so that she could go out and play. Once she had expressed this wish to her mother. Mrs. Powis had had a bad day. Two of the best birds had died, among other things; and she answered Liza crossly. Liza wasn't crushed, but she did not complain any more on rainy days. And now when she felt herself slipping off into slumber, that old childish wish stirred in her mind, that it would stop raining so that she could go out and play.

IV

When on the way home one afternoon Liza noticed at the corner of Edgeware Road a young man in a belted rain coat and a black bowler. He was leaning one shoulder against the round red mail box, apparently not

occupied with anything, watching Liza approach. He looked at her as she passed smiling very pleasantly, and Liza smiled back, displaying her pretty teeth. And then she hurried along and presently was placing the coarse bread, the cheese, and a pot of strong black tea on the table, while her father, roused from his sleep, knocked the dead ashes from his pipe against his chair, and rose, stretching himself with a wide yawn.

As they sat down to tea Liza held out her weekly wage to her mother, who dropped it without a word into the pocket of her large apron. Liza felt vaguely uneasy. She leaned her elbow on the table and drank her tea, listening absently to her mother telling her that she had sold two of the Yorkshire canaries that day. Suddenly Liza, stirred out of her apathy and fidgeting with the table cloth, asked her mother if she could not go out with Agnes Barker one evening to see the moving pictures.

Her father raised his weak eyes and glanced without change of expression from his wife to Liza. Her mother was not angry, but she was surprised. She asked who Agnes Barker was, and Liza told her. Mrs. Powis puckered up her lips, swallowed her tea and said, "Now be a good girl Liz, don't yer be gaddin'," and she rose from the table, drawing her sleeve across her mouth, and prepared to remove the dishes. Liza rose too, helping her mother as usual. Later, when she went upstairs, she sat down on the edge of the bed, her hands resting listlessly on her knees, her blue eyes discontentedly staring at the strip of colourless druggeting.

V

Two days later the young man in the rain coat and the bowler was on the corner again. He saw Liza coming, and as she approached he went up to her and raised his hat. Liza looked straight at him, smiling a little.

"Want t' walk a way?" he asked.

Liza shook her head, "I got t'be gettin' 'ome," she said.

"Aw now," he coaxed, and put his hand under her elbow steering her down Edgeware Road past her own corner.

Liza was fifty minutes in getting home that evening. She hurried up the street a little breathless, wondering what explanation she could give at home. She was not sure what effect her sudden delinquency would have. Her father, she knew, would not be roused, even to curiosity, but her mother she had never understood. She looked up anxiously at the clock over the chemist's as she passed, and saw its round white face shining palely through

the murky atmosphere, its hands pointing to half past five. She came into the shop not so quietly as usual, and her cheeks glowed. Tea was already on the table and her father was spreading large slices of cheese on a thick piece of bread. Her mother stood in the scullery door. "Where yer bin Liz?" she inquired.

Liza drew the pins out of her hat and laid it on a chair. Her hands moved to her fair hair, fluffing it out at the side. "Walkin'," she said briefly.

Mrs. Powis began to pour the tea. "Liz," she said, "I don't want yer walkin'. Yer t'come 'ome."

Liza regarded her mother in silence. She was thinking of a morning recently when one of the girls at Miss Seaman's had arrived very late to work. She looked pale and miserable, and her eyes were swollen and red with weeping. Every now and then during the morning she caught her breath against a fresh burst of tears, while she bent nervously over her bastings. Liza, crossing the room for some buttons, leaned over Agnes's machine with a whispered question. Agnes was a source of all information, and now she answered in a low voice, not unmixed with sympathy, "'Er ma's bin took ter the 'orspital." Liza stared a moment at Emily's bowed head, not from a morbid curiosity in Emily's mother's illness, but from a certain mild surprise at the effect it had on Emily. And now Liza, looking at her mother, wondered how she would feel if some evening she should come home from Miss Seaman's to find that Mrs. Powis had "bin took ter the 'orspital", and the surmise left her unmoved, awakening her imagination to neither sorrow or regret. She looked about the little room so long familiar, the cold looking fireplace, never used even in winter, the black grate holding a folded fan of newspaper; the what-not in the corner with a few scattered pieces of china on its cheaply-carved shelves; the framed photographs of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert hanging on the dull walls, and her eyes dropped to the oblong table covered with a white cloth, always showing tea stains and the yellow mark of someone's egg, and although, as yet nothing meant very much to Liza, all these things were far more intimate, closer to her affections than her mother.

VI

Liza could not get to sleep that night. The young man in the bowler hat had walked her nearly to Kensington Gardens. His name was Gilbert. Liza had told him that she was apprenticed to a dressmaker, and how her mother would never let her go out evenings, and that she had to go directly home after work at four o'clock. Gilbert was very sympathetic and indignant, and

told her how pretty she was. When he left her at the corner he bent his head and said, "Bye dearie."

On their next meeting Liza told Gilbert sadly enough that she "couldn't go walkin' no more." He suggested that she could tell her mother that she was working an hour late in order to help Miss Seaman out when she was extra busy. Liza thought this very clever of Gilbert and agreed delightedly. The plan worked very well. Mrs. Powis accepted the explanation, but she thought Liza ought to have a better wage for the extra time. Liza put this perplexity to Gilbert, who gave her sixpence and told her to give it to her mother with her wage.

One morning Liza, excited by her experience, confided in Agnes. Agnes asked a great many questions, and somehow did not seem to be altogether pleased. In the afternoon she pleaded a headache, and following some heated argument with Miss Seaman, succeeded in knocking off work with Liza at four o'clock.

The two girls walked together down Edgeware Road, and when they approached the corner Liza squeezed her friend's arm. Gilbert was leaning against the mail box waiting. To Liza's astonishment Agnes walked straight up to him, stood aggressively before him, and said in threatening tones, "Now then, don't yer let me see yer 'angin' 'round 'ere no more, or I'll 'ave yer run in, I will. See!" She glared at him a moment and quickly followed up her first remark by adding, "Git off the pyvement."

This sudden onslaught somewhat staggered even the composed Gilbert. He pushed his bowler back on his head and stared at Agnes, and Agnes stared back at him. Then she seized the speechless Liza and whisked her down the street.

Gilbert gazed after them. "My eye!" he exclaimed, "wot a sauce box."

Agnes was talking volubly to Liza and walked almost home with her, within sight of the old sign swinging in the wind, "Robert Powis, Birdfancier."

VII

Liza went about her work very quietly that evening, feeling a little of the same dull indifference she remembered as a child when she had been playing in the yard, and had to come in because it was starting to rain again. For some time after this she did not see Gilbert, although she always looked hopefully ahead of her when she came in sight of the red mail box. And then

one afternoon she saw him sauntering towards her, and she smiled broadly, while her heart began to pound against her ribs. They walked together to the Park. Gilbert had a great deal to say, and talked all the time, especially about Agnes. He had the greatest contempt for Agnes. "Tyke it from me old dear," he said, "she's cryzy with h'envy, and that's that!" he finished decidedly.

He told her to take a new route home from Miss Seaman's, and where he would meet her, and that she must never mention him to Agnes again. To all of this Liza agreed happily, gazing up into Gilbert's dark face, her red lips parted smiling. She quite forgot Agnes' frank cautions in regard to Gilbert and other things. She did not argue it out at all, it simply completely went out of her mind. She loved the sun, and the distant sound of the band in the Park, and to sit under the trees with Gilbert's arm along the back of the bench pressing her shoulders.

Soon Gilbert began begging her to try and get out for an evening, but Liza shook her head. She was sure that it would be impossible. But one afternoon when they had been to Kensington Gardens bathed in a soft April twilight, Gilbert had made a great effort to rouse her spirit, telling her to ask once more if she could not go to the cinema with Agnes. And so that evening when tea was over, a little more confidently this time, Liza again asked her mother for permission to go out.

The real reason for Mrs. Powis' determination to keep Liza in the house was in order to make it easier for herself. Then she had no bothers as to where her daughter might or might not be. "I ain't goin' ter 'ave yer gaddin, Liz," she said, "wot d'yer want ter go for? Ain't yer 'appy 'ere? Ain't yer got a good 'ome?"

Liza felt suddenly angry. Her face grew crimson and she jerked her head impatiently as she leaned over the sink, filled with the dishes waiting to be washed. If Mrs. Powis noticed this, which is doubtful, it made no visible impression on her mind. Liza had always been a good little thing. She never had disobeyed, so why should she now!

A customer came into the shop, and Liza heard him asking her mother for bird seed and gravel. Her anger died as quickly as it had come, her arms dropped wearily to her side and the dishcloth fell from her hands to the floor. She stooped to pick it up, and went on drying the dishes.

VIII

One afternoon, late in May, Liza didn't come home at all. Her father and mother had finished tea, and Mrs. Powis was washing up in the scullery,

while her husband sat in his chair as usual, pressing the cheap tobacco into his pipe with a broad untidy thumb. About seven o'clock Mrs. Powis experienced a strange feeling of anxiety. "Wonder wots come o'Liz," she said, addressing not so much Liza's father, as the surroundings of which Liza was so natural a part.

Mr. Powis got up and went to the door of the shop, his carpet slippers flopping on the floor with each step as he moved heavily across the room. He stood stupidly regarding the cages in the window, the fluttering yellow canaries, and the green budgerigars like small parrots sitting quietly together.

Early the next morning Mrs. Powis came out of the shop, closing the door carefully behind her. She hurried along the streets in the mild sunshine, her black skirt trailing a little on the ground at the back, the cheap blouse drawn tightly across her full high bust, her bonnet a little over one eye. Her expression was not so much of worry as of surprise. When she reached Miss Seaman's the little slavey in a blue cotton dress and dirty white apron was scrubbing the steps. Mrs. Powis had to wait some time before Miss Seaman appeared, looking severe and somewhat annoyed. Mrs. Powis explained that Liza had not been home all the night before, whereupon Miss Seaman folded her hands across the stomach of her dull brown dress, and through her spectacles fixed Liza's mother with a stare of frigid amazement.

"Your *daughter* left my house yesterday at her *usual* hour," she said at length.

Her perfect air of outraged virtue was entirely lost so far as Mrs. Powis was concerned. She stood helplessly in the middle of the room. Her brain was not accustomed to emergencies, much less to one of this sort. She was like a person who, always having lived in the dark, has been too suddenly brought into the full light of day.

A moment later Agnes Barker, about to descend the area steps, was arrested by the somewhat unusual sight of Miss Seaman holding the door open for, and closing it very sharply after, a bewildered looking woman. Mrs. Powis raised one hand and straightened her bonnet. She saw Agnes standing there surveying her with curiosity, and across the pitiful blankness of her mind the thought struck that this might be Liza's friend. "Wot's yer name?" she asked, "h'Agnes—h'Agnes—" she could remember no further.

"Sure," said Agnes, "that's it—h'Agnes Barker."

"Liz, she ain't bin 'ome."

Agnes' jaw dropped. "Wot!" she brought out.

"She ain't bin 'ome, not all night" repeated Mrs. Powis.

Agnes clapped her hand over her mouth, and just at that moment the street door opened and Miss Seaman appeared. "*Miss Barker, please,*" she said curtly.

Agnes leaned hurriedly towards Mrs. Powis, "Look 'ere," she said, "you go on 'ome Missis Powis. Don't yer fret, I'll see yer arfter," and she vanished down the area steps and in the low door.

IX

That day Liza's mother went about her daily tasks in all their ordinary routine. Now and then she paused looking before her as though something not quite usual, not altogether realized had been happening, but still everything went on much in the same way. During the morning she bargained with a customer, holding out for ten and six for a pair of budgerigars, and getting it, and in the afternoon she went to the corner shop for some cheese and a pound of strong black tea. Later she spread the sheet of newspaper on the table before her, but she found it impossible to follow the print. She kept looking at her husband, whose lids were dropping wearily over his faded eyes, yet even he roused at intervals with a slight start and sat upright in his chair.

It was shortly after seven when Agnes Barker opened the shop door, and without further preliminary, walked into the back room. She bestowed a brief glance on Mr. Powis and sat down, resting her hands on the table, her eyes taking in all the details of the ugly surroundings. She drew her chair nearer to Mrs. Powis, asking her questions, and now and then nodding her head as though everything were perfectly plain to her. She told Mrs. Powis that Liza had never worked an extra hour at Miss Seaman's; and she told her where in all probability Liza had been during those hours, and where she almost certainly was now.

Mrs. Powis listened without any apparent excitement. Her husband went on smoking his vile tobacco with no change of expression. Agnes looked from one to the other, and her lips curled downwards. Presently she rose to her feet and stood over Liza's parents. Bending forward she brought her hand down on the table with force, "Missis Powis," she said, "wot did yer go on keepin' Liz in a 'ole like this h'every bloomin h'evin' of 'er life. Just like one o' them little birds in the winder."

She stopped a moment to gaze at them both, and shook her finger in a burst of rage in the direction of the cages in the shop window. Then suddenly with quick insight, seeming to realize the futility of reproach against such stolid unconcern, the hot words died on her lips. She shrugged her heavy shoulders, heaving a sigh, and her shrill voice dropped to a quieter key. “‘Don’t yer be gaddin’, yer says to Liz, ‘don’t yer be gaddin’.” Her coarse features grew suddenly soft. “I was real fond o’ Liz,” she said, “jest like one o’ them little yellor birds,” and she retreated to the door and was gone before Mrs. Powis could speak a further word.

The plumber from across the street came in for a pipe with Mr. Powis, and Liza’s mother went upstairs. She stood in the middle of Liza’s room looking at the strip of colourless druggeting, the cracked basin and pitcher on top of the chest of drawers, and the narrow black iron bed covered with the grey blanket. She moved to the window and looked out upon the darkness, remembering Liza as a little girl standing there, wishing that it would stop raining so that she could go out and play. Possibly some faint emotion was penetrating her mind. She may have been thinking that to-day it was only the same little Liza, hating the rain and wanting to play.

She went downstairs and attended to the birds, and when the old plumber had gone she locked the shop door, turned out the gas, and she and her husband went up to bed. Outside a strong wind was blowing, and Liza’s mother lay awake, listening to the creaking of the rusty old hinges that held the sign over the door, “Robert Powis, Birdfancier.”

Separation

I

Darkness descended over the city and ended the short London day; one of those grey days when a brooding gloom is absorbed by the spirit of the people; a newsless day of troubled forebodings. To Alice Brimacombe it wore the semblance of an evil harbinger, a baleful omen, and spread in the background like a fitting prelude to the existing moment. "Something," she thought, "something disagreeable always happens at the close of such a day as this."

She held her forehead against the cold glass of the window pane, feeling the riotous beat of her pulse, and stricken-eyed looked out upon a night where no gleam of light struck through the profound obscurity. Up and down the street every house was shrouded in deep impenetrable shadow, only far off near the corner one solitary street lamp, like a cheerless beacon shed a dismal and half-hearted radiance downward over the pavement.

To the dead blackness was added a melancholy silence, a predictive silence, prophetic of warnings, hinting of perhaps still deeper sadness, more painful trials to come; and Alice, steeped in a heart-sinking mood of despair, was tuned to a mournful harmony with the voiceless depression of the night.

She held her hand pressed tightly against her cheek, and moved her head from side to side, a simple gesture of tired and helpless distress. All her thoughts and emotions came beating and crowding up against one another in a mad, confusing whirl, while through her perplexity she struggled to find and capture one flash of hope, of reassurance, a straw to cling to, even while she knew that it was true, a supreme unalterable certainty. Here she was, suddenly launched by a circumstance over which she had no control, relentlessly propelled from her shelter, driven out from the quietest of backwaters to a raging sea, and a frail craft was Alice, to be set adrift in a storm. All that she knew, had ever dreamed of, was peace, and here was war.

Until now life had yielded to Alice every desire of her heart. The world could hold for her nothing more than what was within the four walls of this house. Here was all meaning, all expression, the fulfilment of every want and need. She had but one mood, a happy one. She had never been anything but happy. She had no excitements, a few mild diversions, trips to the

country, a change of air, but never a change of ideas. She was not intellectual, but she had some imagination because she loved to dream, but dreams that were always repetitions, pleasant reflections of life as she knew it, never as it might be presented to others. She had some mild likes and dislikes, no passions, no antipathies, because none had ever been thrown in her way; no sorrows, bitter feelings, longings or regrets, nothing disagreeable or hard, because all that had passed her by. Every day she went about her duties with a singing heart, and every night she slept away the hours of darkness until another morning broke to herald in one more happy day. A kind circumstance had combined with a corresponding temperament to build about her a neat safe little fence, about which the world might rage in vain. But now that fence was swept rudely away and she was lifted and flung into the vortex, the blind mad business of war.

“Oh,” she cried angrily, “it is insufferable. But I will never let him go. Why should I when there is no immediate necessity?”

A less intelligent woman might have accepted that thought, welcomed and believed in the idea of delay, but Alice, although she may never have developed any great power of vision, was nevertheless possessed of much natural intuition, and now she could not dupe herself into any false situation. She knew that flight, even compromise, was impossible. She was powerless, paralyzed, tied and bound to the order of an unwritten obligation. She understood all that, but she could not yet give herself over to complete surrender.

“Surely,” she thought, “I have some influence over Richard. I will make him see how much too young Malcolm is. Oh, what a fool I have been never to have guessed! All these recent visits to Hendon, Malcolm’s incessant chatter about the machines. Of course, of course! Why did I not pay more attention in the beginning? But why did Richard tell me nothing about it? All these plans have been made in secret right here before me. Why was I left out?” And then to all her pain was added a lightning sting of resentment, and in that moment was born a direct incriminating charge laid against her husband, bred of her mortal hurt because she had been ignored, not even consulted.

Downstairs in the library Richard sat and listened absently to Malcolm. The boy was discussing aviation with all the delighted enthusiasm of youth. Richard was thinking, “It was rather rough of Malcolm to break it to her so suddenly. I suppose he did not think how much it might hurt her. Perhaps though I am not much more tactful myself. Ought I to have warned her? I did think of that a while ago when Malcolm first spoke to me about it. But I

wanted to spare her as long as I could. It seemed quite bad enough without plunging her into it before it was necessary. It's a stiff proposition for her, a frightful wrench for both of us, but there is no getting away from it. Hateful as it is it must be faced, and what possible advantage can there be in trying to deceive her now. There is no way of glossing a thing like this over, even temporarily. The quickest, the kindest way is to accept the cold bare fact at once. Its all very well to be so practical, but it sounds a bit inadequate and wide of the mark nevertheless. Pretty cold comfort for Alice."

He wondered if he ought to go up to her, and admitted with a little shock of surprise that he was afraid. "I don't know why I should be," he told himself, "but I wouldn't know what to say to her. Oh, this is the worst part of the whole business. I wish that it were over." Losing Malcolm was indeed bad enough, but at the moment he was more concerned for Alice. If only he could understand a little of what she was thinking, but she seemed so alien, so utterly far away from him in a moment when she ought to have been near.

"Perhaps I had better go up to her, or would she rather be alone? Oh, how simply helpless we all are at times. Well—." He sat there in miserable indecision, hearing only a scattered part of what Malcolm was saying, until presently Alice herself came into the room.

Richard got to his feet at once and drew a chair for her to the fire, while Malcolm went on with his discussion. He seemed to be absolutely wound up, unable to drop the subject. "I wish that he would stop talking about it for just now," thought Richard, and tried to throw him a veiled warning, flinging in a word edgewise in an effort to divert the topic of conversation. He looked at Alice and saw that she was apparently not at all upset or disturbed. She sat there perfectly cool and dispassionate, and seemed to follow what Malcolm was saying without the slightest difficulty, was even interested, or appeared to be.

"This is rather a ghastly composure," thought Richard, "what is she hiding behind that smile?" And then across Malcolm he saw her regarding him with a steady persistent attention, staring at him with wide compelling eyes. Overcome by a quick blaze of anger, her concentrated gaze flung to him, a mute, a furious accusation. No tempest of words could have been more expressive, more convincing. "Yes," thought Richard, "she is blaming me for this. I was afraid so."

Later when they had gone upstairs and all the house was hushed and dark for the night, Alice went softly down the hall to Richard's room, intent upon bringing about at once some sort of an understanding between them.

And then, as she stood there outside the door, she was seized with a momentary sense of panic. Now, when the moment had actually arrived, and the decision was to be reached, all her hard-won strength seemed to slip away and desert her. What confidence she had been able to force upon herself seemed false and inefficient. Alice was absolutely unaccustomed and untrained to opposition or debate of any sort. She had never been called upon to exert her reason except for pleasant and trivial things, and now in the midst of such a turmoil, what little logic she had was paltry, of no more material advantage to her than a drop in the ocean. She had not been able to think of a single line of argument to follow, or any one particular point on which to pin her discussion. Anything that had come into her mind she had dismissed, because she knew it to be vain, too insufficient to be effective. But she had lived through a bad two hours, the result of which had been to fire in her a fixed purpose and harden her to exceptional resistance. Somehow she felt that she would be able to overcome Richard if it were only by the intensity of her despair, or she would not succeed at all.

“But why is it,” she thought, “that I appeal to Richard? Why do I not want Malcolm to see how I feel about this?” And then she dropped her head with a fleeting sense of shame.

But in a moment all her defiance returned to her. “No,” she told herself, “I will do this, even at the cost of all my pride. Nothing shall get the better of me. And I must be perfectly cool and patient, for if I become excited Richard will only pity me, and I want him to recognize that I am a power with which he must reckon.” That much at least, with a certain unconscious cunning, she could understand.

With one tremendous effort she conquered the last lingering symbol of misgiving, and smothering each timid fear, she turned the handle of the door and walked resolutely into the room. She stood there, looking, if possible, even quieter than usual, as though she were entrenching herself, firing the first shot from behind a sort of desperate calm.

“Richard,” she said, “you surely do not consent to Malcolm going into the service, do you?” There was nothing in her voice to suggest intimidation, no threat, no menace, and yet the air was pregnant of ominous challenge.

Richard folded his arms across his chest. It was a habit she knew well, but she had never before been impressed by it in any other way than as a natural characteristic. But now she hated it. It seemed to her a belligerent, a quite unnecessary method of expressing his own determination, of conveying to her the idea of his higher judgment and will. But on this

occasion at least Richard could not be accused of a deliberate intention to be aggressive, or to give Alice a sense of feminine inferiority. He was praying that he would be able to make her understand that here was a thing in which neither of them could take a part at all, and Alice came wide indeed of guessing the actual bitter suffering he was at that moment enduring, not only on her account, but on his own.

He wondered what made her look so small and still, and yet so terrible. He felt that in all his life he had never been driven into such a corner, faced with such an inordinate task. It was all really so simple, to be explained in a dozen words. Why was he so suddenly eluded, abandoned of all expression? When he spoke at last, his voice jarred upon his ears as dull and lifeless, and the words as cold and inappropriate.

“Alice,” he said, “is there any reason — —”

She broke in, “but he is too young, he is not yet nineteen!” Reason—reason! In all his choice of words none could have been less acceptable to her than that one, for what had she to do with reason, when it was her heart that wept and pleaded for solace and understanding.

In spite of herself she was swept away, carried along upon an overwhelming flow of excitement, and there with the first volley, with the first word, she had thrown her sworn weapon, tranquillity, behind her, and was fired to a furious offensive. Forsaken of all her composure she stood before him, brilliant-cheeked, starry-eyed, as though some fiery breath animated her frail body with new vitality. The hot accusive words poured from her lips one after another. She only stopped for an occasional moment to draw her breath with a quick convulsive sigh, and continue with fresh impetuosity.

Richard heard her in silent amazement. He was thrown into a state of absolute stupefaction, unable to conceive how in so short a space of time, even as the result of such a shock, so bewildering, so fearful a change could have been wrought. Envy, anger, hate, blame, suspicion, fear; how, within the past few hours, had she discovered all these, allowed them to take possession of her? Those eyes! How often had he watched and loved their deep shades of sympathy and affection, the tender line of that soft mouth, and the slow sweetness of her speech. And now, by a contact, all that had made her beautiful to him was gone. Here indeed was a new Alice, stripped abruptly of every soft illusion, she was now in a primitive state of insurrection. All that Richard had feared had happened, but with a far more

dreadful effect. He had thought of her as broken and in tears, but this—never.

He listened to her spinning her disordered story of injustice and wrong, but now when the first blind rush of passion was passing, she began to feel a little spent, and presently she stopped entirely as though she could think of nothing more to say.

Richard seized the opportunity. He felt that he must do something, anything, to check this exhausting flow of emotion. “Alice,” he said, “you are excited and naturally worried; try to quiet yourself. This can do you no possible good.”

The spoken words were cold enough, but if Alice were not now both blind and deaf to all the finer wealth, the subtle shades of hidden feeling, she might have marked through their apparent reserve, a note of concerned and willing sympathy. But all that she saw and heard was Richard there before her, possessed of all his usual self-control, now mistaken by her prejudiced conceptions for indifference. It enraged her that he could show so little feeling. His practical tone threw her into a fever of impatience, and she flung back at him, “Excited—worried!” and smiled a twisted tortured smile. Her lips curled and drooped into a scornful, disgusted line. It was as though she had said, “This creature, how understanding he is with his words.”

And then with a lightning change of thought she seemed to realize what she had sworn to remember in the first place, that all these high words, this burst of temper, were but poor supports, and tended to lessen her strength rather than otherwise. In a flash she had resorted to a new strategy, and she became all sweet appeal, and clung to his arm, patiently pleading in broken sentences, begging him to consider again and for her sake at least to think it over.

“Do not take my happiness from me,” she cried, “let me keep it a little longer. He is so young, and it is not necessary that he should go yet. In a year or six months perhaps,” (she felt that even the smallest delay might be of some advantage) “and then I promise you that I will not object, if you will only wait a little longer and please me in this one thing. What difference can it make, just one soldier more or less? Richard, Richard, look at me, oh look at me! Can you willingly see me suffer like this? Is it just or right?”

As a last despairing prayer she summoned from the forgotten past all her buried woman’s charm, all the old enchantment of youth, in an exhilarated effort to move him, to bend his will, and watched his face to catch some sign of weakening, anything that she might seize upon and use to her advantage.

She wound her arms about his shoulders with a terrible tenacity, and bent her head back, searching his eyes in breathless suspense, as though she would wring from him a promise of concession. But he only looked gravely at her and said, "Alice, it is you who must think this over. I am sure that when you do you will see that it is not and can never be a question of my consent, or of yours. It is a matter for Malcolm himself."

He could see that she was almost demented, and yet he felt surprised that she evaded the real issue so stubbornly, and said to himself, "Is it possible that she is indicting me with the whole responsibility of sending Malcolm to the war? Or does she think that it is in my power to stop him? Oh, poor child, poor child, she is distraught with anxiety. But what can I say to her?"

In a blundering effort to comfort and conciliate he laid restraining hands upon her shoulders. But Alice, feeling their weight there too much for the nervous energy that possessed her, and interpreting his motive as an expression of force, was overcome by the sudden fatigue of reaction.

"I might have known that it would be of no use," she sighed. "Well then, have it your own way," and she went crushed and beaten from him to the distracted and sleepless hours of the night, hating him, hating herself, hating all the world. She shut the door after her, not loudly or with any evidence of resentment, but when Richard heard the sharp little click of the latch as it closed, he was impressed by a premonition of finality. He thought of her slipping through the hall like a pale shadow to her room, and standing there alone and helpless, and his heart was wrung with unutterable pity and distress.

II

And Malcolm went, as Alice knew he would, into the Royal Flying Corps. The day that he appeared before her in his uniform of a Sub-Lieutenant Alice was conscious of nothing but a dreadful longing for death. She praised, admired, she even simulated an air of pride, for she had a certain fear that Malcolm would see how she felt about this and be ashamed of her, and she had for that reason, if not for no other, managed to keep up at least a semblance of interest. But she thought that here indeed was the fall of the curtain, the end of all things for her, and in the agony of separation she looked again at Richard, her eyes full of malevolent enmity, speaking more plainly than words, "If Malcolm is killed, it will be your fault."

Following all too brief an interval of training Malcolm went to France, and from that day Alice seemed to give him up as completely lost to her

forever, given over to an inexorable destiny, and inevitable fate. In the first days of his absence she went about as though drugged, wrapt in some ugly cloud of depression, and sometimes through her languor she was stirred to a faint alarm at her utter insensibility. She seemed to be completely broken, beggared of all sensation, unable to rise over this experience, or in any way adapt herself to new conditions. A hardier, a more robust personality would have reached out, found and drawn to itself a saving diversion, a substitute, something on which to feed and survive, but Alice long since had drowned all other interests in that of maternity.

Malcolm's letters came, crowded pages of quenchless spirit. To his mother he wrote bright, cheery lines, telling her of his billets, assuring her that the end of the war was fast heaving in sight, and giving her suggestions as to what she might send him in his weekly package.

To his father he wrote interestedly of his work, the various types of machines, their intricate and delicate design, and discussed the values and use of their guns and engines. Alice knew that Richard received these letters, because she saw the envelopes in the mail with her own, but she never asked for the privilege of reading them. Usually Richard offered them to her, and she took them and read them in silence, and gave them back with a formal word of thanks.

Once Malcolm wrote to his father, "I know, Governor, that the old mater wasn't dead nuts on my coming out here. But tell her for me that it's cricket, the only game to play, for a man, until this war is over." Richard smiled when he read this, rather happily than otherwise. The age-worn sentiment, so frankly, so simply expressed, seemed cloaked with an added charm and freshness. Alice smiled too, a wan forgotten smile over the words, "for a man", but she felt no answering thrill of pride, nothing but the same mournful dejection and bitter provocation against her husband, poisoning her life and wasting away what little strength she still possessed.

"Richard," she thought, "is pleased because he has been able to give a son to the war. It makes him happy. And if Malcolm is killed, that will make him happy too. He will tell me that it is glorious. Glorious! I have heard a great deal about glory of late." It grew habitual with her to think along these lines, and if in the beginning she did sometimes feel her own injustice, the spirit of censure became with her so settled a mental process, that she soon actually believed in all that she thought.

In the morning when she came down to breakfast she would find sometimes piled beside her plate, a sheaf of war circulars, some of them

printed regulations regarding the ever-increasing restrictions, and others appeals for every sort and description of war charity. Sometimes Alice would take a moment to look through them wondering how there could be so many people in the world in need of help, and then she would take them between her fingers and tear them one by one in half. One morning when Richard had left the house, and Alice was lingering over her breakfast, she was aware of the maid busying herself a little unnecessarily about the room.

“Is there anything you want, Annie?” Alice said at length.

The maid looked at her mistress a little apologetically as though she realized that the war was a barred topic of conversation in this house. Then she said, “I’m sure its too bad, madam, but Mrs. Weyman’s just ’ad notice that ’er son’s bin killed at the front.”

Mrs. Weyman was Alice’s cook and had been with her ever since Malcolm had been a very small boy.

“Oh,” Alice said coldly, “I’m sorry. Tell Weyman I’m sorry. This is the fourth son that she has lost, is it not?”

“Well not rightly. The second one, ’e’s only missing. ’E’s bin missing five months now, but Mrs. Weyman says she’s just goin’ on thinkin’ ’e’s alive. ’Tis the only way to do, she says.”

When the maid had left the room Alice sat there perfectly still, her eyes bent upon the white tablecloth and the heap of torn and discarded war circulars beside her plate. “Just goin’ on thinkin’ ’e’s alive. ’Tis the only way to do, she says! Oh,” she thought, “poor old thing. Of course it’s very brave of her to take it like that, but these people don’t feel things so much. I’m sure they don’t.”

Richard saw the morbid way in which Alice was isolating herself from every healthful influence, and into what a dangerous apathy she was sinking, refusing herself, as she did, to anything that might partially offset the strain. He put forth every effort to rouse her, and made it a point to be at home with her as much as possible, in spite of open disregard and absolute lack of any sign of appreciation from her. He tried to talk to her, to lift her out of herself, but it seemed no more successful than an attempt might have been to animate and breathe life into a stone.

Once in the evening he said to her, “Alice, there is an article here that I should like to read to you. Would you care to hear it?”

Alice put aside her book at once, and Richard read the article which consisted of a clever and well balanced discussion on aviation, and while of

necessity strictly censored in regard to any intimate information, particular stress was laid on the high degree of safety lately attained in the air, and the wonderful possibilities promised for the future. It was altogether a cheerful article, and calculated to minimize the dangers of flying rather than otherwise.

When he had finished Alice said, "It is very interesting. Thank you very much, Richard," and without another word she took up her book and went on reading as though she had never been interrupted at all.

Possibly the subject had been unfortunate, but Richard had only hoped to arouse her interest and pride in Malcolm's work, and perhaps happily induce her to talk of him, while Alice was crediting Richard with the deliberate intention of having chosen that particular theme in order to turn the knife in the wound, and she said to herself, "he shall not hurt me. I will never let him see me suffer."

Her manner implied simply nothing at all. It was purely and absolutely unstudied, yet so unnatural that Richard, utterly nonplussed, sighed and resigned himself to the hope that one day through some divine accident light might break.

III

Came a day late in November of the following year, when Alice in the afternoon descended the stair intending to take a short walk. It had been a morning of exquisite freshness, of heaven-born harmony, wrapt about in a soft blue mist, so beautiful and so dreamily peaceful, that all the actual events of a storm-tossed world seemed unreal and far away. Alice had felt a little less despondent than usual, and had occupied the morning by making up a box to send to Malcolm. She carried it now under her arm addressed in round legible letters, "Sub-Flight Lieutenant Malcolm Richard Brimacombe."

Below her in the hall two white-capped maids were standing together in a conference of agitated whispers. They started apart as their mistress approached, and one of them in her perturbation dropped upon the floor the fatal yellow envelope. They both stood there as though petrified, unable to move, and it was Alice who came and stooped for the telegram at her feet. Her fingers, strangely steady, opened it without haste, and she drew from the envelope the little folded slip. Everything surrounding her became a sudden faded blur, only the typed words of the telegram penetrated with an awful clearness through the confusion of her brain, as she held it before her and

read: "Deeply regret to inform you—Sub-Flight Lieutenant—Malcolm Richard Brimacomb—killed in action—Official War Office."

Alice folded the telegram again and replaced it in the envelope. Her delicate brows were drawn together, her face expressed a wistful, a childish puzzlement, and she gazed beyond the frightened maids looking over and through them as though they were nothing but thin air. One of them, terrified by this calm transfixion, put out a trembling hand and laid it on Alice's arm, as though by some blind impulse she felt the necessity of making her mistress feel a human touch. Alice lowered her eyes and looked at the envelope in her hand. "Master Malcolm is killed, Annie," she said, and her breast swelled gently to a sigh, tired, long drawn out. Just at that moment the street door opened and Richard stood before her.

At the sight of him, instantly electrified as by some unperceived influence, she pulled herself together, and turned upon him great dark eyes, eyes that burned with a scornful venomous fury, a terrible vindictive triumph. She jerked her shoulders with a touch of impatience, as though she would now throw from her the last shred of her apathy and weakness, moved steadily towards her husband and held the telegram out to him, giving him with one look the full bitter measure of blame.

The situation needed no word of explanation. Richard knew in the first sickening moment what had happened, but even through his own quick shock of grief he was thinking more of Alice, and deploring the unfortunate accident, and what seemed to him the crowning cruelty, that had brought the news to her before he could warn or prepare her for it. He held out his hand to her in an entreating gesture of anxious solicitude, but Alice shrank from him as though she could not bear his touch, even the sight of him was too intolerable for endurance. She turned away and fled up the stairs, hurrying as though her feet could never carry her fast enough. Up—up until her room was reached, the door flung to and locked. Locked against the message of those typed words, their tragic meaning.

She took off her hat and coat, laid them across a chair and threw herself on the bed, staring dry-eyed at the low white ceiling, numb, bewildered, shorn of all emotion, and thinking with thankfulness that now mercifully she would die, and thanked God at least for that.

Once Richard came to the door. He called to her softly but she lay unheeding. Again a maid enquired if she would like some tea, but Alice answered her in so natural a voice that the servant went away reassured.

After a time, out of sheer exhaustion, she slept, and wakened to hear Richard again at the door. "Alice—Alice," he spoke in a moved beseeching tone, and threw into his voice all that he knew and felt of sorrow, regret and pity. But Alice heard only the voice of him whom she looked upon as the despised and guilty perpetrator of this crime. She answered him to say that she was resting and would come presently.

It was now almost dark, and through the partly opened window Alice could hear the postman's knock as he came from door to door down the street with the late afternoon mail. Rat! Tat! Tat! She thought how that sound had been to her the one gleam of light in all these interminable days, and how she would never again hear it but with pain and terror for the memory aroused. Yesterday there had been letters, but yesterday was forever gone. Her mind still torpid from sleep was slowly rousing now to a fuller, a far more agonizing realization, and drenched to the very soul in horror, she was plunged to an abysmal depth of despondency. This dead heart! Dead and cold as stone, still beating! She laid her fingers over it wonderingly, and sat up on the edge of the bed. Smote through the gathering evening gloom the thought that she would not die but live, perhaps for a long time, and never know relief. "Now," she thought, "I shall go on killing time until the grave." She had a harrowing vision of the future, her life, stretching out before her a barren desert, with not even a chasm over which she might throw herself seeking eternal oblivion. She must walk and walk with aching feet over those burning sands of time carrying the unbearable weight of her sorrow.

What was it she had heard of woman's pride sustaining her through an hour such as she herself was now to endure? "What is this cant of pride?" she burst out. "Pride! Prayer! Religion! What words, what idle sounds! Of what possible avail!" And she flung out her arms with a movement of dismissal, refusing to accept even a hope of consolation.

She got to her feet and lit the light above her dressing table. Lifting her hands carefully she smoothed her hair with little deft touches, and then, her fingers halted, suddenly suspended in mid air, she stared back at her white face reflected in the mirror, thinking, "but what am I doing this for? Malcolm is dead."

She looked about her surprised that everything should be so much the same as when she had left the room two hours before. A little breeze was blowing in at the window moving the curtains gently. The fire in the grate had burned itself out and the embers kept dropping through the bars making a little heap of grey ashes on the stone beneath. On the mantel a small gilt clock ticked the minutes steadily away, and Alice watched the perpetual

even swing of the pendulum, wondering how it was possible that life should still continue to revolve on all its given axes, proceed so strangely in every accustomed groove.

All this time Richard had done nothing but pace the library, tirelessly up and down, backwards and forwards, sometimes standing for a moment at the window looking out upon the fast approaching darkness, torn between his own heartbreak and a passionate desire to be a comfort, a necessity to Alice.

Finally, and it seemed to him, after an eternity of hours, hours crowded with a confused blending of emotions, Alice came into the room. He looked at her and thought, "It must be now, or it will never be at all." He came directly to her and said with a sorrowful, a pleading persuasion, "Alice, I would have given my life to have spared you this."

Alice appeared to be oblivious to the touch of tender feeling in this simple expression, and to the great effort Richard was making. She submitted to his caress, the touch of his lips against her hair, and then she detached herself coldly from his encircling arm, found a chair and sat down, her hands resting listlessly on her knees. She did not speak or look at him, and Richard, completely driven back, knowing less than ever how to meet this attitude of unnatural stoicism, was silent, and of his own heart he asked, "Is there no way to reach her? Why does she hate me so?"

IV

The days that succeeded dragged themselves out with a uniform sameness. Alice went through all the necessary duties, and replied to cards and letters of condolence with a mechanical prompt correctness.

Richard's sister came to see her almost immediately and Alice received her with perfect calm and collectedness. She sat very slim and straight in her mourning, listened to her visitor's nicely expressed sympathy, and thanked her. Her sister-in-law was thinking, "How inaccessible she is, and oh how cold!" And then the tears rolled slowly one by one down her cheeks under her veil, shed far less for the dead than for this grief-frozen woman before her. She took her handkerchief from her bag and held it to her eyes. Alice watching her said to herself impatiently, "Oh why does she do that?" And then in a quick wave of anger because another woman could weep for what had not even been her own. "What right had she to do that?"

Afterwards, when she was alone again, she stood before the mantel and looked for a long time with a certain tentative sadness at Malcolm's last portrait there in its leather frame. She put out her hand and moved it a little

to one side so that a yellow shaft of sunlight struck full upon the pictured face. She heard herself repeating in an undertone her sister-in-law's words, "It is so very sad, dear Malcolm," and struck by some ludicrous superficiality, she covered her eyes and laughed, the hard metallic laugh of one who having felt too much can now feel no more.

It rang through the silence of the room with a strange eerie sound, and Richard just then opened the door and looked about him surprised.

"I thought I heard some one," he said, and Alice replied, "No I am alone."

Once in the night she awakened suddenly, frightened and knew not why. She sat up in bed her fingers clutched together spasmodically. "What's the matter with me?" She formed the terrified question, "Why can't I cry?" And she fell back on her pillows without knowing the divine relief of tears.

The words of a verse she had read, she could not remember when, came to mind:

"They gave him a shilling, they gave him a gun,
And so he's gone killing the Germans, my son,
I dream of that shilling, I dream of that gun,
But it's they who are killing, the boy who's my son."

And wide-eyed in the darkness she lay, doomed to listen for the rest of the night to the monotonous repetition of those lines returning again and again through her tired brain. "It's they who are killing, the boy who's my son." And then with the thought came the vision, the shuddering vision, to haunt her waking and sleeping dreams.

She was now more than ever unconscious of the war, and took no interest in the news whether good or ill. She appeared to be utterly preoccupied, to live in some mysterious and inaccessible shadow world of her own, hugging to her heart her solitude, with memory her one and constant sad companion.

She continued in her manner of strict reserve towards Richard, ignoring him almost completely. The servants seemed more near, more real than he. She had cultivated a peculiar way of looking straight before her, and it seemed to Richard that she looked at everything in the room rather than at him. He could not say that she was avoiding him, she simply did not seem to see him or be in any way aware of his presence. While she seldom, if ever, addressed him, she always answered him when he spoke to her, briefly, never conversationally, but invariably with perfect courtesy. Richard felt that

it was like one stranger speaking to another,—strangers, who without any apparent antagonism, had no desire for a closer or more intimate acquaintance.

He groped desperately for the word, the gesture, that might waken her, unlock and set free the flood gates of all this damming silence. Often he had been on the brink of expression, but when he looked at her the utterance was inexplicably choked upon his lips, while he cursed his own fastidious reticence of temperament. If only he could see some promise of response, of weakness, anything that might express a need of him, but while all her personality continued to be wrapt in so unapproachable, so independent a cloud of frozen calmness, nothing could be done.

Sometimes he would lift his eyes over his paper and furtively study her, bending her head over a book, her bright hair shining in the firelight, or more often sitting quietly, supporting her cheek with a slender hand, remotely intent upon her own thoughts. She looked so soft, so young, so everything but what she was, and Richard wondered, “Does she know that I am looking at her? She must. And if she does, how is she able to keep that uncanny composure? She does not cry to Heaven for vengeance, but oh my God, how she is getting it!”

It was all so baffling, so much more puzzling than petulance or anger, and sometimes, scarcely knowing what was demanded of him, he was inclined to give way to a masculine exasperation. He wanted to take her by the shoulders and force her to meet his eyes, and it was incomprehensible to him why he should lack the courage and initiative to bring about this simple test, that might mean a chance of reconciliation, or if not that, at least some other and more desirable footing than the present.

V

At length Christmas came again, a cold sad Christmas, hung with a prevailing air of enforced cheer, an obviously prepared effort to carry through with every possible degree of courage, to ignore depression, accentuate hope.

Alice, roused from a broken sleep long before daylight, lay wide awake until the dawn came stealing palely through the drawn curtains. She watched until the familiar lines of the room stood out clearly, and, quickened from the memories of this day, all her suffering returned to her with increased intensity.

While she was dressing she stopped suddenly, startled to motionless suspension, as though arrested by some unusual thought. She threw her dressing gown about her, and with her hair still falling disordered over her shoulders, she hurried down the hall to Malcolm's room and stood there staring at the bed. Nothing here had been altered since Malcolm had left it a year before. It had been kept cold and darkened, like a silent sepulchre for the dead. Often Alice had dreaded to enter it, and at other times was swept by a deadly fascination to haunt the environment most prone to increase her unhappiness. During the long winter evenings she would steal in and stand alone in the darkness, seeing nothing about her, yet tortured by a host of invisible weapons of pain.

Now she moved to the window and raised the shades, and the room was suddenly flooded with the full bright light of morning. Here she had stood on Malcolm's last evening at home before his first school term. She remembered how he lay straight across the foot of the bed outside the covers, a trick he had acquired in his babyhood. His face was flushed with sound and healthy sleep, his thick fair hair adorably rumpled.

Alice, given over to a dream mood, was carried from the actual painful present to an image of the past. She clasped her hands against her breast while a faint softness dawning through the troubled blue of her eyes, struggled to break their hardened depth. "Now—now," she thought, "I am better. I am going to cry." Her husband's step passed along the hall, and the moment of salvation was gone. She stiffened again to her accustomed attitude and stood perfectly still, praying that Richard might not come and find her here.

Later in the day, feeling a restless need for activity, she came from her room dressed for the street. Almost before she knew it she had opened the library door and said to Richard, "I am going for a walk, Richard. I shall not be long."

Richard put down his paper, surprised that she should stop to tell him, and because she so rarely ventured out of the house. She stood there quite naturally, fastening her glove, evidently unconscious of the break in her attitude. And then she lifted her eyes and looked directly at her husband with an expression of pensiveness.

Richard felt the approach of some indefinable change. "What is it that she is trying to ask of me?" he thought, and then she had closed the door again and had gone so quickly that Richard had no time to speak or offer to go with her.

Leaving the house Alice walked quickly towards the Park, while a bitter wind stung her cheeks to a faint unwonted flush. She lifted her face to see the unclouded sky stretched above her, a clear wide dome of limpid blue, and passing through the gates, she made her way down the broad gravelled walk, distraitly aware of the delicate beauty of the trees, where their dark branches, clothed in a frozen mist, glittered silverlike in the sun. It was as though nature, understanding the universal resolve to promote a cheerful optimism, eager to voice her approval and sing in chorus with the hearts of mankind, had decked herself to a fairy-like alliance, adding all that she knew of beauty to a drooping world.

Once Alice had loved all this, but now, "I can never enjoy it again," she thought, "It is all too sad, but it is beautiful, too."

Slightly in advance of her a blue-garbed nurse pushed an invalid's chair, and when Alice approached them she saw its occupant, a very young officer, throw back his head and heard his laugh ring clearly with merry infectiousness. She walked slowly and edged nearer to them, feeling a little guilty because she was anxious to hear what they were talking about. She could not quite follow the conversation, but she watched out of the corner of her eye, and something in the straight cut of the boy's profile reminded her of Malcolm. She looked at the thin white features so pitifully wasted, and felt a surprised, a compassionate admiration, a tribute to his cheerful courage in the face of such evident illness.

A little further on she stopped and rested her hands on the low iron paling that separates the path from the broad sweep of open ground. Just before her a small band of raw recruits was being drilled, perhaps ten in all. They were not yet in uniform and made up a somewhat comical patchwork of apparel. The officer in charge shouted his commands, and at once they were all at sixes and sevens, turning apparently in every direction but the one desired, and all was chaos. Alice watched them, a little amused in spite of herself. "That one in the soft hat, he seems to be making a lot of trouble. How awkward he is. I suppose somebody is fond of him, and sometime soon he will go over there. Perhaps he will be killed, and somebody somewhere will suffer."

Beside Alice two wounded Tommies sat upon a bench, their arms flung carelessly over the back. One of them had laid aside a pair of crutches, and the other carried a heavy cane, and wore a wide white bandage wound around his head. They too were finding a little diversion in watching the squad of beginners. Alice heard one of them say, "'ave another try. Now then, all together—" and when the order had culminated in a particularly

disastrous climax he broke into loud shouts of laughter, and added to his companion, "Artful show, ain't it Bill," and Bill agreed, "Not 'arf."

Just beyond under the trees another company went through its paces. Every one in trim khaki they stood in two long perfectly straight lines, their gleaming bayonets lifted aslant over their shoulders. At a given word they formed fours, wheeled, advanced, halted and stood at attention, with never a quiver in the line.

"It's like a machine," thought Alice, "but they are human beings after all, like me and everyone else. They have homes, wives, children; they see and hear and feel, and this is what they make of themselves. A machine! And why? So that I may keep my country and my home."

While all that day Malcolm had been very near to her, she was thinking now less of him than of what she was seeing all around her. For the first time he was dwelling in her thoughts as only a part of the whole. He was no longer the universe, he was only her own individual expression of the universe. "All these things exist and will continue to exist. And since it is so and I am here in the midst of it, what right have I to ignore or deny? Perhaps I can never be happy, but could I not help?"

She walked on slowly and came at length unpremeditatedly before the still majestic beauty of St. Mary Abbot's, and saw the doors open for the afternoon service. Impulse urged her towards the church and she crossed the street and entered to the quiet and hushed peace within. The congregation knelt in prayer and Alice slipped noiselessly into a pew at the back of the church and fell upon her knees hoping that here she might find a moment of respite from the difficult burden of the day. In the dim light that filtered through the high stained windows she could see the figures of many black-robed women bending their heads in solemn supplication, and she wondered if they had lost and suffered as she. The soft grey shadows fell all about her with a tranquilizing effect, and her heart was pierced anew with an agonizing pain. But it was now the sweet pain of relief, of release from long-pent emotions.

The prayer ended, she rose from her knees while from the organ swelled the deep lovely notes of a Christmas hymn. Alice saw beside her, sharing her occupancy of the pew, a young girl poorly clothed in cheap mourning. Her ungloved hands, hardened and rough from daily work, painfully chapped from the winter cold, held the hymn book before her. Alice looked at the upturned face, gently moved to see the big brown eyes brim with tears, and the red lips quiver piteously.

“’Ark the ’erald h’angels sings,
Glory tu the new born King.”

The clear untrained voice rang out with poignant sweetness, and Alice, listening, felt a long-forgotten warmth struggling for rebirth in her sleeping heart.

“Joyful h’all ye naitions rise,
Join the triumph of the skies,
With the h’angelic ’ost proclaim,
Christ is born in Bethlehem,
’Ark the ’erald h’angels sings
Glory tu the new born King.”

When the hymn was ended Alice heard the voice of the minister expressing a few final words, and one sentence pierced acutely through her reawakening perceptions. “The dead are very near to us. We must feel that there is no real division between the spirits of those who love. True separation comes only through loss of faith and understanding.”

Alice bent her head strangely subdued to the benediction and when she went again into the open air, she hurried through the cold streets, repeating to herself as she walked, “True separation comes only through loss of faith and understanding.” When she reached the house, instead of going directly to her room as usual, she stopped outside the library door, her fingers resting irresolutely on the handle.

The word of explanation comes to us more often in an unexpected moment of spontaneity without reasoning or forethought, and now suddenly Alice knew the truth, that it was not Malcolm whom she had lost, but Richard. She was severed, deliberately divorced from him, through her own stubborn and perverse will. Embracing with one glance, she saw how all these barriers had been thrown up, this wall built between them with the busy invisible fingers of her own distorted imagination, creating a separation far more real and complete than death, and as though awakening at last from some long nightmare of sleep, she said, “I must destroy and build again.”

And then she was seized with the same trembling panic that had possessed her on a night, it seemed now a long time ago, when she had stood outside Richard’s door gathering her courage just as she was now, but for what a different purpose. She closed her eyes and two tears fell from under the long lashes and dropped upon the dark fur about her neck. “O God,” she prayed silently, “show me what I must do.”

She opened the door and saw Richard still there where she had left him. He appeared to be absorbed in a meditative and dreamy contemplation of some inward vision, and did not hear Alice enter. But in a moment he lifted his head sharply, and Alice saw that his mouth was drawn in pained and rigid lines, his quiet eyes expressing an infinite sadness, and straight from heart to heart there leaped at last the revealing message. They stood there surveying one another, he startled through his gravity, and she motionless, regarding him with an expression of hesitating relief, a little frightened, still uncertain of her reception.

It was Alice who presently broke the moment of stilled suspense, "Richard!" and she was gathered into her husband's arms and held against his heart. She had prayed God to show her what she must do, and now with a single word the work of destruction had been completed. Everything was explained, understood, forgiven. All the false fabric, the work of months, lay wrecked and in ruins at their feet, and in the long silence that followed everything became mysteriously new. Alice was lost in a rush of long-buried and half forgotten emotions, remorse, humility, recompense, an immense self-forgetfulness, an all-embracing pity.

And now, as during the afternoon, Malcolm was not directly in her thoughts. She was seeing once more the patient grief in Richard's eyes, the pathetic sorrow expressed upon the homely face of the little slavey who had knelt beside her in the church, and the smile of courage on the lips of the young officer in the invalid's chair. And she heard again the loud boisterous laugh of the wounded Tommies, and the words, "'Ave another try. Now then — all together."

A little smile, a hint of tenderness trembled upon her lips, and she knew that Malcolm was not lost to her, that she would never be irrevocably separated from him, and just because she had given and loved him so much, she must now give and love everyone more. That must be her gift to him, a symbol, an essence of the spirit that would forever keep them near to one another.

Once more she said to herself, "Perhaps I can never be quite happy—" and then that thought was checked and crushed by another, a stronger, "Yes — yes, you can, you will! Happiness lives somewhere all over the world today. She lives in your heart. Awaken her, for she is only sleeping."

Some Letters From Chelsea

I.

THE SQUARE.

No. 12 — — Square,
London.

Dear Stephen,—

Your letter was forwarded to me from Leeds. How nice to hear from you and to know that you are once more in England! I am delighted, and looking forward, oh insatiable adventurer, to seeing you soon; curious too to know of all your experiences in the tropics, and your impressions, both of which I imagine have been most interesting.

Probably you are even more lean and brown than ever, and chattering fluently in half a dozen tongues; Spanish, Portuguese, and Hindu as well, and with it all feeling rather bored with this conservative exclusive old Island.

And I—I am prosaically married, and living, as you see, in the big old house in — — Square. But I must tell you, and you will be interested in this, that I have also acquired a studio, and am making pottery, as yet but a novice, but at least fairly launched. I have become absolutely entangled in the fascination of things like biscuit, firing, hard paste and soft paste, underglaze and overglaze.

I would remind you in case you may have forgotten, that it was in part your own incentive that urged me to this venture. I am not blaming you for it. I'm much too kind for that. It's bad pottery anyway. But in any event I want you to see my first primitive efforts. Applaud or shrug (I have not forgotten that habit of yours when you are dubious.) But don't be afraid. Not being squeamish I am open to both.

When you come up from Devonshire will you have tea with me some afternoon? No. 9 — — Walk, Chelsea.

No. 12 — — Square,
London.

After you had gone to-day I lingered about the studio, thinking of your criticisms and that quick sympathy that I remember in you so well. And you have changed so little. Yes, a bit more lean and brown, and like the rest of us, a little older.

How naturally and how simply we seemed to take up again the thread of our companionship just where it was broken! While I watched you standing there in the half-light of evening, by a trick, a freak of memory, I was living again an afternoon, is it four years ago?

What a chance, and what a trivial circumstance drew us together! I am standing before the Degas in the South Kensington, lost in contemplation of that lovely ballet scene; the beautiful light and shade, from the dim theatre in the foreground to the brilliant stage, the delicate poise of the dancers, the soft flesh-tones of upflung arms and white stiffness of outstanding skirts.

I am so completely absorbed that I do not hear steps behind me, and moving suddenly backward for a new perspective I come into unexpected contact with—you. A murmured apology, and how do these things happen! We are plunged into conversation, discussing the Degas, the Ingres hanging on the opposite wall, wandering aimlessly upstairs to the Spode, the Chelsea, the Bow, and down again to the furniture and the Rodins.

I am bound to admit that our introduction had none of the earmarks of propriety, nor was our subsequent acquaintance what might be termed correct. Those pilgrimages of ours to Petticoat Lane, the Caledonian Market on a Friday morning, lunch in Soho, discursions to the exhibitions or to Christie's. Tea anywhere! And the afternoon when we sat so late on the Embankment thrashing out the subject of soul and temperament.

Getting lost! It is London's best attraction, and all the more alluring to me, coming, (as I had,) from a small town. I smiled sometimes wondering what my Presbyterian family would have to say could they have caught me then. You were married, I about to be, but what of it! And my Presbyterian family was in Leeds.

Once I told you that you knew better than myself of what I was thinking, and you reminded me of this to-day when you asked me if I were sometimes lonely. It had not occurred to me directly, but there is some truth in it. It is not the ordinary loneliness of those who are too much by themselves, but more the deeper detachment that steals over one in the very heart of a crowd.

I am a creature of solitude, and yet I do not love it, and deplore my fastidious temperament that steers me away from the common mob.

In misery one is so miserable, when happy so infinitely happy. Things mean almost too much. It is a mistake to allow one's sensibilities to become sharpened to a point that approaches super-culture. Eventually what happens? Introspection breeds the hyper-critic, and worst of all it kills your sense of humour, and then indeed you are done for. It's a mundane world.

Gerald says, "my dear girl, it all comes from this 'living your own life.' Why do you do it?"

He only just tolerates this studio of mine, no more, and I think that he lives in secret dread that he has inadvertently married what he so frankly abhors, a modern adventurous 'bas-bleu.' But why I do not know. I have never yet seen the interior of a night club. Nor have I bobbed my hair and aped the costumes of the Russian Ballet. There is no outward suggestion of eccentricity. I do not even smoke, so it is not very bad yet.

Still Bohemia and Belgravia are a troublesome combination, and show nothing apparent of a mutual indulgence. I have succeeded in acquiring — — Walk, but I have thus far failed quite hopelessly to reconcile it with . . . Square. *Mésalliance*, pure and simple.

Dusk is fast approaching while I write, closing in around me profoundly peaceful. I love London best on these short winter days of early twilights. Shadows and evening mists, garments of repose, descend and soften all the sharpness, the crude outlines of the city, while hanging low a faint blue smoke spreads above the river and gently deepens, overcome at length by the oblivion of night.

It is the hour of mystery, of inertia, of fantasy and dreams, when etiquette and custom, the armor of the day, are laid away, and order and will give place to a delicious spiritual fatigue.

Almost always I walk home from the studio, carrying with me a happy memory of pleasant hours gone, and further promise for to-morrow. But only so far, alas! I reach the Square. At once, a touch of magic, and I am someone else. And what a reluctant awakening! Here, like a reproof for my dreaming, this drab, this most unwelcome truth. I am hemmed in by four lines of solid wall, cheerless, unfriendly. Each door is exactly like the last or the next, differing only in that one may have been more newly painted than the rest, gloomy shades of green. One has a vision of the 'betweens' coming out every morning to polish the brass knockers and bellpulls with a dreadful unfailling monotony. In the Square the day begins when the knockers and

bellpulls are polished. A light gleams from some window but gives no scope for your imagination. You are only left with the thought that one drawing room is just like another, except perhaps in the arrangement of the furniture, or the pattern of the chintz, and in each the same cold pride, the same sequence of ideas, orthodox, traditional, inviolable.

One evening I stood quite still a moment under the starlight and looked at those rows of houses, their chimneys in the half-darkness, jutting up against the skyline like sentinels.

‘Oh if I could but warm your barren heart,’ I thought, but only a bleak gust of wind blew the fallen leaves about my feet.

No. 12 — — Square,
London.

Dear Stephen,—

I fairly longed for your company this morning. I have been indulging in my favourite dissipation, hunting in the junk shops on — — Street.

What colour! In all its wonder-shades, deceptive and openly fragrant. A background of old buildings, greys, blacks and browns, and against that what enchanting touches of relief! Blue and amber glass, rose china, the glitter of crystal, and the yellow gleam of brass, and this time not too painfully polished, all displayed with such artless disarray in oval cross-paned windows.

When I hurried home late as usual to lunch, I sat down feeling Brookes’ restrained and perfect eye upon me. There are moments when Brookes is able to make me tremendously conscious of my inferiority.

‘What a funereal plague he is!’ I thought irritably. ‘But how does he do it? He makes you know a thing without a wink of a lash. What is he disapproving of now?’ I wondered.

In the Square the proper attitude is to seem as though one were carrying all the cares of the nation on one’s shoulders, and thinking very hard about it, and possibly to-day I looked too affable and happy, too satisfied with my morning’s revel to be quite respectable. One thing is certain. I was not contemplating with any great sadness, the cares of the nation. And is it to be expected that I should go all the way down one side of — — Street, and up the other, in and out of every little dusty shop, even climbing to an attic to see an old chest hidden there, and after all this present the same correct and

lady-like appearance with which I started out? It's unreasonable! Well, I was not going to make a fuss about it anyhow, and took refuge in aplomb.

"What a beautiful day, Brookes!" I said brightly and beamed.

"Yes madam, quite!" An image! An effigy! Imperturbability personified! Being a beautiful day apparently was all wrong, and I a culprit for suggesting it.

I wonder if below-stairs they sometimes surmise as to the company that I keep. I've always noticed a certain vigilance in their manner since the evening when I brought the old crossing sweeper from the corner in to have a meal and be warmed.

Gerald was amused, tolerant as one is to a child. It stung me, and I said, "But my dear Gerald, what was I to do? The poor man! He was half frozen, and hungry!"

Gerald said, "But my dear girl, if it were as bad as all that there are charitable places where he might have gone, and it upsets them so downstairs." He was really rather annoyed.

Strictly 'entre nous' there are moments when I fairly despise the quiet traditional air of this house. Must I always do it this way because it always has been done this way? Why drag the dead past into the living present? Why so much dread of an idea for no other legitimate reason than because it is new? Everything done at the same hour every day, and always knowing what is going to be done each hour of every day. Everyone thinking the same thoughts, speaking the same language, and if in some hidden corner of their souls an idea strays that deviates ever so slightly from the beaten track, they crush it, frightened even to have thought of it. Method and method, and system and system, and saddest of all the certitude!

Are you smiling, amused at this impetuous outburst? Oh, I know! It's a threadbare cry of the times, and smacks rather horribly of futurism and liberty and elbowroom, and all the obvious subjects people ought never to talk about if they wish to be listened to. But one can't forever be profound, and things you live with every day have a habit of being far more true than amusing.

I never pass down my own staircase, nor enter the library with all the books in sets, nor sit at the head of that long shining table of linen and silver that I do not hear that word ringing in my ears, alien—alien—alien. Handsome, yes! Comfort, luxury, but not my own.

When Gerald brought me to this house he said, "You shall have my mother's rooms." From his point of view no such honor would ever be likely to descend a second time upon my luckless head. I ought not to be hard or to ridicule, for there was nothing intentionally patronizing about it. It was simply Gerald's idea of expressing recognition and regard for my worth, and as such deserves appreciation.

But how, surrounded as I am by this Victorianism, the bed with lace curtains draped from a ring in the ceiling, the footstools, the lampshades, the ugly tables, the heavy gloom of the upholstery, how can I be myself, and therefore how be happy?

The room is crowded. Crowded with what? Ornaments, furniture, respectability! Legends, fossils of antiquity! Not one corner, nothing anywhere expresses me. To change it! But how? In countless ways I feel her ghostly presence near me telling me that nothing must be touched, reproaching me for my thought. I look into the mirror and there she is behind me, the black silk gown, the large cameo on her breast catching a bit of old lace about her throat, the small delicate hands folded with what unconscious strength. A picture, not aggressive, aggressiveness is easy, but just a dreadful fixed tranquillity.

I am a weak creature, for if I had a spark of courage I should sweep these rooms clear and fill them with a riot of colour. I can see it all, a blaze of extravagance; excess, like a woman hung with too many jewels. Purples, deep rose and garnet, gilt and amber and apple-green; a couch like Cleopatra's, a dressing table like Marie Antoinette, frivolous, capricious, and for idleness, a 'chaise longue' with silken cushions of delicate hues, deep bowls of roses everywhere, and the most subtle of perfumes over the whole. A lustrous, an indolent conceit. Not all this to satisfy the artist in my soul, for, need I say it, my tastes are much more simple, but long-suffering my heart has grown revengeful. Poor Victoria! How crushed you would be by such a purposeful, and I fear vindictive triumph.

Often in a courageous mood I plan to speak to Gerald. I wake in the morning. Presently the maid will draw the curtains, those dark decorous curtains, and bring my morning tea. Morning tea! I loathe it! I am possessed by only one desire, and one conviction that not another day will my patient, or impatient spirit endure.

While I dress I turn carefully over in my mind, summoning all my poor store of tact, what I will say, and go down to breakfast determined to say it. Gerald comes politely from behind the *Times* (oh, if he would but sometimes

growl and make it easier for me!) From the side table I choose bacon, kippers or eggs, and it is postponed until the evening.

After dinner I watch him in his chair, the utterly unstudied correctness of his evening clothes, the long narrow foot, the fine lines of the hand raised to shield his face from the fire. Presently comes the late post, a chance remark about shooting in Scotland.

“Gerald, I should like to have my rooms—your mother’s rooms redecorated.” The words have hung trembling on my lips, appealing for expression, how many times. But they are never uttered. One does not do these things. One just goes on choosing bacon, kippers or eggs, reading the *Times*, and waiting for the late post.

The clock chimes the hour. Surely no strokes were ever so slow and even! A knell! A dirge! I know that I am beaten.

Still I have mercies for which I may be thankful, I have married a man almost familyless. One aunt is the only burden. Aunt Anne! She is very stiff and straight and sharp. A symphony in angularity. She is always dressed in black, and her skirt at the back trails on the rugs as she walks. She wears a small black bonnet, trimmed with a small black plume, and although probably it is frequently quite new, it is always the same bonnet.

She comes to tea, talks of the dog, the weather, having the chimneys swept, last week’s heavy fog, the most reliable place to have the chintz covers cleaned, the Army and Navy Stores, flannels and influenza, and then the weather and the dog.

Aunt Anne is given to grave thoughts, but none, I know, so grave as me. I am something she may have heard of, like Bolshevism, but never, she is thankful, intimately known. One day I told her about the studio, wanting for once to see her stunned into stupefaction. I should have been quite satisfied to arouse something less violent than that.

Giving her no loophole for preparedness I sprang it on her with a certain cruel deliberation, and watched for results. But if I had hoped to create chaos I was to be thoroughly deceived. For a breathless moment I did think that she looked like holding up her hands, and I am convinced that, inwardly at least, she was exclaiming, ‘O tempora, O mores!’ But that was all the triumph I was to get. Habit is too stubborn, custom too mighty, and the greatest of these is breeding. To my complete disappointment she continued to look nothing but genteel. Perhaps I have never admired her until that moment. It’s a horrid business, having one’s worst fears confirmed.

I had a satanic impulse to invite her to the studio for tea. I thought that might have done it, and I was merciless that day. I had it all planned out quite beautifully how I should receive her in my working dress, a window cleaners' costume of blue linen, a knee-length coat, trousers and all complete, and the tam that keeps my hair from blowing about my face perched at the most rakish angle conceivable. I dwelt excitedly on that exact angle. But at the moment Gerald came in.

He said, "Ah! Aunt Anne!" Oh, if you could imagine the way he says "Ah! Aunt Anne!" It settles everything. Absolutely final.

However, my blood was up, and even Gerald's presence almost failed upon this occasion in its usual sedative effect. I wanted to shout, I nearly did; I've never been so fatally close to anything in my life, "Out with it Aunt Anne! Tell him how frightfully sorry you are that he has got himself into such a shocking matrimonial mess. Say something! Say anything!"

What she *did* say was, "Gerald!" And turned her cold cheek to his dutiful kiss, while I subsided like a pricked balloon, beaten again.

No. 12 — — Square,
London.

Dear Stephen,—

When I left you in the gardens this morning I went to the studio. I began my work at the wheel, but it was impossible. Deserted of all my cunning my hands were no fit mould for the clay. I muddled about hopelessly clumsy, shaping some graceless thing, beating it down, beginning over. My clay was too soft, I had thrown on too much water, and with a string I cut a fresh mass. Another beginning. The wheel went spinning round and round, and made me dizzy watching it. 'This must be potter's palsy,' I said to myself, and presently in despair I gave it up.

Somewhere I read of a Japanese artist who built for himself a house of two stories. When the mood of solitude and creation was upon him he climbed a ladder to the second story and drew the ladder up after him so that nothing from below might disturb his peace.

To-day I drew my ladder up and dreamed away the afternoon. Chance thoughts closed around me of life in all its poignant beauty, and how lovely it is! Regrets, longings, hopes, sorrows, joys, all crowded into each day. What does it matter if sorrow is sad, if one but feels it! And why deplore that

one's longings be not gratified! Is it not far more that we have wished or longed at all! Even if something we have had be taken from us, perhaps something very dear, should we not be glad that it has even once been our own! Just remembering may be so beautiful, or just hoping. For all around us people go on day after day, aimlessly existing, incurious, consenting, indifferent to the possibilities each hour may hold for every one of us, even the unfortunate and sometimes they most of all. Surely the only sin must be in satisfaction, or if dissatisfied, acquiescence.

I thought of our intimate talk of this morning, and from what you told me, I guessed pretty well your perplexity, and drew my own conclusions. You've got a beautiful wife, Stephen, but in your case it's just the traveller wedded to the stay-at-home. I wonder—well, I was about to suggest that you should talk to Kathleen, and tell her how you feel, but then I suppose you can't really change people after all, and it wouldn't be very much satisfaction to do so, for everyone is only happy in his own natural groove in life. After all we are both pretty much in the same boat, aren't we, you and I, and I know only too well that it is anything but an easy matter adjusting oneself to a condition of living which is abstract and foreign to what you want. You thought suppression wrong, and that it should continue, tyranny. The important thing was courage. One ought to have enough of it to go ahead and branch out some way or other. It did not matter much really how you did it, and a great amount of what is forced upon us in regard to duty was rather idle. I wonder if you are right! It is certainly a great temptation to me to believe so. Am I always to live beneath the eyes of a disapproving butler, and in time become a married Aunt Anne, and wear a bonnet with a nodding plume, and talk of the weather and the chimneys being swept!

There in the corner was my wheel, and on it the moist grey clod still waiting to be moulded. A potter, not liking what he moulds, destroys and throws his clay again, and on and on, until at last he fashions something nearer to his dream. Why not? I looked about my studio, the floors and walls so worn and shabby, the haphazard arrangement of the unmatched furniture, so incorrect, yet all so infinitely dear. And I am happy here. Why not?

I fell to thinking on when in the early days of the studio I was visited by an old friend. She has wealth, position, and what opportunities! She came in, charmingly attractive, apologizing that she was late. 'The street was rather hard to find, the entrance so high up. Such a climb!' And then as an after-thought, a platitude, she added, 'but I expect you must find it most interesting.'

I was amused and secretly sorry for her. Her soul has never risen above an entrance or a street. They are still important, still necessary to her.

Near me on the table I had filled a pewter bowl with anemones, lovely shades of pinks and mauves, and I thought how beautiful they looked in the mellow evening light, and that if there had been nothing else in the room but—that, there would still have been beauty, and of my own creating. The bowl was mine, the choice of flowers and their arrangement mine, and I threw out my hands in the ecstatic delight of possession. From my window I could see the river, and over the housetops, the day dying in a blaze of glory. What have the entrance and the street got to do with it!

I walked home slowly. Brookes, automatic, inevitable, opened the door, and later when I was dressed, he brought my letters to the drawing room. Soft-footed and with averted eyes, he laid the evening papers carefully folded on the table and drew the curtains, while furtively I watched his perfectly uncompromising back out of the room. And then I laughed softly to myself, thinking, ‘there is no mistake here about the entrance and the street.’

I am writing you a confused, and I am afraid, not a very satisfactory letter, but it is only an indication of my own inner confusion and discontent.

What am I to do?

Just this moment I left my desk and stood a while at the open window looking out upon a dark and starless night, so dark and starless that I could see nothing about me but the street lamps, dismal little halos of light. And stretched before me, black, unseen but crushing, the Square! It bore down upon and overwhelmed me with what immensity of pride and place! It is a prison-house into which I have wandered, but it is idle now to plot escape for my captive spirit.

There is nothing to do.

Perhaps some day if I had the courage just never to come back to it. But I have no courage, and I have come back. Oh, Stephen, Stephen, you who have never lived this life and known its deadly weight, do not be contemptuous of me and my timidity, nor reproach me in a secret corner of your heart.

And if in the gardens to-day I dared to fancy—. But I was intoxicated, drunk with the sweetness, the exquisite freshness of morning. One is caught up in the magic of the moment, carried away.

And so goodnight. This morning—but this morning was a dream, and as a dream is gone. Evening is here, and the world and our families are calling from below, and I hear Gerald's step upon the stair.

Ladders down!

II.

THE STUDIO.

No. 9 — — Walk,
Chelsea.

Stephen,—

Will you be surprised? I have left the Square, and I am here in the studio for a time at least.

There is very little to be said, and yet thinking of it now I am amazed. So short a time ago, even yesterday, I was resigned, or almost so, to-day a fugitive. How queer that all the little every day decisions should seem to take so much time and thought, and this—it has been done in a moment. An impulse, an overpowering necessity, impossible to explain.

This morning when I came here I sat down quietly and wondered what actually had driven me to this. So many things came into my mind yet none of them alone or together seemed sufficient.

Ridicule? No, there had been very little of that, and in any case one can bear with ridicule. Condemnation? Condemnation may be different, though even at its worst one may endure if only there be open warfare, a chance for fair discussion, where you have a footing, not fighting in the dark. And then I had a ridiculous thought of Brookes. Was it Brookes who had driven me out? I hadn't been a match for such formidable perfection perhaps. Well, it is not after all so absurd as it sounds.

Oh reasons! Why search for reasons! They are too often nothing more than excuses. Let me at least be honest. I have met my Sedan and I have deserted. Despise me if you like for I have fled the field, vanquished, but not subdued.

There have been no words, nothing approaching a quarrel. When the moment arrived it was all so simple, so unbelievably easy. I told Gerald that I wanted to be alone for a while, and explained where I would be. The least evidence of hurt or anger and there might have been some ground for hope,

but he was only a little surprised, and protested of course, it seemed to me more as a matter of propriety than as anything else. Am I pitiless? But why be insincere? He does not need me, and when he understood that I was really in earnest he accepted it with characteristic equanimity.

Such a little thing, pride! But oh, how starched and how vainglorious! Even in the end I looked for just one little wavering weakness. But no! Well perhaps I too have got my share of pique and plume. I'll let it go at that.

I cannot be sad or regretful, for the day has been a glorious one. I walked through the Park, hearing the distant sound of music, catching a glimpse of the red coats of the band through the trees. And the green, so fresh, so newly kissed to life. The long slanting yellow light, a prophesy of evening. Soon night, and then—the breaking of another day.

Of the future I know nothing, nor can I even guess. But what satisfaction, what triumph to know that you have thrown behind you each arresting influence, and now at last you are your own unfettered self. And just as I stretched out my arms to embrace all that was mine in the studio, I now throw them wide to life. It too will be mine.

I am free, and how happy! Promise and delight are everywhere.

Ave! Viva!

No. 9 — — Walk,
Chelsea.

You know Stephen a habit, an eccentricity if you prefer, that I have of always keeping one day in the week for a ramble, just to wander and enjoy. To-day I have been all down the Strand, Fleet Street and Ludgate Hill. Blindfolded now I could find my way.

How I love it, that busy hum of men and action, the people on the streets streaming by crowds and crowds, labourer, idler, beggar, dreamer, mummer and looker-on!

Here and there out of a sea of faces one touches you, draws attention, and passing leaves a memory indefinable as it is unaccountable. Just a glance, a glimmer of understanding, a queer divining pantomime. They are gone and you will never see them again.

A young girl with bright cheeks, her hands thrust deep in the pockets of her belted coat, careless, alert, alive. What happy eyes! What is she thinking

about? But of course, of love and the adored one.

An old man, a weakened wreck of time and circumstance, guiding his blind steps with a cane tapping incessantly before him on the pavement, about his neck a tray of matches and shoelaces pleadingly offered to the passersby, hoping for luck and a few pence.

On the corner near Ludgate Hill the flower girls, noisy and florid behind their brilliant patch of blooms, nosegay in hand thrust towards you temptingly, shawls about their solid shoulders, and the inimitable ostrich tip drooping boldly over the brims of their rusty black sailors.

The buses freight-laden with humanity, jolted by and pulled up abruptly at the curb, while a busman, halted in the traffic beside another, flings a jest to his mate, and boisterously they continue to laugh it out together until with the ongoing tide they are lost to one another.

How happy they all are, and I was happy too just wandering on and dreaming. I have not asked for very much, have I? Just to be left alone, to wander on and dream. That is all it amounts to really.

The afternoon was dark and St. Paul's wrapt deep in gloom. One could but dimly see the pigeons perched quivering on the steps, or darting suddenly upward on swift restless flights, balanced overhead on spreading wing. As early as three o'clock the yellow lights broke through the windows and open doorways, shining, like all the lights of London, palely, yet how inviting!

Shops and houses. What romance! What enchantment! How much of life lies packed beyond those door ways, and I was not to pass the afternoon without an adventure.

Towards evening while I lingered in one of my favourite haunts, a tiny shop just back of Clifford's Inn, the door opened, and turning my head quite casually as one does, I saw beside me, standing phantom-like beneath the spluttering gas jet, a youth so slim and pale that I was momentarily startled. For an instant I could see only the face, looming out of the shadows, and silhouetted against the darkening doorway like an apparition.

The shop being scarcely large enough to hold one customer in comfort he apparently felt somewhat of an intruder, and raising his hat with an air of apology, he turned his attention to a heap of second-hand music that lay upon a broken Windsor chair.

I had been looking over some old books, and having alighted upon an early edition, two volumes in most disreputable bindings of de Seigne, and

promptly purchased them, I moved to the door and was met by London's own phenomenon—fog.

I've never yet got reconciled to fog. It fascinates but frightens me. I like well enough to watch from the window its gathering and mysterious opaqueness, and to feel myself just upon the edge of slipping away into its weird sense of detachment, but I dread to be actually out in it. I am always very glad to have the glass of the window pane as a barrier of safety, and while I hesitated with my foot on the step I heard a most attractive voice at my shoulder, "I beg your pardon, but hadn't you better wait a little? It's rather dense."

I thought so too, and then began a conversation that drifted from fogs and the weather to the interests of the little shop and finally to music.

His voice had attracted me at once; so deep, and vibrating with a soft melodious cadence. I liked the dark eyes set in a white intensely sensitive face.

Presently the gloom without was pierced by the faint yellowish light of a street lamp, and the fog was slowly lifting. We made our way cautiously to the nearest tube, and before it was reached I knew that he had dreams of a musical career. I had told him about the studio, and he had asked an altogether tactful permission to come and see me there. You know how it is. Some people do these things quite naturally and leave the impression of having been simple and friendly rather than forward, and all the more delightful for lacking in convention. Madam Grundy has always found a cold home with me, and long since has fled to warmer hearths. And there are plenty of them. She won't freeze, I'm sure of that. I know at least of one where she may browse forevermore, and having driven me once from there, she must be content with her victory as I am with my defeat. Yes, I've had my fill of Madam Grundy.

When I reached the studio the old man who lives in the basement was attending to my fire. It was burning brightly shedding warmth and cheer, and I threw myself beside it in absolute comfort.

"How lovely, Mr. Watkins!" I said, "it's horrid out, this fog."

"Fog!" he said, regarding me scornfully over the rim of his spectacles, "I've known some fogs in my day," and proceeded to tell me of all the fogs he had known in his day.

He is a great old bore, and garrulous! But thinking of Brookes, how human! He began all over again the story of his life, but I was oblivious.

Pleasantly reminiscent of my day, steeped in lazy and genial ease, I watched the firelight, fitful, dancing, gleaming on my brass and copper warming pans hanging on the wall. I heard nothing of what he was telling me, only his voice droning on and on, and presently he shuffled out of the room.

I drew up my chair, and held out my hands to the heat. ‘Some day,’ I thought, ‘I will have a new rug here. Persian, Turkish, Chinese? It does not matter, but it will be browns and yellows with some blue. I want a cabinet too. That one I saw on Brook Street of walnut, and such walnut, deep mellow and rich, with a rounded top and latticed doors and a thin piecrust edge of dulled gilt about the base. I should stand it there between those two windows. I will go and look at it again to-morrow. I can’t have it, but I can look at it, and dream about having it.’

“That corner is too dark, it needs something,” and I placed a platter with a bright design on the top bookshelf and stood back studying the effect, idling about contemplating, changing and enjoying.

I made my tea. The little tea pot I found one day in a tiny shop in Islington. I remember how I caught sight of it in the window surrounded by a medley of second-hand clothing, some worthless books, and a tray of odds and ends bearing a written card, “Every article on this tray 1/6 each.” I remember too with what delighted jubilation I came away with it under my arm feeling like an angler with a prize catch. I carried it all the way to the studio before going home to the Square. One does not carry parcels in the Square. Moreover it belonged to the studio and not to the Square, and why supply Brookes with any additional ground for his wretched superiority? He wouldn’t have understood that tea pot. It was quite a humble little tea pot.

I am so contented. How nice not to have anyone asking you what you have done that day. It makes me so impatient. You are not always ready to talk about it, and if you are you will without enquiry. Otherwise you would rather not have the question put to you. You have to pass it off by answering “oh, one thing and another,” or some other banality, and so the dialogue, not being spontaneous, dwindles down into guessing what the chances are for a late spring or an early summer. It’s so absurd. Why must people talk?

When you have an interesting book someone is sure to say, “that light is bad,” or “you read too much,” or “your eyes’ll give out.” What is the use of telling people? They probably know, and if they don’t they won’t by any chance believe you.

If it is not advice about ‘the light being bad,’ or ‘your eyes giving out,’ they ask you pleasantly (too pleasantly, for it calls upon you to be pleasant)

what the book is about. If only they would snap and give you the much desired opportunity to snap back! But pleasantness is awful! You dislike being interrupted, and if you say the natural, the truthful thing, “Don’t bother me just now,” there is an offended silence. The sort of a silence that plays on your nerves like nothing else. It makes you feel a perfect beast, and is so wholly exasperating that you might far better have told them in the first place what the book was about; history, philosophy, psychology, logic or love. And now where are you? How much wiser are they, and you—? You don’t want to launch out into a discussion of history, philosophy, psychology, logic or love; you want to get on with your book. You are voted a boor, when all you really wish for is to be left alone. Why is it rude to tell people that you wish they would leave you alone?

The clock chimes the hour. An exclamation! “Half past ten!” They are so surprised because it is half past ten. They want you to be surprised, and if you are not they repeat it just as though you had not heard them the first time.

Not to be forced into giving a reason. “Will you do this or that this morning or this afternoon, or this evening?” Perhaps you happen not to be in the mood for it. If you say “no,” they ask, “Why?” Or, “well what *are* you going to do?” There is nothing for it, you must make an excuse, you must be a coward, you must lie. What a bother!

To close or open the window without having to ask if someone minds, or to have them ask if you mind. Not to have to go to the opera if you prefer the cinema, or to the cinema if you prefer the opera. To be able to go out and come in when you like, or not to go out and come in at all. To change your mind about going out and coming in.

Oh people! People weren’t made to live together in the same house.

No. 9 — — Walk,
Chelsea.

Dear Stephen,—

Your letter, clamouring for news, complaining that you have heard nothing of me for two months, (though I am sure it is not half so long as that) came this morning.

What has been happening to me? Really very little. Sometimes life is just delightful adventures one after another, beginning or ending, and held

by some divine and reckless chance you are swept along with the tide. And then again you are left in a little backwater and just as helpless there.

I envy you Devonshire, for London is dull, too listless to be either pleasant or inspiring. The air is torpid like heavy sleep, and I have given way to frequent fits of weariness and depression. No sunlight, no morning, no evening, just long grey days of fogs and rain and languor.

But I have been busy too and have only just completed a copy of a dozen old Dutch tiles, delft, in various designs of animals. They are my first work on tiles and I had many setbacks, especially with my colour in the kiln. It ran so much at first attempts that my poor animals took on the semblance of haunted nightmares. I found it all very interesting, but possibly because of the weather, or is it my mental attitude that is at fault, I have not got so much pleasure out of my work as I ought and usually do.

Once in the midst of a busy day I stopped and looked at my tiles now almost ready for the firing, and overcome by a sudden petulance I pushed them from me impatiently. I almost hated them. One toppled from the table and broke in half and I picked it up thinking, 'now I have spoiled the set. Oh well, what does it matter? I can make a thousand tiles. But what am I doing it for? Isn't there anything better to do than making tiles?'

For the first time the studio seemed small and cramped and still, and oh so empty, and then I put on my hat and went out into the streets just to see the people and hear the noise and bluster of the traffic. It rained and rained and I came in drenched to the studio and the broken tile. 'If this is life,' I said to myself, 'I do not like it much.'

However, apart from all this, one splash of colour has been added to an otherwise rather sombre month. In a recent letter to you did I not tell you of my meeting with a young 'artist' in the fog? You will remember how interested I was and wondering if I would ever see him again. That he was a musician and his name Ian Hastings was all that I knew about him until one afternoon not long ago, at tea time, just as my little kettle began to sing, there he was in the doorway, a dripping umbrella in one hand, his hat in the other, the collar of his Burbury buttoned up around his chin.

I was really glad to see him, and I thought how young he looked, how lonely and how depressed. He moved about the studio quite friendly and at home, not talking much at first, but the drowsy hour of twilight, a musing fire and tea compel confidences.

It is quite a romance. He is married, has quarrelled with an extremely wealthy but not very sympathetic 'paterfamilias' because he hates office

work. He found it impossible to support a wife on music alone. He would naturally. And the dénouement! She returns to the father and he to his career.

Ours was a friendship that began at once without prelude or convention, and following this first visit he came to the studio frequently, always a little restless and depressed. I knew that he loved his work but I could see that he was not really happy. I was interested, and curious too I must confess, but to press a confidence—never!

One afternoon while he sat thoughtfully beside the fire flicking the ashes from one cigarette after another, he said in his low expressive voice, “I wonder if you can help me to see daylight a little. You somehow seem so happy.”

His work has been going fairly well, although to him it would matter very little whether he ever did anything great or not, just so long as it be music. Triumph was, as it is so often, not the essential thing.

He said, “It is my wife. I ought to go back.”

I looked up in some surprise. The idea, coming from him, seemed trite and out of place. I did not know how to answer him and after a moment I said, “But she is comfortable. Your father, he is quite able—” I stopped, afraid to be intrusive.

“Yes, he is able, and willing, but it is not his responsibility. It is mine.”

Ah! So that was it, the secret of all his moods. But duty! It was the last thing which I should have attributed to him.

“You understand,” he went on, “how at first I could not give up my idea. I would not accept anything from home. You can understand that sort of pride. We lived in poverty, more or less, but I had to compose. I spent long hours dreaming over the piano, but we were starving, or something very like it, scarcely the life for my wife, a beautiful and pleasure-loving girl. She kept urging me to go back to my father, and in the end she left me. How can I blame her? What else could I expect? Such a struggle was too foreign to one reared as she had been. I knew that too, very well, when I married her, but I had hoped—I scarcely know what now. I did not take things into full consideration, her temperament and my own. And now recently some force, something compelling has got ahold of me. You know how it is when a thought, an idea dogs your very existence. You have to talk about it to someone. I ought to go back.” He finished with a sigh.

“But your music?” I said.

He looked at me, a droll little smile in the dark beseeching eyes.

I went on, "Could you not satisfy your father with a certain amount of office work and still have some time—."

He broke in impatiently, "No, no, I can't compromise. You can imagine it. I work on the accounts during the morning, and probably at about four (and it would be the same stated maddening hour every day) my father comes in. It gives him a personal sense of victory to see me there, and so being pleased and feeling generous, he pats me approvingly on the back and says, 'That'll do for to-day, my boy. Now run along and compose,' or something to that effect. Oh, he would do it just like that. You don't know his magnanimity."

I bent my head smiling, a little amused, yet fully recognizing and appreciating the truth of all this. And here it was again, a case almost identical with my own. The potter not liking what he moulds, his right to mould again.

"It seems," I said, "quite as unfair that you should be expected to give up your life entirely, as that—."

"If I could be sure of that," he said, "but you see I married her. The life I gave her was not the one she had expected, and she could not see the necessity for it. Perhaps she was right, but I was a rebel, I wanted everything my own way. However, it comes to one or the other of us, I am stronger, more fit to make the sacrifice, change, whatever you may wish to call it."

"Ian," I said, "I am afraid that I can't very well help you in this. It is rather beyond my province. Other people can hardly judge or advise. You must work out such a thing as this for yourself."

"Yes," he agreed, "I know that. But where would you say the line was fairly drawn? Duty, to others, to yourself? What is too great a sacrifice either way?"

"Oh, Ian," I held up my hands, "you can't expect me to tell you that. It's rather a momentous question, and I—am anything but a moralist. But come, you are taking this too seriously."

He shrugged his shoulders and began at once to talk of something else, and shortly afterwards he left me with no further discussion.

But now my world was shaken and somewhere a note was jarring a little out of tune. At first glance Ian's secret and rather indefinite discontent had struck me as false, altogether out of proportion, a childish thing, and had it

not been so clear to me how real at the moment it was to him, I should have brushed it aside, too trivial a matter for consideration. 'It is nothing,' I said to myself convincingly, 'nothing but the natural and fleeting alternations of his temperament. He will have forgotten it to-morrow.' I suppose that I wanted him to forget.

And yet I thought about it, and gradually in some mysterious way it communicated itself to me, not only as a thing apart, but as a personal question. I was seized with a shadowy sense of unrest and shook it off impatiently. 'What has it got to do with me?' I thought, 'why should it touch me with so peculiar a significance? That word, 'responsibilities,' that phrase — 'I ought.'

I looked about me searching for the harmony and satisfaction that never yet had failed me in this room. Above the mantel hangs a colour print, just the young fresh face of a girl, whose red and tilted lips have always seemed to give back to me a gay smile of recognition and encouragement, but now were touched with something of disdain. And in the firelight the warming pans leered at me strangely, the piercings in the metal-like grinning eyes in round, yellow face, deriding me ironically.

I closed my eyes wearily, and then through some queer following of ideas I saw an image of the Square. If since leaving it, I had thought of it at all, it had only been as some dim relic of the past, and now I wondered how it was possible that what had once been so much a part of my life could be so quickly forgotten.

Gerald, Aunt Anne, Brookes, the *Times*, eggs, bacon and kippers. How soulless and insensible! Yet thinking of it now through the haze that touches things remote and far away, it seemed a blurred and softened picture.

Aunt Anne! The same black dress and bonnet, the nodding plume, but what had happened to her? She seemed no longer stiff, more kind and gentle, and old. I had never realized how old she must be. People do not easily accept a new viewpoint when they are old. I hadn't thought of that.

And Gerald, all reserve and dignity, but was he not only reflecting what all his life long he had been taught and trained to reflect? Did he really condemn? And for my part had I made one single honest effort to right the situation, and explain to him the reason for my impatience. He had been so proud, but I — was I altogether blameless?

How dark the shadows in the corners! The rain is coming down in torrents. And the wind! It howls across the roof, and shakes the windows and sets them rattling in their frames.

It might be a nice relief to hear someone say, 'That light is bad,' or 'You read too much,' or exclaim that it was 'half past ten.'

I am lonely.

No. 9 — — Walk,
Chelsea.

Stephen, I am touched, and grateful too, your coming to London after my last letter. Being fairly human after all, and not half so self-sufficing as I seem, I am not at all averse to being thought about and helped, and you have done both. Seeing you again, talking to you has been something by way of a faith cure. How did you know so well what I needed, and that just forgetting, work, perplexities, ideas, surrendering everything to one May day in Kew, could be so perfect a panacea for disordered meditations?

The colour, the space, the sun, a warm caress; rhododendron bushes, a feast of beauty, crowded and drooping beneath their weight of lovely blooms! Fields of golden daffodils blowing in the wind. Lyrical! Absolutely lyrical! What place have triste and clouded thoughts amidst such breathless beauty? Waxing eloquent I am! But Stephen, that *is* life as it should be. Things growing in the open, each plant producing its own natural flower and fragrance, pellucid and tender, nothing cramped, or forced and overshadowed. Plenty of room and light, and—freedom.

After our long walk with what a delicious fatigue we threw ourselves under the trees beside the narrow walled stream! You and I have a generous capacity, Stephen, for just enjoying the luxury of being idle, and presently when I heard your voice summoning me from my dream-world, "Could one go on like this forever? What do you think?" I begged you not to ask me to think. You smiled contentedly, gluttonously lazy and we fell silent.

I see again the two merry little ruffians on the opposite bank of the stream fishing with a worm on a bent pin, their round impudent faces, the brazen stare in their wide brown eyes. You called to them, "What do you catch there, boys?" And how we shrieked with joy at the answer wafted across to us, "'errings and plice, sorr." What a sense of humour! Shamelessly infantile, I call it.

There are moments, Stephen, the most golden of all, one steals from time, and yesterday we were thieves, our plunder a few short sunny hours. All wonderful things are shy and fugitive. Greedily we seek for them and in rare moments they come to us unsought. They linger with us briefly, and

greedily again we stretch out grasping hands, but that not being in the divine plan of things, they go. Always and forever, from the whims and heights of our castle building, we are snatched back again to the actual.

When I left you I went to the studio and was waylaid at the door by Ian, a sad tired Ian, begging mutely for solace and for tea.

“I was afraid,” he said, “that I might not find you. I don’t know what I should have done.”

I was so happy that I laughed outright that he could be so mournful.

“Life is terrible. Is that it, Ian?”

“You have an uncanny intuition,” he said.

We talked quietly for a time. I told him about Kew, about the ’errings and the plice. He smiled a little at that, but he was dreadfully restless and depressed, and I saw that I was failing in all my efforts to cheer him. I did not know what to do with him, and felt impatient, not with Ian, but with circumstances, and I thought irritably, ‘Why can’t one go on doing what one likes best? This theory of other people’s claims is nothing more than a half truth. Isn’t it enough just to be happy, even as you and I had been that day? Why can’t everyone just be happy?’

I looked at Ian, studying the expressive mouth, moody yet sweet, the eyes wistful and remote, like mirrors of a troubled soul intent upon a search for truth. And then once more I hesitated, stirred and dubious. I wasn’t sure. But still the spirit of the day was too much with me, ‘No, no,’ I thought, ‘he is wrong.’

And then I decided to approach him quite frankly. ‘I shall have to be very material,’ I thought, and I said, “Ian, are you in love with your wife?”

He smiled at the question but answered me gravely enough, “I am very fond of her. I have only seen her once in five months.”

“It sounds perhaps a bit heretical to suggest it, for this I know is a serious thing to you, but have you ever considered divorce?”

“Yes, for her sake I have thought of it, but it is not a solution in my case, and I am rather inclined to doubt its efficacy collectively as a law.”

“But why?” I wondered what he knew about it. I couldn’t imagine him dwelling on problems of that sort.

“It’s all too slack. I know of course that there must be many deserving cases where conditions are intolerable, but I am speaking of more incipient

affairs, I suppose like my own, where a disastrous outcome might be checked and avoided if taken in time. It seems to me that as long as two people take it into their heads to marry and live together in the same house year in and year out, they must expect some friction. This is not a world for division, but for a continual bridging and patching up and adjusting of differences. It's a nuisance of course. We don't like it, but then! Divorce is only a palliative, and a palliative that people are beginning to take to all too readily," and after a moment he added naively enough, "There ought to be a court for the express purpose of holding people up to public ridicule, for making them see themselves as others see them, and what would really help more than anything also would be to educate them up into keeping their tempers. Some sort of a law ought to be passed to make it compulsory."

"I've a glimmer of doubt as to the wisdom of that, Ian," I said. "The world is bad enough as it is, you want to make it intolerable. And I can't see that keeping one's temper has got very much to do with education. The most educated people lose their tempers. That is why I left the Square. Certainly no lack of education there, but no one ever got angry. Don't you know the joys of a good stiff breeze?"

He paid no attention to this and warming now to his subject he waved debative arms over his head exclaiming, "Tolerance, tolerance, it is the most priceless of virtues."

I broke in, "A priceless virtue! I daresay. But hardly an agreeable daily companion. Virtue isn't everything," I grumbled.

But he was not listening to me. "Mutual toleration, it ought to be branded on every marriage certificate."

"Ian! How disgustingly worldly! Imagine desecrating a marriage certificate as you suggest. It's absolute heresy. A few things still do remain sacred. Have you no faith in romance, or that married people can ever continue to love one another?"

He caught me up, "Now, there you are. Have I no faith in romance, or that married people can ever continue to love one another? What you say is practically an admission that married people continuing to love one another is romance."

I turned my head away with a helpless gesture, "Oh, go away. Don't talk to me any more," I said, but he went on.

"And you are right. It is romance, and certainly I have faith in it. But I am also convinced that there would be infinitely less trouble all around if

everyone would begin and end the day with a prayer for mutual toleration.”

“If I hear that word again I shall go mad. How awful Ian! Think of it! To get up in the morning saying to oneself, ‘Oh, give me grace to endure this man’s or this woman’s presence—’ Horrible! You are doing a great deal of chattering, but you are not proving anything.”

He shook his head, “Oh proving. We don’t prove things. We only believe them. It’s not a problem in mathematics exactly.”

Following a moment’s silence, sullen on my part, for by that last remark I felt that I had been outdone, he returned to his subject with added animation, “More toleration (I’m sorry to have to use the word again) means inevitably less incompatibility. Less incompatibility and at least half the divorce courts would go into liquidation, and a very good thing too.”

“Are you sure that people would be any happier for that?”

“I think that many of them would. If there were no easy way out of it, they’d jog along.”

“But, ‘jogging along,’ Ian. It isn’t—well a tempting existence.”

“No, it’s not tempting, it’s necessary. People marry, and before long they catch one another in all sorts of absurd situations. Now think, for instance, of seeing for the first time your husband being politically affable to a business acquaintance, someone you know that he really intensely dislikes. He looks a bit silly doesn’t he? ‘What a hypocritical idiot he is,’ you think, ‘not the man I thought he was at all.’ Or your wife, entertaining a woman whom she really despises and envies. What a babbling little simpleton! They are real revelations, those. Not an end, but a beginning, certainly. There is nothing like seeing one another being ridiculous. And just imagine, to come down to much more trivial things, though quite as important, all the little daily happenings, buttoning your boots, powdering your nose. It’s not romantic at all. It’s ludicrous. But you can’t get away from it. You have to put up with it. Jog along! Romance will rarely survive in anything like its pristine freshness over and above such scenes as those. Do you think— —”

“I think you are getting rather off your subject. You begin a debate on divorce, and now it is buttoning your boots, and powdering your nose. If you take up an argument you ought to keep to your theme. You can’t run down every little lane and alley that presents itself and expect to be convincing. Men talk about women being illogical, but I never heard anything like this. And, as I said before, it’s middleclass.”

“Logic! Bah! Don’t talk to me of logic. I detest the word. Who is ever logical? Some stupid people merely dupe themselves into believing that they are, that’s all. It’s a dull thing anyhow. And middleclass! Well, I must say that the middleclass often come far nearer a true interpretation of life than the cultured. They do it unconsciously, and without theory. They seldom think about it at all, but they arrive. Cant, if you like, the family, the church, Christmas cards and all that, but I am inclined to believe that a little cant may not be such a bad thing after all. It’s a good sheet anchor if nothing more, and there are plenty of us here in this world below who would be none the worse for a sheet anchor. I often read for the sake of amusement and rest the evidence in the popular divorce cases that crowd the courts. My landlady is an amiable soul, and seems to have guessed the natural trend of my literary tastes, and so she leaves her Daily Mirror in my room every morning when she is through with it. It’s very kind of her you know. I read it in the evenings if ever I am troubled with a bout of insomnia. Now, there you have it in all its details, tragic and comic, mundane and otherwise. Only just recently there was a case in which the evidence submitted by the woman read something like this, ‘I can’t see too much of people. I become satiated. It’s my temperament. It won’t stand it. It spoils everything.’ You know the sort of thing. (Oh yes, I am exaggerating for effect, not very much though, I give you my word.) Well, so far as I could make out what the poor soul-torn woman was trying to convey was that if only she had never been forced into so disagreeable a necessity as seeing her husband about the house, or anywhere else, for that matter, all this unfortunate business would never have happened, and she would have gone on loving him with dutiful affection forever. Now there’s a woman whom a sheet anchor and just a little cant wouldn’t do any harm.”

“But, Ian, wait a moment. Let me get my breath. Are we talking about divorce, or sheet anchors or Christmas cards, or what? If I am not mistaken your idea is that too much culture may be at the root of the evil. But all that, what you have just described, I’d call it by some other name than culture.”

“It’s a certain sort of culture. A needless excess of refinement.”

“Of course there is always the extreme. You are citing a very extreme case.”

“Not so very. You may think so, and certainly it sounded so by the time it came into the courts, but in all probability, and I could wager that it did begin with some absurd and infinitesimal thing.”

“But you are forgetting. It’s the absurd and infinitesimal things that count most. It always is.”

“I know that. But is it any reason for dwelling on them, magnifying them, letting them run around loose in your mind, until they become with thought simply colossal? Well, to go on with the case in point, the woman finally accused her husband of indelicacy and a lack of consideration, because, so far as my limited intelligence would carry me, he had not gone down on his knees and knocked on her door, and begged for admittance.”

“Well, would you have wanted the husband to rush into the room and seize her by the hair of the head, or some aboriginal thing like that?” I was growing warm.

“No, not at all, although I am bound she would have had a great deal more respect for him if he had done something of the sort. But what I mean to say is this, that if those two people had been sharing (now sharing is the word, not occupying, and don’t get them confused) the same room in the good old middleclass style, there would have been no doors, no knockings and probably no divorce. You see what I mean? Nice fuzzy little bunnies live quite happily in their little holes.”

“Yes,” I said with fine scorn, “I see what you mean. It’s very deep and profound, but I’m able to grasp it. Not very well of course. I’m limited. You mustn’t expect too much of me, but I’m getting on. You’ll be preaching about the birds in their nests and having large families soon.”

“I might do worse.”

“But bunnies and birds, you must remember, have no brain.”

“Ah!” He fixed me with pointed finger, “that’s it. Brain! Too much of it. Some people grab all the brain. They make a regular corner in brain. Beastly selfish I call it.”

“No,” I said, “I can’t agree with you at all, and I am reaching the point where I shall cease to be amused and become genuinely angry. You deprecate intellect and uphold the commonplace.”

“I do neither. I don’t deprecate intellect. I admire it in any form. And I only uphold the commonplace as a sedative.”

“A sedative! A sedative to what?”

“To intellect. Oh, don’t ask me any more.”

“Quite right. I won’t. You have already got yourself into the most awful maze about simply nothing at all. I defy you to get out of it with any grace or credit.”

“I have no intention of trying. Too much of a fag, and I’m hot enough as it is.”

“Oh,” I threw out at him, “what a coward to get out of it like that, just because you’re hot. However I’m not sorry. I am far from sure that I can stand any more myself. My head is fairly swimming as it is, or bursting, I’m not sure which. But I’ll throw you one small crumb of comfort. I may not agree with you, but it is at least a point of view. I do see that much.”

“Kind soul,” he mocked, “generous as ever. But I’ll make you respect me yet before I am through with you.”

He really was very funny, so young, so much in earnest and still so much at sea. Yet through my amusement I could not help but understand that there was more than a little truth in what he said, and that all this banter was but a cloak covering a struggle to arrive at a decision in his own case.

I had never before been inclined to think him really serious in this matter of giving up his music, except in the spirit of a passing mood, and now I began to be a little astonished to see how deeply he actually felt about it, and how much real thought he was giving to the subject.

He had dropped suddenly from animated conversation to a pensive silence and sat stretched with an easy grace in his chair.

“Ian,” I said, struck by a sudden curiosity, “you know my own story and why I am here. I wonder what you think of me. Tell me.”

He regarded me a moment with clear divining eyes, and then he smiled his own disarming smile, “No, I couldn’t. You’d be angry.”

“Oh,” I exclaimed, “am I so bad as all that?”

“Well then, if you must know. I think you are rather like a child with a new toy, and like a child you are tiring of it. Now I can’t help it. You asked me for it, and I said you would be angry.”

“But I am not at all. I am rather impressed,” and I was. And where a moment before I had been amused and laughing I was now quickly overtaken by a deep and brooding depression. Why is it that nothing ever quite fulfills its promise? Always we seem to fall short of something. I sound like some lamenting heroine of the stage. But what confusion! Do any of us know exactly at what we are aiming? Do I? I had thought so.

“Marriage!” I burst out impatiently, “It’s a stupid institution if you ask me. It’s selfish and narrow and—oh bother!”

I really felt this intensely at the moment, and was peeved that he could laugh at me with such evident and wholehearted amusement for saying it. It was not so terribly funny, and, like the rest of my sex, I dislike not to be taken seriously.

“It seems to me,” he said with mock gravity, “that someone somewhere has expressed that opinion before you. Probably if the real truth were known every single unfortunate human who has slipped his neck within the noose has said it, certainly thought it, at one time or another. However, what are you going to do about it? Have you hit upon a better plan? No! Then what’s to be done?”

I meditated gloomily, and then, “You do really think of giving up your career?” I said.

He smiled, “Career is a big word,” and getting to his feet he threw out his hands with a movement of impatience as though he were tired thinking about it.

“Give it up? I don’t know. I’m not happy though.”

“But do you think anyone is all the time?”

“No, of course not. I don’t hope for that, nor want it. Perfect harmony is out of the question, and who but the stupid would expect or wish to make an adagio out of life! Not I at any rate. But there is a great deal in feeling satisfied.”

“And don’t you?”

“No, I can’t. But I must not inflict myself upon you any further, or you will close the door in my face the next time that I come.”

I regarded him affectionately, “Never that,” I said, “Sit down and play me something.”

He sat down at the piano. His fingers lingering with loving passion over the keys filled the stillness of the studio with a sweetly mournful melody that closed upon a hushed and beautiful chord.

I raised my eyes to meet his troubled ones, and when he had gone I was left, not sad but sobered, and sensitive, as though all his perplexities, his riddle of life were in part, my own. I can’t shake it off or get away from it. Divorce! Why had I defended divorce? Was it because secretly I had thought

of it all along? Perhaps. And yet what right have I? Rights! Have I become suddenly religious?

Well, I left my husband because I did not like the butler and the furniture. Can that be right? I have been so happy, and so satisfied, and now it is only in a fleeting moment of excitement that I capture again that first rapturous content. What is this thing that threatens my peace? It tracks me everywhere. Conscience? Well then, if it is conscience I do not like it. And if it is conscience for what is it reproaching me? What fault? What crime? All my happiness, my heavenly freedom, have I been cheated? Is it not the real truth after all? Doubt is hateful, and I have been so sure. Yesterday with you I was so sure. And now—. It is life. It changes so, from day to day it changes, and we with it.

No. 9 — — Walk,
Chelsea.

Stephen! Jealous! Of my solitude, of my desire for it, to share it with me. But I do not mean to avoid you as you imagine. Much of the truth is that I am completely tired out, and you know that I have been working very hard. And the rest I am unable to explain, even to my own heart. In all my life I have never felt so lost and so alone. It's not pleasant. And yet now, queerly enough, I dread to be helped or influenced one way or the other. I only know that I must work my own way out of this dark tunnel into which I have wandered, and surely soon I shall see the light of day. But don't, oh don't misunderstand. We are all slaves to our moods, variable, uncertain, inexplicable.

You ask me for news of Ian, and this I am able to give you. I wonder if you will be surprised. Late this afternoon the silence of the studio was broken by a knock that I knew instinctively to be his. The door opened, and there he was, his chin lowered on his chest, a way that he has, the deep passionate eyes fixed on mine holding an expression half sad and half relieved. At once I knew that something had happened.

"I've plunged," he said.

"What! You have gone back, given up your music?"

"Yes! General family forgiveness and rejoicings, fatted calf and all that."

I fell weakly into the nearest chair. I had not anticipated such a surrender, for at the moment I could think of it as nothing but surrender, and

I was sorry.

“Ian! What did they say?”

“Well,” father said, “Now if only you had taken my advice in the first place.” He couldn’t resist that I expect. But he was kind, he was awfully kind. My wife, bless her, was frankly delighted. “She said, ‘Now you’ll never be cold or hungry again.’ She thought I had come home because I was cold and hungry.”

I shook my head a little sadly.

“You are disappointed?” he said.

“It is your music. You are forsaking an ideal.”

“Am I? Or is it only that I am forsaking one for another, and perhaps a better?” He dropped beside me on my chair and threw his arm about my shoulder with charming abandon. “See here, this isn’t going to hurt me. You know what my music means to me. No use talking about that now. But I know, at heart I have always known, that I shall never do anything tremendous. We Bohemians,—like so many ships sailing out to sea, are lost or sunk and never heard of again. Or we drift and drift and drift, delightfully it is true, there are endless numbers doing just that, and out of the melting pot there comes perhaps, one poet, one writer, one artist, one musician in a hundred years, and I am not that one. I knew, or I know what you are going to say, but wait! Free, I should ask nothing better from life than the privilege of contributing to the dregs of that melting pot. But I am not free, I am responsible. I have talked a great deal about Bohemianism, I have rather boasted of it. I liked to think of myself as one of those careless inconsequent souls. Perhaps they get the most out of life. I don’t know. I’ve always believed so. But the real truth is that I am not one of them, for if I were could I recognize such a thing as the community, its rights, its importance? Is a lover a real lover unless he is thoroughly and utterly selfish, blind to every fact but his love?” He was silent a moment, and then he added, “I should only have dreamed my life away.”

“But don’t you see,” I exclaimed, “that you have a perfect right to do that, and at least you contribute the dream?”

I looked at him surprised that he could seem so satisfied. I couldn’t understand that. A little more gloom, and I should have been more inclined to sympathy. But that, I expect is like a woman.

“You have made this decision,” I said, “and you are happy.”

He lifted his shoulders. "Happy! Happiness is a state of mind peculiar to a class of people whose lives never change. Did I not once hear you exclaim how piteous it is to see all around you so many ignorant people? But my dear, they are after all those who know best what happiness is in the accepted sense of the word. To the rest of us it is exaltation, a will-o-the-wisp, so elusive that you grasp it and it is gone, crumbled and broken as dust, or flown like a butterfly from your greedy fingers. The best thing we can do is to be sensible, and then possibly we may end by being happy."

I could think of nothing to say and fell into a rather sulky silence, not to be won over so easily, and he went on. "I dreamed of freedom. I thought about it so much that it became a thing I must have. I wondered about it and the delights it must offer. I seized it, I have it, and now I know."

"But Ian, it satisfies you. It is all that you hoped and expected."

"As an experience, yes. But is it going to be enough forever, all this? Nothing else but freedom?"

"Why think of the future?"

"How do I know why? Why do we think of anything? I suppose because we must."

"But don't you want it any more, freedom? Do you think that possession necessarily means that you must value a thing less?"

"Possession strips it of much of its glamour."

"Even freedom?"

"Even freedom. It isn't everything. It's a phase, a mood at best, nothing more."

"Of course. Everything is a phase. Life is nothing but a series of phases, of changes, or it ought to be."

"Yes, but behind all that, there must be something solid, some backbone."

"Have you discovered it?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure. I think it may be—well, it's something quite simple."

"Yes?"

"To be of use."

"But you are. Your music is of use."

“To myself.”

“And to others. The beauty — .”

“No, not enough. Just imagine! Some inexorable fate is rushing towards everyone of us. Should it overtake me to-morrow, to-night do you think that I would be satisfied with what I have done? Have you ever thought of it?”

“But what sort of a state of mind would we be in if we were always thinking of sudden death overtaking us.”

“I don’t suggest that we should always be thinking of it. Think of it once.”

In a moment he turned to me again and said with some vehemence, as though even now he were only half convinced, “What use is there in my wishing now that I had never incurred the responsibilities of marriage. I have done so, therefore I must accept them, the family, the church, Christmas cards and all. And my father! He is not young, and I am all he has. In a few years from now I shall hear him say, ‘I want you to help me with this or that.’ You know it’s a nice thought that,

“‘I will do so much in the years to come, But what have I done to-day?’”

“What are you saying, Ian?”

“I don’t know. Some silly rhyme I learned in my babyhood. Just a little thing.”

“But go on with it.”

“Oh, I can’t remember. You know how childish things have a habit of clinging. Well, not much longer shall I be asking myself what I have done with my day. I shall know. The results will be written for every eye to see—in the ledgers.” He passed his hand over his hair with a smile peculiarly sweet and free from malice, “I think they’ll make an awful ass of me in that office.”

“How can you joke over the grave.”

He roared, “Oh come, don’t be heavy. I’m not going to my death. I’m going to have my bath turned on for me every morning, a hot one, and my clothes, perfectly pressed, laid out for me every evening, and roast beef every Sunday, and ‘I’m never going to be cold or hungry again.’”

“There is something in that.”

“Well rather. Just think of it. But you’ve never been cold and hungry so you can’t.”

“You’ll be cold and hungry in another way though.”

“Soul! My dear take my advice, never talk about soul. Think of it if you like, not too much, but talk of it—never! It isn’t done. Besides don’t be a damper. I’m not in the mood to remember that I have a soul at all. I’ve just had lunch with my father. My father knows how to order a lunch.” He cast his eyes to Heaven and kissed his fingertips lightly into space. He was irresistible, lovable, and altogether ridiculous. I was divided between laughter and tears. Gone was the brooding boy of yesterday who talked about his temperament, and here was a humorous man in his place dilating upon the joys of the epicure.

As he left me he turned to say over his shoulder, “I’m going to drop in shortly. I know how incredulous you are and I want to prove to you how well it is going to agree with me to be supporting a wife in all the luxury to which she has been accustomed. Then you’ll see! I shall be probably extremely jovial and well fed, a trifle rotund, immensely respectable—.”

“He is doing it uncommonly well,” I thought, and waved him away covering my ears, and with one swift look about the studio he was gone.

I’m tired, I think for the first time in my life. Shall I tell you, Stephen, how tired I am, of thinking, of dreaming, of doing, of being? What use is it all, this life? We go a little way, we meet people, we never know them and they learn no more of our hearts than we of theirs. It is nothing but loneliness. We think we are happy, something happens and we are hurt. No one understands and we are only a little more lonely than before. Further on and we blunder and are hurt again. Condemnation for the blunder, suffering for the hurt, and still no one ever understands. And the interludes, the moments when we think that we are living, what are they but a deceit? A getting ready for the next blunder and hurt! We are helpless, we do nothing but hold our futile hands before us and blunder and blunder.

Once I dreamed of sorrow as a beautiful experience, but I did not know. I spoke of misery and I had never been miserable. I walked the streets of London and let my spirit soar in some imaginative flight, thinking of all the life hidden beyond those doors. I thought of it as romance, enchantment, delighting in it, and perhaps all that was there door after door was blunder and hurt and heartbreak.

I became acquainted with people rather than knew them. I wanted to think about them and weave some fairy cobweb legend of my own about

their lives. Mr. Watkins telling me his story, while I, watching the play of the firelight, heard nothing. The blind street mendicant peddling his matches. I thought that age was sad and poverty painful. It is of course. A truism! Yes, I have been sitting here all this time feeding myself on truisms and doing nothing. Making pottery! Well, what's pottery? And the fog that I watched from the window but dreaded to be out in. But life is not all for watching from the window. I suppose there is nothing new in that either. But I—what am I? An on-looker! That's new. To me at any rate. Goodnight.

No. 9 — — Walk,
Chelsea.

To-day I have had visitors. Ian and his wife have been to tea. I had wondered about him, feeling rather bitter about it all, convinced that he would never be happy again, and then I had his note telling me that he was bringing her to see me.

I had thought of her as an exquisite creature, and she was indeed all of that, and much more than I had dreamed of. But I had also imagined her to be light, shallow and irresponsible, and she was none of these, but quite to the contrary, quick, intelligent, full of response and absolutely unaffected.

I could understand, too, why she had left Ian. It was not at all because she was at heart essentially selfish, or that she did not care for him, but because she was utterly transplanted to a soil too rough and foreign for her blooming.

Do you remember that day at Kew when we walked through the orchid house. I can think of no comparison more apt, for she, like those lovely blooms so fragile and so soft, needed light, sun and care. She wanted, not worries and tears, but laughter and enjoyments, and she drooped without them. A delicate plant perhaps, but what an exquisite one! How desirable and how little deserving of blame!

Ian was saying, "You know, Gratian, this is the room in which I repented of all my sins and decided to reform and be a model husband."

A smile, sweetly affectionate, rippled upward from the lovely mouth and lingered in the gentian depth of her eyes. A demure little smile. "It's a nice room," said Gratian.

Ian laughed and looked at her in a way never to be mistaken. Here was open love-making right beneath my nose.

After tea, while Gratian strolled about the studio, I seized a moment when she stood at the far end of the room, and leaning nearer to Ian I said in an undertone, "Young man, there's a love-light in your eyes that I don't quite like."

"Hush!" he whispered, "I haven't come here to be quizzed. How mean of you. But isn't she, don't you think she is really—."

"Yes, I do," and I looked back at him feeling rather unaccountably amidst such obvious felicity, very near to tears.

I wanted to ask him to play, and I was afraid. It seemed, for I was sad and sensitive still clinging to sentiment, like mockery. But he took the necessity for suggesting it out of my hands, and while I was explaining the pottery process to Gratian, he sat down at the piano and I heard again, like a message, the same beautiful little theme that he had played to me on the day when he had told me of all his troubles. I broke off in the midst of what I was saying and bent my head drinking in each sad and plaintive note. I looked at Gratian and wondered if she understood. No! And perhaps after all it is better that she does not.

Promising to come again shortly they left me, but something of the spirit of that visit will always be with me. Gratian, her beauty, her grace, and Ian, his winsome charm, the laughter of his eyes and lips covering such sweet gravity of soul. He has been good for me. He has made me smile when I have been too sober. Living so much alone I have become buried in self-analysis. Even my happy moments have been too solemn, too given over to heavy theories, and solutions that whether they led me anywhere or not, helped me very little in the business of every day. I needed to be roused and wakened, to be taught something by someone else, and Ian, with his steady outlook, his balance, but more than anything else, his humour, has shown me something of the sparkle and twinkle of life that permeates the serious and keeps it sane.

And oh, how ignorant we are! How arrogant in our self-assurance that we know what is best for us! In the beginning I said to myself like many another imbecile before me, 'This is my life. The only one so far as I know that I shall ever have. I will live it gloriously, to my own complete satisfaction,' and I believed that I was doing so. Soon something tells me that I am making a mistake. How indignant I am! That I—the infallible I, should be in need of help! And all the while I am struggling, not wanting to be convinced. But in the end I know. I admit. In the very moment when I believe that all the world is mine I awake to the fact that little is mine. I have

one objective—myself, a studio, a set of dull ideas, and ‘homeless near a thousand homes I stand.’ And one more word of truth. I *want* a home. I’m middleclass.

Yes, I know now. I began to know on a fateful day when out of the fog Ian first came knocking at my door.

At last! I am humble! Dear Stephen, goodnight.

No. 9 — — Walk,
Chelsea.

If what I write to-night seems crude and ill-expressed forgive me. I have had your letter a week, but the difficulty of writing you what I feel has become, with each thoughtful day, none the less easy. I am afraid of falling into the sin of moralizing, or the worse one of sentimentality, both so easy when one is tired and lonely and in love.

I knew that what you have written me must sometime be said between us, and I have dreaded it, because nothing can be quite the same for us again. Friends and then love! It springs up, if not to ruin, to take the place of the other, a cruel flower of passion that withers with its heat the old companionship.

Stephen, yes I love you. Haven’t you known it! I have loved you all along, now as on that morning not long ago when I all but confessed it to you in the gardens. But it is not everything. Love is never everything. It is only a beginning or a part, and it is very hard to tell you the rest.

You see it is the old question of freedom all over again. Freedom may be all right for some. Perhaps it is only because I personally have made a mess of it. But I feel now that when we think we have it we are never so far from it. Six months ago so steeped was I in the spirit of self-realization that probably nothing would have kept us apart.

My life with Gerald has been neither empty nor full. It has been amiable. He and I have scarcely a single idea in common, and yet, through him I have come to understand obligation to him and to every fellow human being, and to know freedom degenerates into license. It is not half so much life itself that is unstable as our own faithless and ever changing natures. We are not good marchers, we hate to fall in line, but we are not fit to do without it yet. We need the constable on the corner.

Here, in — — Walk, I have spent one happy week after another, for I have been happy. Every etching, every piece of glass and china and furniture holds for me some interesting memory. I love my work and I have had a fair measure of success. And I have been free, only at last to learn that in itself it is not enough. Like Ian I should only have dreamed my life away, and I should never have been of any use to anyone. And I am not now too proud to admit that I should like to be of use to someone.

Your loneliness, the lack of sympathy I understand. Who better than I? And the suspicion that anyone might have done as well as you. I know, oh I know all that only too well. But marriage is the finest, the most difficult, and at once the simplest and most subtle thing in the world, and people do not try half hard enough to live together and make a success of it.

Think of Kathleen. She is happy. She believes that you are happy. How can we bring to her, and with premeditation, the hateful publicity of the courts, and for that one abused word, incompatibility. She is the sweetest of women, and whether you think it or not you are necessary to her. Go to her, oh go to her. She only needs to be told. So many of us only need to be told. Tell her everything. There may be things for you to learn. Don't be surprised.

It seems strange that after five months utterly apart from that old life that I am returning to it, entirely in opposition to all that I wanted and hoped and believed. I have thought, stubborn to the end, that by this decision I am losing myself, being swept away upon the current of a false convention. And then I know, I can't tell how, that that is not true. In this moment I have taken more from the heart of life than fate has snatched from me. It may, it may not, be victory, but it is not defeat.

To-morrow I am going back to the Square. Gerald was here this afternoon. We talked a very little, and then he said, "Will you come back to me?"

I looked at him, searching beneath the surface of those words, which seemed indeed cold enough, for warmth, something more than propriety.

And then he added, "I want you to come back to me."

I was arrested by a shade, an inflection of his voice, a subtle note, suppressed and shy, yet pleading to be heard. A regret, a hope, a leniency? And suddenly I wondered why I had never before been able to penetrate beyond mere manifestation.

We were standing a little apart and I, woman-like, wanted him to come to me, to make the first move, but he only stood there waiting. And then urged by some impulse, I know not what, I held out my hands to him. At once he had covered the steps that divided us, and when with unexpected feeling he caught my fingers to his lips I thought, 'It is I who have fallen short. Such a simple thing, he has needed only encouragement.'

I am writing from the studio at the end of a short October day. Outside the rain is falling gently on branches already almost naked. A sad and languid melancholy hangs above the river. The studio is wrapt in dark shadows and still dreamy reflection. All my little etchings are just the same. The Durer is hanging over the long table, and I have the little one that I coveted from the Leicester galleries too. Your favourite Queen Anne chair has got a new covering, a lovely old 'petit point.' I have one new piece of Chelsea, a shepherdess, and four wonderful blue Nanquin plates.

Above the mantel still hangs the colour print, the young girl with red tilted lips and gay alluring smile. Youth! And one day I bought on impulse from a cheap little dealer in faked antiques, an oil. He insisted upon it being an authentic Guido Reni, and while I did not stop to dispute the point I have never regretted buying it. It is the head of a woman against a black ground, the hair shading softly into the shadows, the lovely grave eyes, the sweet direct expression. It is an outlook on life. Maturity!

I speak of all these things because I want you to see that they do and will continue to exist, and fill the future with possibilities and interests.

This last word I write still a little incredulous, and in my secret heart I know its insufficiency. But if I am giving expression to perhaps more than I can bring myself to believe in, yet I must make some effort. I will not say that I am happy, nor even satisfied, for I am neither one or the other. I cannot think it quite just, but justice in this world is little more than something to aim at. All that I am now going back to is not easy. It has not been so in the past, nor will it be in the future. I know that. But perhaps after a while things will grow to be a habit. Possibly it's the best way.

God knows I have not solved the problem. I have only told you my thoughts. I may be deluding myself into what is only a part or a semblance of the truth. I can't be sure. The great perplexity is still there. I don't know why I am here in this world or for what exact purpose, and in my selfish way I've often thought about it. But all that I have ever been able to discover is that we can never be sure of anything. We can only feel and believe, and go

on trying to understand one another, and that probably is as near as any of us will ever come to the mysterious dayspring of youth.

“Play up!” Stephen, and goodbye.

The Brass Bowl

The traffic rolled steadily and noisily up and down, cutting through air heavy and moist with a yellow curtain of threatened fog. Night was falling, and near me I saw the lamp-lighter approaching, moving quickly from lamp to lamp. I strolled along with careless leisure, stopping now and then at the quaint little shop windows, enjoying the artless display of china, glass and pewter. Across the road in the gloom I caught the bright blur of golden oranges and red apples, and the fruit vendor lounging lazily behind his stall.

And then beside me I was aware of an old man standing in the low doorway of his shop. His narrow shoulders drooped beneath the weight of many years, and the bent knees seemed scarcely able to support his thin body. Dark, near-sighted eyes followed the passing stream of humanity with a vacant and slowly shifting glance, and under the high Jewish nose and full red mouth a long grey beard hung down, covering the sunken chest.

His window was filled with odds and ends of cast off clothing; coats, skirts and trousers drearily faded; bits of cheap lace, old shoes and gloves, and to one side a bright cerise blouse half covering a pair of shapeless stays. In the midst of this, somewhat to my astonishment, I saw a bowl of beaten brass and I stood regarding it with interest. I spoke to the old man, pointing to it, and he brought it from the window. Nearer inspection disclosed a most singular design and workmanship, and in the obscure interior of the shop I held it in my hands, studying the peculiar shape and artistic symmetry of the pattern beaten into the metal.

Around me was every evidence of the most sordid poverty. High up along one wall a rope stretched from which hung a further collection of apparel; a rain coat, the frayed edges darkly stained, a Prince Albert, green with age, a red knitted vest, and next to this a lady's blue evening gown with elaborate sequin trimming. In a row along a low shelf were several pairs of discoloured satin slippers, leaning against one another on slanting unsteady heels.

The old man stood watching me in silence, rubbing his hands together, but apparently not much interested in a prospective bargain. I looked again at the bowl in my hands, holding it up and admiring the dark shine of the brass. I had found rather a beautiful thing in the midst of dismal

surroundings, and half closing my eyes, I pictured it filled with roses on my long walnut table, reflecting the soft light from porcelain lamps.

I made a modest proposal, but the old man shook his head without a word. Continuing to turn it about in my hands, I raised my offer, and then, to my surprise, he told me that the bowl was not for sale.

“Why do you have it in your window?” I asked with some curiosity, but he would only repeat, “I cannot sell it to anyone. It is impossible.”

“But surely,” I said, glancing with gentle significance about me, “how much would you take for it?”

The old grey head moved from side to side as before, and he put out jealous hands to take his treasure from me. At this I became the more eager, and full of imagination as I am, I had already begun to weave a secret about its history. I watched him place it on the counter beside him, and with impulsive apprehension, I was sure that in some way it was connected with a strange occurrence in this old man’s life. I remembered the well-known emotional affection of their race, and was urged inquisitively to probe his story. How long ago must youth have fled this soul and age have entered, slowly to wither and at last to deaden all save mere existence! And here still I had found one active perception, a tenderness still alive for some event perhaps now long in the past, and loving romance the more when blending unsuspected amidst the humblest of humanity, I cast about me for an opening to the story.

I hesitated with instinctive delicacy, contemplating in the swiftly gathering dusk, the small stooped figure in threadbare garments, appearing pathetically congruous against the cheerless background.

I said kindly, “There is something connected with this bowl that makes you unwilling to sell it to me?”

The dim age-clouded eyes raised to mine revealed a faint appeal, and seeing him inclined to confidence, I continued persuasively, “I shall not press you, but I should be very interested to hear its history.”

His thin restless fingers moved apart making a gesture in the direction of a low wooden chair in the corner. I drew it forward and sat down, resting my hands on the counter, waiting expectantly for him to begin. How complete was my astonishment to hear him speaking in a strong voice with a faint Jewish intonation, but in wonderfully free and almost perfect English. And this was his tale of the brass bowl:

“Madame, I am a Russian subject. I was born in St. Petersburg, and lived there during my early childhood. It is long ago, yet without difficulty or effort I recall now the quiet days passing empty of change and event. Our home was blest with much domestic peace and happiness, and I, an only child, received from my parents a generous share of affectionate devotion. Unassuming, law-abiding, of modest ambition, we asked nothing more than to live and earn our bread undisturbed.

“In my country at that time, all was confusion, consequent upon the throne ascension of Nicholas I. During the winter of the year 1825 an insurrection arose in St. Petersburg. There was firing, bloodshed, corpses lay all about on the frozen streets, and days of terror succeeded by black night fell on a terrified people. Following came an investigation of secret societies, searches, arrests, and many innocents were apprehended, charged with aiding political intrigue. My father, wrongly accused, unjustly condemned, was imprisoned and exiled, finally to die alone and unattended, a victim among many others of merciless and inhuman treatment. How cruel! How miserable!

“My mother, a beautiful woman of Polish birth, could not outlive such suffering and sorrow. Her pure and loving nature bent beneath the weight of loneliness and despair, and soon I stood comfortless and desolate beside the poor grave in which was buried all that I most cherished.”

He clasped his hands together, moving his lips mutely, while I, profoundly absorbed, remained in silent attentiveness.

“My mother in giving me this bowl, desired me to part with it only unto the children of my marriage,” his fingers caressed its gleaming rim, “we were poor, so poor, and this, the one thing of value and beauty in our home, was cherished by my mother with some unaccountable belief that it would bring us happiness, or tragedy if we should lose it.

“Following the death of my mother, afflicted and almost friendless I resolved that I would leave St. Petersburg, a city now to me full of horrible memories. I wished even to go from Russia, where tyranny with one stroke had swept from me all of love and home. I set out, making my way with much difficulty and hardship. In England I landed penniless, yet young and hopeful for the future.”

He came nearer to me and raised a shaking arm above his head, while one spare hand beat upon the ancient breast. Fire gathered behind the faded eyes, lending to his quaint little person a certain droll majesty. He went on, his voice gathering new strength and volume.

“In early life we see mad visions of victory, and I—I too have had my dream. I am able, as you see, to speak your tongue. I have read much and I have worked and suffered.

“One small bare attic room month upon month sheltered me, and here, during the evenings, I remained alone, reading the long night hours through, denying myself food and sleep, intent only upon study, and through it to raise my mind to power and so advance my position. Dreams! Dreams! Too soon I fed upon despondency and failure, and in spite of all my hopes and every hard endeavour I remained, and still do remain, poor and unknown.

“I married early. My wife, also of Jewish descent, a while gave to me new encouragement. A brief year of happiness and she too was taken from me at the birth of our child. And now, hope lost to me, deserted of all courage, there remained to me only my little Anna.

“My youth had been shorn of natural affection, my manhood deprived through loss of my wife, and in consequence of this my devotion to my little child became intense and boundless. In her I centered every interest, and lavished upon her all the wealth of my bereaved love. She grew to be a lovely creature, so small, vivacious, and full of impetuous happiness, flashing about here and there, untroubled and bright like the sunshine in this dingy home, all that I could ever afford her. I taught her as I could. I wished that she should be grave and studious, while she, born to joy and frolic, would avoid each task I set her, and quickly became impatient. Study proved to her but a tedious and weary drudgery.”

A quick sigh escaped his lips, and he pointed before him into the darkness, folding the little room in deepening shadows. “There she sits reading aloud to me, holding uneasily the volume too large for her tiny knees. A difficult word appears, she shakes with impatience her dark curls, looking seriously to me. The book falls from her hands to the floor, she laughs—runs to my arms—”

And now, wrapt in a sad remembrance of the past, he scarcely seemed to realize my presence. Somber eyes, dreamily remote, gazed beyond me into the dusk. His voice, quietly undulating, continued in sorrowful reminiscence.

“There came a time when other love than mine revealed itself to her, and radiant, she made no effort to conceal from me her happy secret, expecting, and what more natural, that I should gladly share in her delight. But I, how blind, how deceived, what evil possessed my soul! Unaccountably, and with violence, I opposed her marriage. My father, my mother, my wife, I had lost

all, and should she also leave me! This last calamity I could not suffer in silence. I had known very well that some day this must happen, and foolishly I had refused to meet the possibility that now became a reality. She had made her choice wisely, I grant that I had no just complaints, and yet because she loved him I felt for him a blind unreasoning hatred. Always since then I have failed to understand my state of mind, and while to myself I admitted my injustice, I still remained deaf to all her entreaties. With many devices she endeavored to persuade me, being patient with my temper many weeks. One night we sat far into the morning hours. She had that day made known to me his approaching departure from this country. He was to emigrate to the Brazils, and it was her intention to accompany him. She pleaded for my consent, suggesting that I too should go with them to their new home. Her sweet voice urges me, ‘But father why—why?’ And I cannot answer. I do not myself know why, but angrily and stubbornly I resist unto the end.

“I see it all as yesterday. Here a candle splutters a miserable light, while she leans across the table towards me. Her dark hair falls in glorious beauty, yet even the wild sorrow in her tragic eyes fails to move me. She holds her cheek to mine uttering soft woman’s words and I am stone. And then, as though at last realizing my final decision, she turns abruptly from me snatches in her hands this bowl, and holding it high above her said, ‘Father, one day you too shall think as I, and when that time may come, place this vessel in the window here. It is true that I am going far away, still in my dreams I will see it there and know that I am forgiven, and I will come to you.’

“Unable to explain my attitude, I would not yield to her supplications, and pushed from me her imploring hands, avoiding coldly her words of distress and pleading. All—all was taken from me. On the morrow she was gone, and I have seen her no more.

“And now I lived again in deep despair. Comfortless I spent my days, vainly and too late reproaching my obstinate spirit, and mourning anew my hopeless grief. My life became insensible and dulled, one gleam alone remaining. Cherishing a hope that destiny might not wholly abandon me, I placed this bowl there in my poor window—”

His voice broke upon the last words, and tears streamed from the old eyes all down the pale cheeks. And then from quivering lips, a wailing lament, “My Anna—my little child of love, may the good God one day return you to these tender arms, only that I may assure you—”

Overcome under the strain of rare and long confined emotion, he leaned in weakness against the counter, with trembling hands extended towards the bowl. Moved beyond words, I felt as though some spirit invaded the little room, permeating the air with strange solemnity.

After a moment, pregnant of compassion, I pressed my hands with silent feeling upon the weak and rounded shoulders. He lifted to me tearful eyes of gratitude, and I could only murmur, "She will come," and then again, "She will come."

Presently, my heart stirred to reverence, I replaced the bowl where first I had seen it, amidst the cheap array of coats and skirts and close to the brightness of the cerise blouse.

At that moment the door opened to admit a customer, a bustling angular woman with sharp cheek bones and a high coarse colour. She placed a large newspaper parcel on the counter, and proceeded to unknot the cord, spreading before her a ludicrous collection of children's clothing. Flannels, heavy stockings and boots, all far advanced upon the road towards complete dissolution. I turned my eyes from her to the little man, and was struck to dumb astonishment. All his dignity fallen from him, he was once again the second-hand clothing dealer, fingering the articles before him with a business-like contempt.

I gazed about me, unable to believe in so sudden a transition. Had I dreamed this story? And was this little Jew the same person who had so short a time before told it to me with such fine feeling, such rapturous detachment? I listened to the woman's hard East London accents bargaining aggressively, and heard her say, "Wot, 'Arf a crown! 'Arf a crown for the lot! My Gawd!" She surveyed him with menace, planting her hands on her broad hips, her chin thrust forward at a threatening angle, while he stood before her utterly indifferent, his raised shoulders and upturned palms speakingly eloquent, as though to say "Take it or leave it, that is my last word."

It was not however to be hers. She launched out upon what was apparently to become a long and vituperative harangue. And so I left them, slipping away and closing the door quietly behind me.

Outside the heavy buses lumbered awkwardly past one another on the narrow street, and the swift taxis threaded their perilous way in and out, sounding their noisy warning. Beneath the yellowish flare of a street lamp a constable pushed by me, leading with bored and satiated calmness, an intoxicated woman, whose tweed cap fell with comical pathos over the

drink-befogged eyes. A newsboy, holding a large-lettered placard against him, shouted in loud Cockney, the headlines of the press.

I made my way in sad meditation towards High Street, marvelling upon the queer surprises of life, the amazing and ever-recurring wonder of romance, winding its devious ways, regardless alike of caste and circumstance, stalking broadcast amidst the riches of Kings, and again descending, lending colour to the commonplace, hidden and still beautiful beneath the meanest appearances. Heedless, the persistent stream of ordered traffic passed, while all around the pulsating beat of existence throbbed with ceaseless life.

A Conversation

In a beautiful room lit by the soft uncertain glow from the fire, Phyllis presided over a solitary tea table. She looked happy, and certainly very lovely, holding the delicate cup in a small ringed hand, and leaning back relaxed in the comfortable depth of her chair.

A maid in trim grey uniform and fresh whiteness of cap and apron came in, preparing with trained unhurried deftness to remove the tea tray. When, with perfect quietness, the door had closed behind her, Phyllis got to her feet and, cigarette indolently between her lips, moved about the room. She lingered by the writing table to touch the flowers with light caressing fingers, bending back the stalks, her dainty head to one side dreamily considering the effect. From the blotter she drew an opened letter, read it through, and held it thoughtfully in her hand. "Paris," she sighed, "Oh I must. But how?" When her husband came into the room she was leaning to drop the ashes from her cigarette over the grate. He looked worried, and very tired, and threw himself on the Chesterfield, passing a thin nervous hand over his dark hair.

Phyllis watched him a moment attentively, and then she said, "John, how tired you look. Why *do* you work so hard?" The slow languid inflection of her voice matched perfectly the studied grace of her movements. Her husband sent a glance, a little amused, over the luxury of the room, and up and down the charming little figure of his wife in velvet and sables.

"Is this a new gown Phyllis?" he asked.

"Yes," she turned on her heels for inspection, "do you like it?"

"Oh tremendously, yes. I say Phyllis — —"

"It's from Armand," she broke in, "and he let me have it for half of its real value."

"You mean," he said, "half of its real value on condition that you take a dozen others with it. Always state your case in full, Phyllis."

"Well if you care to put it that way, but it's half of its real value just the same."

“My dear I don’t wish to appear pedantic, but it’s got nothing whatever to do with value, it’s simply notorious pelf. Your friend Armand is nothing but a bleating freebooter. With a few high-sounding bon-mots he beguiles you women into believing anything.”

“Nothing of the sort, unless the woman had no experience. When I bought this dress he told me that I had the best figure in London. You don’t suppose, do you, that I was simple enough to believe him.”

“Infernal cheek to tell you that, whether you believed him or not.” He drew her down beside him. “Phyllis,” he said, “do you ever think you’d care to live in the country?”

“The country! Good Heavens!”

“Yes,” he went on, “have a nice little home in the country, a nice snug little home?”

“There’s nothing to do, nothing to see, and you never meet any people.”

He laughed amusedly, “Especially pastry cooks and creditors,” he finished. “I’d weed the lawn and you’d trim the borders. You’d look lovely trimming a border, Phyllis.”

“Lovely and grubby. A sort of pastoral garden of Eden. *How* balmy!”

He studied the piquant profile, the impudently tilted nose. “My poor Phyllis, you’d be ‘all dressed up and nowhere to go’.”

She glanced at him aslant from under her long curled lashes with charming coquetry. “Exactly,” she said, “Besides you like a pastry cook as well as another man. Do go and rest before you dress.”

“This nocturnal pace is a bit dizzy. Do I have to go out to-night?”

“Certainly, and don’t grouse.” She observed him a moment absently, “Do you know,” she said, “that you ought to be awfully grateful to me.”

“I am. But why?”

She extended her arms. “All this, your position. I’m the stimulus, am I not? If it weren’t for me you’d be simply plebian. You’d browse in suburbia all your life. You’d never be anyone.”

“If it weren’t for you my sweet impenitent, I shouldn’t have to be anyone.”

“Oh don’t pose John. You *are* ambitious only you like to pretend that you are not.”

“Well just what, Phyllis, is your idea of ambition? Come, this is getting interesting.”

“No,” she said, “I’m not going to commit myself.”

“The supposition I draw is that it consists in my aiming always to make enough money with which to pay your dressmaker. Is that it?”

“Partly. That, at any rate, keeps you from sleeping too much.”

“Quite right, it does. Where is the account for that gown?”

Her eyes, brimful of mournful innocence, followed the low blue flame from the coals, while she drew reluctantly from behind the cushions a sheaf of expensive looking bills. John took them from her hand without glancing at them, stuffed them hastily into his coat pocket. He leaned his head back against the Chesterfield, raised his feet on a stool, and went on, his voice a little weary, “Phyllis I’ve been in to see Wylie. Don’t be alarmed, there’s nothing wrong. For one whole hour he filled the air with interrogations of every sort. How was my appetite? How was my sleep? Any palpitations? Any worries? At last I got away, my impression of the whole visit being that, at my expense, Wylie was in anywhere from five to eight guineas, simply for the pleasant privilege of having told me that I must, above all, be under no worries, financial or otherwise. Also that I must go away for as long as I can. Amazing, isn’t it?”

“He merely thinks you need a rest, John, and I, for one, entirely agree with him. You’ll go, won’t you.”

“It’s not convenient, but I might manage it. I’m haunted with visions of future gloom if I don’t.”

“You are resenting the five or eight guineas, but you may just as well get your money’s worth by doing what he advises, especially if it is to save you another five or eight later on.”

He raised surrendering hands over his head, “Phyllis, for the love of Heaven! I’ve been threatened with a choice of Bedlam or Paradise to-day. I’ll go.”

“It’d be poor economy not to. I know more about real economy than you do, John.”

He threw back his head in shouts of unrestrained laughter.

She said, “I’m sure *I* don’t mind if it amuses you, but *what* is the use of saving now for something that you may want ten years hence that you

probably won't want at all?"

"I'm a novice to this new order of frugal finance, old thing. You'll have to supply the answer."

"Well," she said, "this gown for instance. It is giving me a great deal of pleasure to wear it, to say nothing of the pleasure you get out of seeing me in it. Now if I hadn't got it, in the future I should regard the thirty guineas saved with simply useless regret, and we should have lost all the pleasure due to the gown. Where is the economy in that?"

"I'm not prepared to say. It's much too intricate for me. But if it's a question of pleasure, I'm sure I'm always very glad to look at thirty guineas."

She sighed, "I'm afraid you have a poor conception of my mentality. You don't half appreciate it."

"Oh yes I do, more every day. You can't make me think that blue is pink, but you can always make me think blue when I want to think pink. But see here, Phyllis, I do really know that this exquisite little head of yours is screwed on very tight, and now just to prove it to you, I'll let you share the problem that at present besets me. I am, as you know, not what you might call niggardly. At least I hope that I am not. Where is the dictionary?" He went to the bookcase, and drew a large volume from the shelf. Returning to the Chesterfield he opened it on his knee, turning the pages with one hand, the other arm placed affectionately about his wife's shoulders. "Here we are, banish—bank—banknote—bankrupt—there Phyllis, b-a-n-k-r-u-p-t, bankrupt—say it after me, an insolvent, one who cannot pay his debts, to render unable to pay his debts—bleak, cheerless sort of word, isn't it."

He turned his head to look at the small features so naively serious, and touched his lips to her cheek, "What a brute I feel introducing you to such sordid language, but there it is! We shall have to save, (SAVE, Phyllis), and spend a little less, especially if I am to make at all possible this trip that Wylie advises."

She took his hand pressing it gently, "You are to go next week, stay a whole month, and not to worry about anything."

"Bromide or chloroform, Phyllis?"

"You continue to joke over the most serious emergencies, but promise me that you will go."

“Done! And now that the point is settled, what will *you* do? You’re not keen on the country.”

“You begin at once to fuss over something. That’s not the way to take a holiday. Don’t ask any questions, don’t think them, just go to sleep.”

“Righto! Rip Van W. for a hundred years. Is that the idea?” He rose reluctantly to his feet and moved across the room to replace the dictionary. Phyllis, standing by the grate, took the poker and stirred the coals to a brighter blaze.

“I meant to tell you,” she said casually, “that mother and Edith are going to Paris next week.”

He wheeled in his track, suddenly erect, like a terrier on the alert. She bent pensively over the fire, holding out her hands to the heat. Following a short poignant silence he looked directly at her and said, “What’s the price to Paris, Phyllis?”

“Paris!” She returned his candid gaze, “but I haven’t asked to go to Paris. I thought we had made up our minds to sa—, be more prudent. Why do you fly off at once on such an extravagant idea?”

“I—fly off—*my* idea!”

“Well, you said it.”

“You not only conjure me into saying it, you stupefy me into believing that I thought of it in the first place.”

She spread out her hands, “Of course you are at perfect liberty to place the blame on me.”

Her eyes were wide and plaintive, her lips a little apart, the beautiful lines of her small form silhouetted against the firelight. He came to her, catching her suddenly to him, pressing his mouth to the soft fragrance of her hair, and after a moment he said, “Darling, promise me that you will go to Paris with your mother and Edith.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *A Bit of a Drifter and Other Stories* by Mabel Hodgson Gurd]