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THE OLD WIVES' TALE

VOL. II

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THE OLD WIVES' TALE

by

ARNOLD BENNETT

VOL. II

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BOOK III: SOPHIA

CHAPTER i: THE ELOPEMENT

§ 1

HER soberly rich dress had a countrified air, as she waited, ready for the streets, in the bedroom of the London hotel on the afternoon of the first of July, 1866; but there was nothing of the provincial in that beautiful face, nor in that bearing at once shy and haughty; and her eager heart soared beyond geographical boundaries.

It was the Hatfield Hotel, in Salisbury Street, between the Strand and the river. Both street and hotel are now gone, lost in the vast foundations of the Savoy and the Cecil; but the type of the Hatfield lingers with ever-increasing shabbiness in Jermyn Street. In 1866, with its dark passages and crooked stairs, its candles, its carpets and stuffs which had outlived their patterns, its narrow dining-room where a thousand busy flies ate together at one long table, its acrid stagnant atmosphere, and its disturbing sensation of dirt everywhere concealing itself, it stood forth in rectitude as a good average modern hotel. The patched and senile drabness of the bedroom made an environment that emphasized Sophia's flashing youth. She alone in it was unsullied.

There was a knock at the door, apparently gay and jaunty. But she thought, truly: "He's nearly as nervous as I am!" And in her sick nervousness she coughed, and then tried to take full possession of herself. The moment had at last come which would divide her life as a battle divides the history of a nation. Her mind in an

instant swept backwards through an inciedible three months

The schemings to obtain and to hide Gerald's letters at the shop, and to reply to them! The far more complex and dangerous duplicity practised upon her majestic aunt at Axe! The visits to the Axe post-office! The three divine meetings with Gerald at early morning by the canal-feeder, when he had told her of his inheritance and of the harshness of his uncle Boldero, and with a rush of words had spread before her the prospect of eternal bliss! The nights of fear! The sudden, dizzy acquiescence in his plan, and the feeling of universal unreality which obsessed her! The audacious departure from her aunt's, showering a cascade of appalling lies! Her dismay at Knype Station! Her blush as she asked for a ticket to London! The ironic, sympathetic glance of the porter, who took charge of her trunk! And then the thunder of the incoming train! Her renewed dismay when she found that it was very full, and her distracted plunge into a compartment with six people already in it! And the abrupt reopening of the carriage-door and that curt inquisition from an inspector: "Where for, please! Where for? Where for?" Until her turn was reached: "Where for, miss?" and her weak little reply: "Euston"! And more violent blushes! And then the long, steady beating of the train over the rails, keeping time to the rhythm of the unanswerable voice within her breast: "Why are you here? Why are you here?" And then Rugby; and the awful ordeal of meeting Gerald, his entry into the compartment, the rearrangement of seats, and their excruciatingly painful attempts at commonplace conversation in the publicity of the carriage! (She had felt that that part of the enterprise had not been very well devised by Gerald.) And at last London: the thousands of cabs, the fabulous streets, the general roar, all dream-surpassing,

intensifying to an extraordinary degree the obsession of unreality, the illusion that she could not really have done what she had done, that she was not really doing what she was doing!

Supremely and finally, the delicious torture of the clutch of terror at her heart as she moved by Gerald's side through the impossible adventure! Who was this rash, mad Sophia? Surely not herself!

The knock at the door was impatiently repeated.

"Come in," she said timidly.

Gerald Scales came in. Yes, beneath that mien of a commercial traveller who has been everywhere and through everything, he was very nervous. It was her privacy that, with her consent, he had invaded. He had engaged the bedroom only with the intention of using it as a retreat for Sophia until the evening, when they were to resume their travels. It ought not to have any disturbing significance. But the mere disorder on the washstand, a towel lying on one of the cane chairs, made him feel that he was affronting decency, and so increased his jaunty nervousness. The moment was painful; the moment was difficult beyond his skill to handle it naturally.

Approaching her with factitious ease, he kissed her through her veil, which she then lifted with an impulsive movement, and he kissed her again, more ardently, perceiving that her ardour was exceeding his. This was the first time they had been alone together since her flight from Axe. And yet, with his worldly experience, he was naive enough to be surprised that he could not put all the heat of passion into his embrace, and he wondered why he was not thrilled at the contact with her! However, the powerful clinging of her lips somewhat startled his senses, and also delighted him by its silent promise. He could smell the stuff of her veil, the sarsenet of her bodice, and, as it were wrapped in

these odours as her body was wrapped in its clothes, the faint fleshly perfume of her body itself. Her face, viewed so close that he could see the almost imperceptible down on those fruit-like cheeks, was astonishingly beautiful; the dark eyes were exquisitely misted; and he could feel the secret loyalty of her soul ascending to him. She was very slightly taller than her lover; but somehow she hung from him, her body curved backwards, and her bosom pressed against his, so that instead of looking up at her gaze he looked down at it. He preferred that; perfectly proportioned though he was, his stature was a delicate point with him. His spirits rose by the uplift of his senses. His fears slipped away; he began to be very satisfied with himself. He was the inheritor of twelve thousand pounds, and he had won this unique creature. She was his capture; he held her close, permittedly scanning the minutiae of her skin, permittedly crushing her flimsy silks. Something in him had forced her to lay her modesty on the altar of his desire. And the sun brightly shone. So he kissed her yet more ardently, and with the slightest touch of a victor's condescension; and her burning response more than restored the self-confidence which he had been losing.

"I've got no one but you now," she murmured in *a* melting voice.

She fancied in her ignorance that the expression of this sentiment would please him. She was not aware that a man is usually rather chilled by it, because it proves to him that the other is thinking about his responsibilities and not about his privileges. Certainly it calmed Gerald, though without imparting to him her sense of his responsibilities. He smiled vaguely. To Sophia his smile was a miracle continually renewed; it mingled dashing gaiety with a hint of wistful appeal in a manner that never failed to bewitch her. A less innocent girl than Sophia might have divined from that

adorable half-feminine smile that she could do anything with Gerald except rely on him. But Sophia had to learn.

"Are you ready?" he asked, placing his hands on her shoulders and holding her away from him.

"Yes," she said, nerving herself. Their faces were still very near together.

"Well, would you like to go and see the Doré pictures?"

A simple enough question! A proposal felicitous enough! Doré was becoming known even in the Five Towns, not, assuredly, by his illustrations to the *Contes Drolatiques* of Balzac—but by his shuddering Biblical conceits. In pious circles Dore was saving art from the reproach of futility and frivolity. It was indubitably a tasteful idea on Gerald's part to take his love of a summer's afternoon to gaze at the originals of those prints which had so deeply impressed the Five Towns. It was an idea that sanctified the profane adventure.

Yet Sophia showed signs of affliction. Her colour went and came; her throat made the motion of swallowing; there was a muscular contraction over her whole body. And she drew herself from him. Her glance, however, did not leave him, and his eyes fell before hers.

"But what about the—wedding?" she breathed.

That sentence seemed to cost all her pride; but she was obliged to utter it, and to pay for it.

"Oh," he said lightly and quickly, just as though she had reminded him of a detail that might have been forgotten, "I was just going to tell you. It can't be done here. There's been some change in the rules. I only found out for certain late last night. But I've ascertained that it'll be as simple as A B C before the English Consul at Paris; and as I've got the tickets for us to go over to-night, as we arranged. ..." He stopped.

She sat down on the towel-covered chair, staggered. She

believed what he said. She did not suspect that he was using the classic device of the seducer. It was his casualness that staggered her. Had it really been his intention to set off on an excursion and remark as an afterthought: *"By the way*, we can't be married as I told you at half-past two to-day"? Despite her extreme ignorance and innocence, Sophia held a high opinion of her own commonsense and capacity for looking after herself, and she could scarcely believe that he was expecting her to go to Paris, and at night, without being married. She looked pitiably young, virgin, raw, unsophisticated; helpless in the midst of dreadful dangers. Yet her head was full of a blank astonishment at being mistaken for a simpleton! The sole explanation could be that Gerald, in some matters, must himself be a confiding simpleton. He had not reflected. He had not sufficiently realized the immensity of her sacrifice in flying with him even to London. She felt sorry for him. She had the woman's first glimpse of the necessity for some adjustment of outlook as an essential preliminary to uninterrupted happiness.

"It'll be all right!" Gerald persuasively continued.

He looked at her, as she was not looking at him. She was nineteen. But she seemed to him utterly mature and mysterious. Her face baffled him; her mind was a foreign land. Helpless in one sense she might be; yet she, and not he, stood for destiny; the future lay in the secret and capricious workings of that mind.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed curtly. "Oh no!"

"Oh no what?"

"We can't possibly go like that," she said.

"But don't I tell you it'll be all right?" he protested. "If we stay here and they come after you . . .! Besides, I've got the tickets and all."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" she demanded.

"But how could I?" he grumbled. "Have we had a single minute alone?"

This was nearly true. They could not have discussed the formalities of marriage in the crowded train, nor during the hurried lunch with a dozen cocked ears at the same table. He saw himself on sure ground here.

"Now, could we?" he pressed.

"And you talk about going to see pictures!" was her reply.

Undoubtedly this had been a grave error of tact. He recognized that it was a stupidity. And so he resented it as though she had committed it and not he.

"My dear girl," he said, hurt, "I acted for the best. It isn't my fault if rules are altered and officials silly."

"You ought to have told me before," she persisted sullenly.

"But how *could* I?"

He almost believed in that moment that he had really intended to marry her, and that the ineptitudes of red-tape had prevented him from achieving his honourable purpose. Whereas he had done nothing whatever towards the marriage.

"Oh no! Oh no!" she repeated, with heavy lip and liquid eye. "Oh no!"

He gathered that she was flouting his suggestion of Paris.

Slowly and nervously he approached her. She did not stir nor look up. Her glance was fixed on the washstand. He bent down and murmured:

"Come, now. It'll be all right. You'll travel in the ladies' saloon on the steam-packet."

She did not stir. He bent lower and touched the back of her neck with his lips. And she sprang up, sobbing and angry. Because she was mad for him she hated him furiously. All tenderness had vanished.

"I'll thank you not to touch me!" she said fiercely. She had given him her lips a moment ago, but now to graze her neck was an insult.

He smiled sheepishly. "But really you must be reasonable," he argued. "What have I done?"

"It's what you haven't done, I think!" she cried. "Why didn't you tell me while we were in the cab?"

"I didn't care to begin worrying you just then," he replied: which was exactly true.

The fact was, he had of course shirked telling her that no marriage would occur that day. Not being a professional seducer of young girls, he lacked skill to do a difficult thing simply.

"Now come along, little girl," he went on, with just a trifle of impatience. "Let's go out and enjoy ourselves. I assure you that everything will be all right in Paris."

"That's what you said about coming to London," she retorted sarcastically through her sobs. "And look at you!"

Did he imagine for a single instant that she would have come to London with him save on the understanding that she was to be irfarried immediately upon arrival? This attitude of an indignant question was not to be reconciled with her belief that his. excuses for himself were truthful. But she did not remark the discrepancy.

Her sarcasm wounded his vanity.

"Oh, very well!" he muttered. "If you don't choose to believe what I say!" He shrugged his shoulders.

She said nothing; but the sobs swept at intervals through her frame, shaking it.

Reading hesitation in her face, he tried again. "Come along, little girl. And wipe your eyes." And he approached her. She stepped back.

"No, no!" she denied him, passionately. He had es-

teemed her too cheaply. And she did not care to be called 'little girl.'

"Then what shall you do?" he inquired, in a tone which blended mockery and bullying. She was making a fool of him.

"I can tell you what I shan't do," she said. "I shan't go to Paris." Her sobs were less frequent.

"That's not my question," he said icily. "I want to know what you will do."

There was now no pretence of affectionateness either on her part or on his. They might, to judge from their attitudes, have been nourished from infancy on mutual hatred.

"what's that got to do with you?" she demanded.

"It's got everything to do with me," he said.

"Well, you can go and find out!" she said.

It was girlish; it was childish; it was scarcely according to the canons for conducting a final rupture; but it was not the less tragically serious. Indeed, the spectacle of this young girl absurdly behaving like one, in a serious crisis, increased the tragicalness of the situation even if it did not heighten it. The idea that ran through Gerald's brain was the ridiculous folly of having anything to do with young girls. He was quite blind to her beauty.

" 'Go'?" he repeated her word. "You mean that?"

"Of course I mean it," she answered promptly.

The coward in him urged him to take advantage of her ignorant, helpless pride, and leave her at her word. He remembered the scene she had made at the pit shaft, and he said to himself that her charm was not worth her temper, and that he was a fool ever to have dreamed that it was, and that he would be doubly a fool now not to seize the opportunity of withdrawing from an insane enterprise.

"I am to go?" he asked, with a sneer.

She nodded.

"Of course if you order me to leave you, I must. Can I do anything for you?"

She signified that he could not.

"Nothing? You're sure?"

She frowned.

"Well, then, good-bye." He turned towards the door.

"I suppose you'd leave me here without money or anything?" she said in a cold, cutting voice. And her sneer was far more destructive than his. It destroyed in him the last trace of compassion for her.

"Oh, I beg pardon!" he said, and swaggeringly counted out five sovereigns on to a chest of drawers.

She rushed at them. "Do you think I'll take your odious money?" she snarled, gathering the coins in her gloved hand.

Her first impulse was to throw them in his face; but she paused and then flung them into a corner of the room.

"Pick them up!" she commanded him.

"No, thanks," he said briefly; and left, shutting the door.

Only a very little while, and they had been lovers, exuding tenderness with every gesture, like a perfume! Only a very little while, and she had been deciding to telegraph condescendingly to her mother that she was 'all right'! And now the dream was utterly dissolved. And the voice of that hard commonsense which spake to her in her wildest moods grew loud in asserting that the enterprise could never have come to any good, that it was from its inception an impossible enterprise, unredeemed by the slightest justification. An enormous folly! Yes, an elopement; but not like a real elopement; always unreal! She had always known that it was only an imitation of an elopement, and must end in some awful disappointment. She had never truly wanted to run away; but something within

her had pricked her forward in spite of her protests. The strict notions of her elderly relatives were right after all. It was she who had been wrong. And it was she who would have to pay.

"I've been a wicked girl," she said to herself grimly, in the midst of her ruin.

She faced the fact. But she would not repent; at any rate she would never sit on that stool. She would not exchange the remains of her pride for the means of escape from the worst misery that life could offer. On that point she knew herself. And she set to work to repair and renew her pride.

Whatever happened she would not return to the Five Towns. She could not, because she had stolen money from her Aunt Harriet. As much as she had thrown back at Gerald, she had filched from her aunt, but in the form of a note. A prudent, mysterious instinct had moved her to take this precaution. And she was glad. She would never have been able to dart that sneer at Gerald about money if she had really needed money. So she rejoiced in her crime; though, since Aunt Harriet would assuredly discover the loss at once, the crime eternally prevented her from going back to her family. Never, never would she look at her mother with the eyes of a thief!

(In truth Aunt Harriet did discover the loss, and very creditably said naught about it to anybody. The knowledge of it would have twisted the knife in the maternal heart.)

Sophia was also glad that she had refused to proceed to Paris. The recollection of her firmness in refusing flattered her vanity as a girl convinced that she could take care of herself. To go to Paris unmarried would have been an inconceivable madness. The mere thought of the enormity did outrage to her moral susceptibilities. No, Gerald had most perfectly mistaken her for another sort of girl; as, for instance, a shop-assistant or a barmaid!

With this the catalogue of her satisfactions ended. She had no idea at all as to what she ought to do, or could do. The mere prospect of venturing out of the room intimidated her. Had Gerald left her trunk in the hall? Of course he had. What a question! But what would happen to her? London . . . London had merely dazed her. She could do nothing for herself. She was as helpless as a rabbit in London. She drew aside the window-curtain and had a glimpse of the river. It was inevitable that she should think of suicide; for she could not suppose that any girl had ever got herself into a plight more desperate than hers. "I could slip out at night and drown myself," she thought seriously. " A nice thing that would be for Gerald!"

Then loneliness, like a black midnight, overwhelmed her, swiftly wasting her strength, disintegrating her pride in its horrid flood. She glanced about for support, as a woman in the open street who feels she is going to faint, and went blindly to the bed, falling on it with the upper part of her body, in an attitude of abandonment. She wept, but without sobbing.

§2

Gerald Scales walked about the Strand, staring up at its high narrow houses, crushed one against another as though they had been packed, unsorted, by a packer who thought of nothing but economy of space. Except by Somerset House, King's College, and one or two theatres and banks, the monotony of mean shops, with several storeys unevenly perched over them, was unbroken. Then Gerald encountered Exeter Hall, and examined its prominent facade with a provincial's eye; for despite his travels he was not very familiar with London. Exeter Hall naturally took his mind back to his Uncle Boldero, that great and ardent Non-

conformist, and his own godly youth. It was laughable to muse upon what his uncle would say and think, did the old man know that his nephew had run away with a girl, meaning to seduce her in Paris. It was enormously funny!

However, he had done with all that. He was well out of it. She had told him to go, and he had gone. She had money to get home; she had nothing to do but use the tongue in her head. The rest was her affair. He would go to Paris alone, and find another amusement. It was absurd to have supposed that Sophia would ever have suited him. Not in such a family as the Baineses could one reasonably expect to discover an ideal mistress. No! there had been a mistake. The whole business was wrong. She had nearly made a fool of him. But he was not the man to be made a fool of. He had kept his dignity intact.

So he said to himself. Yet all the time his dignity, and his pride also, were bleeding, dropping invisible blood along the length of the Strand pavements.

He was at Salisbury Street again. He pictured her in the bedroom. Damn her! He wanted her. He wanted her with an excessive desire. He hated to think that he had been baulked. He hated to think that she would remain immaculate. And he continued to picture her in the exciting privacy of that cursed bedroom.

Now he was walking down Salisbury Street. He did not wish to be walking down Salisbury Street; but there he was!

"Oh, hell!" he murmured, "I suppose I must go through with it."

He felt desperate. He was ready to pay any price in order to be able to say to himself that he had accomplished what he had set his heart on.

"My wife hasn't gone out, has she?" he asked of the hall-porter.

"I'm not sure, sir; I think not," said the hall-porter.

The fear that Sophia had already departed made him sick. When he noticed her trunk still there, he took hope and ran upstairs.

He saw her, a dark crumpled, sinuous piece of humanity, half on and half off the bed, silhouetted against the bluish-white counterpane; her hat was on the floor, with the spotted veil trailing away from it. This sight seemed to him to be the most touching that he had ever seen, though her face was hidden. He forgot everything except the deep and strange emotion which affected him. He approached the bed. She did not stir.

Having heard the entry and knowing that it must be Gerald who had entered, Sophia forced herself to remain still. A wild, splendid hope shot up in her. Constrained by all the power of her will not to move, she could not stifle a sob that had lain in ambush in her throat.

The sound of that sob fetched tears to the eyes of Gerald.

"Sophia!" he appealed to her.

But she did not stir. Another sob shook her.

"Very well, then," said Gerald. "We'll stay in London till we can be married. I'll arrange it. I'll find a nice boarding-house for you, and I'll tell the people you're my cousin. I shall stay on at this hotel, and I'll come and see you every day."

A silence.

"Thank you!" she blubbered. "Thank you!"

He saw that her little gloved hand was stretching out towards him, like a feeler; and he seized it, and knelt down and took her clumsily by the waist. Somehow he dared not kiss her yet.

An immense relief surged very slowly through them both.

"I—I—really——" She began to say something, but the articulation was lost in her sobs.

"What? What do you say, dearest?" he questioned eagerly.

And she made another effort. "I really couldn't have gone to Paris with you without being married," she succeeded at last. "I really couldn't."

"No, no!" he soothed her. "Of course you couldn't. It was I who was wrong. But you didn't know how I felt. . . . Sophia, it's all right now, isn't it?"

She sat up and kissed him fairly.

It was so wonderful and startling that he burst openly into tears. She saw in the facile intensity of his emotion a guarantee of their future happiness. And as he had soothed her, so now she soothed him. They clung together, equally surprised at the sweet, exquisite, blissful melancholy which drenched them through and through. It was remorse for having quarrelled, for having lacked faith in the supreme Tightness of the high adventure. Everything was right, and would be right; and they had been criminally absurd. It was remorse; but it was pure bliss, and worth the quarrel! Gerald resumed his perfection again in her eyes! He was the soul of goodness and honour! And for him she was again the ideal mistress, who would, however, be also a wife. As in his mind he rapidly ran over the steps necessary to their marriage, he kept saying to himself, far off in some remote cavern of the brain: "I shall have her! I shall have her!" He did not reflect that this fragile slip of the Baines stock, unconsciously drawing upon the accumulated strength of generations of honest living, had put a defeat upon him.

After tea, Gerald, utterly content with the universe, redeemed his word and found an irreproachable boarding-house for Sophia in Westminster, near the Abbey. She was astonished at the glibness of his lies to the landlady about her, and about their circumstances generally. He also found

a church and a parson, close by, and in halt an hour the formalities preliminary to a marriage were begun. He explained'to her that as she was now resident in London, it would be simpler to recommence the business entirely. She sagaciously agreed. As she by no means wished to wound him again, she made no inquiry about those other formalities which, owing to red-tape, had so unexpectedly proved abortive! She knew she was going to be married, and that sufficed. The next day she carried out her filial idea of telegraphing to her mother.

CHAPTER II: SUPPER

§1

THEY had been to Versailles and had dined there. A tram had sufficed to take them out; but for the return, Gerald, who had been drinking champagne, would not be content with less than a carriage. Further, he insisted on entering Paris by way of the Bois and the Arc de Triomphe. Thoroughly to appease his conceit, it would have been necessary to swing open the gates of honour in the Arc and allow his fiacre to pass through; to be forced to drive round the monument instead of under it hurt the sense of fitness which champagne engenders. Gerald was in all his pride that day. He had been displaying the wonders to Sophia, and he could not escape the cicerone's secret feeling: that he himself was somehow responsible for the wonders. Moreover, he was exceedingly satisfied with the effect produced by Sophia.

Sophia, on arriving in Paris with the ring on her triumphant finger, had timidly mentioned the subject of frocks. None would have guessed from her tone that she was possessed by the desire for French clothes as by a devil. She had been surprised and delighted by the eagerness of Gerald's response. Gerald, too, was possessed by a devil. He thirsted to see her in French clothes. He knew some of the shops and ateliers in the Rue de la Paix, the Rue de la Chaussee d'Antin, and the Palais Royal. He was much more skilled in the lore of frocks than she, for his previous business in Paris had brought him into relations with the great firms; and Sophia suffered a brief humiliation in the discovery that his private opinion of her dresses was that

they were not dresses at all. She had been aware that they were not Parisian, nor even of London; but she had thought them pretty good. It healed her wound, however, to reflect that Gerald had so marvellously kept his own counsel in order to spare her self-love. Gerald had taken her to an establishment in the Chaussee d'Antin. It was not one of what Gerald called *Us grandes maisons,* but it was on the very fringe of them, and the real *haute couture* was practised therein; and Gerald was remembered there by name.

Sophia had gone in trembling and ashamed, yet in her heart courageously determined to emerge uncompromisingly French. But the models frightened her. They surpassed even the most fantastic things that she had seen in the streets. She recoiled before them arid seemed to hide for refuge in Gerald, as it were appealing to him for moral protection, and answering to him instead of to the saleswoman when the saleswoman offered remarks in stiff English. The prices also frightened her. The simplest trifle here cost sixteen pounds; and her mother's historic 'silk,' whose elaborateness had cost twelve pounds, was supposed to have approached the inexpressible! Gerald said that she was not to think about prices. She was, however, forced by some instinct to think about prices—she who at home had scorned the narrowness of life in the Square. In the Square she was understood to be quite without commonsense, hopelessly imprudent; yet here, a spring of sagacity seemed to be welling up in her all the time, a continual antidote against the general madness in which she found herself. With extraordinary rapidity she had formed a habit of preaching moderation to Gerald. She hated to 'see money thrown away,' and her notion of the boundary line between throwing money away and judiciously spending it was still the notion of the Square.

Gerald would laugh. But she would say, piqued and

blushing, but self-sure: "You can laugh!" It was all deliciously agreeable.

On this evening she wore the first of the new costumes. She had worn it all day. Characteristically she had chosen something which was not too special for either afternoon or evening, for either warm or cold weather. It was of pale blue taffetas striped in a darker blue, with the corsage cut in basques, and the underskirt of a similar taffetas, but unstriped. The effect of the ornate overskirt falling on the plain underskirt with its small double *volant* was, she thought, and Gerald too, adorable. The waist was higher than any she had had before, and the crinoline expansive. Tied round her head with a large bow and flying blue ribbons under the chin, was a fragile flat *capote* like a baby's bonnet, which allowed her hair to escape in front and her great chignon behind. A large spotted veil flew out from the *capote* over the chignon. Her double skirts waved amply over Gerald's knees in the carriage, and she leant back against the hard cushions and put an arrogant look into her face, and thought of nothing but the intense throbbing joy of life, longing with painful ardour for more and more pleasure, then and for ever.

As the carriage slipped downwards through the wide, empty gloom of the Champs Elysees into the brilliant Paris that was waiting for them, another carriage drawn by two white horses flashed upwards and was gone in the dust. Its only occupant, except the coachman and footman, was a woman. Gerald stared after it.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "That's Hortense!"

It might have been Hortense, or it might not. But he instantly convinced himself that it was. Not every evening did one meet Hortense driving alone in the Champs Elyseèes, and in August too!

"Hortense?" Sophia asked simply.

"Yes. Hortense Schneider."

"Who is she?"

"You've never heard of Hortense Schneider?"

"No!"

"Well! Have you ever heard of Offenbach?"

"I-I don't know. I don't think so."

He had the mien of utter incredulity. "You don't mean to say you've never heard of *BlueLeardl"*

"I've heard of Bluebeard, of course," said she. "Who hasn't?"

"I mean the opera—Offenbach's."

She shook her head, scarce knowing even what an opera was.

"Well, well! What next?"

He implied that such ignorance stood alone in his experience. Really he was delighted at the cleanness of the slate on which he had to write. And Sophia was not a bit alarmed. She relished instruction from his lips. It was a pleasure to her to learn from that exhaustless store of worldly knowledge. To the world she would do her best to assume omniscience in its ways, but to him, in her present mood, she liked to play the ignorant, uninitiated little thing.

"Why," he said, "the Schneider has been the rage since last year but one. Absolutely the *rage."*

"I do wish I'd noticed her!" said Sophia.

"As soon as the Varietes reopens we'll go and see her," he replied, and then gave his detailed version of the career of Hortense Schneider.

More joys for her in the near future ! She had yet scarcely penetrated the crust of her bliss. She exulted in the dazzling destiny which comprises freedom, fortune, eternal gaiety, and the exquisite Gerald.

As they crossed the Place de la Concorde, she inquired, "Are we going back to the hotel?"

"No," he said. "I thought we'd go and have supper somewhere, if it isn't too early."

"After all that dinner?"

"All what dinner? You ate about five times as much as me, anyhow!"

"Oh, *Pm* ready!" she said.

She was. This day, because it was the first day of her French frock, she regarded as her *debut* in the dizzy life of capitals. She existed in a rapture of bliss, an ecstasy which could feel no fatigue, either of body or spirit.

§2

It was after midnight when they went into the Restaurant Sylvain; Gerald, having decided not to go to the hotel, had changed his mind and called there, and having called there, had remained a long time: this of course! Sophia was already accustoming herself to the idea that, with Gerald, it was impossible to predict accurately more than five minutes of the future.

As the *chassew* held open the door for them to enter, and Sophia passed modestly into the glowing yellow interior of the restaurant, followed by Gerald in his character of man-of-the-world, they drew the attention of Sylvain's numerous and glittering guests. No face could have made a more provocative contrast to the women's faces in those screened rooms than the face of Sophia, so childlike between the baby's bonnet and the huge bow of ribbon, so candid, so charmingly conscious of its own pure beauty and of the fact that she was no longer a virgin, but the equal in knowledge of any woman alive. She saw around her, clustered about the white tables, multitudes of violently red lips, powdered cheeks, cold, hard eyes, self-possessed arrogant faces, and insolent bosoms. What had impressed her more than any-

thing else in Paris, more even than the three-horsed omnibuses, was the extraordinary self-assurance of all the women, their unashamed posing, their calm acceptance of the public gaze. They seemed to say: "We are the renowned Parisiennes." They frightened her: they appeared to her so corrupt and so proud in their corruption. She had already seen a dozen women in various situations of conspicuousness apply powder to their complexions with no more ado than if they had been giving a pat to their hair. She could not understand such boldness. As for them, they marvelled at the phenomena presented in Sophia's person; they admired; they admitted the style of the gown; but they envied neither her innocence nor her beauty; they envied nothing but her youth and the fresh tint of her cheeks.

"Encore des Anglais!" said some of them, as if that explained all.

Gerald had a very curt way with waiters; and the more obsequious they were, the haughtier he became; and a head-waiter was no more to him than a scullion. He gave loud-voiced orders in French of which both he and Sophia were proud, and a table was laid for them in a corner near one of the large windows. Sophia settled herself on the bench of green velvet, and began to ply the ivory fan which Gerald had given her. It was very hot; all the windows were wide open, and the sounds of the street mingled clearly with the tinkle of the supper-room. Outside, against a sky of deepest purple, Sophia could discern the black skeleton of a gigantic building; it was the new opera house.

"All sorts here!" said Gerald, contentedly, after he had ordered iced soup and sparkling Moselle. Sophia did not know what Moselle was, but she imagined that anything would be better than champagne.

Sylvain's was then typical of the Second Empire, and particularly famous as a supper-room. Expensive and gay,

it provided, with its discreet decorations, a sumptuous scene where lorettes, actresses, respectable women, and an occasional grisette in luck, could satisfy their curiosity as to each other. In its catholicity it was highly correct as a resort; not many other restaurants in the centre could have successfully fought against the rival attractions of the Bois and the dim groves of the Champs Elysees on a night in August. The complicated richness of the dresses, the yards and yards of fine stitchery, the endless ruching, the hints, more or less incautious, of nether treasures of embroidered linen; and, leaping over all this to the eye, the vivid colourings of silks and muslins, veils, plumes and flowers, piled as it were pell-mell in heaps on the universal green cushions to the furthest vista of the restaurant, and all multiplied in gilt mirrors—the spectacle intoxicated Sophia. Her eyes gleamed. She drank the soup with eagerness, and tasted the wine, though no desire on her part to like wine could make her like it; and then, seeing pineapples on a large table covered with fruits, she told Gerald that she should like some pineapple, and Gerald ordered one.

She gathered Iier self-esteem and her wits together, and began to give Gerald her views on the costumes. She could do so with impunity, because her own was indubitably beyond criticism. Some she wholly condemned, and there was not one which earned her unreserved approval. All the absurd fastidiousness of her schoolgirlish provinciality emerged in that eager, affected torrent of remarks. However, she was clever enough to read, after a time, in Gerald's tone and features, that she was making a tedious fool of herself. And she adroitly shifted her criticism from the taste to the *work*—she put a strong accent on the word—and pronounced that to be miraculous beyond description. She reckoned that she knew what dressmaking and millinery were, and her little fund of expert knowledge caused her to

picture a whole necessary cityful of girls stitching, stitching, and stitching day and night. She had wondered, during the few odd days that they had spent in Paris, between visits to Chantilly and other places, at the massed luxury of the shops; she had wondered, starting with St. Luke's Square as a standard, how they could all thrive. But now in her first real glimpse of the banal and licentious profusion of one among a hundred restaurants, she wondered that the shops were so few. She thought how splendid was all this expensiveness for trade. Indeed, the notions chasing each other within that lovely and foolish head were a surprising medley.

"Well, what do you think of Sylvain's?" Gerald asked, impatient to be assured that his Sylvain's had duly overwhelmed her.

"Oh, Gerald !" she murmured, indicating that speech was inadequate. And she just furtively touched his hand with hers.

The ennui due to her critical disquisition on the shortcomings of Parisian costume cleared away from Gerald's face.

"What do you suppose those people there are talking about?" he said with a jerk of the head towards a chattering group of three gorgeous lorettes and two middle-aged men at the next table but one.

"What are they talking about?"

"They're talking about the execution of the murderer Rivain that takes place at Auxerre the day after to-morrow. They're arranging to make up a party and go and see it."

"Oh, what a horrid idea!" said Sophia.

"Guillotine, you know!" said Gerald.

"But can people see it?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, I think it's horrible."

"Yes, that's why people like to go and see it. Besides, the man isn't an ordinary sort of criminal at all. He's very young and good-looking, and well connected. And he killed the celebrated Claudine. …"

"Claudine?"

"Claudine Jacquinot. Of course you wouldn't know. She was a tremendous—er—wrong 'un here in the forties. Made a lot of money, and retired to her native town."

Sophia, in spite of her efforts to maintain the *role* of a woman who has nothing to learn, blushed.

"Then she was older than he is."

"Thirty-five years older, if a day."

"What did he kill her for?"

"She wouldn't give him enough money. She was his mistress—or rather one of 'em. He wanted money for a young lady friend, you see. He killed her and took all the jewels she was wearing.whenever he went to see her she always wore all her best jewels—and you may bet a woman like that had a few. It seems she had been afraid for a long time that he meant to do for her."

"Then why did she see him! And why did she wear her jewels?"

"Because she liked being afraid, goose! Some women only enjoy themselves when they're terrified. Queer isn't it?"

Gerald insisted on meeting his wife's gaze as he finished these revelations. He pretended that such stories were the commonest things on earth, and that to be scandalized by them was infantile. Sophia, thrust suddenly into a strange civilization perfectly frank in its sensuality and its sensuousness, under the guidance of a young man to whom her half-formed intelligence was a most diverting toy—Sophia felt mysteriously uncomfortable, disturbed by sinister, flitting phantoms of ideas which she only dimly apprehended. Her

eyes fell. Gerald laughed self-consciously. She would not eat any more pineapple.

Immediately afterwards there came into the restaurant an apparition which momentarily stopped every conversation in the room. It was a tall and mature woman who wore over a dress of purplish-black silk a vast flowing *sortie de bal* of vermilion velvet, looped and tasselled with gold. No other costume could live by the side of that garment, Arab in shape, Russian in colour, and Parisian in style. It blazed. The woman's heavy coiffure was bound with fillets of gold braid and crimson rosettes. She was followed by a young Englishman in evening dress and whiskers of the most exact correctness. The woman sailed, a little breathlessly, to a table next to Gerald's, and took possession of it with an air of use, almost of tedium. She sat down, threw the cloak from her majestic bosom, and expanded her chest. Seeming to ignore the Englishman, who superciliously assumed the seat opposite to her, she let her large scornful eyes travel round the restaurant, slowly and imperiously meeting the curiosity which she had evoked. Her beauty had undoubtedly been dazzling, it was still effulgent; but the blossom was about to fall. She was admirably rouged and powdered; her arms were glorious; her lashes were long. There was little fault, save the excessive ripeness of a blonde who fights in vain against obesity. And her clothes combined audacity with the propriety of fashion. She carelessly deposed costly trinkets on the table, and then, having intimidated the whole company, she accepted the menu from the head-waiter and began to study it.

"That's one of 'em!" Gerald whispered to Sophia.

"One of what?" Sophia whispered.

Gerald raised his eyebrows warningly, and winked. The Englishman had overheard; and a look of frigid displeasure passed across his proud face. Evidently he belo aged to a

rank much higher than Gerald's; and Gerald, though he could always comfort himself by the thought that he had been to a university with the best, felt his own inferiority and could not hide that he felt it. Gerald was wealthy; he came of a wealthy family; but he had not the habit of wealth. When he spent money furiously, he did it with bravado, too conscious of grandeur and too conscious of the difficulties of acquiring that which he threw away. For Gerald had earned money. This whiskered Englishman had never earned money, never known the value of it, never imagined himself without as much of it as he might happen to want. He had the face of one accustomed to give orders and to look down upon inferiors. He was absolutely sure of himself. That his companion chiefly ignored him did not appear to incommode him in the least. She spoke to him in French. He replied in English, very briefly; and then, in English, he commanded the supper. As soon as the champagne was served he began to drink; in the intervals of drinking he gently stroked his whiskers. The woman spoke no more.

Gerald talked more loudly. With that aristocratic Englishman observing him, he could not remain at ease. And not only did he talk more loudly; he brought into his conversation references to money, travels, and worldly experiences. While seeking to impress the Englishman, he was merely becoming ridiculous to the Englishman; and obscurely he was aware of this. Sophia noticed and regretted it. Still, feeling very unimportant herself, she was reconciled to the superiority of the whiskered Englishman as to a natural fact. Gerald's behaviour slightly lowered him in her esteem. Then she looked at him—at his well-shaped neatness, his vivacious face, his excellent clothes, and decided that he was much to be preferred to any heavy-jawed, long-nosed aristocrat alive.

The woman whose vermilion cloak lay around her like a fortification spoke to her escort. He did not understand. He tried to express himself in French, and failed. Then the woman recommenced, talking at length. When she had done he shook his head. His acquaintance with French was limited to the vocabulary of food.

"Guillotine!" he murmured, the sole word of her discourse that he had understood.

"Oui, oui! Guillotine. Enfin . . . !" cried the woman excitedly. Encouraged by her success in conveying even one word of her remarks, she began a third time.

"Excuse me," said Gerald. "Madame is talking about the execution at Auxerre the day after to-morrow. N'est-ce-pas, madame, que vous parliez de Rivain?"

• The Englishman glared angrily at Gerald's officious interruption. But the woman smiled benevolently on Gerald, and insisted on talking to her friend through him. And the Englishman had to make the best of the situation.

"There isn't a restaurant in Paris to-night where they aren't talking about that execution," said Gerald on his own account.

"Indeed!" observed the Englishman.

Wine affected them in different ways.

Now a fragile, short young Frenchman, with an extremely pale face ending in a thin black imperial, appeared at the entrance. He looked about, and, recognizing the woman of the scarlet cloak, very discreetly saluted her. THen he saw Gerald, and his worn, fatigued features showed a sudden, startled smile. He came rapidly forward, hat in hand, seized Gerald's palm and greeted him effusively.

"My wife," said Gerald, with the solemn care of a man who is determined to prove that he is entirely sober.

The young man became grave and excessively ceremonious. He bowed low over Sophia's hand and kissed it. Her

impulse was to laugh, but the gravity of the young man's deference stopped her. She glanced at Gerald, blushing, as if to say: "This comedy is not my fault." Gerald said something, the young man turned to him and his face resumed its welcoming smile.

"This is Monsieur Chirac," Gerald at length completed the introduction, "a friend of mine when I lived in Paris."

He was proud to have met by accident an acquaintance in a restaurant. It demonstrated that he was a Parisian, and improved his standing with the whiskered Englishman and the vermilion cloak.

"It is the first time you come Paris, madame?" Chirac addressed himself to Sophia, in limping, timorous English.

"Yes," she giggled. He bowed again.

Chirac, with his best compliments, felicitated Gerald upon his marriage.

"Don't mention it!" said the humorous Gerald in English, amused at his own wit: and then: "What about this execution?"

"Ah!" replied Chirac, breathing out a long breath, and smiling at Sophia. "Rivain! Rivain!" He made a large, important gesture with his hand.

It was at once to be seen that Gerald had touched the topic which secretly ravaged the supper-world as a subterranean 'fire ravages a mine.

"I go!" said Chirac, with pride, glancing at Sophia, who smiled self-consciously.

Chirac entered upon a conversation with Gerald in French. Sophia comprehended that Gerald was surprised and impressed by what Chirac told him and that Chirac in turn was surprised. Then Gerald laboriously found his pocket-book, and after some fumbling with it handed it to Chirac so that the latter might write in it.

"Madame!" murmured Chirac, resuming his ceremonious stiffness in order to take leave. "Alors, c'est entendu, mon cher ami!" he said to Gerald, who nodded phlegmatically. And Chirac went away to the next table but one, where were the three lorettes and the two middle-aged men. He was received there with enthusiasm.

Sophia began to be teased by a little fear that Gerald was not quite his usual self. She did not think of him as tipsy. The idea of his being tipsy would have shocked her. She did not think clearly at all. She was lost and dazed in the labyrinth of new and vivid impressions into which Gerald had led her. But her prudence was awake.

"I think I'm tired," she said in a low voice.

"You don't want to go, do you?" he asked, hurt.

"Well——"

"Oh, wait a bit!"

The owner of the vermilion cloak spoke again to Gerald, who showed that he was flattered. While talking to her he ordered a brandy-and-soda. And then he could not refrain from displaying to her his familiarity with Parisian life, and he related how he had met Hortense Schneider behind a pair of white horses. The vermilion cloak grew even more sociable at the mention of this resounding name, and chattered with the most agreeable vivacity. Her friend stared inimically.

"Do you hear that?" Gerald explained to Sophia, who was sitting silent. "About Hortense Schneider—you know, we met her to-night. It seems she made a bet of a louis with some fellow, and when he lost he sent her the louis set in diamonds worth a hundred thousand francs. That's how they go on here."

"Oh!" cried Sophia, further than ever in the labyrinth.

"'Scuse me," the Englishman put in heavily. He had heard the words 'Hortense Schneider,' 'Hortense Schneider,'

repeating themselves in the conversation, and at last it had occurred to him that the conversation was about Hortense Schneider. '"Scuse me," he began again. "Are you—do you mean Hortense Schneider?"

"Yes," said Gerald. "We met her to-night."

"She's in Trouville," said the Englishman, flatly.

Gerald shook his head positively.

"I gave a supper to her in Trouville last night," said the Englishman. "And she plays at the Casino Theatre to-night."

Gerald was repulsed but not defeated. "What is she playing in to-night? Tell me that!" he sneered.

"I don't see why I sh'd tell you."

"Hm!" Gerald retorted. "If what you say is true, it's a very strange thing I should have seen her in the Champs Elysees to-night, isn't it?"

The Englishman drank more wine. "If you want to insult me, sir——" he began coldly.

"Gerald!" Sophia urged in a whisper.

"Be quiet!" Gerald snapped.

A fiddler in fancy costume plunged into the restaurant at that moment and began to play wildly. The shock of his strange advent momentarily silenced the quarrel; but soon it leaped up again, under the shelter of the noisy music,—the common, tedious, tippler's quarrel. It rose higher and higher. The fiddler looked askance at it over his fiddle. Chirac cautiously observed it. Instead of attending to the music, the festal company attended to the quarrel. Three waiters in a group watched it with an impartial sporting interest. The English voices grew more menacing.

Then suddenly the whiskered Englishman, jerking his head towards the door, said more quietly:

"Hadn't we better settle thish outside?"

"At your service!" said Gerald, rising.

The owner of the vermilion cloak lifted her eyebrows to Chirac in fatigued disgust, but she said nothing. Nor did Sophia say anything. Sophia was overcome by terror.

The swain of the cloak, dragging his coat after him across the floor, left the restaurant without offering any apology or explanation to his lady.

"Wait here for me," said Gerald defiantly to Sophia. "I shall be back in a minute."

"But, Gerald!" She put her hand on his sleeve.

He snatched his arm away. "Wait here for me, I tell you," he repeated.

The doorkeeper obsequiously opened the door to the two unsteady carousers, for whom the fiddler diew back, still playing.

Thus Sophia was left side by side with the vermilion cloak. She was quite helpless. All the pride of a married woman had abandoned her. She stood transfixed by intense shame, staring painfully at a pillar, to avoid the universal assault of eyes. She felt like an indiscreet little girl, and she looked like one. No youthful radiant beauty of features, no grace and style of a Parisian dress, no certificate of a ring, no premature initiation into the mysteries, could save her from the appearance of a raw fool whose foolishness had been her undoing. Her face changed to its reddest, and remained at that, and all the fundamental innocence of her nature, which had been overlaid by the violent experiences of her brief companionship with Gerald, rose again to the surface with that blush. Her situation drew pity from a few hearts and a careless contempt from the rest. But since once more it was a question of *ces Anglais,* nobody could be astonished.

Without moving her head, she twisted her eyes to the clock: half-past two. The fiddler ceased his dance and made a collection in his tasselled cap. The vermilion cloak threw

a coin into the cap. Sophia stared at it moveless, until thr fiddler, tired of waiting, passed to the next table and relieved her agony. She had no money at all. She set herself to watch the clock; but its fingers would not stir.

With an exclamation the lady of the cloak got up and peered out of the window, chatted with waiters, and then removed herself and her cloak to the next table, where she was received with amiable sympathy by the three lorettes, Chirac, and the other two men. The party surreptitiously examined Sophia from time to time. Then Chirac went outside with the head-waiter, returned, consulted with his friends, and finally approached Sophia. It was twenty minutes past three.

He renewed his magnificent bow. *'Madame," he said carefully, "will you allow me to bring you to your hotel?"

He made no reference to Gerald, partly, doubtless, because his English was treacherous on difficult ground.

Sophia had not sufficient presence of mind to thank her saviour.

"But the bill?" she stammered. "The bill isn't paid."

He did not instantly understand her. But one of the waiters had caught the sound of a familiar word, and sprang forward with a slip of paper on a plate.

"I have no money," said Sophia, with a feeble smile.

"Je vous arrangerai 9a," he said. "What name of the hotel? Meurice, is it not?"

"Hotel Meurice," said Sophia. "Yes."

He spoke to the head-waiter about the bill, which was carried away like something obscene; and on his arm, which he punctiliously offered and she could not refuse, Sophia left the scene of her ignominy. She was so distraught that she could not manage her crinoline in the doorway. No sign anywhere outside of Gerald or his foe!

He put her into an open carriage, and in five minutes they had clattered down the brilliant silence of the Rue de la Paix, through the Place Vendome into the Rue de Rivoli; and the night-porter of the hotel was at the carriage-step.

"I tell them at the restaurant where you gone," said Chirac, bare-headed under the long colonnade of the street. "If your husband is there, I tell him. Till to-morrow. . . !"

His manners were more wonderful than any that Sophia had ever imagined. He might have been in the dark Tuileries on the opposite side of the street, saluting an empress, instead of taking leave of a raw little girl, who was still too disturbed even to thank him.

She fled candle in hand up the wide, many-cornered stairs; Gerald might be already in the bedroom, . . . drunk! There was a chance. But the gilt-fringed bedroom was empty. She sat down at the velvet-covered table amid the shadows cast by the candle that wavered in the draught from the open window. And she set her teeth and a cold fury possessed her in the hot and languorous night. Gerald was an imbecile. That he should have allowed himself to get tipsy was bad enough, but that he should have exposed her to the horrible situation from which Chirac had extricated her, was unspeakably disgraceful. He was an imbecile. He had no commonsense. With all his captivating charm, he could not be relied upon not to make himself and her ridiculous, tragically ridiculous. Compare him with Mr. Chirac! She leaned despairingly on the table. She would not undress. She would not move. She had to realize her position; she had to see it.

Folly! Folly! Fancy a commercial traveller throwing a compromising piece of paper to the daughter of his customer in the shop itself: that was the incredible folly with which

their relations had begun! And his mad gesture at the pit-shaft! And his scheme for bringing her to Paris unmarried! And then to-night! Monstrous folly! Alone in the bedroom she was a wise and a disillusioned woman, wiser than any of those dolls in the restaurant.

And had she not gone to Geiald, as it were, over the dead body of her father, through lies and lies and again lies? That was how she phrased it to herself. . . . Over the dead body of her father! How could such a venture succeed? How could she ever have hoped that it would succeed? In that moment she saw her acts with the ten ible vision of a Hebrew prophet.

She thought of the Square and of her life there with her mother and Constance. Never would her pride allow her to return to that life, not even if the worst happened to her that could happen. She was one of those who are prepared to pay without grumbling for what they have had.

There was a sound outside. She noticed that the dawn had begun. The door opened and disclosed Gerald.

They exchanged a searching glance, and Gerald shut the door. Gerald infected the air, but she perceived at once that he was sobered. His lip was bleeding.

"Mr. Chirac brought me home," she said.

"So it seems," said Gerald, curtly. "I asked you to wait for me. Didn't I say I should come back?"

He was adopting the injured magisterial tone of the man who is ridiculously trying to conceal from himself and others that he has recently behaved like an ass.

She resented the injustice. "I don't think you need talk like that," she said.

"Like what?" he bullied her, determined that she should be in the wrong.

And what a hard look on his pretty face!

Her prudence bade her accept the injustice. She was his.

Rapt away from her own world, she was utterly dependent on his good nature.

"I knocked my chin against the damned balustrade, coming upstairs," said Gerald, gloomily.

She knew that was a lie. "Did you?" she replied kindly. "Let me bathe it."

CHAPTER III: AN AMBITION SATISFIED

§1

SHE went to sleep in misery. All the glory of her new life had been eclipsed. But when she woke up, a few hours later, in the large velvety stateliness of the bedroom for which Gerald was paying so fantastic a price per day, she was in a brighter mood, and very willing to reconsider her verdicts. Her pride induced her to put Gerald in the right and herself in the wrong, for she was too proud to admit that she had married a charming and irresponsible fool. And, indeed, ought she not to put herself in the wrong? Gerald had told her to wait, and she had not waited. He had said that he should return to the restaurant, and he had returned. Why had she not waited? She had not waited because she had behaved like a simpleton. She had been terrified about nothing. Had she not been frequenting restaurants now for a month past? Ought not a married woman to be capable of waiting an hour in a restaurant for her lawful husband without looking a ninny? And as for Gerald's behaviour, how could he have acted differently? The other Englishman was obviously a brute and had sought a quarrel. His contradiction of Gerald's statements was extremely offensive. On being invited by the brute **to** go outside, what could Gerald do but comply? Not to have complied might have meant a fight in the restaurant, as the brute was certainly drunk. Compared to the brute, Gerald was not at all drunk, merely a little gay and talkative. Then Gerald's fib about his chin was natural; he simply wished to minimize the fuss and to spare her feelings. It was, in fact, just like Gerald to keep perfect silence as to what had passed between himself and the brute. However, she was convinced that Gerald, so

lithe and quick, had given that great brute with his supercilious ways as good as he received, if not better.

And if she were a man and had asked her wife to wait in a restaurant, and the wife had gone home under the escort of another man, she would most assuredly be much more angry than Gerald had been. She was very glad that she had controlled herself and exercised a meek diplomacy. A quarrel had thus been avoided. Yes, the finish of the evening could not be called a quarrel; after her nursing of his chin, nothing but a slight coolness on his part had persisted.

She arose silently and began to dress, full of a determination to treat Gerald as a good wife ought to treat a husband. Gerald did not stir; he was an excellent sleeper: one of those organisms that never want to go to bed and never want to get up. When her toilet was complete save for her bodice, there was a knock at the door. She started.

"Gerald!" She approached the bed, and leaned her nude bosom over her husband, and put her arms round his neck. This method of being brought back to consciousness did not displease him.

The knock was repeated. He gave a grunt.

"Some one's knocking at the door," she whispered.

"Then why don't you open it?" he asked dreamily.

"I'm not dressed, darling."

He looked at her. "Stick something on your shoulders, girl!" said he. "What does it matter?"

There she was, being a simpleton again, despite her resolution!

She obeyed, and cautiously opened the door, standing behind it.

A middle-aged whiskered servant, in a long white apron, announced matters in French which passed her understanding. But Gerald had heard from the bed, and he replied.

"Bien, monsieur!" The servant departed, with a bow, down the obscure corridor.

"It's Chirac," Gerald explained when she had shut the door. "I was forgetting I asked him to come and have lunch with us, early. He's waiting in the drawing-room. Just put your bodice on, and go and talk to him till I come."

He jumped out of bed, and then, standing in his night-garb, stretched himself and terrifically yawned.

"Me?" Sophia questioned.

"Who else?" said Gerald, with that curious satiric dryness which he would sometimes import into his tone.

"But I can't speak French!" she protested.

"I didn't suppose you could," said Gerald, with an increase of dryness; "but you know as well as I do that he can speak English."

"Oh, very well, then!" she murmured with agreeable alacrity.

Evidently Gerald had not yet quite recovered from his legitimate displeasure of the night. He minutely examined his mouth in the glass of the Louis Philippe wardrobe. It showed scarcely a trace of battle.

"I say!" he stopped her, as, nervous at the prospect before her, she was leaving the room. "I was thinking of going to Auxerre to-day."

"Auxerre?" she repeated, wondering under what circumstances she had recently heard that name. Then she remembered: it was the place of execution of the murderer Rivain.

"Yes," he said. "Chirac has to go. He's on a newspaper now. He was an architect when I knew him. He's got to go and he thinks himself jolly lucky. So I thought I'd go with him."

The truth was that he had definitely arranged to go.

"Not to see the execution?" she stammered.

"Why not? I've always wanted to see an execution, especially with the guillotine. Arid executions are public in France. It's quite the proper thing to go to them."

"But why do you want to see an execution?"

"It just happens that I do want to see an execution. It's a fancy of mine, that's all. I don't know that any reason is necessary," he said, pouring out water into the diminutive ewer.

She was aghast. "And shall you leave me here alone?"

"Well," said he, "I don't see why my being married should prevent me from doing something that I've always wanted to do. Do you?"

"Oh H0!" she eagerly concurred.

"That's all right," he said. "You can do exactly as you like. Either stay here, or come with me. If you go to Auxerre there's no need at all for you to see the execution. It's an interesting old town—cathedral and so on. But of course if you can't bear to be in the same town as a guillotine, I'll go alone. I shall come back to-morrow."

It was plain where his wish lay. She stopped the phrases that came to her lips, and did her best to dismiss the thoughts which prompted them.

"Of course I'll go," she said quietly. She hesitated, and then went up to the washstand and kissed a part of his cheek that was not soapy. That kiss, which comforted and somehow reassured her, was the expression of a surrender whose monstrousness she would not admit to herself.

In the rich and dusty drawing-room, Chirac and Chirac's exquisite formalities awaited her. Nobody else was there.

"My husband . . ." she began, smiling and blushing. She liked Chirac.

It was the first time she had had the opportunity of using that word to other than a servant. It soothed her and gave her confidence. She perceived after a few moments that

Chirac did genuinely admire her; more, that she inspired him with something that resembled awe. Speaking very slowly and distinctly she said that she should travel with her husband to Auxerre, as he saw no objection to that course; implying that if he saw no objection she was perfectly satisfied. Chirac was concurrence itself. In five minutes it seemed to be the most natural and proper thing in the world that, on her honeymoon, she should be going with her husband to a particular town because a notorious murderer was about to be decapitated there in public.

"My husband has always wanted to see an execution," she said, later, "It would be a pity to. . . ."

"As psychological experience," replied Chirac, pronouncing the *p* of the adjective, "it will be very *interessant.* . . . To observe one's self, in such circumstances. …" He smiled enthusiastically.

She thought how strange even nice Frenchmen were. Imagine going to an execution in order to observe yourself!

§ 2

What continually impressed Sophia as strange, in the behaviour not only of Gerald but of Chirac and other people with whom she came into contact, was its quality of casualness. She had all her life been accustomed to see enterprises, even minor ones, well pondered and then carefully schemed beforehand. In St. Luke's Square there was always, in every head, a sort of time-table of existence prepared at least one week in advance. But in Gerald's world nothing was prearranged. Elaborate affairs were decided in a moment and undertaken with extraordinary lightness. Thus the excursion to Auxerre! During lunch scarcely a word was said as to it; the conversation, in English for Sophia's advantage, turning, as usual under such

circumstances, upon the difficulty of languages and the differences between countries. Nobody would have guessed that any member of the party had any preoccupation whatever for the rest of the day. The meal was delightful to Sophia; not merely did she find Chirac comfortingly kind and sincere, but Gerald was restored to the perfection of his charm and his good humour. Then suddenly, in the midst of coffee, the question of trains loomed up like a swift crisis. In five minutes Chirac had departed—whether to his office or his home Sophia did not understand, and within a quarter of an hour she and Gerald were driving rapidly to the Gare de Lyon, Gerald stuffing into his pocket a large envelope full of papers which he had received by registered post. They caught the train by about a minute, and Chirac by a few seconds. Yet neither he nor Gerald seemed to envisage the risk of inconvenience and annoyance which they had incurred and escaped. Chirac chattered through the window with another journalist in the next compartment. When she had leisure to examine him, Sophia saw that he must have called at his home to put on old clothes. Everybody except herself and Gerald seemed to travel in his oldest clothes.

The train was hot, noisy and dusty. But, one after another, all three of them fell asleep, and slept heavily, calmly, like healthy and exhausted young animals. Nothing could disturb them for more than a moment. To Sophia it appeared to be by simple chance that Chirac aroused himself and them at Laroche and sleepily seized her valise and got them all out on the platform, where they yawned and smiled, full of the deep, half-realized satisfaction of repose. They drank nectar from a wheeled buffet, drank it eagerly, in thirsty gulps, and sighed with pleasure and relief, and Gerald threw down a coin, refusing change with a lord's gesture. The local train to Auxerre was full, and

with a varied and sinister cargo. At length they were in the zone of the waiting guillotine. The rumour ran that the executioner was on the train. No one had seen him; no one was sure of recognizing him, but everyone hugged the belief that he was on the train. Although the sun was sinking the heat seemed not to abate. Attitudes grew more limp, more abandoned. Soot and prickly dust flew in unceasingly at the open windows. The train stopped at Bonnard, Chemilly, and Moneteau, each time before a waiting crowd that invaded it. And at last, in the great station at Auxerre, it poured out an incredible mass of befouled humanity that spread over everything like an inundation. Sophia was frightened. Gerald left the initiative to Chirac, and Chirac took her arm and led her forward, looking behind him to see that Gerald followed with the valise. Frenzy seemed to reign in Auxerre.

The driver of a cab demanded ten francs for transporting them to the Hotel de PEpee.

"Bah!" scornfully exclaimed Chirac, in his quality of experienced Parisian who is not to be exploited by heavy-witted provincials.

But the driver of the next cab demanded twelve francs.

"Jump in," said Gerald to Sophia. Chirac lifted his eyebrows.

At the same moment a tall, stout man with the hard face of a flourishing scoundrel, and a young, pallid girl on his arm, pushed aside both Gerald and Chirac and got into the cab with his companion.

Chirac protested, telling him that the cab was already engaged.

The usurper scowled and swore, and the young girl laughed boldly.

Sophia, shrinking, expected her escort to execute justice heroic and final; but she was disappointed.

"Srute!" murmured Chirac, and shrugged his shoulders, as the carriage drove off, leaving them foolish on the kerb.

By this time all the other cabs had been seized. They walked to the Hotel de 1'Epee, jostled by the crowd, Sophia and Chirac in front, and Gerald following with the valise, whose weight caused him to lean over to the right and his left arm to rise. The avenue was long, straight, and misty with a floating dust. Sophia had a vivid sense of the romantic. They saw towers and spires, and Chirac talked to her slowly and carefully of the cathedral and the famous churches. He said that the stained glass was marvellous, and with much care he catalogued for her all the things she must visit. They crossed a river. She felt as though she was stepping into the middle age. At intervals Gerald changed the valise from hand to hand; obstinatelv, he would not let Chirac touch it. They struggled upwards, through narrow curving streets.

"Voila!" said Chirac.

They were in front of the Hotel de 1'Epee. Across the street was a cafè crammed with people. Several carriages stood in front. The Hotel de 1'Epee had a reassuring air of mellow respectability, such as Chirac had claimed for it. He had suggested this hotel for Madame Scales because it was not near the place of execution. Gerald had said, "Of course! Of course!" Chirac, who did not mean to go to bed, required no room for himself.

The Hotel de I'Epee had one room to offer, at the price of twenty-five francs.

Gerald revolted at the attempted imposition. "A ^nice thing!" he grumbled, "that ordinary travellers can't get a decent room at a decent price just because some one's going to be guillotined to-morrow! We'll try elsewhere!"

His features expressed disgust, but Sophia fancied that he was secretly pleased.

They swaggered out of the busy stir of the hotel, as those must who, having declined to be swindled, wish to preserve their importance in the face of the world. In the street a cabman solicited them, and filled them with hope by saying that he knew of a hotel that might suit them and would drive them there for five francs. He furiously lashed his horse. The mere fact of being in a swiftly moving carriage which wayfarers had to avoid nimbly, maintained their spirits. They had a near glimpse of the cathedral. The cab halted with a bump, in a small square, in front of a repellent building which bore the sign, 'Hotel de Vezelay.[5] The horse was bleeding. Gerald instructed Sophia to remain where she was, and he and Chirac went up four stone steps into the hotel. Sophia, stared at by loose crowds that were promenading, gazed about her, and saw that all the windows of the square were open and most of them occupied by people who laughed and chattered. Then there was a shout: Gerald's voice. He had appeared at a window on the second floor of the hotel with Chirac and a very fat woman. Chirac saluted, and Gerald laughed carelessly, and nodded.

"It's all right," said Gerald, having descended.

"How much do they ask?" Sophia inquired indiscreetly.

Gerald hesitated, and looked self-conscious. "Thirty-five francs," he said. "But I've had enough of driving about. It seems we're lucky to get it even at that."

And Chirac shrugged his shoulders as if to indicate that the situation and the price ought to be accepted philosophically. Gerald gave the driver five francs. He examined the piece and demanded a pourboire.

"Oh! Damn!" said Gerald, and, because he had no smaller change, parted with another two francs.

"Is any one coming out for this damned valise?" Gerald demanded, like a tyrant whose wrath would presently fall

if the populace did not instantly set about minding their p's and q's.

But nobody emerged, and he was compelled to carry the bag himself.

The hotel was dark and malodorous, and every room seemed to be crowded with giggling groups of drinkers.

"We can't both sleep in this bed, surely," said Sophia when, Chirac having remained downstairs, she faced Gerald in a small, mean bedroom.

"You don't suppose I shall go to bed, do you?" said Gerald, rather brusquely. "It's for you. We're going to eat now. Look sharp."

§3

It was night. She lay in the narrow, crimson-draped bed. The heavy crimson curtains had been drawn across the dirty lace curtains of the window, but the lights of the little square faintly penetrated through chinks into the room. The sounds of the square also penetrated, extraordinarily loud and clear, for the unabated heat had compelled her to leave the window open. She could not sleep. Exhausted though she was, there was no hope of her being able to sleep.

Once again she was profoundly depressed. She remembered the dinner with horror. The long, crowded table, with semi-circular ends, in the oppressive and reeking dining-room lighted by oil-lamps! There must have been at least forty people at that table. Most of them ate disgustingly, as noisily as pigs, with the ends of the large coarse napkins tucked in at their necks. All the service was done by the fat woman whom she had seen at the window with Gerald, and a young girl whose demeanour was candidly brazen. Both these creatures were slatterns. Everything

was dirty. But the food was good. Chirac and Gerald were agreed that the food was good, as well as the wine. "Remarquable!" Chirac had said, of the wine. Sophia, however, could neither eat nor drink with relish. She was afraid. The company shocked her by its gestures alone. It was very heterogeneous in appearance, some of the diners being well dressed, approaching elegance, and others shabby. But all the faces, to the youngest, were brutalized, corrupt, and shameless. The juxtaposition of old men and young women was odious to her, especially when those pairs kissed, as they did frequently towards the end of the meal. Happily she was placed between Chirac and Gerald. That situation seemed to shelter her even from the conversation. She would have comprehended nothing of the conversation, had it not been for the presence of a middle-aged Englishman who sat at the opposite end of the table with a youngish, stylish Frenchwoman whom she had seen at Sylvain's on the previous night. The Englishman was evidently under a promise to teach English to the Frenchwoman. He kept translating for her into English, slowly and distinctly, and she would repeat the phrases after him, with strange contortions of the mouth.

Thus Sophia gathered that the talk was exclusively about assassinations, executions, criminals, and executioners. Some of the people there made a practice of attending every execution. They were fountains of interesting gossip, and the lions of the meal. There was a woman who could recall the dying words of all the victims ofjustice for twenty years past. The table roared with hysteric laughter at one of this woman's anecdotes. Sophia learned that she had related how a criminal had said to the priest who was goodnaturedly trying to screen the sight of the guillotine from him with his body: "Stand away now, parson. Haven't I paid to see it?" Such was the Englishman's rendering. The

wages of the executioners and their assistants were discussed, and differences of opinions led to ferocious arguments. A young and dandiacal fellow told, as a fact which he was ready to vouch for with a pistol, how Cora Pearl, the renowned English courtesan, had through her influence over a prefect of police succeeded in visiting a criminal alone in his cell during the night preceding his execution, and had only quitted him an hour before the final summons. The tale won the honours of the dinner. It was regarded as truly impressive, and inevitably it led to the general inquiry: what could the highest personages in the empire see to admire in that red-haired Englishwoman? And of course Rivain himself, the handsome homicide, the centre and hero of the fete, was never long out of the conversation. Several of the diners had seen him; one or two knew him and could give amazing details of his prowess as a man of pleasure. Despite his crime, he seemed to be the object of sincere idolatry. It was said positively that a niece of his victim had been promised a front place at the execution.

Apropos of this, Sophia gathered, to her intense astonishment and alarm, that the prison was close by and that the execution would take place at the corner of the square itself in which the hotel was situated. Gerald must have known; he had hidden it from her. She regarded him sideways, with distrust. As the dinner finished, Gerald's pose of a calm, disinterested, scientific observer of humanity gradually broke down. He could not maintain it in front of the increasing licence of the scene round the table. He was at length somewhat ashamed of having exposed his wife to the view of such an orgy; his restless glance carefully avoided both Sophia and Chirac. The latter, whose unaffected simplicity of interest in the affair had more than anything helped to keep Sophia in countenance, observed

the change in Gerald and Sophia's excessive discomfort, and suggested that they should leave the table without waiting for the coffee. Gerald agreed quickly. Thus had Sophia been released from the horror of the dinner. She did not understand how a man so thoughtful and kindly as Chirac—he had bidden her good night with the most distinguished courtesy—could tolerate, much less pleasurably savour, the gluttonous, drunken, and salacious debauchery of the Hotel de Vezelay; but his theory was, so far as she could judge from his imperfect English, that whatever existed might be admitted and examined by serious persons interested in the study of human nature. His face seemed to say: "Why not?" His face seemed to say to Gerald and to herself: "If this incommodes you, what did you come for?"

Gerald had left her at the bedroom door with a self-conscious nod. She had partly undressed and lain down, and instantly the hotel had transformed itself into a kind of sounding-box. It was as if, beneath and within all the noises of the square, every movement in the hotel reached her ears through cardboard walls: distant shoutings and laughter below; rattlings of crockery below; stampings up and down stairs; stealthy creepings up and down stairs; brusque calls; fragments of song, whisperings; long sighs suddenly stifled; mysterious groans as of torture, broken by a giggle; quarrels and bickering,—she was spared nothing in the strangely resonant darkness.

Then there came out of the little square a great uproar and commotion, with shrieks, and under the shrieks a confused din. In vain she pressed her face into the pillow and listened to the irregular, prodigious noise of her eyelashes as they scraped the rough linen. The thought had somehow introduced itself into her head that she must arise and go to the window and see all that was to be seen. She

resisted. She said to herself that the idea was absurd, that she did not *wish* to go to the window. Nevertheless, while arguing with herself, she well knew that resistance to the thought was useless and that ultimately her legs would obey its command.

When ultimately she yielded to the fascination and went to the window and pulled aside one of the curtains, she had a feeling of relief.

The cool, grey beginnings of dawn were in the sky, and every detail of the square was visible. Without exception all the windows were wide open and filled with sightseers. In the background of many windows were burning candles or lamps that the far distant approach of the sun was already killing. In front of these, on the frontier of two mingling lights, the attentive figures of the watchers were curiously silhouetted. On the red-tiled roofs, too, was a squatted population. Below, a troop of gendarmes, mounted on caracoling horses stretched in line across the square, was gradually sweeping the entire square of a packed, gesticulating, cursing crowd. The operation of this immense besom was very slow. As the spaces of the square were cleared they began to be dotted by privileged persons, journalists or law officers or their friends, who walked to and fro in conscious pride; among them Sophia descried Gerald and Chirac, strolling arm-in-arm and talking to two elaborately clad girls, who were also arm-in-arm.

Then she saw a red reflection coming from one of the side streets of which she had a vista; it was the swinging lantern of a waggon drawn by a gaunt grey horse. The vehicle stopped at the end of the square from which the besom had started, and it was immediately surrounded by the privileged, who, however, were soon persuaded to stand away. The crowd amassed now at the principal inlets of the square, gave a formidable cry and burst into the refrain—

"Le voila!
Nicolas!
Ah! Ah! Ah!"

The clamour became furious as a group of workmen in blue blouses drew piece by piece all the components of the guillotine from the waggon and laid them carefully on the ground, under the superintendence of a man in a black frock-coat and a silk hat with broad flat brims; a little fussy man of nervous gestures. And presently the red columns had risen upright from the ground and were joined at the top by an acrobatic climber. As each part was bolted and screwed to the growing machine the man in the high hat carefully tested it. In a short time that seemed very long, the guillotine was finished save for the triangular steel blade which lay shining on the ground, a cynosure. The executioner pointed to it, and two men picked it up and slipped it into its groove, and hoisted it to the summit of the machine. The executioner peered at it interminably amid a universal silence. Then he actuated the mechanism, and the mass of metal fell with a muffled, reverberating thud. There were a few faint shrieks, blended together, and then an overpowering racket of cheers, shouts, hootings, and fragments of song. The blade was again lifted, instantly reproducing silence, and again it fell, liberating a new bedlam. The executioner made a movement of satisfaction. Many women at the windows clapped enthusiastically, and the gendarmes had to fight brutally against the fierce pressure of the crowd. The workmen doffed their blouses and put on coats, and Sophia was disturbed to see them coming in single file towards the hotel, followed by the executioner in the silk hat.

§4

There was a tremendous opening of doors in the Hotel de Vezelay, and much whispering on thresholds, as the executioner and his band entered solemnly. Sophia heard them tramp upstairs; they seemed to hesitate, and then apparently went into a room on the same landing as hers. A door banged. But Sophia could hear the regular sound of new voices talking, and then the rattling of glasses on a tray. The conversation which came to her from the windows of the hotel now showed a great increase of excitement. She could not see the people at these neighbouring windows without showing her own head, and this she would not do. The boom of a heavy bell striking the hour vibrated over the roofs of the square; she supposed that it might be the cathedral clock. In a corner of the square she saw Gerald talking vivaciously alone with one of the two girls who had been together. She wondered vaguely how such a girl had been brought up, and what her parents thought—or knew! And she was conscious of an intense pride in herself, of a measureless haughty feeling of superiority.

Her eye caught the guillotine again, and was held by it. Guarded by gendarmes, that tall and simple object did most menacingly dominate the square with its crude red columns. Tools and a large open box lay on the ground beside it. The enfeebled horse in the waggon had an air of dozing on his twisted legs. Then the first rays of the sun shot lengthwise across the square at the level of the chimneys; and Sophia noticed that nearly all the lamps and candles had been extinguished. Many people at the windows were yawning; they laughed foolishly after they had yawned. Some were eating and drinking. Some were shouting conversations from one house to another. The mounted gendarmes were still pressing back the

feverish crowds that growled at all the inlets to the square. She saw Chirac walking to and fro alone. But she could not find Gerald. He could not have left the square. Perhaps he had returned to the hotel and would come up to see if she was comfortable or if she needed anything. Guiltily she sprang back into bed. When last she had surveyed the room it had been dark; now it was bright and every detail stood clear. Yet she had the sensation of having been at the window only a few minutes.

She waited. But Gerald did not come. She could hear chiefly the steady hum of the voices of the executioner and his aids. She reflected that the room in which they were must be at the back. The other sounds in the hotel grew less noticeable. Then, after an age, she heard a door open, and a low voice say something commandingly in French, and then a 'Oui, monsieur,' and a general descent of the stairs. The executioner and his aids were leaving. "You," cried a drunken English voice from an upper floor—it was the middle-aged Englishman translating what the executioner had said—"you, you will take the head." Then a rough laugh, and the repeating voice of the Englishman's girl, still pursuing her studies in English: "You will take ze 'ead. Yess, sair." And another laugh. At length quiet reigned in the hotel. Sophia said to herself: "I won't stir from this bed till it's all over and Gerald comes back!"

She dozed, under the sheet, and was awakened by a tremendous shrieking, growling, and yelling: a phenomenon of human bestiality that far surpassed Sophia's narrow experiences. Shut up though she was in a room, perfectly secure, the mad fury of that crowd, balked at the inlets to the square, thrilled and intimidated her. It sounded as if they would be capable of tearing the very horses to pieces. "I must stay where I am," she murmured. And even while saying it she rose and went to the window again and peeped

out. The torture involved was extreme, but she had not sufficient force within her to resist the fascination. She stared greedily into the bright square. The first thing she saw was Gerald coming out of a house opposite, followed after a few seconds by the girl with whom he had previously been talking. Gerald glanced hastily up at the facade of the hotel, and then approached as near as he could to the red columns, in front of which were now drawn a line of gendarmes with naked swords. A second and larger waggon, with two horses, waited by the side of the other one. The racket beyond the square continued and even grew louder. But the couple of hundred persons within the cordons, and all the inhabitants of the windows, drunk and sober, gazed in a fixed and sinister enchantment at the region of the guillotine, as Sophia gazed. "I cannot stand this!" she told herself in horror, but she could not move; she could not move even her eyes.

At intervals the crowd would burst out in a violent staccato—

"Le voila!
Nicholas!
Ah! Ah! Ah!"

And the final 'Ah' was devilish.

Then a gigantic passionate roar, the culmination of the mob's fierce savagery, crashed against the skies. The line of maddened horses swerved and reared, and seemed to fall on the furious multitude while the statue-like gendarmes rocked over them. It was a last effort to break the cordon, and it failed.

From the little street at the rear of the guillotine appeared a priest, walking backwards, and holding a crucifix high in his right hand, and behind him came the handsome hero, his body all crossed with cords, between two warders, who

pressed against him and suppoited mm on eitner siae. ne was certainly very young. He lifted his chin gallantly, but his face was incredibly white. Sophia discerned that the priest was trying to hide the sight of the guillotine from the prisoner with his body, just as in the story which she had heard at dinner.

Except the voice of the priest, indistinctly rising and falling in prayer for the dying, there was no sound in the square or its environs. The windows were now occupied by groups turned to stone with distended eyes fixed on the little procession. Sophia had a tightening of the throat, and the hand trembled by which she held the curtain. The central figure did not seem to her to be alive; but rather a doll, a marionette wound up to imitate the action of a tragedy. She saw the priest offer the crucifix to the mouth of the marionette, which with a clumsy unhuman shoving of its corded shoulders butted the thing away. And as the procession turned and stopped she could plainly see that the marionette's nape and shoulders were bare, his shirt having been slit. It was horrible. "Why do I stay here?" she asked herself hysterically. But she did not stir. The victim had disappeared now in the midst of a group of men. Then she perceived him prone under the red column, between the grooves. The silence was now broken only by the tinkling of the horses' bits in the corners of the square. The line of gendarmes in front of the scaffold held their swords tightly and looked over their noses, ignoring the privileged groups that peered almost between their shoulders.

And Sophia waited, horror-struck. She saw nothing but the gleaming triangle of metal that was suspended high above the prone, attendant victim. She felt like a lost soul, torn too soon from shelter, and exposed for ever to the worst hazards of destiny. Why was she in this strange, incompre-

hensible town, foreign and inimical to her, watching with agonized glance this cruel, obscene spectacle? Her sensibilities were all a bleeding mass of wounds. Why? Only yesterday, and she had been an innocent, timid creature in Bursley, in Axe, a foolish creature who deemed the concealment of letters a supreme excitement. Either that day or this day was not real. Why was she imprisoned alone in that odious, indescribably odious hotel, with no one to soothe and comfort her, and carry her away?

The distant bell boomed once. Then a monosyllabic voice sounded, sharp, low, nervous; she recognized the voice of the executioner, whose name she had heard but could not remember. There was a clicking noise. . . .

She shrank down to the floor in terror and loathing, and hid her face, and shuddered. Shriek after shriek, from various windows, rang on her ears in a fusillade; and then the mad yell of the penned crowd, which, like herself, had not seen but had heard, extinguished all other noise. Justice was done. The great ambition of Gerald's life was at last satisfied.

§5

Later, amid the stir of the hotel, there came a knock at her door, impatient and nervous. Forgetting, in her tribulation, that she was without her bodice, she got up from the floor in a kind of miserable dream, and opened. Chirac stood on the landing, and he had Gerald by the arm. Chirac looked worn out, curiously fragile and pathetic; but Gerald was the very image of death. The attainment of ambition had utterly destroyed his equilibrium; his curiosity had proved itself stronger than his stomach. Sophia would have pitied him had she in that moment been capable of pity. Gerald staggered past her into the room, and sank with a groan on to the bed. Not long since he had been proudly conversing

with impudent women. Now, in swift collapse, he was as flaccid as a sick hound and as disgusting as an aged drunkard.

"He is some little *soujfrant,"* said Chirac, weakly.

Sophia perceived in Chirac's tone the assumption that of course her present duty was to devote herself to the task of restoring her shamed husband to his manly pride.

"And what about me?" she thought bitterly.

The fat woman ascended the stairs like a tottering blancmange, and began to gabble to Sophia, who understood nothing whatever.

"She wants sixty francs," Chirac said, and in answer to Sophia's startled question, he explained that Gerald had agreed to pay a hundred francs for the room, which was the landlady's own—fifty francs in advance and the fifty after the execution. The other ten was for the dinner. The landlady, distrusting the whole of her *clientele,,* was collecting her accounts instantly on the completion of the spectacle.

Sophia made no remark as to Gerald's lie to her. Indeed, Chirac had heard it. She knew Gerald for a glib liar to others, but she was naively surprised when he practised upon herself.

"Gerald! Do you hear?" she said coldly.

The amateur of severed heads only groaned.

With a movement of irritation she went to him and felt in his pockets for his purse; he acquiesced, still groaning. Chirac helped her to choose and count the coins.

The fat woman, appeased, pursued her way.

"Good-bye, madame!" said Chirac, with his customary courtliness, transforming the landing of the hideous hotel into some imperial antechamber.

"Are you going away?" she asked, in surprise. Her distress was so obvious that it tremendously flattered him. He would have stayed if he could. But he had to return to Paris to write and deliver his article.

"To-morrow, I hope!" he murmured sympathetically, kissing her hand. The gesture atoned somewhat for the sordidness of her situation, and even corrected the faults of her attire. Always afterwards it seemed to her that Chirac was an old and intimate friend; he had successfully passed through the ordeal of seeing 'the wrong side' of the stuff of her life.

She shut the door on him with a lingering glance, and reconciled herself to her predicament.

Gerald slept. Just as he was, he slept heavily.

This was what he had brought her to, then! The horrors of the night, of the dawn, and of the morning! Ineffable suffering and humiliation; anguish and torture that could never be forgotten! And after a fatuous vigil of unguessecl licence, he had tottered back, an offensive beast, to sleep the day away in that filthy chamber! He did not possess even enough spirit to play the *role* of roysterer to the end. And she was bound to him; far, far from any other human aid; cut off irrevocably by her pride from those who perhaps would have protected her from his dangerous folly. The deep conviction henceforward formed a permanent part of her general consciousness that he was simply an irresponsible and thoughtless fool! He was without *sense.* Such was her brilliant and godlike husband, the man who had given her the right to call herself a married woman! He was a fool. With all her ignorance of the world she could see that nobody but an arrant imbecile could have brought her to the present pass. Her native sagacity revolted. Gusts of feeling came over her in which she could have thrashed him into the realization of his responsibilities.

Sticking out of the breast-pocket of his soiled coat was the packet which he had received on the previous day. If he had not already lost it, he could only thank his luck. She took it. "There were English bank-notes in it for two hundred

pounds, a letter from a banker, and other papers. With precautions against noise she tore the envelope and the letter and papers into small pieces, and then looked about for a place to hide them. A cupboard suggested itself. She got on a chair and pushed the fragments out of sight on the topmost shelf, where they may well be to this day. She finished dressing, and then sewed the notes into the lining of her skirt. She had no silly, delicate notions about stealing. She obscurely felt that, in the care of a man like Gerald, she might find herself in the most monstrous, the most impossible dilemmas. Those notes, safe and secret in her skirt, gave her confidence, reassured her against the perils of the future, and endowed her with independence. The act was characteristic of her enterprise and of her fundamental prudence. It approached the heroic. And her conscience hotly defended its righteousness.

She decided that when he discovered his loss, she would merely deny all knowledge of the envelope, for he had not spoken a word to her about it. He never mentioned the details of money; he had a fortune. However, the necessity for this untruth did not occur. He made no reference whatever to his loss. The fact was, he thought he had been careless enough to let the envelope be filched from him during the excesses of the night.

All day till evening Sophia sat on a dirty chair, without food, while Gerald slept. She kept repeating to herself, in amazed resentment: "A hundred francs for this room! A hundred francs! And he hadn't the pluck to tell me 1" She could not have expressed her contempt.

Long before sheer ennui forced her to look out of the window again, every sign of justice had been removed from the square. Nothing whatever remained in the heavy August sunshine save gathered heaps of filth where the horses had reared and caracoled.

CHAPTER IV: A CRISIS FOR GERALD

§ 1

FOR a time there existed in the minds of both Gerald and Sophia the remarkable notion that twelve thousand pounds represented the infinity of wealth, that this sum possessed special magical properties which rendered it insensible to the process of subtraction. It seemed impossible that twelve thousand pounds, while continually getting less, could ultimately quite disappear. The notion lived longer in the mind of Gerald than in that of Sophia; for Gerald would never look at a disturbing fact, whereas Sophia's gaze was morbidly fascinated by such phenomena. In a life devoted to travel and pleasure Gerald meant not to spend more than six hundred a year, the interest on his fortune. Six hundred a year is less than two pounds a day, yet Gerald never paid less than two pounds a day in hotel bills alone. He hoped that he was living on a thousand a year, had a secret fear that he might be spending fifteen hundred, and was really spending about two thousand five hundred. Still, the remarkable notion of the inexhaustibility of twelve thousand pounds always reassured him. The faster the money went, the more vigorously this notion flourished in Gerald's mind. When twelve had unaccountably dwindled to three, Gerald suddenly decided that he must act, and in a few months he lost two thousand on the Paris Bourse. The adventure frightened him, and in his panic he scattered a couple of hundred in a frenzy of high living.

But even with only twenty thousand francs left out of three hundred thousand, he held closely to the belief that natural laws would in his case somehow be suspended. He

had heard of men who were once rich begging bread and sweeping crossings, but he felt quite secure against such risks by simple virtue of the axiom that he was he. However, he meant to assist the axiom by efforts to earn money. When these continued to fail, he tried to assist the axiom by borrowing money; but he found that his uncle had definitely done with him. He would have assisted the axiom by stealing money, but he had neither the nerve nor the knowledge to be a swindler; he was not even sufficiently expert to cheat at cards.

He had thought in thousands. Now he began to think in hundreds, in tens, daily and hourly. He paid two hundred francs in railway fares in order to live economically in a village, and shortly afterwards another two hundred francs in railway fares in order to live economically in Paris. And to celebrate the arrival in Paris and the definite commencement of an era of strict economy and serious search for a livelihood, he spent a hundred francs on a dinner at the Maison Doree and two balcony stalls at the Gymnase. In brief, he omitted nothing—no act, no resolve, no self-deception—of the typical fool in his situation; always convinced that his difficulties and his wisdom were quite exceptional.

In May, 1870, on an afternoon, he was ranging nervously to and fro in a three-cornered bedroom of a little hotel at the angle of the Rue Fontaine and the Rue Laval (now the Rue Victor Masse"), within half a minute of the Boulevard de Clichy. It had come to that—an exchange of the 'grand boulevard' for the 'boulevard ext&ieur'! Sophia sat on a chair at the grimy window, glancing down in idle disgust of life at the Clichy-Odeon omnibus which was casting off its tip-horse at the corner of the Rue Ghaptal. The noise of petty, hurried traffic over the bossy paving stones was deafening. The locality was not one to correspond with an ideal.

There was too much humanity crowded into tnose narrow hilly streets; humanity seemed to be bulging out at the windows of the high houses. Gerald healed his pride by saying that this was, after all, the real Paris, and that the cookery was as good as could be got anywhere, pay what you would. He seldom ate a meal in the little salons on the first floor without becoming ecstatic upon the cookery. To hear him, he might have chosen the hotel on its superlative merits, without regard to expense. And with his air of use and custom, he did indeed look like a connoisseur of Paris who knew better than to herd with vulgar tourists in the pens of the Madeleine quarter. He was dressed with some distinction; good clothes, when put to the test, survive a change of fortune, as a Roman arch survives the luxury of departed empire. Only his collar, large V-shaped front, and wristbands, which bore the ineffaceable signs of cheap laundering, reflected the shadow of impending disaster.

He glanced sideways, stealthily, at Sophia. She, too, was still dressed with distinction; in the robe of black *faille,* the cashmere shawl, and the little black hat with its falling veil, there was no apparent symptom of beggary. She would have been judged as one of those women who content themselves with few clothes but good, and, greatly aided by nature, make a little go a long way. Good black will last for eternity; it discloses no secrets of modification and mending, and it is not transparent.

At last Gerald, resuming a suspended conversation, said as it were doggedly:

"I tell you I haven't got five francs altogether! and you can feel my pockets if you like," added the habitual liar in him, fearing incredulity.

"Well, and what do you expect *me* to do?" Sophia inquired.

The accent, at once ironic and listless, in which she put

this question, showed that strange and vital things had happened to Sophia in the four years which had elapsed since her marriage. It did really seem to her, indeed, that the Sophia whom Gerald had espoused was dead and gone, and that another Sophia had come into her body: so intensely conscious was she of a fundamental change in herself under the stress of continuous experience. And though this was but a seeming, though she was still the same Sophia more fully disclosed, it was a true seeming. Indisputably more beautiful than when Gerald had unwillingly made her his legal wife, she was now nearly twenty-four, and looked perhaps somewhat older than her age. Her frame was firmly set, her waist thicker, neither slim nor stout. The lips were rather hard, and she had a habit of tightening her mouth, on the same provocation as sends a snail into its shell. No trace was left of immature gawkiness in her gestures or of simplicity in her intonations. She was a woman of commanding and slightly arrogant charm, not in the least degree the charm of innocence and ingenuousness. Her eyes were the eyes of one who has lost her illusions too violently and too completely. Her gaze, coldly comprehending, implied familiarity with the abjectness of human nature. Gerald had begun and had finished her education. He had not ruined her, as a bad professor may ruin a fine voice, because her moral force immeasurably exceeded his; he had unwittingly produced a masterpiece, but it was a tragic masterpiece. Sophia was such a woman as, by a mere glance as she utters an opinion, will make a man say to himself, half in desire and half in alarm lest she reads him too: "By Jove! she must have been through a thing or two. She knows what people are!"

The marriage was, of course, a calamitous folly. From the very first, from the moment when the commercial traveller had with incomparable rash fatuity thrown the

paper pellet over the counter, Sophia's awakening commonsense had told her that in yielding to her instinct she was sowing misery and shame for herself; but she had gone on, as if under a spell. It had needed the irretrievableness of flight from home to begin the breaking of the trance. Once fully awakened out of the trance, she had recognized her marriage for what it was. She had made neither the best nor the worst of it. She had accepted Gerald as one accepts a climate. She saw again and again that he was irreclaimably a fool and a prodigy of irresponsibleness. She tolerated him, now with sweetness, now bitterly; accepting always his caprices, and not permitting herself to have wishes of her own. She was ready to pay the price of pride and of a moment's imbecility with a lifetime of self-repression. It was high, but it was the price. She had acquired nothing but an exceptionally good knowledge of the French language (she soon learnt to scorn Gerald's glib maltreatment of the tongue), and she had conserved nothing but her dignity. She knew that Gerald was sick of her, that he would have danced for joy to be rid of her; that he was constantly unfaithful; that he had long since ceased to be excited by her beauty. She knew also that at bottom he was a little afraid of her; here was her sole moral consolation. The thing that sometimes struck her as surprising was that he had not abandoned her, simply and crudely walked off one day and forgotten to take her with him

They hated each other, but in different ways. She loathed him, and he resented her.

"What do I expect you to do?" he repeated after her. "Why don't you write home to your people and get some money out of them?"

Now that he had said what was in his mind, he faced her with a bullying swagger. Had he been a bigger man he might have tried the effect of physical bullying on her. One

of his numerous reasons for resenting her was that she was the taller of the two.

She made no reply.

"Now you needn't turn pale and begin all that fuss over again. \\ hat I'm suggesting is a perfectly reasonable thing. If I haven't got money I haven't got it. I can't invent it."

She perceived that he was ready for one of their periodical tempestuous quarrels. But that day she felt too tired and unwell to quarrel. His warning against a repetition of 'fuss' had reference to the gastric dizziness from which she had been suffering for two years. It would take her usually after a meal. She did not swoon, but her head swam and she could not stand. She would sink down wherever she happened to be, and, her face alarmingly white, murmur faintly: "My salts." Within five minutes the attack had gone and left no trace. She had been through one just after lunch. He resented this affection. He detested being compelled to hand the smelling-bottle to her, and he would have avoided doing so if her pallor did not always alarm him. Nothing but this pallor convinced him that the attacks were not a deep ruse to impress him. His attitude invariably implied that she could cure the malady if she chose, but that through obstinacy she did not choose.

"Are you going to have the decency to answer my question, or aren't you?"

"What question?" Her vibrating voice was low and restrained.

"Will you write to your people?"

"For money?"

The sarcasm of her tone was diabolic. She could not have kept the sarcasm out of her tone; she did not attempt to keep it out. She cared little if it whipped him to fury. Did he imagine, seriously, that she would be capable of going on her knees to her family? She? Was he unaware that his

wife was the proudest and the most obstinate woman on earth, that all her behaviour to him was the expression of her pride and her obstinacy? Ill and weak though she felt, she marshalled together all the forces of her character to defend her resolve never, never to eat the bread of humiliation. She was absolutely determined to be dead to her family. Certainly, one December, several years previously, she had seen English Christmas cards in an English shop in the Rue de Rivoli, and in a sudden gush of tenderness towards Constance, she had despatched a coloured greeting, to Constance and her mother. And having initiated the custom, she had continued it. That was not like asking a kindness; it was a bestowing a kindness. But except for the annual card, she was dead to St. Luke's Square. She was one of those daughters who disappear and are not discussed in the family circle. The thought of her immense foolishness, the little tender thoughts of Constance, some flitting souvenir, full of unwilling admiration, of a regal gesture of her mother,—these things only steeled her against any sort of resurrection after death.

And he was urging her to write home for money! Why, she would not even have paid a visit in splendour to St. Luke's Square. Never should they know what she had suffered! And especially her Aunt Harriet, from whom she had stolen!

"Will you write to your people?" he demanded yet again, emphasizing and separating each word.

"No," she said shortly, with terrible disdain.

"Why not?"

"Because I won't." The curling line of her lips, as they closed on each other, said all the rest; all the cruel truths about his unspeakable, inane, coarse follies, his laziness, his excesses, his lies, his deceptions, his bad faith, his truculence, his improvidence, his shameful waste and ruin of his

life and hers. She doubted whether he realized his baseness and her wrongs, but if he could not read them in her silent contumely, she was too proud to recite them to him. She had never complained, save in uncontrolled moments of anger.

"If that's the way you're going to talk—all right!" he snapped, furious. Evidently he was baffled.

She kept silence. She was determined to see what he would do in the face of her inaction.

"You know, I'm not joking," he pursued. "We shall starve."

"Very well," she agreed. "We shall starve."

She watched him surreptitiously, and she was almost sure that he really had come to the end of his tether. His voice, which never alone convinced, carried a sort of conviction now. He was penniless. In four years he had squandered twelve thousand pounds, and had nothing to show for it except an enfeebled digestion and a tragic figure of a wife. One small point of satisfaction there was—and all the Baines in her clutched at it and tried to suck satisfaction from it—their manner of travelling about from hotel to hotel had made it impossible for Gerald to run up debts. A few debts he might have, unknown to her, but they could not be serious.

So they looked at one another, in hatred and despair. The inevitable had arrived. For months she had fronted it in bravado, not concealing from herself that it lay in waiting. For years he had been sure that though the inevitable might happen to others it could not happen to him. There it was! He was conscious of a heavy weight in his stomach, and she of a general numbness, enwrapping her fatigue. Even then he could not believe that it was true, this disaster. As for Sophia she was reconciling herself with bitter philosophy to the eccentricities of fate. Who would have

dreamed that she, a young girl brought up, etc.? Her mother could not have improved the occasion more uncompromisingly than Sophia did—behind that disdainful mask.

"Well-if that's it ... !" Gerald exploded at length, puffing. And he puffed out of the room and was gone in a second.

§2

She languidly picked up a book, the moment Gerald had departed, and tried to prove to herself that she was sufficiently in command of her nerves to read. For a long time reading had been her chief solace. But she could not read. She glanced round the inhospitable chamber, and thought of the hundreds of rooms—some splendid and some vile, but all arid in their unwelcoming aspect—through which she had passed in her progress from mad exultation to calm and cold disgust. The ceaseless din of the street annoyed her jaded ears. And a great wave of desire for peace, peace of no matter what kind, swept through her. And then her deep distrust of Gerald reawakened; in spite of his seriously desperate air, which had a quality of sincerity quite new in her experience of him, she could not be entirely sure that, in asserting utter penury, he was not after all merely using a trick to get rid of her.

She sprang up, threw the book on the bed, and seized her gloves. She would follow him, if she could. She would do what she had never done before-she would spy on him. Fighting against her lassitude, she descended the long winding stairs, and peeped forth from the doorway into the street. The ground floor of the hotel was a wine-shop; the stout landlord was lightly flicking one of the three little yellow tables that stood on the pavement. He smiled with

his customary benevolence, and silently pointed in the direction of the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette. She saw Gerald down there in the distance. He was smoking a cigar.

He seemed to be a little man without a care. The smoke of the cigar came first round his left cheek and then round his right, sailing away into nothing. He walked with a gay spring, but not quickly, flourishing his cane as freely as the traffic of the pavement would permit, glancing into all the shop windows and into the eyes of all the women under forty. This was not at all the same man as had a moment ago been spitting angry menaces at her in the bedroom of the hotel. It was a fellow of blithe charm, ripe for any adventurous joys that destiny had to offer.

Supposing he turned round and saw her?

If he turned round and saw her and asked her what she was doing there in the street, she would tell him plainly: "I'm following you, to find out what you do."

But he did not turn. He went straight forward, deviating at the church, where the crowd became thicker, into the Rue du Faubourg Montmartre, and so to the boulevard, which he crossed. The whole city seemed excited and vivacious. Cannons boomed in slow succession, and flags were flying. Sophia had no conception of the significance of those guns, for, though she read a great deal, she never read a newspaper; the idea of opening a newspaper never occurred to her. But she was accustomed to the feverish atmosphere of Paris. She had lately seen regiments of cavalry flashing and prancing in the Luxembourg Gardens, and had much admired the fine picture. She accepted the booming as another expression of the high spirits that had to find vent somehow in this feverish empire. She so accepted it and forgot it, using all the panorama of the capital as a dim background for her exacerbated egoism.

She was obliged to walk slowly, because Gerald walked

slowly. A beautiful woman, or any woman not positively hag-like or venerable, who walks slowly in the streets of Paris becomes at once the cause of inconvenient desires, as representing the main objective on earth, always transcending in importance politics and affairs. Just as a true patriotic Englishman cannot be too busy to run after a fox, so a Frenchman is always ready to forsake all in order to follow a woman whom he has never before set eyes on. Many men thought twice about her, with her romantic Saxon mystery of temperament, and her Parisian clothes; but all refrained from affronting her, not in the least out of respect for the gloom in her face, but from an expert conviction that those rapt eyes were fixed immovably on another male. She walked unscathed amid the frothing hounds as though protected by a spell.

On the south side of the boulevard, Gerald proceeded down the Rue Montmartre, and then turned suddenly into the Rue Croissant. Sophia stopped and asked the price cf some combs which were exposed outside a little shop. Then she went on, boldly passing the end of the Rue Croissant. No shadow of Gerald! She saw the signs of newspapers all along the street, *Le Bien Public, La Presse Libre, La Patrie.* There was a creamery at the corner. She entered it, asked for a cup of chocolate, and sat down. She wanted to drink coffee, but every doctor had forbidden coffee to her, on account of her attacks of dizziness. Then, having ordered chocolate, she felt that, on this occasion, when she had need of strength in her great fatigue, only coffee could suffice her, and she changed the order. She was close to the door, and Gerald could not escape her vigilance if he emerged at that end of the street. She drank the coffee with greedy satisfaction, and waited in the creamery till she began to feel conspicuous there. And then Gerald went by the door, within six feet of her. He turned the corner and continued

his descent of the Rue Montmartre. She paid for her coffee and followed the chase. Her blood seemed to be up. Her lips were tightened, and her thought was: "Wherever he goes, I'll go, and I don't care what happens." She despised him. She felt herself above him. She felt that somehow, since quitting the hotel, he had been gradually growing more and more vile and meet to be exterminated. She imagined infamies as to the Rue Croissant. There was no obvious ground for this intensifying of her attitude towards him; it was merely the result of the chase. All that could be definitely charged against him was the smoking of a cigar.

He stepped into a tobacco-shop, and came out with a longer cigar than the first one, a more expensive article, stripped off its collar, and lighted it as a millionaire might have lighted it. This was the man who swore that he did not possess five francs.

She tracked him as far as the Rue de Rivoli, and then lost him. There were vast surging crowds in the Rue de Rivoli, and much bunting, and soldiers and gesticulatory policemen. The general effect of the street was that all things were brightly waving in the breeze. She was caught in the crowd as in the current of a stream, and when she tried to sidle out of it into a square, a row of smiling policemen barred her passage; she was a part of the traffic that they had to regulate. She drifted till the Louvre came into view. After all, Gerald had only strolled forth to see the sight of the day, whatever it might be! She knew not what it was. She had no curiosity about it. In the middle of all that thickening mass of humanity, staring with one accord at the vast monument of royal and imperial vanities, she thought, with her characteristic grimness, of the sacrifice of her whole career as a school-teacher for the chance of seeing Gerald once a quarter in the shop. She gloated over that, as a sick appetite will gloat over tainted food- And

she saw the shop, and the curve of the stairs up to the showroom, and the pier-glass in the showroom.

Then the guns began to boom again, and splendid carriages swept one after another from under a majestic archway and glittered westward down a lane of spotless splendid uniforms. The carriages were laden with still more splendid uniforms, and with enchanting toilets. Sophia, in her modestly stylish black, mechanically noticed how much easier it was for attired women to sit in a carriage now that crinolines had gone. That was the sole impression made upon her by this glimpse of the last fete of the Napoleonic Empire. She knew not that the supreme pillars of imperialism were exhibiting themselves before her; and that the eyes of those uniforms and those toilettes were full of the legendary beauty of Eugenie, and their ears echoing to the long phrases of Napoleon the Third about his gratitude to his people for their confidence in him as shown by the plebiscite, and about the ratification of constitutional reforms guaranteeing order, and about the empire having been strengthened at its base, and about showing force by moderation and envisaging the future vithout fear, and about the bosom of peace and liberty, and the eternal continuance of his dynasty.

She just wondered vaguely what was afoot.

When the last carriage had rolled away, and the guns and acclamations had ceased, the crowd at length began to scatter. She was carried by it into the Place du Palais Royal, and in a few moments she managed to withdraw into the Rue des Boris Enfants and was free.

The coins in her purse amounted to three sous, and therefore, though she felt exhausted to the point of illness, she had to return to the hotel on foot. Very slowly she crawled upwards in the direction of the Boulevard, through the expiring gaiety of the city. Near the Bourse a fiacre

overtook her, and in the fiacre were Gerald and a woman. Gerald had not seen her; he was talking eagerly to his ornate companion. All his body was alive. The fiacre was out of sight in a moment, but Sophia judged instantly the grade of the woman, who was evidently of the discreet class that frequented the big shops of an afternoon with something of their own to sell.

Sophia's grimness increased. The pace of the fiacre, her fatigued body, Gerald's delightful, careless vivacity, the attractive streaming veil of the nice, modest courtesan—everything conspired to increase it.

§ 3

Gerald returned to the bedroom which contained his wife and all else that he owned in the world at about nine o'clock that evening. Sophia was in bed. She had been driven to bed by weariness. She would have preferred to sit up to receive her husband, even if it had meant sitting up all night, but her body was too heavy for her spirit. She lay in the dark. Sne had eaten nothing. Gerald came straight into the room. He struck a match, which burned blue, with a stench, for several seconds, and then gave a clear, yellow flame. He lit a candle; and saw his wife.

"Oh!" he said; "you're there, are you?"

She offered no reply.

"Won't speak, eh!" he said. "Agreeable sort of wife! Well, have you made up your mind to do what I told you? I've come back especially to know."

She still did not speak.

He sat down, with his hat on, and stuck out his feet, wagging them to and fro on the heels.

"I'm quite without money," he went on. "And I'm sure your people will be glad to lend us a bit till I get some.

Especially as it's a question of you starving as well as me. If I had enough to pay your fares to Bursley I'd pack you off. But I haven't."

She could only hear his exasperating voice. The end of the bed was between her eyes and his.

"Liar!" she said, with uncompromising distinctness. The word reached him barbed with all the poison of her contempt and disgust.

There was a pause.

"Oh! I'm a liar, am I? Thanks. I lied enough to get you, I'll admit. But you never complained of that. I remember beginning the New Year well with a thumping lie just to have a sight of you, my vixen. But you didn't complain then. I took you with only the clothes on your back. And I've spent every cent I had on you. And now I'm spun, you call me a liar."

She said nothing.

"However," he went on, "this is going to come to an end, this is!"

He rose, changed the position of the candle, putting it on a chest of drawers, and then drew his trunk from the wall, and knelt in front of it.

She gathered that he was packing his clothes. At first she did not comprehend his reference to beginning the New Year. Then his meaning revealed itself. That story to her mother about having been attacked by ruffians at the bottom of King Street had been an invention, a ruse to account plausibly for his presence on her mother's door-step! And she had never suspected that the story was not true. In spite of her experience of his lying, she had never suspected that that particular statement was a lie. What a simpleton she was!

There was a continual movement in the room for about a quarter of an hour. Then a key turned in the lock of the trunk.

His head popped up over the foot of the bed. "This isn't a joke, you know," he said.

She kept silence.

"I give you one more chance. Will you write to your mother—or Constance if you like—or won't you?"

She scorned to reply in any way.

"I'm your husband," he said. "And it's your duty to obey me, particularly in an affair like this. I order you to write to your mother."

The corners of her lips turned downwards.

Angered by her mute obstinacy, he broke away from the bed with a sudden gesture.

"You do as you like," he cried, putting on his overcoat, "and I shall do as I like. You can't say I haven't warned you. It's your own deliberate choice, mind you! Whatever happens to you you've brought on yourself." He lifted and shrugged his shoulders to get the overcoat exactly into place on his shoulders.

She would not speak a word, not even to insist that she was indisposed.

He pushed his trunk outside the door, and returned to the bed.

"You understand," he said menacingly; "I'm off."

She looked up at the foul ceiling.

"Hm!" he sniffed, bringing his reserves of pride to combat the persistent silence that was damaging his dignity. And he went off, sticking his head forward like a pugilist.

"Here!" she muttered. "You're forgetting this."

He turned.

She stretched her hand to the night-table and held up a red circlet.

"What is it?"

"It's a bit of paper off the cigar you bought in the Rue

Montmartre this afternoon," she answered, in a significant tone.

He hesitated, then swore violently, and bounced out of the room. He had made her suffer, but she was almost repaid for everything by that moment of cruel triumph. She exulted in it, and never forgot it.

Five minutes later, the gloomy menial in felt slippers and alpaca jacket, who seemed to pass the whole of his life flitting in and out of bedrooms like a rabbit in a warren, carried Gerald's trunk downstairs. She recognized the peculiar tread of his slippers.

Then there was a knock at the door. The landlady entered, actuated by a legitimate curiosity.

"Madame is suffering?" the landlady began.

Sophia refused offers of food and nursing.

"Madame knows without doubt that monsieur has gone away?"

"Has he paid the bill?" Sophia asked bluntly.

"But yes, madame, till to-morrow. Then madame has want of nothing?"

"If you will extinguish the candle," said Sophia.

He had deserted her, then!

"All this," she reflected, listening in the dark to the ceaseless rattle of ,the street, "because mother and Constance wanted to see the elephant, and I had to go into father's room! I should never have caught sight of him from the drawing-room window!"

§4

She passed a night of physical misery, exasperated by the tireless rattling vitality of the street. She kept saying to herself: "I'm all alone now, and I'm going to be ill. I am ill." She saw herself dying in Paris, and heard the ex-

pressions of facile sympathy and idle curiosity drawn forth by the sight of the dead body of this foreign woman in a little Paris hotel. She reached the stage, in the gradual excruciation of her nerves, when she was obliged to concentrate her agonized mind on an intense and painful expectancy of the next new noise, which when it came increased her torture and decreased her strength to support it. She went through all the interminable dilatoriness of the dawn, from the moment when she could scarcely discern the window to the moment when she could read the word 'Bock' on the red circlet of paper which had tossed all night on the sea of the counterpane. She knew she would never sleep again. She could not imagine herself asleep; and then she was startled by a sound that seemed to clash with the rest of her impressions. It was a knocking at the door. With a start she perceived that she must have been asleep.

"Enter," she murmured.

There entered the menial in alpaca. His waxen face showed a morose commiseration. He noiselessly approached the bed-he seemed to have none of the characteristics of a man, but to be a creature infinitely mysterious and aloof from humanity—and held out to Sophia a visiting card in his grey hand.

It was Chirac's card.

"Monsieur asked for monsieur," said the waiter. "And then, as monsieur had gone away he demanded to see madame. He says it is very important."

Her heart jumped, partly in vague alarm, and partly with a sense of relief at this chance of speaking to someone whom she knew. She tried to reflect rationally.

"What time is it?" she inquired.

"Eleven o'clock, madame."

This was surprising. The fact that it was eleven o'clock

destroyed the remains of her self-confidence. How could it be eleven o'clock, with the dawn scarcely finished?

"He says it is very important," repeated the waiter, imperturbably and solemnly. "Will madame see him an instant?"

Between resignation and anticipation she said: "Yes."

"It is well, madame," said the waiter, disappearing without a sound.

She sat up and managed to drag her *matinee* from a chair and put it around her shoulders. Then she sank back from weakness, physical and spiritual. She hated to receive Chirac in a bedroom, and particularly in that bedroom. But the hotel had no public room except the dining-room, which began to be occupied after eleven o'clock. Moreover, she could not possibly get up. Yes, on the whole she was pleased to see Chirac. He was almost her only acquaintance, assuredly the only being whom she could by any stretch of meaning call a friend, in the whole of Europe. Gerald and she had wandered to and fro, skimming always over the real life of nations, and never penetrating into it. There was no place for them, because they had made none. With the exception of Chirac, whom an accident of business had thrown into Gerald's company years before, they had no social relations. Gerald was not a man to make friends; he did not seem to need friends, or at any rate to feel the want of them. But, as chance had given him Chirac, he maintained the connection whenever they came to Paris. Sophia, of course, had not been able to escape from the solitude imposed by existence in hotels. Since her marriage she had never spoken to a woman in the way of intimacy. But once or twice she had approached intimacy with Chirac, whose wistful admiration for her always aroused into activity her desire to charm.

Preceded by the menial, he came into the room hurriedly,

apologetically, with an air of acute anxiety. And as he saw her lying on her back, with flushed features, her hair disarranged, and only the grace of the silk ribbons of her *matinee* to mitigate the melancholy repulsiveness of her surroundings, that anxiety seemed to deepen.

"Dear madame," he stammered, "all my excuses!" He hastened to the bedside and kissed her hand—a little peck, according to his custom. "You are ill?"

"I have my migraine," she said. "You want Gerald?"

"Yes," he said diffidently. "He had promised——"

"He has left me," Sophia interrupted him in her weak and fatigued voice. She closed her eyes as she uttered the words.

"Left you?" He glanced round to be sure that the waiter had retired.

"Quitted me! Abandoned me! Last night!"

"Not possible!" he breathed.

She nodded. She felt intimate with him. Like all secretive persons, she could be suddenly expansive at times.

"It is serious?" he questioned.

"All that is most serious," she replied.

"And you will! Ah, the wretch! Ah, the wretch! That, for example!" He waved his hat about.

"What is it you want, Chirac?" she demanded, in a confidential tone.

"Eh, well," said Chirac. "You do not know where he has gone?"

"No. What do you want?" she insisted.

He was nervous. He fidgeted. She guessed that, though warm with sympathy for her plight, he was preoccupied by interests and apprehensions of his own. He did not refuse her request temporarily to leave the astonishing matter of her situation in order to discuss the matter of his visit.

"Eh, well! He came to me yesterday afternoon in the Rue Croissant to borrow some money."

She understood then the object of Gerald's stroll on the previous afternoon.

"I hope you didn't lend him any," she said.

"Eh, well! It was like this. He said he ought to have received five thousand francs yesterday morning, but that he had had a telegram that it would not arrive till to-day. And he had need of five hundred francs at once. I had not five hundred francs"—he smiled sadly, as if to insinuate that he did not handle such sums—"but I borrowed it from the cashbox of the journal. It is necessary, absolutely, that I should return it this morning." He spoke with increased seriousness. "Your husband said he would take a cab and bring me the money immediately on the arrival of the post this morning—about nine o'clock. Pardon me for deranging you with such a——"

He stopped. She could see that he really was grieved to 'derange' her, but that circumstances pressed.

"At my paper," he murmured, "it is not so easy as that to-in fine—!"

Gerald had genuinely been at his last francs. He had not lied when she thought he had lied. The nakedness of his character showed now. Instantly upon the final and definite cessation of the lawful supply of money, he had set his wits to obtain money unlawfully. He had, in fact, simply stolen it from Chirac, with the ornamental addition of endangering Chirac's reputation and situation—as a sort of reward to Chirac for the kindness! And, further, no sooner had he got hold of the money than it had intoxicated him, and he had yielded to the first fatuous temptation. He had no sense of responsibility, no scruple. And as for common prudence—had he not risked permanent disgrace and even prison for a paltry sum which he would certainly squander in two or three days? Yes, it was indubitable that he would stop at nothing, at nothing whatever.

"You did not know that he was coming to me?" asked Chirac, pulling his short, silky brown beard.

"No," Sophia answered.

"But he said that you had charged him with your friendlinesses to me!" He nodded his head once or twice, sadly but candidly accepting, in his quality of a Latin, the plain facts of human nature—reconciling himself to them at once.

Sophia revolted at this crowning detail of the structure of Gerald's rascality.

"It is fortunate that I can pay you," she said.

"But——" he tried to protest.

"I have quite enough money."

She did not say this to screen Gerald, but merely from *amour-propre*. She would not let Chirac think that she was the wife of a man bereft of all honour. And so she clothed Gerald with the rag of having, at any rate, not left her in destitution as well as in sickness. Her assertion seemed a strange one, in view of the fact that he had abandoned her on the previous evening—that is to say, immediately after the borrowing from Chirac. But Chirac did not examine the statement.

"Perhaps he has the intention to send me the money. Perhaps, after all, he is now at the offices——"

"No," said Sophia. "He is gone. Will you go downstairs and wait for me? We will go together to Cook's office. **It** is English money I have."

"Cook's?" he repeated. The word now so potent had then little significance. "But you are ill. You cannot——"

"I feel better."

She did. Or rather, she felt nothing except the power of her resolve to remove the painful anxiety from that wistful brow. The shame of the trick played on Chirac awakened new forces in her. She dressed in a physical torment which, however, had no more reality than a nightmare. She

searched in a place where even an inquisitive husband would not think of looking, and then, painfully, she descended the long stairs, holding to the rail, which swam round and round her, carrying the whole staircase with it. "After all," she thought, "I can't be seriously ill, or I shouldn't have been able to get up and go out like this. I never guessed early this morning that I could do it! I can't possibly be as ill as I thought I was!"

And in the vestibule she encountered Chirac's face, lightening at the sight of her, which proved to him that his deliverance was really to be accomplished,

"Permit me——"

"I'm all right," she smiled, tottering. "Get a cab." It suddenly occurred to her that she might quite as easily have given him the money in English notes; he could have changed them. But she had not thought. Her brain would not operate. She was dreaming and waking together.

He helped her into the cab.

§5

In the *bureau de change* there was a little knot of English people, with naive, romantic, and honest faces, quite different from the faces outside in the street. No corruption in those faces, but a sort of wondering and infantile sincerity, rather out of its element and lost in a land too unsophisticated, seeming to belong to an earlier age! Sophia liked their tourist stare, and their plain and ugly clothes. She longed to be back in England, longed for a moment with violence, drowning in that desire.

The English clerk behind his brass bars took her notes, and carefully examined them one by one. She watched him, not entirely convinced of his reality, and thought vaguely of the detestable morning when she had abstracted the notes

from Gerald's pocket. She was filled with pity for the simple, ignorant Sophia of those days, the Sophia who still had a few ridiculous illusions concerning Gerald's character. Often, since, she had been tempted to break into the money, but she had always withstood the temptation, saying to herself that an hour of more urgent need would come. It had come. She was proud of her firmness, of the force of will which had enabled her to reserve the fund intact. The clerk gave her a keen look, and then asked her how she would take the French money. And she saw the notes falling down one after another on to the counter as the clerk separated them with a snapping sound of the paper.

Chirac was beside her.

"Does that make the count?" she said, having pushed towards him five hundred-franc notes.

"I should not know how to thank you," he said, accepting the notes. "Truly——"

His joy was unmistakably eager. He had had a shock and a fright, and he now saw the danger past. He could return to the cashier of his newspaper, and fling down the money with a lordly and careless air, as if to say: "When it is a question of these English, one can always be sure!" But first he would escort her to the hotel. She declined—she did not know why, for he was her sole point of moral support in all France. He insisted. She yielded. So she turned her back, with regret, on that little English oasis in the Sahara of Paris, and staggered to the fiacre.

And now that she had done what she had to do, she lost control of her body, and reclined flaccid and inert. Chirac was evidently alarmed. He did not speak, but glanced at her from time to time with eyes full of fear. The carriage appeared to her to be swimming amid waves over great depths. Then she was aware of a heavy weight against her shoulder; she had slipped down upon Chirac, unconscious.

CHAPTER V: FEVER

§ 1

THEN she was lying in bed in a small room, obscure because it was heavily curtained; the light came through the inner pair of curtains of *ecru* lace, with a beautiful soft silvery quality. A man was standing by the side of the bed—not Chirac.

"Now, madame," he said to her, with kind firmness, and speaking with a charming exaggerated purity of the vowels. "You have the mucous fever. I have had it myself. You will be forced to take baths, very frequently. I must ask you to reconcile yourself to that, to be good."

She did not reply. It did not occur to her to reply. But she certainly thought that this doctor-he was probably a doctor—was overestimating her case. She felt better than she had felt for two days. Still, she did not desire to move, nor was she in the least anxious as to her surroundings. She lay quiet.

A woman in a rather coquettish deshabille watched over her with expert skill.

Later, Sophia seemed to be revisiting the sea on whose waves the cab had swum; but now she was under the sea, in a watery gulf, terribly deep; and the sounds of the world came to her through the water, sudden and strange. Hands seized her and forced her from the subaqueous grotto where she had hidden into new alarms. And she briefly perceived that there was a large bath by the side of the bed, and that she was being pushed into it. The water was icy cold. After that her outlook upon things was for a time clearer and more precise. She knew from fragments of talk which she heard that she was put into the cold bath by her bed every three

hours, night and day, and that she remained in it for ten minutes. Always, before the bath, she had to drink a glass of wine, and sometimes another glass while she was in the bath. Beyond this wine, and occasionally a cup of soup, she took nothing, had no wish to take anything. She grew perfectly accustomed to these extraordinary habits of life, to this merging of night and day into one monotonous and endless repetition of the same rite amid the same circumstances on exactly the same spot. Then followed a period during which she objected to being constantly wakened up for this annoying immersion. And she fought against it even in her dreams. Long days seemed to pass when she could not be sure whether she had been put into the bath or not, when all external phenomena were disconcertingly interwoven with matters which she knew to be merely fanciful. And then she was overwhelmed by the hopeless gravity of her state. She felt that her state was desperate. She felt that she was dying. Her unhappiness was extreme, not because she was dying, but because the veils of sense were so puzzling, so exasperating, and because her exhausted body was so vitiated, in every fibre, by disease. She was perfectly aware that she was going to die. She cried aloud for a pair of scissors. She wanted to cut off her hair, and to send part of it to Constance and part of it to her mother, in separate packages. She insisted upon separate packages. Nobody would give her a pair of scissors. She implored, meekly, haughtily, furiously, but nobody would satisfy her. It seemed to her shocking that all her hair should go with her into her coffin while Constance and her mother had nothing by which to remember her, no tangible souvenir of her beauty. Then she fought for the scissors. She clutched at someone—always through those baffling veils—who was putting her into the bath by the bedside, and fought frantically. It appeared to her that this someone was the

rather stout woman who had supped at Sylvain's with the quarrelsome Englishman four years ago. She could not rid herself of this singular conceit, though she knew it to be absurd. . . .

A long time afterwards—it seemed like a century—she did actually and unmistakably see the woman sitting by her bed, and the woman was crying.

"Why are you crying?" Sophia asked wonderingly.

And the other, younger, woman, who was standing at the foot of the bed, replied:

"You do well to ask! It is you who have hurt her, in your delirium, when you so madly demanded the scissors."

The stout woman smiled with the tears on her cheeks; but Sophia wept, from remorse. The stout woman looked old, worn, and untidy. The other one was much younger. Sophia did not trouble to inquire from them who they were.

That little conversation formed a brief interlude in the delirium, which overtook her again and distorted everything. She forgot, however, that she was destined to die.

One day her brain cleared. She could be sure that she had gone to sleep in the morning and not wakened till the evening. Hence she had not been put into the bath.

"Have I had my baths?" she questioned.

It was the doctor who faced her.

"No," he said, "the baths are finished."

She knew from his face that she was out of danger. Moreover, she was conscious of a new feeling in her body, as though the fount of physical energy within her, long interrupted, had recommenced to flow—but very slowly, a trickling. It was a rebirth. She was not glad, but her body itself was glad; her body had an existence of its own.

She was now often left by herself in the bedroom. To the right of the foot of the bed was a piano in walnut, and to the left a chimney-piece with a large mirror. She wanted to

look* at herself in the mirror. But it was a very long way off. She tried to sit up, and could not. She hoped that one day she would be able to get as far as the mirror. She said not a word about this to either of the two women.

Often they would sit in the bedroom and talk without ceasing. Sophia learnt that the stout woman was named Foucault, and the other Laurence. Sometimes Laurence would address Madame Foucault as Aime'e, but usually she was more formal. Madame Foucault always called the other Laurence.

Sophia's curiosity stirred and awoke. But she could not obtain any very exact information as to where she was, except that the house was in the Rue Breda, off the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette. She recollected vaguely that the reputation of the street was sinister. It appeared that, on the day when she had gone out with Chirac, the upper part of the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette was closed for repairs—(this she remembered)-and that the cabman had turned up the Rue Breda in order to make a detour, and that it was just opposite to the house of Madame Foucault that she had lost consciousness. Madame Foucault happened to be getting into a cab at the moment; but she had told Chirac nevertheless to carry Sophia into the house, and a policeman had helped. Then, when the doctor came, it was discovered that she could not be moved, save to a hospital, and both Madame Foucault and Laurence were determined that no friend of Chirac's should be committed to the horrors of a Paris hospital. Madame Foucault had suffered in one as a patient, and Laurence had been a nurse in another. . . .

Chirac was now away. The women talked loosely of a war.

"How kind you have been!" murmured Sophia, with humid eyes.

But they silenced her with gestures. She was not to talk. They seemed to have nothing further to tell her. They said

Chirac would be returning perhaps soon, and that she could talk to him. Evidently they both held Chirac in affection. They said often that he was a charming boy.

Bit by bit Sophia comprehended the length and the seriousness of her illness, and the immense devotion of the two women, and the terrific disturbance of their lives, and her own debility. She saw that the women were strongly attached to her, and she could not understand why, as she had never done anything for them, whereas they had done everything for her. She had not learnt that benefits rendered, not benefits received, are the cause of such attachments.

All the time she was plotting, and gathering her strength to disobey orders and get as far as the mirror. Her preliminary studies and her preparations were as elaborate as those of a prisoner arranging to escape from a fortress. The first attempt was a failure. The second succeeded. Though she could not stand without support, she managed by clinging to the bed to reach a chair, and to push the chair in front of her until it approached the mirror. The enterprise was exciting and terrific. Then she saw a face in the glass: white, incredibly emaciated, with great, wild, staring eyes; and the shoulders were bent as though with age. It was a painful, almost a horrible sight. It frightened her, so that in her alarm she recoiled from it. Not attending sufficiently to the chair, she sank to the ground. She could not pick herself up, and she was caught there, miserably, by her angered jailers. The vision of her face taught her more efficiently than anything else the gravity of her adventure. As the women lifted her inert, repentant mass into the bed, she reflected, "How queer my life is!" It seemed to her that she ought to have been trimming hats in the showroom instead of being in that curtained, mysterious, Parisian interior.

§ 2

One day Madame Foucault knocked at the door of Sophia's little room (this ceremony of knocking was one of the indications that Sophia, convalescent, had been reinstated in her rights as an individual), and cried:

"Madame, one is going to leave you all alone for some time."

"Come in," said Sophia, who was sitting up in an armchair, and reading.

Madame Foucault opened the door. "One is going to leave you all alone for some time," she repeated in a low, confidential voice, sharply contrasting with her shriek behind the door.

Sophia nodded and smiled, and Madame Foucault also nodded and smiled. But Madame Foucault's face quickly resumed its anxious expression.

"The servant's brother marries himself to-day, and she implored me to accord her two days—what would you? Madame Laurence is out. And I must go out. It is four o'clock. I shall re-enter at six o'clock striking. Therefore. . . ."

"Perfectly," Sophia concurred.

She looked curiously at Madame Foucault, who was carefully made up and arranged for the street, in a dress of yellow tussore with blue ornaments, bright lemon-coloured gloves, a little blue bonnet, and a little white parasol not wider when opened than her shoulders. Cheeks, lips, and eyes were heavily charged with rouge, powder, or black. And that too abundant waist had been most cunningly confined in a belt that descended beneath, instead of rising above, the lower masses of the vast torso. The general effect was worthy of the effort that must have gone to it. Madame Foucault was not rejuvenated by her toilette, but it almost

procured her pardon for the crime of being over forty, fat, creased, and worn out. It was one of those defeats that are a triumph.

"You are very chic," said Sophia, uttering her admiration.

"Ah!" said Madame Foucault, shrugging the shoulders of disillusion. "Chic! What does that do?"

But she was pleased.

The front-door banged. Sophia, by herself for the first time in the flat into which she had been carried unconscious and which she had never since left, had the disturbing sensation of being surrounded by mysterious rooms and mysterious things. She tried to continue reading, but the sentences conveyed nothing to her. She rose—she could walk now a little—and looked out of the window, through the interstices of the pattern of the lace curtains. The window gave on the courtyard, which was about sixteen feet below her. A low wall divided the courtyard from that of the next house. And the windows of the two houses, only to be distinguished by the different tints of their yellow paint, rose tier above tier in level floors, continuing beyond Sophia':; field of vision. She pressed her face against the glass, and remembered the St. Luke's Square of her childhood; and just as there from the showroom window she could not even by pressing her face against the glass see the pavement, so here she could not see the roof; the courtyard was like the bottom of a well. There was no end to the windows; six storeys she could count, and the sills of a seventh were the limit of her view. Every window was heavily curtained, like her own. Some of the upper ones had green sunblinds. Scarcely any sound! Mysteries brooded without as well as within the flat of Madame Foucault. Sophia saw a bodiless hand twitch at a curtain and vanish. She noticed a green bird in a tiny cage on a sill in the next house. A woman whom she took to be

the concierge appeared in the courtyard, deposited a small plant in the track of a ray of sunshine that lighted a corner for a couple of hours in the afternoon, and disappeared again. Then she heard a piano—somewhere. That was all. The feeling that secret and strange lives were being lived behind those baffling windows, that humanity was everywhere intimately pulsing around her, oppressed her spirit yet not quite unpleasantly. The environment softened her glance upon the spectacle of existence, insomuch that sadness became a voluptuous pleasure. And the environment threw her back on herself, into a sensuous contemplation of the fundamental fact of Sophia Scales, formerly Sophia Baines.

She turned to the room, with the marks of the bath on the floor by the bed, and the draped piano that was never opened, and her two trunks filling up the corner opposite the door. She had the idea of thoroughly examining those trunks, which Chirac or somebody else must have fetched from the hotel. At the top of one of them was her purse, tied up with old ribbon and ostentatiously sealed! How comical these French people were when they deemed it necessary to be serious! She emptied both trunks, scrutinizing minutely all her goods, and thinking of the varied occasions upon which she had obtained them. Then she carefully restored them, her mind full of souvenirs newly awakened.

She sighed as she straightened her back. A clock struck in another room. It seemed to invite her towards discoveries. She had been in no other room of the flat. She knew nothing of the rest of the flat save by sound. For neither of the other women had ever described it, nor had it occurred to them that Sophia might care to leave her room though she could not leave the house.

She opened her door, and glanced along the dim corridor, with which she was familiar. She knew that the kitchen lay

next to her little room, and that next to the kitchen came the front-door. On the opposite side of the corridor were four double-doors. She crossed to the pair of doors facing her own little door, and quietly turned the handle, but the doors were locked; the same with the next pair. The third pair yielded, and she was in a large bedroom, with three windows on the street. She saw that the second pair of doors, which she had failed to unfasten, also opened into this room. Between the two pairs of doors was a wide bed. In front of the central window was a large dressing-table. To the left of the bed, half hiding the locked doors, was a large screen. On the marble mantelpiece, reflected in a huge mirror, that ascended to the ornate cornice, was a gilt-and-basalt clock, with pendants to match. On the opposite side of the room from this was a long wide couch. The floor was of polished oak, with a skin on either side of the bed. At the foot of the bed was a small writing-table, with a penny bottle of ink on it. A few coloured prints and engravings—representing, for example, Louis Philippe and his family, and people perishing on a raft—broke the tedium of the walls. The first impression on Sophia's eye was one of sombre splendour. Everything had the air of being richly ornamented, draped, looped, carved, twisted, brocaded into gorgeousness. The dark crimson bed-hangings fell from massive rosettes in majestic folds. The counterpane was covered with lace. The window-curtains had amplitude beyond the necessary, and they were suspended from behind fringed and pleated valances. The green sofa and its sateen cushions were stiff with applied embroidery. The chandelier hanging from the middle of the ceiling, modelled to represent cupids holding festoons, was a glittering confusion of gilt and lustres: the lustres tinkled when Sophia stood on a certain part of the floor. The cane-seated chairs were completely gilded. There was an effect of spaciousness.

And the situation of the bed between the two double-doors, with the three windows in front and other pairs of doors communicating with other rooms on either hand, produced in addition an admirable symmetry.

But Sophia, with the sharp gaze of a woman brought up in the traditions of a modesty so proud that it scorns ostentation, quickly tested and condemned the details of this chamber that imitated every luxury. Nothing in it, she found, was 'good.' And in St. Luke's Square 'goodness' meant honest workmanship, permanence, the absence of pretence. All the stuffs were cheap and showy and shabby; all the furniture was cracked, warped, or broken. The clock showed five minutes past twelve at five o'clock. And further, dust was everywhere, except in those places where even the most perfunctory cleaning could not have left it. In the obscurer pleatings of draperies it lay thick. Sophia's lip curled, and instinctively she lifted her peignoir. One of her mother's phrases came into her head: 'a lick and a promise.[5] And then another: "If you want to leave dirt, leave it where eyerybody can see it, not in the corners."

She peeped behind the screen, and all the horrible welter of a *cabinet de toilette* met her gaze: a repulsive medley of foul waters, stained vessels and cloths, brushes, sponges, powders, and pastes. Clothes were hung up in disorder on rough nails; among them she recognized a dressing-gown of Madame Foucault's, and, behind affairs of later date, the dazzling scarlet cloak in which she had first seen Madame Foucault, dilapidated now. So this was Madame Foucault's room! This was the bower from which that elegance emerged, the filth from which had sprung the mature blossom!

She passed from that room direct to another, of which the shutters were closed, leaving it in twilight. This room too was a bedroom, rather smaller than the middle one, and

having only one window, but furnished with the same dubious opulence. Dust covered it everywhere, and small footmarks were visible in the dust on the floor. At the back was a small door, papered to match the wall, and within this door was a *cabinet de toilette,* with no light and no air; neither in the room nor the closet was there any sign of individual habitation. She traversed the main bedroom again and found another bedroom to balance the second one, but open to the full light of day, and in a state of extreme disorder; the double-pillowed bed had not even been made; clothes and towels draped all the furniture; shoes were about the floor, and on a piece of string tied across the windows hung a single white stocking, wet. At the back was a *cabinet de toilette,* as dark as the other one, a vile malodorous mess of appliances whose familiar forms loomed vague and extraordinarily sinister in the dense obscurity. Sophia turned away with the righteous disgust of one whose preparations for the gaze of the world are as candid and simple as those of a child. Concealed dirt shocked her as much as it would have shocked her mother; and as for the trickeries of the toilet table, she contemned them as harshly as a young saint who has never been tempted contemns moral weakness. She thought of the strange flaccid daily life of those two women, whose hours seemed to slip unprofitably away without any result of achievement. She had actually witnessed nothing; but since the beginning of her convalescence her ears had heard, and she could piece the evidences together. There was never any sound in the flat, outside the kitchen, until noon. Then vague noises and smells would commence. And about one o'clock Madame Foucault, disarrayed, would come to inquire if the servant had attended to the needs of the invalid. Then the odours of cookery would accentuate themselves; bells rang; fragments of conversations escaped through doors ajar; occasionally

a man's voice or a heavy step; then the fragrance of coffee; sometimes the sound of a kiss, the banging of the front door, the noise of brushing, or of the shaking of a carpet, a little scream as at some trifling domestic contretemps. Laurence, still in a dressing-gown, would lounge into Sophia's room, dirty, haggard, but polite with a curious stiff ceremony, and would drink her coffee there. This wandering in peignoirs would continue till three o'clock, and then Laurence might say, as if nerving herself to an unusual and immense effort: "I must be dressed by five o'clock. I have not a moment." Often Madame Foucault did not dress at all; on such days she would go to bed immediately after dinner, with the remark that she didn't know what was the matter with her, but she was exhausted. And then the servant would retire to her seventh floor, and there would be silence until, now and then, faint creepings were heard at midnight or after. Once or twice, through the chinks of her door, Sophia had seen a light at two o'clock in the morning, just before the dawn.

Yet these were the women who had saved her life, who between them had put her into a cold bath every three hours night and day for weeks! Surely it was impossible after that to despise them for their shiftlessness and talkative idling in peignoirs; impossible to despise them for anything whatever! But Sophia, conscious of her inheritance of strong and resolute character, did despise them as poor things. The one point on which she envied them was their formal manners to her, which seemed to become more dignified and graciously distant as her health improved. It was always 'Madame,' 'Madame,' to her, with an intonation of increasing deference. They might have been apologizing to her for themselves.

She prowled into all the corners of the flat; but she discovered no more rooms, nothing but a large cupboard

crammed with Madame Foucault's dresses. Then she went back to the large bedroom, and enjoyed the busy movement and rattle of the sloping street, and had long, vague yearnings for strength and for freedom in wide, sane places. She decided that on the morrow she would dress herself 'properly,' and never again wear a peignoir; the peignoir and all that it represented, disgusted her. And while looking at the street she ceased to see it and saw Cook's office and Chirac helping her into the carriage. Where was he? Why had he brought her to this impossible abode? What did he mean by such conduct? . . . But could he have acted otherwise? He had done the one thing that he could do. . . . Chance! . . . Chance! And why an impossible abode? Was one place more impossible than another? . . . All this came of running away from home with Gerald. It was remarkable that she seldom thought of Gerald. He had vanished from her life as he had come into it—madly, preposterously. She wondered what the next stage in her career would be. She certainly could not forecast it. Perhaps Gerald was starving, or in prison. . . . Bah! That exclamation expressed her appalling disdain of Gerald and of the Sophia who had once deemed him the paragon of men. Bah!

A carriage stopping in front of the house awakened her from her meditation. Madame Foucault and a man very much younger than Madame Foucault got out of it. Sophia fled. After all, this prying into other people's rooms was quite inexcusable. She dropped on to her own bed and picked up a book, in case Madame Foucault should come in.

§3

In the evening, just after night had fallen, Sophia on the bed heard the sound of raised and acrimonious voices in

Madame Foucault's room. Nothing except dinner had happened since the arrival of Madame Foucault and the young man. These two had evidently dined informally in the bedroom on a dish or so prepared by Madame Foucault, who had herself served Sophia with her invalid's repast. The odours of cookery still hung in the air.

The noise of virulent discussion increased and continued, and then Sophia could hear sobbing, broken by short and fierce phrases from the man. Then the door of the bedroom opened brusquely. "J'en ai soupe!" exclaimed the man, in tones of angry disgust. "Laisse-moi, je te prie!" And then a soft muffled sound, as of a struggle, a quick step, and the very violent banging of the front door. After that there was a noticeable silence, save for the regular sobbing. Sophia wondered when it would cease, that monotonous sobbing.

"What is the matter?" she called out from her bed.

The sobbing grew louder, like the sobbing of a child who has detected an awakening of sympathy and instinctively begins to practise upon it. In the end Sophia arose and put on the peignoir which she had almost determined never to wear again.

The broad corridor was lighted by a small, smelling oil-lamp with a crimson globe. That soft, transforming radiance seemed to paint the whole corridor with voluptuous luxury: so much so that it was impossible to believe that the smell came from the lamp. Under the lamp lay Madame Foucault on the floor, a shapeless mass of lace, frilled linen, and corset; her light brown hair was loose and spread about the floor. At the first glance, the creature abandoned to grief made a romantic and striking picture, and Sophia thought for an instant that she had at length encountered life on a plane that would correspond to her dreams of romance. And she was impressed, with a feeling somewhat akin to that of a middling commoner when con-

fronted with a viscount. There was, in the distance, something imposing and sensational about that prone, trembling figure. The tragic works of love were therein apparently manifest, in a sort of dignified beauty. But when Sophia bent over Madame Foucault, and touched her flabbiness, this illusion at once vanished; and instead of being dramatically pathetic the woman was ridiculous. Her face, especially as damaged by tears, could not support the ordeal of inspection; it was horrible; not a picture, but a palette; or like the coloured design of a pavement artist after a heavy shower. Her great, relaxed eyelids alone would have rendered any face absurd; and there were monstrous details far worse than the eyelids. Then she was amazingly fat; her flesh seemed to be escaping at all ends from a corset strained to the utmost limit. And above her boots—she was still wearing dainty, high-heeled, tightly laced boots—the calves bulged suddenly out.

As a woman of between forty and fifty, the obese sepulchre of a dead vulgar beauty, she had no right to passions and tears and homage, or even the means of life; she had no right to expose herself picturesquely beneath a crimson glow in all the panoply of ribboned garters and lacy seductiveness. It was silly; it was disgraceful. She ought to have known that only youth and slimness have the right to appeal to the feelings by indecent abandonments.

Such were the thoughts that mingled with the sympathy of the beautiful and slim Sophia as she bent down to Madame Foucault. She was sorry for her landlady, but at the same time she despised her, and resented her woe.

"What is the matter?" she asked quietly.

"He has chucked me!" stammered Madame Foucault. "And he's the last. I have no one now!"

She rolled over in the most grotesque manner, kicking up

her legs, with a fresh outburst of sobs. Sophia felt quite ashamed for her.

"Come and lie down. Come now!" she said, with a touch of sharpness. "You mustn't lie there like that."

Madame Foucault's behaviour was really too outrageous. Sophia helped her, morally rather than physically, to rise, and then persuaded her into the large bedroom. Madame Foucault fell on the bed, of which the counterpane had been thrown over the foot. Sophia covered the lower part of her heaving body with the counterpane.

"Now, calm yourself, please!"

This room too was lit in crimson, by a small lamp that stood on the night-table, and though the shade of the lamp was cracked, the general effect of the great chamber was incontestably romantic. Only the pillows of the wide bed and a small semi-circle of floor were illuminated, all the rest lay in shadow. Madame Foucault's head had dropped between the pillows. A tray containing dirty plates and glasses and a wine-bottle was speciously picturesque on the writing-table.

Despite her genuine gratitude to Madame Foucault for astounding care during her illness, Sophia did not like her landlady, and the present scene made her coldly wrathful. She saw the probability of having another's troubles piled on the top of her own. She did not, in her mind, actively object, because she felt that she could not be more hopelessly miserable than she was; but she passively resented the mposition. Her reason told her that she ought to sympa-.hize with this ageing, ugly, disagreeable, undignified woman; but her heart was reluctant; her heart did not want to know anything at all about Madame Foucault, nor to enter in any way into her private life.

"I have not a single friend now," stammered Madame Foucault.

"Oh, yes, you have," said Sophia, cheerfully. "You have Madame Laurence."

"Laurence—that is not a friend. You know what I mean."

"And me! I am your friend!" said Sophia, in obedience to her conscience.

"You are very kind," replied Madame Foucault, from the pillow. "But you know what I mean."

The fact was that Sophia did know what she meant. The terms of their intercourse had been suddenly changed. There was no pretentious ceremony now, but the sincerity that disaster brings. The vast structure of make-believe, which between them they had gradually built, had crumbled to nothing.

"I never treated badly any man in my life," whimpered Madame Foucault. "I have always been a good girl. There is not a man who can say I have not been a good girl. Never was I a girl like the rest. And everyone has said so. Ah! when I tell you that once I had a hotel in the Avenue de la Reine Hortense. Four horses. . . . I have sold a horse to Madame Musard. . . . You know Madame Musard. . . . But one cannot make economies. Impossible to make economies! Ah! In 'fifty-six I was spending a hundred thousand francs a year. That cannot last. Always I have said to myself: 'That cannot last.' Always I had the intention. . . . But what would you? I installed myself here, and borrowed money to pay for the furniture. There did not remain to me one jewel. The men are poltroons, all! I could let three bedrooms for three hundred and fifty francs a month, and with serving meals and so on I could live."

"Then that," Sophia interrupted, pointing to her own bedroom across the corridor, "is your room?"

"Yes," said Madame Foucault. "I put you in it because at the moment all these were let. They are so no longer.

Only one—Laurence—and she does not pay me always. What would you? Tenants-that does not find itself at the present hour. ... I have nothing, and I owe. And he quits me. He chooses this moment to quit me! And why? For nothing. For nothing. That is not for his money that I regret him. No, no! You know, at his age—he is twenty-five—and with a woman like me—one is not generous! No. I loved him. And then a man is a moral support, always. I loved him. It is at my age, mine, that one knows how to love. Beauty goes always, but not the temperament! Ah, that—No! ... I loved him. I love him."

Sophia's face tingled with a sudden emotion caused by the repetition of those last three words, whose spell no usage can mar. But she said nothing.

"Do you know what I shall become? There is nothing but that for me. And I know of such, who are there already. A charwoman! Yes, a charwoman! More soon or more late. Well, that is life. What would you? One exists always." Then in a different tone: "I demand your pardon, madame, for talking like this. I ought to have shame."

And Sophia felt that in listening she also ought to be ashamed. But she was not ashamed. Everything seemed very natural, and even ordinary. And, moreover, Sophia was full of the sense of her superiority over the woman on the bed. Four /ears ago, in the Restaurant Sylvain, the ingenious and ignorant Sophia had shyly sat in awe of the resplendent courtesan, with her haughty stare, her large, easy gestures, and her imperturbable contempt for the man who was paying. And now Sophia knew that she, Sophia, knew all that was to be known about human nature. She had not merely youth, beauty, and virtue, but knowledge—knowledge enough to reconcile her to her own misery. She had a vigorous, clear mind, and a clean conscience. She could look anyone in the face, and judge everyone too as a

woman of the world. Whereas this obscene wreck on the bed had nothing whatever left. She had not merely lost her effulgent beauty, she had become repulsive. She could never have had any commonsense, nor any force of character. Her haughtiness in the day of glory was simply fatuous, based on stupidity. She had passed the years in idleness, trailing about all day in stuffy rooms, and emerging at night to impress nincompoops; continually meaning to do things which she never did, continually surprised at the lateness of the hour, continually occupied with the most foolish trifles. And here she was at over forty writhing about on the bare floor because a boy of twenty-five (who *must* be a worthless idiot) had abandoned her after a scene of ridiculous shoutings and stampings. She was dependent on the caprices of a young scamp, the last donkey to turn from her with loathing! Sophia thought: "Goodness! If I had been in her place I shouldn't have been like that. I should have been rich. I should have saved like a miser. I wouldn't have been dependent on anybody at that age. If I couldn't have made a better courtesan than this pitiable woman, I would have drowned myself."

In the harsh vanity of her conscious capableness and young strength she thought thus, half forgetting her own follies, and half excusing them on the ground of inexperience.

Sophia wanted to go round the flat and destroy every crimson lampshade in it. She wanted to shake Madame Foucault into self-respect and sagacity. Moral reprehension, though present in her mind, was only faint. Certainly she felt the immense gulf between the honest woman and the wanton, but she did not feel it as she would have expected to feel it. "What a fool you have been!" she thought; not: "What a sinner!" With her precocious cynicism, which was somewhat unsuited to the lovely northern

youthfulness of that face, she said to herself that the whole situation and their relative attitudes would have been different if only Madame Foucault had had the wit to amass a fortune, as (according to Gerald) some of her rivals had succeeded in doing.

And all the time she was thinking, in another part of her mind: "I ought not to be here. It's no use arguing. I ought not to be here. Chirac did the only thing for me there was to do. But I must go now."

Madame Foucault continued to recite her woes, chiefly financial, in a weak voice damp with tears; she also continued to apologize for mentioning herself. She had finished sobbing, and lay looking at the wall, away from Sophia, who stood irresolute near the bed, ashamed for her companion's weakness and incapacity.

"You must not forget," said Sophia, irritated by the unrelieved darkness of the picture drawn by Madame Foucault, "that at least I owe you a considerable sum, and that I am only waiting for you to tell me how much it is. I have asked you twice already, I think."

"Oh, you are still suffering!" said Madame Foucault.

"I am quite well enough to pay my debts," said Sophia.

"I do not like to accept money from you," said Madame Foucault.

"But why not?"

"You will have the doctor to pay."

"Please do not talk in that way," said Sophia. "I have money, and I can pay for everything, and I shall pay for everything."

She was annoyed because she was sure that Madame Foucault was only making a pretence of delicacy, and that in any case her delicacy was preposterous. Sophia had remarked this on the two previous occasions when she had mentioned the subject of bills. Madame Foucault would

not treat her as an ordinary lodger, now that the illness was past. She wanted, as it were, to complete brilliantly what she had begun, and to live in Sophia's memory as a unique figure of lavish philanthropy. This was a sentiment, a luxury that she desired to offer herself: the thought that she had played providence to a respectable married lady in distress; she frequently hinted at Sophia's misfortunes and helplessness. But she could not afford the luxury. She gazed at it as a poor woman gazes at costly stuffs through the glass of a shop-window. The truth was, she wanted the luxury for nothing. For a double reason Sophia was exasperated: by Madame Foucault's absurd desire, and by a natural objection to the *rôle* of a subject for philanthropy. She would not admit that Madame Foucault's devotion as a nurse entitled her to the satisfaction of being a philanthropist when there was no necessity for philanthropy.

"How long have I been here?" asked Sophia.

"I don't know," murmured Madame Foucault. "Eight weeks—or is it nine?"

"Suppose we say nine," said Sophia.

"Very well," agreed Madame Foucault, apparently reluctant.

"Now, how much must I pay you per week?"

"I don't want anything—I don't want anything! You are a friend of Chirac's. You——"

"Not at all!" Sophia interrupted, tapping her foot and biting her lip. "Naturally I must pay."

Madame Foucault wept quietly.

"Shall I pay you seventy-five francs a week?" said Sophia, anxious to end the matter.

"It is too much!" Madame Foucault protested, insincerely.

"What? For all you have done for me?"

"I speak not of that," Madame Foucault modestly replied.

If the devotion was not to be paid for, then seventy-five francs a week was assuredly too much, as during more than half the time Sophia had had almost no food. Madame Foucault was therefore within the truth when she again protested, at sight of the bank-notes which Sophia brought from her trunk:

"I am sure that it is too much."

"Not at all!" Sophia repeated. "Nine weeks at seventy-five. That makes six hundred and seventy-five. Here are seven hundreds."

"I have no change," said Madame Foucault. "I have nothing."

"That will pay for the hire of the bath," said Sophia.

She laid the notes on the pillow. Madame Foucault looked at them gluttonously, as any other person would have done in her place. She did not touch them. After an instant she burst into wild tears.

"But why do you cry?" Sophia asked, softened.

"I-I don't know!" spluttered Madame Foucault. "You are so beautiful. I am so content that we saved you." Her great wet eyes rested on Sophia.

It was sentimentality. Sophia ruthlessly set it down as sentimentality. But she was touched. She was suddenly moved. Those women, such as they were in their foolishness, probably had saved her life—and she a stranger! Flaccid as they were, they had been capable of resolute perseverance there. It was possible to say that chance had thrown them upon an enterprise which they could not have abandoned till they or death had won. It was possible to say that they hoped vaguely to derive advantage from their labours. But even then? Judged by an ordinary standard, those women had been angels of mercy. And Sophia was despising them, cruelly taking their motives to pieces, accusing them of incapacity when she herself stood a su-

preme proof of their capacity in, at any rate, one direction! In a rush of emotion she saw her hardness and her injustice.

She bent down. *'Never can I forget how kind you have been to me. It is incredible! Incredible!" She spoke softly, in tones loaded with genuine feeling. It was all she said. She could not embroider on the theme. She had no talent for thanksgiving.

Madame Foucault made the beginning of a gesture, as if she meant to kiss Sophia with those thick, marred lips; but refrained. Her head sank back, and then she had a recurrence of the fit of nervous sobbing. Immediately afterwards there was the sound of a latchkey in the front door of the flat; the bedroom door was open. Still sobbing very violently, she cocked her ear, and pushed the bank-notes under the pillow.

Madame Laurence—as she was called: Sophia had never heard her surname—came straight into the bedroom, and beheld the scene with astonishment in her dark twinkling eyes. She was usually dressed in black, because people said that black suited her, and because black was never out of fashion; black was an expression of her idiosyncrasy. She showed a certain elegance, and by comparison with the extreme disorder of Madame Foucault and the deshabille of Sophia her appearance, all fresh from a modish restaurant, was brilliant; it gave her an advantage over the other two—that moral advantage which ceremonial raiment always gives.

"What is it that passes?" she demanded.

"He has chucked me, Laurence!" exclaimed Madame Foucault, in a sort of hysteric scream which seemed to force its way through her sobs. From the extraordinary freshness of Madame Foucault's woe, it might have been supposed that her young man had only that instant strode out.

Laurence and Sophia exchanged a swift glance; and

Laurence, of course, perceived that Sophia's relations with her landlady and nurse were now of a different, a more candid order. She indicated her perception of the change by a single slight movement of the eyebrows.

"But listen, Aimee," she said authoritatively. "You must not let yourself go like that. He will return."

"Never!" cried Madame Foucault. "It is finished. And he is the last!"

Laurence, ignoring Madame Foucault, approached Sophia. "You have an air very fatigued," she said, caressing Sophia's shoulder with her gloved hand. "You are pale like everything. All this is not for you. It is not reasonable to remain here, you still suffering! At this hour! Truly not reasonable!"

Her hands persuaded Sophia towards the corridor. And, in fact, Sophia did then notice her own exhaustion. She departed from the room with the ready obedience of physical weakness, and shut her door.

After about half an hour, during which she heard confused noises and murmurings, her door half opened.

"May I enter, since you are not asleep?" It was Laurence's voice. Twice, now, she had addressed Sophia without adding the formal 'madame.'

"Enter, I beg you," Sophia called from the bed. "I am reading."

Laurence came in. Sophia was both glad and sorry to see her. She was eager to hear gossip which, however, she felt she ought to despise. Moreover, she knew that if they talked that night they would talk as friends, and that Laurence would ever afterwards treat her with the familiarity of a friend. This she dreaded. Still, she knew that she would yield, at any rate, to the temptation to listen to gossip.

"I have put her to bed," said Laurence, in a whisper, as she cautiously closed the door. "The poor woman! Oh,

what a charming bracelet! It is a true pearl, naturally?"

Her roving eye had immediately, with an infallible instinct, caught sight of a bracelet which, in taking stock of her possessions, Sophia had accidentally left on the piano. She picked it up, and then put it down again.

"Yes," said Sophia. She was about to add: "It's nearly all the jewellery I possess"; but she stopped.

Laurence moved towards Sophia's bed, and stood over it as she had often done in her quality as nurse. She had taken off her gloves, and she made a piquant, pretty show, with her thirty years, and her agreeable, slightly roguish face, in which were mingled the knowingness of a street boy and the confidence of a woman who has ceased to be surprised at the influence of her snub nose on a highly intelligent man.

"Did she tell you what they had quarrelled about?" Laurence inquired abruptly. And not only the phrasing of the question, but the assured tone in which it was uttered, showed that Laurence meant to be the familiar of Sophia.

"Not a word!" said Sophia.

In this brief question and reply, all was crudely implied that had previously been supposed not to exist. The relations between the two women were altered irretrievably in a moment.

"It must have been her fault!" said Laurence. "With men she is insupportable. I have never understood how that poor woman has made her way. With women she is charming. But she seems to be incapable of not treating men like dogs. Some men adore that, but they are few. Is it not?"

Sophia smiled.

"I have told her! How many times have I told her! But it is useless. It is stronger than she is, and if she finishes on straw one will be able to say that it was because of that.

But truly she ought not to have asked him here! Truly that was too much! If he knew. . . !"

"Why not?" asked Sophia, awkwardly. The answer startled her.

"Because her room has not been disinfected."

"But I thought all the flat had been disinfected?"

"All except her room."

"But why not her room?"

Laurence shrugged her shoulders. "She did not want to disturb her things! Is it that I know, I? She is like that. She takes an idea—and then, there you are!"

"She told me every room had been disinfected."

"She told the same to the police and the doctor."

"Then all the disinfection is useless?"

"Perfectly! But she is like that. This flat might be very remunerative; but with her, never! She has not even paid for the furniture—after two years!"

"But what will become of her?" Sophia asked.

"Ah-that!" Another shrug of the shoulders. "All that I know is that it will be necessary for me to leave here. The last time I brought Monsieur Gerf here, she was excessively rude to him. She has doubtless told you about Monsieur Cerf?"

"No. Who is Monsieur Cerf?"

"Ah! She has not told you? That astonishes me. Monsieur Cerf, that is my friend, you know."

"Oh!" murmured Sophia.

"Yes," Laurence proceeded, impelled by a desire to impress Sophia and to gossip at large. "That is my friend. I knew him at the hospital. It was to please him that I left the hospital. After that we quarrelled for two years; but at the end he gave me right. I did not budge. Two years! It is long. And I had left the hospital. I could have gone back. But I would not. That is not a life, to be nurse in a

Paris hospital! No, I drew myself out as well as I could. . . . He is the most charming boy you can imagine! And rich now; that is to say, relatively. He has a cousin infinitely more rich than he. I dined with them both to-night at the Maison Doree. For a luxurious boy, he is a luxurious boy—the cousin I mean. It appears that he has made a fortune in Canada."

"Truly!" said Sophia, with politeness. Laurence's hand was playing on the edge of the bed, and Sophia observed for the first time that it bore a wedding-ring.

"You remark my ring?" Laurence laughed. "That is he—the cousin. 'What!' he said, 'you do not wear an *alliance?* An *alliance* is more proper. We are going to arrange that after dinner.' I said that all the jewellers' shops would be closed. 'That is all the same to me,' he said. 'We will open one.' And in effect . . . it passed like that. He succeeded! Is it not beautiful?" She held forth her hand.

"Yes," said Sophia. "It is very beautiful."

"Yours also is beautiful," said Laurence, with an extremely puzzling intonation.

"It is just the ordinary English wedding-ring," said Sophia. In spite of herself she blushed.

" 'Now I have married you. It is I, the cure,' said he—the cousin—when he put the ring on my finger. Oh, he is excessively amusing! He pleases me much. And he is all alone. He asked me whether I knew among my friends a sympathetic, pretty girl, to make four with us three for a picnic. I said I was not sure, but I thought not. Whom do I know? Nobody. I'm not a woman like the rest. I am always discreet. I do not like casual relations. . . . But he is very well, the cousin. Brown eyes. . . . It is an idea—will you come, one day? He speaks English. He loves the English. He is all that is most correct, the perfect gentleman. He would arrange a dazzling fete. I am sure he

would be enchanted to make your acquaintance. Enchanted! ... As for my Charles, happily he is completely mad about me—otherwise I should have fear."

She smiled, and in her smile was a genuine respect for Sophia's face.

"I fear I cannot come," said Sophia. She honestly endeavoured to keep out of her reply any accent of moral superiority, but she did not quite succeed. She was not at all horrified by Laurence's suggestion. She meant simply to refuse it; but she could not do so in a natural voice.

"It is true you are not yet strong enough," said the imperturbable Laurence, quickly, and with a perfect imitation of naturalness. "But soon you must make a little promenade." She stared at her ring. "After all, it is more proper," she observed judicially. "With a wedding-ring one is less likely to be annoyed. What is curious is that the idea never before came to me. Yet. ..."

"You like jewellery?" said Sophia.

"If I like jewellery!"—witha gesture of the hands.

"Will you pass me that bracelet?"

Laurence obeyed, and Sophia clasped it round the girl's wrist.

"Keep it," Sophia said.

"For me?" Laurence exclaimed, ravished. "It is too much."

"It is not enough," said Sophia. "And when you look at it, you must remember how kind you were to me, and how grateful I am."

"How nicely you say that!" Laurence said ecstatically.

And Sophia felt that she had indeed said it rather nicely. This giving of the bracelet, souvenir of one of the few capricious follies that Gerald had committed for her and not for himself, pleased Sophia very much.

"I am afraid your nursing of me forced you to neglect Monsieur Gerf," she added.

"Yes, a little!*' said Laurence, impartially, with a small pout of haughtiness. "It is true that he used to complain. But I soon put him straight. What an idea! He knows there are things upon which I do not joke. It is not he who will quarrel a second time! Believe me!"

Laurence's absolute conviction of her power was what impressed Sophia. To Sophia she seemed to be a vulgar little piece of goods, with dubious charm and a glance that was far too brazen. Her movements were vulgar. And Sophia wondered how she had established her empire and upon what it rested.

"I shall not show this to Aimee," whispered Laurence, indicating the bracelet.

"As you wish," said Sophia.

"By the way, have I told you that war is declared?" Laurence casually remarked.

"No," said Sophia. "What war?"

"The scene with Aimee made me forget it. . . . With Germany. The city is quite excited. An immense crowd in front of the new Opera. They say we shall be at Berlin in a month—or at most two months."

"Oh!" Sophia muttered. "Why is there a war?"

"Ah! It is I who asked that. Nobody knows. It is those Prussians."

"Don't you think we ought to begin again with the disinfecting?" Sophia asked anxiously. "I must speak to Madame Foucault."

Laurence told her not to worry, and went off to show the bracelet to Madame Foucault. She had privately decided that this was a pleasure which, after all, she could not deny herself.

§4

About a fortnight later—it was a fine Saturday in early August—Sophia, with a large pinafore over her dress, was finishing the portentous preparations for disinfecting the flat. Part of the affair was already accomplished, her own room and the corridor having been fumigated on the previous day, in spite of the opposition of Madame Foucault, who had taken amiss Laurence's tale-bearing to Sophia. Laurence had left the flat—under exactly what circumstances Sophia knew not, but she guessed that it must have been in consequence of a scene elaborating the tiff caused by Madame Foucault's resentment against Laurence. The brief, factitious friendliness between Laurence and Sophia had gone like a dream, and Laurence had gone like a dream. The servant had been dismissed; in her place Madame Foucault employed a charwoman each morning for two hours. Finally, Madame Foucault had been suddenly called away that morning by a letter to her sick father at St. Mamm£s-sur-Seine. Sophia was delighted at the chance. The disinfecting of the flat had become an obsession with Sophia—the obsession of a convalescent whose perspective unconsciously twists things to the most wry shapes. She had had trouble on the day before with Madame Foucault, and she was* expecting more serious trouble when the moment arrived for ejecting Madame Foucault as well as all her movable belongings from Madame Foucault's own room. Nevertheless, Sophia had been determined, whatever should happen, to complete an honest fumigation of the entire flat. Hence the eagerness with which, urging Madame Foucault to go to her father, Sophia had protested that she was perfectly strong and could manage by herself for a couple of days. Owing to the partial suppression of the ordinary railway services in favour of military needs, Madame

Foucault could not hope to go and return on the same day. Sophia had lent her a louis.

Pans of sulphur were mysteriously burning in each of the three front rooms, and two pairs of doors had been pasted over with paper, to prevent the fumes from escaping. The charwoman had departed. Sophia, with brush, scissors, flour-paste, and news-sheets, was sealing the third pair of doors, when there was a ring at the front door.

She had only to cross the corridor in order to open.

It was Chirac. She was not surprised to see him. The outbreak of the war had induced even Sophia and her landlady to look through at least one newspaper during the day, and she had in this way learnt, from an article signed by Chirac, that he had returned to Paris after a mission into the Vosges country for his paper.

He started on seeing her. "Ah!" He breathed out the exclamation slowly. And then smiled, seized her hand, and kissed it.

The sight of his obvious extreme pleasure in meeting her again was the sweetest experience that had fallen to Sophia for years.

"Then you are cured?"

"Quite."

He sighed. "You know, this is an enormous relief to me, to know, veritably, that you are no longer in danger. You gave me a fright . . . but a fright, my dear madame!"

She smiled in silence.

As he glanced inquiringly up and down the corridor, she said—

"I'm all alone in the flat. I'm disinfecting it."

"Then that is sulphur that I smell?"

She nodded. "Excuse me while I finish this door," she said.

He closed the front-door. "But you seem to be quite at home here!" he observed.

"I ought to be," said she.

He glanced again inquiringly up and down the corridor. "And you are really all alone now?" he asked, as though to be doubly sure.

She explained the circumstances.

"I owe you my most sincere excuses for bringing you here," he said confidentially.

"But why?" she replied, looking intently at her door. "They have been most kind to me. Nobody could have been kinder. And Madame Laurence being such a good nurse——"

"It is true," said he. "That was a reason. In effect they are both very good-natured little women. . . . You comprehend, as journalist it arrives to me to know all kinds of people. . . ." He snapped his fingers. . . . "And as we were opposite the house. In fine, I pray you to excuse me. . . ."

"Hold me this paper," she said. "It is necessary that every crack should be covered; also between the floor and the door."

"You English are wonderful," he murmured, as he took the paper. "Imagine you doing that! Then," he added, resuming the confidential tone, "I suppose you will leave the Foucault now, hein?"

"I suppose so," she said carelessly.

"You go to England?"

She turned to him, as she patted the creases out of a strip of paper with a duster, and shook her head.

"Not to England?"

"No."

"If it is not indiscreet, where are you going?"

"I don't know," she said candidly.

And she did not know. She was without a plan. Her brain told her that she ought to return to Bursley, or, at the

least, write. But her pride would not hear of such a surrender. Her situation would have to be far more desperate than it was before she could confess her defeat to her family even in a letter. A thousand times no! That was a point which she had for ever decided. She would face any disaster, and any other shame, rather than the shame of her family's forgiving reception of her.

"And you?" she asked, "How does it go? This war?"

He told her, in a few words, a few leading facts about himself. "It must not be said," he added of the war, "but that will turn out ill! I—I know, you comprehend."

"Truly?" she answered with casualness.

"You have heard nothing of him?" Chirac asked.

"Who? Gerald?"

He gave a gesture.

"Nothing! Not a word! Nothing!"

"He will have gone back to England!"

"Never!" she said positively

"But why not?"

"Because he prefers France. He really does like France. I think it is the only real passion he ever had."

"It is astonishing," reflected Chirac, "how France is loved! And yet. . . ! But to live, what will he do? Must live!"

Sophia merely shrugged her shoulders.

"Then it is finished between you two?" he muttered awkwardly.

She nodded. She was on her knees, at the lower crack of the doors.

"There!" she said, rising. "It's well done, isn't it? That is all."

She smiled at him, facing him squarely, in the obscurity of the untidy and shabby corridor. Both felt that they had become very intimate. He was intensely flattered by her attitude, and she knew it.

"Now," she said, "I will take off my pinafore. Where can I niche you? There is only my bedroom, and I want that. What are we to do?"

"Listen," he suggested diffidently. "Will you do me the honour to come for a drive? That will do you good. There is sunshine. And you are always very pale."

"With pleasure," she agreed cordially.

While dressing, she heard him walking up and down the corridor; occasionally they exchanged a few words. Before leaving, Sophia pulled off the paper from one of the key-holes of the sealed suite of rooms, and they peered through, one after the other, and saw the green glow of the sulphur, and were troubled by its uncanniness. And then Sophia refixed the paper.

In descending the stairs of the house she felt the infirmity of her knees; but in other respects, though she had been out only once before since her illness, she was conscious of a sufficient strength. A disinclination for any enterprise had prevented her from taking the air as she ought to have done, but within the flat she had exercised her limbs in many small tasks. The little Chirac, nervously active and restless, wanted to take her arm, but she would not allow it.

The concierge and part of her family stared curiously at Sophia as she passed under the archway, for the course of her illness had excited the interest of the whole house. Just as the carriage was driving off, the concierge came across the pavement and paid her compliments, and then said:

"You do not know by hazard why Madame Foucault has not returned for lunch, madame?"

"Returned for lunch!" said Sophia. "She will not come back till to-morrow."

The concierge made a face. "Ah! How curious it is! She told my husband that she would return in two hours. It is very grave! Question of business."

"I know nothing, madame," said Sophia. She and Chirac looked at each other. The concierge murmured thanks and went off muttering indistinctly.

The fiacre turned down the Rue Laferriere, the horse slipping and sliding as usual over the cobblestones. Soon they were on the boulevard, making for the Champs Elysees and the Bois de Boulogne.

The fresh breeze and bright sunshine and the large freedom of the streets quickly intoxicated Sophia—intoxicated her, that is to say, in quite a physical sense. She was almost drunk, with the heady savour of life itself. A mild ecstasy of well-being overcame her. She saw the flat as a horrible, vile prison, and blamed herself for not leaving it sooner and oftener. The air was medicine, for body and mind too. Her perspective was instantly corrected. She was happy, living neither in the past nor in the future, but in and for that hour. And beneath her happiness moved a wistful melancholy for the Sophia who had suffered such a captivity and such woes. She yearned for more and yet more delight, for careless orgies of passionate pleasure, in the midst of which she would forget all trouble. Why had she refused the offer of Laurence? Why had she not rushed at once into the splendid fire of joyous indulgence, ignoring everything but the crude, sensuous instinct? Acutely aware as she was of her youth, her beauty, and her charm, she wondered at her refusal. She did not regret her refusal. She placidly observed it as the result of some tremendously powerful motive in herself, which could not be questioned or reasoned with—which was, in fact, the essential *her*.

"Do I look like an invalid?" she asked, leaning back luxuriously in the carriage among the crowd of other vehicles.

Chirac hesitated. "My faith! Yes!" he said at length. "But it becomes you. If I did not know that you have little love for compliments, I——"

"But I adore compliments!" she exclaimed. "What made you think that?"

"Well, then," he youthfully burst out, "you are more ravishing than ever."

She gave herself up deliciously to his admiration.

After a silence, he said: "Ah! if you knew how disquieted I was about you, away there. . . ! I should not know how to tell you. Veritably disquieted, you comprehend! What could I do? Tell me a little about your illness."

She recounted details.

As the fiacre entered the Rue Royale, they noticed a crowd of people in front of the Madeleine shouting and cheering.

The cabman turned towards them. "It appears there has been a victory!" he said.

"A victory! If only it was true!" murmured Chirac, cynically.

In the Rue Royale people were running frantically to and fro, laughing and gesticulating in glee. The customers in the cafes stood on their chairs, and even on tables, to watch, and occasionally to join in, the sudden fever. The fiacre was slowed to a walking pace. Flags and carpets began to show from the upper storeys of houses. The crowd grew thicker and more febrile. "Victory! Victory!" rang hoarsely, shrilly, and hoarsely again in the air.

"My God!" said Chirac, trembling. "It must be a true victory! We are saved! We are saved! . . . Oh yes, it is true!"

"But naturally it is true! What are you saying?" demanded the driver.

At the Place de la Concorde the fiacre had to stop altogether. The immense square was a sea of white hats and flowers and happy faces, with carriages anchored like boats on its surface. Flag after flag waved out from neighbouring

roofs in the breeze that tempered the August sun. Then hats began to go up, and cheers rolled across the square like echoes of firing in an enclosed valley. Chirac's driver jumped madly on to his seat, and cracked his whip.

"Vive la France!" he bawled with all the force of his lungs.

A thousand throats answered him.

Then there was a stir behind them. Another carriage was being slowly forced to the front. The crowd was pushing it, and crying, "Marseillaise! Marseillaise!" In the carriage was a woman alone; not beautiful, but distinguished, and with the assured gaze of one who is accustomed to homage and multitudinous applause.

"It is Gueymard!" said Chirac to Sophia. He was very pale. And he too shouted, "Marseillaise!" All his features were distorted.

The woman rose and spoke to her coachman, who offered his hand and she climbed to the box seat, and stood on it and bowed several times.

"Marseillaise!" The cry continued. Then a roar of cheers, and then silence spread round the square like an inundation. And amid this silence the woman began to sing the Marseillaise. As she sang, the tears ran down her cheeks. Everybody in the vicinity was weeping or sternly frowning. In the pauses of the first verse could be heard the rattle of horses' bits, or a whistle of a tug on the river. The refrain, signalled by a proud challenging toss of Gueymard's head, leapt up like a tropical tempest, formidable, overpowering. Sophia, who had had no warning of the emotion gathering within her, sobbed violently. At the close of the hymn Gueymard's carriage was assaulted by worshippers. All around, in the tumult of shouting, men were kissing and embracing each other; and hats went up continually in fountains. Chirac leaned over the side of the

carriage and wrung the hand of a man who was standing by the wheel.

"Who is that?" Sophia asked, in an unsteady voice, to break the inexplicable tension within her.

"I don't know," said Chirac. He was weeping like a child and he sang out: "Victory! To Berlin! Victory!"

§5

Sophia walked alone, with tired limbs, up the damaged oak stairs to the flat. Chirac had decided that, in the circumstances of the victory, he would do well to go to the offices of his paper rather earlier than usual. He had brought her back to the Rue Brèda. They had taken leave of each other in a sort of dream or general enchantment due to their participation in the vast national delirium which somehow dominated individual feelings. They did not define their relations. They had been conscious only of emotion.

The stairs, which smelt of damp even in summer, disgusted Sophia. She thought of the flat with horror and longed for green places and luxury. On the landing were two stoutish, ill-dressed men, of middle age, apparently waiting. Sophia found her key and opened the door.

"Pardon, madame!" said one of the men, raising his hat, and they both pushed into the flat after her. They stared, puzzled, at the strips of paper pasted on the doors.

"What do you want?" she asked haughtily. She was very frightened. The extraordinary irruption brought her down with a shock to the scale of the individual.

"I am the concierge," said the man who had addressed her. He had the air of a superior artisan. "It was my wife who spoke to you this afternoon. This," pointing to his companion, "this is the law. I regret it, but. . . ."

The law saluted and shut the front door. Like the con-

ciergc, the law emitted an odour—the odour of uncleanliness on a hot August day.

"The rent?" exclaimed Sophia.

"No, madame, not the rent: the furniture!"

Then she learnt the history of the furniture. It had belonged to the concierge, who had acquired it from a previous tenant and sold it on credit to Madame Foucault. Madame Foucault had signed bills and had not met them. She had made promises and broken them. She had done everything except discharge her liabilities. She had been warned and warned again. That day had been fixed as the last limit, and she had solemnly assured her creditor that on that day she would pay. On leaving the house she had stated precisely and clearly that she would return before lunch with all the money. She had made no mention of a sick father.

Sophia slowly perceived the extent of Madame Foucault's duplicity and moral cowardice. No doubt the sick father was an invention. The woman, at the end of a tether which no ingenuity of lies could further lengthen, had probably absented herself solely to avoid the pain of witnessing the seizure. She would do anything, however silly, to avoid an immediate unpleasantness. Or perhaps she had absented herself without any particular aim, but simply in the hope that something fortunate might occur. Perhaps she had hoped that Sophia, taken unawares, would generously pay. Sophia smiled grimly.

"Well," she said. "I can't do anything. I suppose you must do what you have to do. You will let me pick up my own affairs?"

"Perfectly, madame!"

She warned them as to the danger of opening the sealed rooms. The man of the law seemed prepared to stay in the corridor indefinitely. No prospect of delay disturbed him.

Strange and disturbing, the triumph of the concierge! He was a locksmith by trade. He and his wife and their children lived in two little dark rooms by the archway—an insignificant fragment of the house. He was away from home about fourteen hours every day, except Sundays, when he washed the courtyard. All the other duties of the concierge were performed by the wife. The pair always looked poor, untidy, dirty, and rather forlorn. But they were steadily levying toll on everybody in the big house. They amassed money in forty ways. They lived for money, and all men have what they live for. With what arrogant gestures Madame Foucault would descend from a carriage at the great door! What respectful attitudes and tones the ageing courtesan would receive from the wife and children of the concierge! But beneath these conventional fictions the truth was that the concierge held the whip. At last he was using it. And he had given himself a half-holiday in order to celebrate his second acquirement of the ostentatious furniture and the crimson lampshades. This was one of the dramatic crises in his career as a man of substance. The national thrill of victory had not penetrated into the flat with the concierge and the law. The emotions of the concierge were entirely independent of the Napoleonic foreign policy.

As Sophia, sick with a sudden disillusion, was putting her things together, and wondering where she was to go, and whether it would be politic to consult Chirac, she heard a fluster at the front door: cries, protestations, implorings. Her own door was thrust open, and Madame Foucault burst in.

"Save me!" exclaimed Madame Foucault, sinking to the ground.

The feeble theatricality of the gesture offended Sophia's taste. She asked sternly what Madame Foucault expected

her to do. Had not Madame Foucault knowingly exposed her, without the least warning, to the extreme annoyance of this visit of the law, a visit which meant practically that Sophia was put into the street?

"You must not be hard!" Madame Foucault sobbed.

Sophia learnt the complete history of the woman's efforts to pay for the furniture: a farrago of folly and deceptions. Madame Foucault confessed too much. Sophia scorned confession for the sake of confession. She scorned the impulse which forces a weak creature to insist on its weakness, to revel in remorse, and to find an excuse for its conduct in the very fact that there is no excuse. She gathered that Madame Foucault had in fact gone away in the hope that Sophia, trapped, would pay; and that in the end, she had not even had the courage of her own trickery, and had run back, driven by panic into audacity, to fall at Sophia's feet, lest Sophia might not have yielded and the furniture have been seized. From beginning to end the conduct of Madame Foucault had been fatuous and despicable and wicked. Sophia coldly condemned Madame Foucault for having allowed herself to be brought into the world with such a weak and maudlin character, and for having allowed herself to grow old and ugly. As a sight the woman was positively disgraceful.

"Save me!" she exclaimed again. "I did what I could for you!"

Sophia hated her. But the logic of the appeal was irresistible.

"But what can I do?" she asked reluctantly.

"Lend me the money. You can. If you don't, this will be the end for me."

"And a good thing, too!" thought Sophia's hard sense.

"How much is it?" Sophia glumly asked.

"It isn't a thousand francs!" said Madame Foucault with

eagerness. "All my beautiful furniture will go for less than a thousand francs! Save me!"

She was nauseating Sophia.

"Please rise," said Sophia, her hands fidgeting undecidedly.

"I shall repay you, surely!" Madame Foucault asseverated. "I swear!"

"Does she take me for a fool?" thought Sophia, "with her oaths!"

"No!" said Sophia. "I won't lend you the money. But I tell you what I will do. I will buy the furniture at that price; and I will promise to re-sell it to you as soon as you can pay me. Like that, you can be tranquil. But I have very little money. I must have a guarantee. The furniture must be mine till you pay me."

"You are an angel of charity!" cried Madame Foucault, embracing Sophia's skirts. "I will do whatever you wish. Ah! You Englishwomen are astonishing."

Sophia was not an angel of charity. What she had promised to do involved sacrifice and anxiety without the prospect of reward. But it was not charity. It was part of the price Sophia paid for the exercise of her logical faculty; she paid it unwillingly. 'I did what I could for you!' Sophia would have died sooner than remind anyone of a benefit conferred, and Madame Foucault had committed precisely that enormity. The appeal was inexcusable to a fine mind; but it was effective.

The men were behind the door, listening. Sophia paid out of her stock of notes. Needless to say, the total was more and not less than a thousand francs. Madame Foucault grew rapidly confidential with the man. Without consulting Sophia, she asked the bailiff to draw up a receipt transferring the ownership of all the furniture to Sophia; and the bailiff, struck into obligingness by glimpses of Sophia's

beauty, consented to do so. There was much conferring upon forms of words, and flourishing of pens between thick, vile fingers, and scattering of ink.

Before the men left Madame Foucault uncorked a bottle of wine for them, and helped them to drink it. Throughout the evening she was insupportably deferential to Sophia, who was driven to bed. Madame Foucault contentedly went up to the sixth floor to occupy the servant's bedroom. She was glad to get so far away from the sulphur, of which a few faint fumes had penetrated into the corridor.

The next morning, after a stifling night of bad dreams, Sophia was too ill to get up. She looked round at the furniture in the little room, and she imagined the furniture in the other rooms, and dismally thought: "All this furniture is mine. She will never pay me! I am saddled with it."

It was cheaply bought, but she probably could not sell it for even what she had paid. Still, the sense of ownership was reassuring.

The charwoman brought her coffee, and Chirac's newspaper; from which she learnt that the news of the victory which had sent the city mad on the previous day was utterly false. Tears came into her eyes as she gazed absently at all the curtained windows of the courtyard. She had youth and loveliness; according to the rules she ought to have been irresponsible, gay, and indulgently watched over by the wisdom of admiring age. But she felt towards the French nation as a mother might feel towards adorable, wilful children suffering through their own charming foolishness. She saw France personified in Chirac. How easily, despite his special knowledge, he had yielded to the fever! Her heart bled for France and Chirac on that morning of reaction and of truth. She could not bear to recall the scene in the Place de la Concorde. Madame Foucault had not descended.

CHAPTER VI: THE SIEGE

§I

MADAME FOUCAULT came into Sophia's room one afternoon with a peculiarly guilty expression on her large face, and she held her peignoir close to her exuberant body in folds consciously majestic, as though endeavouring to prove to Sophia by her carriage that despite her shifting eyes she was the most righteous and sincere woman that ever lived.

It was Saturday, the third of September, a beautiful day. Sophia, suffering from an unimportant relapse, had remained in a state of inactivity, and had scarcely gone out at all. She loathed the flat, but lacked the energy to leave it every day. There was no sufficiently definite object in leaving it. She could not go out and look for health as she might have looked for flowers. So she remained in the flat, and stared at the courtyard and the continual mystery of lives hidden behmd curtains that occasionally moved. And the painted yellow walls of the house, and the papered walls of her room pressed upon her and crushed her. For a few days Chirac had called daily, animated by the most adorable solicitude. Then he had ceased to call. She had tired of reading the journals; they lay unopened. The relations between Madame Foucault and herself, and her status in the flat of which she now legally owned the furniture,—these things were left unsettled. But the question of her board was arranged on the terms that she halved the cost of food and service with Madame Foucault; her expenses were thus reduced to the lowest possible—about eighteen francs a week. An idea hung in the air-like a scientific discovery on the point of being made by several independent investigators simultaneously—that she and Madame Foucault

should co-operate in order to let furnished rooms at a remunerative profit. Sophia felt the nearness of the idea and she wanted to be shocked at the notion of any avowed association between herself and Madame Foucault; but she could not be.

"Here are a lady and a gentleman who want a bedroom," began Madame Foucault, "a nice large bedroom, furnished."

"Oh!" said Sophia; "who are they?"

"They will pay a hundred and thirty francs a month, in advance, for the middle bedroom."

"You've shown it to them already?" said Sophia. And her tone implied that somehow she was conscious of a right to overlook the affair of Madame Foucault.

"No," said the other. "I said to myself that first I would ask you for a counsel."

"Then will they pay all that for a room they haven't seen?"

"The fact is," said Madame Foucault, sheepishly. "The lady has seen the room before. I know her a little. It is a former tenant. She lived here some weeks."

"In that room?"

"Oh no! She was poor enough then."

"Where are they?"

"In the corridor. She is very well, the lady. Naturally one must live, she like all the world; but she is veritably well. Quite respectable! One would never say. . . . Then there would be the meals. We could demand one franc for the *cafe au lait,* two and a half francs for the lunch, and three francs for the dinner. Without counting other things. That would mean over five hundred francs a month, at least. And what would they cost us? Almost nothing! By what appears, he is a plutocrat. … I could thus quickly repay you."

"Is it a married couple?"

"Ah! You know, one cannot demand the marriage certificate." Madame Foucault indicated by a gesture that the Rue Breda was not the paradise of saints.

"When she came before, this lady, was it with the same man?" Sophia asked coldly.

"Ah, my faith, no!" exclaimed Madame Foucault, bridling. "It was a bad sort, the other, a . . .! Ah, no."

"Why do you ask my advice?" Sophia abruptly questioned, in a hard, inimical voice. "Is it that it concerns me?"

Tears came at once into the eyes of Madame Foucault. "Do not be unkind," she implored.

"I'm not unkind," said Sophia, in the same tone.

"Shall you leave me if I accept this offer?"

There was a pause.

"Yes," said Sophia, bluntly. She tried to be large-hearted, large-minded, and sympathetic; but there was no sign of these qualities in her speech.

"And if you take with you the furniture which is yours. . . !"

Sophia kept silence.

"How am I to live, I demand of you?" Madame Foucault askedweakly.

"By being respectable and dealing with respectable people!" said Sophia, uncompromisingly, in tones of steel.

"I am unhappy!" murmured the elder woman. "However, you are more strong than I!"

She brusquely dabbed her eyes, gave a little sob, and ran out of the room. Sophia listened at the door, and heard her dismiss the would-be tenants of the best bedroom. She wondered that she should possess such moral ascendancy over the woman, she so young and ingenuous! For, of course, she had not meant to remove the furniture. She

could hear Madame Foucault sobbing quietly in one of the other rooms; and her lips curled.

Before evening a truly astonishing event happened. Perceiving that Madame Foucault showed no signs of bestirring herself, Sophia, with good nature in her heart but not on her tongue, went to her, and said:

"Shall I occupy myself with the dinner?"

Madame Foucault sobbed more loudly.

"That would be very amiable on your part," Madame Foucault managed at last to reply, not very articulately.

Sophia put a hat on and went to the grocer's. The grocer, who kept a busy establishment at the corner of the Rue Clausel, was a middle-aged and wealthy man. He had sent his young wife and two children to Normandy until victory over the Prussians should be more assured, and he asked Sophia whether it was true that there was a good bedroom to let in the flat where she lived. His servant was ill of small-pox; he was attacked by anxieties and fears on all sides; he would not enter his own flat on account of possible infection; he liked Sophia, and Madame Foucault had been a customer of his, with intervals, for twenty years. Within an hour he had arranged to rent the middle bedroom at eighty francs a month, and to take his meals there. The terms were modest, but the respectability was prodigious. All the glory of this tenancy fell upon Sophia.

Madame Foucault was deeply impressed. Characteristically she began at once to construct a theory that Sophia had only to walk out of the house in order to discover ideal tenants for the rooms. Also she regarded the advent of the grocer as a reward from Providence for her self-denial in refusing the profits of sinfulriess. Sophia felt personally responsible to the grocer for his comfort, and so she herself undertook the preparation of the room. Madame Foucault was amazed at the thoroughness of her housewifery, and

at the ingenuity of her ideas for the arrangement of furniture. She sat and watched with admiration sycophantic but real.

That night, when Sophia was in bed, Madame Foucault came into the room, and dropped down by the side of the bed, and begged Sophia to be her moral support for ever. She confessed herself generally. She explained how she had always hated the negation of respectability; how respectability was the one thing that she had ail her life passionately desired. She said that if Sophia would be her partner in the letting of furnished rooms to respectable persons, she would obey her in everything. She gave Sophia a list of all the traits in Sophia's character which she admired. She asked Sophia to influence her, to stand by her. She insisted that she would sleep on the sixth floor in the servant's tiny room; and she had a vision of three bedrooms let to successful tradesmen. She was in an ecstasy of repentance and good intentions.

Sophia consented to the business proposition; for she had nothing else whatever in prospect, and she shared Madame Foucault's rosy view about the remunerativeness of the bedrooms. With three tenants who took meals the two women would be able to feed themselves for nothing and still make a profit on the food; and the rents would be clear gain.

And she felt very sorry for the ageing, feckless Madame Foucault, whose sincerity was obvious. The association between them would be strange; it would have been impossible to explain it to St. Luke's Square. . . . And yet, if there was anything at all in the virtue of Christian charity, what could properly be urged against the association?

"Ah!" murmured Madame Foucault, kissing Sophia's hands, "it is to-day, then, that I recommence my life. You will see—you will see! You have saved me!"

It was a strange sight, the time-worn, disfigured courtesan, half prostrate before the beautiful young creature proud and unassailable in the instinctive force of her own character. It was almost a didactic tableau, fraught with lessons for the vicious. Sophia was happier than she had been for years. She had a purpose in existence; she had a fluid soul to mould to her will according to her wisdom; and there was a large compassion to her credit, Public opinion could not intimidate her, for in her case there was no public opinion; she knew nobody; nobody had the right to question her doings.

The next day, Sunday, they both worked hard at the bedrooms from early morning. The grocer was installed in his chamber, and the two other rooms were cleansed as they had never been cleansed. At four o'clock, the weather being more magnificent than ever, Madame Foucault said:

"If we took a promenade on the boulevard?"

Sophia reflected. They were partners. "Very well," she agreed.

The boulevard was crammed with gay, laughing crowds. All the cafes were full. None, who did not know, could have guessed that the news of Sedan was scarcely a day old in the capital. Delirious joy reigned in the glittering sunshine. As the two women strolled along, content with their industry and their resolves, they came to a National Guard, who, perched on a ladder, was chipping away the "N" from the official sign of a court-tradesman. He was exchanging jokes with a circle of open mouths. It was in this way that Madame Foucault and Sophia learnt of the establishment of a republic.

"Vive la rèpublique!" cried Madame Foucault, incontinently, and then apologized to Sophia for the lapse.

They listened a long while to a man who was telling strange histories of the Empress.

Suddenly Sophia noticed that Madame Foucault was no longer at her elbow. She glanced about, and saw her in earnest conversation with a young man whose face seemed familiar. She remembered it was the young man with whom Madame Foucault had quarrelled on the night when Sophia found her prone in the corridor; the last remaining worshipper of the courtesan.

The woman's face was quite changed by her agitation. Sophia drew away, offended. She watched the pair from a distance for a few moments, and then, furious in disillusion, she escaped from the fever of the boulevards and walked quietly home. Madame Foucault did not return. Apparently Madame Foucault was doomed to be the toy of chance. Two days later Sophia received a scrawled letter from her, with the information that her lover had required that she should accompany him to Brussels, as Paris would soon be getting dangerous. "He adores me always. He is the most delicious boy. As I have always said, this is the grand passion of my life. I am happy. He would not permit me to come to you. He has spent two thousand francs on clothes for me, since naturally I had nothing." And so on. No word of apology. Sophia, in reading the letter, allowed for a certain exaggeration and twisting of the truth.

"Young fool! Fool!" she burst out angrily. She did not mean herself; she meant the fatuous adorer of that dilapidated, horrible woman. She never saw her again. Doubtless Madame Foucault fulfilled her own prediction as to her ultimate destiny, but in Brussels.

§ 2

Sophia still possessed about a hundred pounds, and had she chosen to leave Paris and France, there was nothing to

prevent her from doing so. Perhaps if she had chanced to visit the Gare St. Lazare or the Gare du Nord, the sight of tens of thousands of people flying seawards might have stirred in her the desire to flee also from the vague coming danger. But she did not visit those termini; she was too busy looking after M. Niepce, her grocer. Moreover, she would not quit her furniture, which seemed to her to be a sort of rock. With a flat full of furniture she considered that she ought to be able to devise a livelihood; the enterprise of becoming independent was already indeed begun. She ardently wished to be independent, to utilize in her own behalf the gifts of organization, foresight, commonsensc and tenacity which she knew she possessed and which had lain idle. And she hated the idea of flight.

Chirac returned as unexpectedly as he had gone; an expedition for his paper had occupied him. With his lips he urged her to go, but his eyes spoke differently. He had, one afternoon, a mood of candid despair, such as he would have dared to show only to one in whom he felt great confidence. "They will come to Paris," he said; "nothing can stop them. And . . . then. . . !" He gave a cynical laugh. But when he urged her to go she said:

"And what about my furniture? And I've promised M. Niepce to look after him."

Then Chirac informed her that he was without a lodging, and that he would like to rent one of her rooms. She agreed.

Shortly afterwards he introduced a middle-aged acquaintance named Carlier, the secretary-general of his newspaper, who wished to rent a bedroom. Thus by good fortune Sophia let all her rooms immediately, and was sure of over two hundred francs a month, apart from the profit on meals supplied. On this latter occasion Chirac (and his companion too) was quite optimistic, reiterating an

absolute certitude that Paris could never be invested. Briefly, Sophia did not believe him. She believed the candidly despairing Chirac. She had no information, no wide theory, to justify her pessimism; nothing but the inward conviction that the race capable of behaving as she had seen it behave in the Place de la Concorde, was bound to be defeated. She loved the French race; but all the practical Teutonic sagacity in her wanted to take care of it in its difficulties, and was rather angry with it for being so unfitted to take care of itself.

She let the men talk, and with careless disdain of their discussions and their certainties she went about her business of preparation. At this period, overworked and harassed by novel responsibilities and risks, she was happier, for days together, than she had ever been, simply because she had a purpose in life and was depending upon herself. Her ignorance of the military and political situation was complete; the situation did not interest her. What interested her was that she had three men to feed wholly or partially, and that the price of eatables was rising. She bought eatables. She bought fifty pecks of potatoes at a franc a peck, and another fifty pecks at a franc and a quarter—double the normal price; ten hams at two and a half francs a pound; a large quantity of tinned vegetables and fruits, a sack of flour, rice, biscuits, coffee, Lyons sausage, dried prunes, dried figs, and much wood and charcoal. But the chief of her purchases was cheese, of which her mother used to say that bread and cheese and water made a complete diet. Many of these articles she obtained from her grocer. All of them, except the flour and the biscuits, she stored in the cellar belonging to the flat; after several days' delay, for the Parisian workmen were too elated by the advent of a republic to stoop to labour, she caused a new lock to be fixed on the cellar-

door. Her activities were the sensation of the house. Everybody admired, but no one imitated.

One morning, on going to do her marketing, she found a notice across the shuttered windows of her creamery in the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette: "Closed for want of milk." The siege had begun. It was in the closing of the creamery that the siege was figured for her; in this, and in eggs at five sous a piece. She went elsewhere for her milk and paid a franc a litre for it. That evening she told her lodgers that the price of meals would be doubled, and that if any gentleman thought that he could get equally good meals elsewhere, he was at liberty to get them elsewhere. Her position was strengthened by the appearance of another candidate for a room, a friend of Niepce. She at once offered him her own room, at a hundred and fifty francs a month.

"You see," she said, "there is a piano in it."

"But I don't play the piano," the man protested, shocked at the price.

"That is not my fault," she said.

He agreed to pay the price demanded for the room because of the opportunity of getting good meals much cheaper than in the restaurants. Like M. Niepce, he was a 'siege-widower,' his wife having been put under shelter in Brittany. Sophia took to the servant's bedroom on the sixth floor. It measured nine feet by seven, and had no window save a skylight; but Sophia was in a fair way to realize a profit of at least four pounds a week, after paying for everything.

On the night when she installed herself in that chamber, amid a world of domestics and poor people, she worked very late, and the rays of her candles shot up intermittently through the skylight into a black heaven; at intervals she flitted up and down the stairs with a candle. Unknown to

her a crowd gradually formed opposite the house in the street, and at about one o'clock in the morning, a file of soldiers woke the concierge and invaded the courtyard, and every window was suddenly populated with heads. Sophia was called upon to prove that she was not a spy signalling to the Prussians. Three quarters of an hour passed before her innocence was established and the staircases cleared of uniforms and dishevelled curiosity. The childish, impossible unreason of the suspicion against her completed in Sophia's mind the ruin of the reputation of the French people as a sensible race. She was extremely caustic the next day to her boarders. Except for this episode, the frequency of military uniforms in the streets, the price of food, and the fact that at least one house in four was flying either the ambulance flag or the flag of a foreign embassy (in an absurd hope of immunity from the impending bombardment) the siege did not exist for Sophia. The men often talked about their guard-duty, and disappeared for a day or two to the ramparts, but she was too busy to listen to them. She thought of nothing but her enterprise, which absorbed all her powers. She arose at six a.m., in the dark, and by seven-thirty M. Niepce and his friend had been served with breakfast, and much general work was already done. At eight o'clock she went out to market. When asked why she continued to buy at a high price, articles of which she had a store, she would reply: "I am keeping all that till things are much dearer." This was regarded as astounding astuteness.

On the fifteenth of October she paid the quarter's rent of the flat, four hundred francs, and was accepted as tenant. Her ears were soon quite accustomed to the sound of cannon and she felt that she had always been a citizeness of Paris, and that Paris had always been besieged. She did not speculate about the end of the siege; she lived from day to day.

Occasionally she had a qualm of fear, when the firing grew momentarily louder, or when she heard that battles had been fought in such and such, a suburb. But then she said it was absurd to be afraid when you were with a couple of million people, all in the same plight as yourself. She grew reconciled to everything. She even began to like her tiny bedroom, partly because it was so easy to keep warm (the question of artificial heat was growing acute in Paris), and partly because it ensured her privacy. Down in the flat, whatever was done or said in one room could be more or less heard in all the others, owing to the prevalence of doors.

Her existence, in the first half of November, had become regular with a monotony almost absolute. Only the number of meals served to her boarders varied slightly from day to day. All these repasts, save now and then one in the evening, were carried into the bedrooms by the charwoman. Sophia did not allow herself to be seen much, except in the afternoons. Though Sophia continued to increase her prices, and was now selling her stores at an immense profit, she never approached the prices current outside. She was very indignant against the exploitation of Paris by its shopkeepers, who had vast supplies of provender, and were hoarding for the rise. But the force of their example was too great for her to ignore it entirely; she contented herself with about half their gains. Only to M. Niepce did she charge more than to the others, because he was a shopkeeper. The four men appreciated their paradise. In them developed that agreeable feeling of security which solitary males find only under the roof of a landlady who is at once prompt, honest, and a votary of cleanliness. Sophia hung a slate near the front-door, and on this slate they wrote their requests for meals, for being called, for laundry-work, etc. Sophia never made a mis-

take, and never forgot. The perfection of the domestic machine amazed these men, who had been accustomed to something quite different, and who every day heard harrowing stories of discomfort and swindling from their acquaintances. They even admired Sophia for making them pay, if not too high, still high. They thought it wonderful that she should tell them the price of all things in advance, and even show them how to avoid expense, particularly in the matter of warmth. She arranged rugs for each of them, so that they could sit comfortably in their rooms with nothing but a small charcoal heater for the hands. Quite naturally they came to regard her as the paragon and miracle of women. They endowed her with every fine quality. According to them there had never been such a woman in the history of mankind; there could not have been! She became legendary among their friends: a young and elegant creature, surpassingly beautiful, proud, queenly, unapproachable, scarcely visible, a marvellous manager, a fine cook and artificer of strange English dishes, utterly reliable, utterly exact and with habits of order. . . ! They adored the slight English accent which gave a touch of the exotic to her very correct and freely idiomatic French. In short, Sophia was perfect for them, an impossible woman. Whatever she did was right.

And she went up to her room every night with limbs exhausted, but with head clear enough to balance her accounts and go through her money. She did this in bed with thick gloves on. If often she did not sleep well, it was not because of the distant guns, but because of her preoccupation with the subject of finance. She was making money, and she wanted to make more. She was always inventing ways of economy. She was so anxious to achieve independence that money was always in her iriind. She

began to love gold, to love hoarding it, and to hate paying it away.

One morning her charwoman, who by good fortune was nearly as precise as Sophia herself, failed to appear. When the moment came for serving M. Niepce's breakfast, Sophia hesitated, and then decided to look after the old man personally. She knocked at his door, and went boldly in with the tray and candle. He started at seeing her; she was wearing a blue apron, as the charwoman did, but there could be no mistaking her for the charwoman. Niepcc looked older in bed than when dressed. He had a rather ridiculous, undignified appearance, common among old men before their morning toilette is achieved; and a night-cap did not improve it. His rotund paunch lifted the bed-clothes, upon which, for the sake of extra warmth, he had spread unmajestic garments. Sophia smiled to herself; but the contempt implied by that secret smile was softened by the thought: "Poor old man!" She told him briefly that she supposed the charwoman to be ill. He coughed and moved nervously. His benevolent and simple face beamed on her paternally as she fixed the tray by the bed.

"I really must open the window for one little second," she said, and did so. The chill air of the street came through the closed shutters, and the old man made a noise as of shivering. She pushed back the shutters, and closed the window, and then did the same with the other two windows. It was almost day in the room.

"You will no longer need the candle," she said, and came back to the bedside to extinguish it.

The benign and fatherly old man put his arm round her waist. Fresh from the tonic of pure air, and with the notion of his ridiculousness still in her mind, she was staggered for an instant by this gesture. She had never given a thought to the temperament of the old grocer, the

husband of a young wife. She could not always imaginatively keep in mind the effect of her own radiance, especially under such circumstances. But after an instant her precocious cynicism, which had slept, sprang up. "Naturally! I might have expected it!" she thought with blasting scorn.

"Take away your hand!" she said bitterly to the amiable old fool. She did not stir.

He obeyed, sheepishly.

"Do you wish to remain with me?" she asked, and as he did not immediately answer, she said in a most commanding tone: "Answer, then!"

"Yes," he said feebly.

"Well, behave properly."

She went towards the door.

"I wished only——" he stammered.

"I do not wish to know what you wished," she said.

Afterwards she wondered how much of the incident had been overheard. The other breakfasts she left outside the —respective doors; and in future Niepce's also.

The charwoman never came again. She had caught smallpox and she died of it, thus losing a good situation. Strange to say, Sophia did not replace her; the temptation to save her wages and food was too strong. She could not, however, stand waiting for hours at the door of the official baker and the official butcher, one of a long line of frozen women, for the daily rations of bread and tri-weekly rations of meat. She employed the concierge's boy, at two sous an hour, to do this. Sometimes he would come in with his hands so blue and cold that he could scarcely hold the precious cards which gave the right to the rations and which cost Chirac an hour or two of waiting at the mayoral offices each week. Sophia might have fed her flock without resorting to the official rations, but she would not sacrifice the economy which they represented. She demanded thick

clothes for the concierge's boy, and received boots from Chirac, gloves from Carlier, and a great overcoat from Niepce. The weather increased in severity, and provisions in price. One day she sold to the wife of a chemist who lived on the first floor, for a hundred and ten francs, a ham for which she had paid less than thirty francs. She was conscious of a thrill ofjoy in receiving a beautiful banknote and a gold coin in exchange for a mere ham. By this time her total cash resources had grown to nearly five thousand francs. It was astounding. And the reserves in the cellar were still considerable, and the sack of flour that encumbered the kitchen was still more than half full. The death of the faithful charwoman, when she heard of it, produced but little effect on Sophia, who was so overworked and so completely absorbed in her own affairs that she had no nervous energy to spare for sentimental regrets. The charwoman, by whose side she had regularly passed many hours in the kitchen, so that she knew every crease in her face and fold of her dress, vanished out of Sophia's memory.

Sophia cleaned and arranged two of the bedrooms in the morning, and two in the afternoon. She had stayed in hotels where fifteen bedrooms were in charge of a single chambermaid, and she thought it would be hard if she could not manage four in the intervals of cooking and other work! This she said to herself by way of excuse for not engaging another charwoman. One afternoon she was rubbing the brass knobs of the numerous doors in M. Niepce's room, when the grocer unexpectedly came in.

She glanced at him sharply. There was a self-conscious look in his eye. He had entered the flat noiselessly. She remembered having told him, in response to a question, that she now did his room in the afternoon. Why should he have left his shop? He hung up his hat behind the door,

with the meticulous care of an old man. Then he took off his overcoat and rubbed his hands.

"You do well to wear gloves, madame," he said, "It is dog's weather."

"I do not wear them for the cold," she replied. "I wear them so as not to spoil my hands."

"Ah! truly! Very well! Very well! May I demand some wood? Where shall I find it? I do not wish to derange you."

She refused his help, and brought wood from the kitchen, counting the logs audibly before him.

"Shall I light the fire now?" she asked.

"I will light it," he said.

"Give me a match, please."

As she was arranging the wood and paper, he said: "Madame, will you listen to me?"

"What is it?"

"Do not be angry," he said. "Have I not proved that I am capable of respecting you? I continue in that respect. It is with all that respect that I say to you that I love you, madame. . . . No, remain calm, I implore you!" The fact was that Sophia showed no sign of not remaining calm. "It is true that I have a wife. But what do you wish. . . ? She is far away. I love you madly," he proceeded with dignified respect. "I know I am old; but I am rich. I understand your character. You are a lady, you are decided, direct, sincere, and a woman of business. I have the greatest respect for you. One can talk to you as one could not to another woman. You prefer directness and sincerity. Madame, I will give you two thousand francs a month, and all you require from my shop, if you will be amiable to me. I am very solitary, I need the society of a charming creature who would be sympathetic. Two thousand francs a month. It is money."

He wiped his shiny head with his hand.

Sophia was bending over the fire. She turned her head towards him.

"Is that all?" she said quietly.

"You could count on my discretion," he said in a low voice. "I appreciate your scruples. I would come, very late, to your room on the sixth. One could arrange. . . . You see, I am direct, like you."

She had an impulse to order him tempestuously out of the flat; but it was not a genuine impulse. He was an old fool. Why not treat him as such? To take him seriously would be absurd. Moreover, he was a very remunerative boarder.

"Do not be stupid," she said with cruel tranquillity. "Do not be an old fool."

And the benign but fatuous middle-aged lecher saw the enchanting vision of Sophia, with her natty apron and her amusing gloves, sweep and fade from the room. He left the house, and the expensive fire warmed an empty room.

Sophia was angry with him. He had evidently planned the proposal. If capable of respect, he was evidently also capable of chicane. But she supposed these Frenchmen were all alike: disgusting; and decided that it was useless to worry over a universal fact. They had simply no shame, and she had been very prudent to establish herself far away on the sixth floor. She hoped that none of the other boarders had overheard Niepce's outrageous insolence. She was not sure if Chirac was not writing in his room.

That night there was no sound of cannon in the distance and Sophia for some time was unable to sleep. She woke up with a start, after a doze, and struck a match to look at her watch. It had stopped. She had forgotten to wind it up, which omission indicated that the grocer had perturbed her more than she thought. She could not be sure how long she had slept. The hour might be two o'clock or

it might be six o'clock. Impossible for her to rest! She got up and dressed (in case it should be as late as she feared) and crept down the interminable creaking stairs with a candle. As she descended, the conviction that it was the middle of the night grew upon her, and she stepped more softly. There was no sound save that caused by her footfalls. With her latchkey she cautiously opened the front door of the flat and entered. She could then hear the noisy ticking of the small, cheap clock in the kitchen. At the same moment another door creaked, and Chirac, with hair all tousled, but fully dressed, appeared in the corridor.

"So you have decided to sell yourself to him!" Chirac whispered.

She drew away instinctively, and she could feel herself blushing. She was at a loss. She saw that Chirac was in a furious rage, tremendously moved. He crept towards her, half crouching. She had never seen anything so theatrical as his movement, and the twitching of his face. She felt that she too ought *to* be theatrical, that she ought nobly to scorn his infamous suggestion, his unwarrantable attack. Even supposing that she had decided to sell herself to the old pasha, did that concern him? A dignified silence, an annihilating glance, were all that he deserved. But she was not capable of this heroic behaviour.

"What time is it?" she added weakly.

"Three o'clock," Chirac sneered.

"I forgot to wind up my watch," she said. "And so I came down to see."

"In effect!" He spoke sarcastically, as if saying: "I've waited for you, and here you are."

She said to herself that she owed him nothing, but all the time she felt that he and she were the only young people in that flat, and that she did owe to him the proof that she was

guiltless of the supreme dishonour of youth. She collected her forces and looked at him.

"You should be ashamed," she said. "You will wake the others."

"And M. Niepce—will he need to be wakened?"

"M. Niepce is not here," she said.

Niepce's door was unlatched. She pushed it open, and went into the room, which was empty and bore no sign of having been used.

"Come and satisfy yourself!" she insisted.

Chirac did so. His face fell.

She took her watch from her pocket.

"And now wind my watch, and set it, please."

She saw that he was in anguish. He could not take the watch. Tears came into his eyes. Then he hid his face, and dashed away. She heard a sob-impeded murmur that sounded like, "Forgive me!" and the banging of a door. And in the stillness she heard the regular snoring of M. Carlier. She too cried. Her vision was blurred by a mist, and she stumbled into the kitchen and seized the clock, and carried it with her upstairs, and shivered in the intense cold of the night. She wept gently for a very long time. "What a shame! What a shame!" she said to herself. Yet she did not quite blame Chirac. The frost drove her into bed, but not to sleep. She continued to cry. At dawn her eyes were inflamed with weeping. She was back in the kitchen then. Chirac's door was wide open. He had left the flat. On the slate was written, "I shall not take meals to-day."

§3

Their relations were permanently changed. For several days they did not meet at all; and when at the end of the week Chirac was obliged at last to face Sophia in order to

pay his bill, he had a most grievous expression. It was obvious that he considered himself a criminal without any defence to offer for his crime. He seemed to make no attempt to hide his state of mind. But he said nothing. As for Sophia, she preserved a mien of amiable cheerfulness. She exerted herself to convince him by her attitude that she bore no resentment, that she had determined to forget the incident, that in short she was the forgiving angel of his dreams. She did not, however, succeed entirely in being quite natural. Confronted by his misery, it would have been impossible for her to be quite natural, and at the same time quite cheerful!

A little later the social atmosphere of the flat began to grow querulous, disputatious and perverse. The nerves of everybody were seriously strained. This applied to the whole city. Days of heavy rains followed the sharp frosts, and the town was, as it were, sodden with woe. The gates were closed. And though nine-tenths of the inhabitants never went outside the gates, the definite and absolute closing of them demoralized all hearts. Gas was no longer supplied. Rats, cats, and thorough-bred horses were being eaten and pronounced 'not bad.' The siege had ceased to be a novelty. Friends did not invite one another to a 'siege-dinner' as to a picnic. Sophia, fatigued by regular overwork, became weary of the situation. She was angry with the Prussians for dilatoriness, and with the French for inaction, and she poured out her English spleen on her boarders. The boarders told each other in secret that the *patronne* was growing formidable. Chiefly she bore a grudge against the shopkeepers; and when, upon a rumour of peace, the shop-windows one day suddenly blossomed with prodigious quantities of all edibles, at highest prices, thus proving that the famine was artificially created, Sophia was furious. M. Niepce in particular, though he sold

goods to her at a special discount, suffered indignities. A few days later that benign and fatherly man put himself lamentably in the wrong by attempting to introduce into his room a charming young creature who knew how to be sympathetic. Sophia, by an accident unfortunate for the grocer, caught them in the corridor. She was beside herself, but the only outward symptoms were a white face and a cold steely voice that grated like a rasp on the susceptibilities of the adherents of Aphrodite. At this period Sophia had certainly developed into a termagant—without knowing it!

She would often insist now on talking about the siege, and hearing everything that the men could tell her. Her comments, made without the least regard for the justifiable delicacy of their feelings as Frenchmen, sometimes led to heated exchanges. When all Montmartre and the Quartier Breda was impassioned by the appearance from outside of the Thirty-second battalion, she took the side of the populace, and would not credit the solemn statement of the journalists, proved by documents, that these maltreated soldiers were not cowards in flight. She supported the women who had spit in the faces of the Thirty-second. She actually said that if she had met them, she would have spit too. Really she was convinced of the innocence of the Thirty-second, but something prevented her from admitting it. The dispute ended with high words between herself and Chirac.

The next day Chirac came home at an unusual hour, knocked at the kitchen door, and said:

"I must give notice to leave you."

"Why?" she demanded curtly.

She was kneading flour and water for a potato-cake. Her potato-cakes were the joy of the household.

"My paper has stopped!" said Chirac.

"Oh!" she added thoughtfully, but not looking at him. "That is no reason why you should leave."

"Yes," he said. "This place is beyond my means. I do not need to tell you that in ceasing to appear the paper has omitted to pay its debts. The house owes me a month's salary. So I must leave!"

"No!" said Sophia. "You can pay me when you have money."

He shook his head. "I have no intention of accepting your kindness."

"Haven't you got any money?" she abruptly asked.

"None," said he. "It is the disaster—quite simply!"

"Then you will be forced to get into debt somewhere."

"Yes, but not here! Not to you!"

"Truly, Chirac," she exclaimed, with a cajoling voice, "you are not reasonable."

"Nevertheless it is like that!" he said with decision.

"Eh, well!" she turned on him menacingly. "It will not be like that! You understand me? You will stay. And you will pay me when you can. Otherwise we shall quarrel. Do you imagine I shall tolerate your childishness? Just because you were angry last night——"

"It is not that," he protested. "You ought to know it is not that." (She did.) "It is solely that I cannot permit myself to——"

"Enough!" she cried peremptorily, stopping him. And then in a quieter tone, "And what about Garlier? Is he also in the ditch?"

"Ah! he has money," said Chirac, with sad envy.

"You also, one day," said she. "You stop—in any case until after Christmas, or we quarrel. Is it agreed?" Her accent had softened.

"You are too good!" he yielded. "I cannot quarrel with you. But it pains me to accept——"

"Oh!" she snapped, dropping into the vulgar idiom, "you make me sweat with your stupid pride. Is it that that you call friendship? Go away now. How do you wish that I should succeed with this cake while you station yourself there to distract me?"

§4

But in three days Chirac, with amazing luck, fell into another situation, and on the *Journal des Debdts.* It was the Prussians who had found him a place. The celebrated Payenneville, second greatest *chroniqueur* of his time, had caught a cold while doing his duty as a national guard, and had died of pneumonia. The weather was severe again; soldiers were being frozen to death at Aubervilliers. Payenneville's position was taken by another man, whose post was offered to Chirac. He told Sophia of his good fortune with unconcealed vanity.

"You with your smile!" she said impatiently. "One can refuse you nothing!"

She behaved just as though Chirac had disgusted her. She humbled him. But with his fellow-lodgers his airs of importance as a member of the editorial staff of the *Debdts* were comical in their ingenuousness. On the very same day Carlier gave notice to leave Sophia. He was comparatively rich; but the habits which had enabled him to arrive at independence in the uncertain vocation of a journalist would not allow him, while he was earning nothing, to spend a sou more than was absolutely necessary. He had decided to join forces with a widowed sister, who was accustomed to parsimony as parsimony is understood in France, and who was living on hoarded potatoes and wine.

"There!" said Sophia, "you have lost me a tenant!"

And she insisted, half jocularly and half seriously, that

Carlier was leaving because he could not stand Chirac's infantile conceit. The flat was full of acrimonious words.

On Christmas morning Chirac lay in bed rather late; the newspapers did not appear that day. Paris seemed to be in a sort of stupor. About eleven o'clock he came to the kitchen door.

"I must speak with you," he said. His tone impressed Sophia.

"Enter," said she.

He went in, and closed the door like a conspirator. "We must have a little fete," he said. "You and I."

"Fete!" she repeated. "What an idea! How can I leave?"

If the idea had not appealed to the secrecies of her heart, stirring desires and souvenirs upon which the dust of time lay thick, she would not have begun by suggesting difficulties; she would have begun by a flat refusal.

"That is nothing," he said vigorously. "It is Christmas, and I must have a chat with you. We cannot chat here. I have not had a true little chat with you since you were ill. You will come with me to a restaurant for lunch,"

She laughed. "And the lunch of my lodgers?"

"You will serve it a little earlier. We will go out immediately afterwards, and we will return in time for you to prepare dinner. It is quite simple."

She shook her head. "You are mad," she said crossly.

"It is necessary that I should offer you something," he went on scowling. "You comprehend me? I wish you to lunch with me to-day. I demand it, and you are not going to refuse me."

He was very close to her in the little kitchen, and he spoke fiercely, bullyingly, exactly as she had spoken to him when insisting that he should live on credit with her for a while.

"You are very rude," she parried.

"If I am rude, it is all the same to me," he held out uncompromisingly. "You will lunch with me; I hold to it."

"How can I be dressed?" she protested.

"That does not concern me. Arrange that as you can."

It was the most curious invitation to a Christmas dinner imaginable.

At a quarter past twelve they issued forth side by side, heavily clad, into the mournful streets. The sky, slate-coloured, presaged snow. The air was bitterly cold, and yet damp. There were no fiacres in the little three-cornered place which forms the mouth of the Rue Clausel. In the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, a single empty omnibus was toiling up the steep glassy slope, the horses slipping and recovering themselves in response to the whip-cracking, which sounded in the streets as in an empty vault. Higher up, in the Rue Fontaine, one of the few shops that were open displayed this announcement: *"A large selection of cheeses for New Tear's gifts"* They laughed.

"Last year at this moment," said Chirac, "I was thinking of only one thing—the masked ball at the opera. I could not sleep after it. This year even the churches are not open. And you?"

She put her lips together. "Do not ask me," she said.

They proceeded in silence.

"We are triste, we others," he said. "But the Prussians, in their trenches, they cannot be so gay, either! Their families and their Christmas trees must be lacking to them. Let us laugh!"

The Place Blanche and the Boulevard de Clichy were no more lively than the lesser streets and squares. There was no life anywhere, scarcely a sound; not even the sound of cannon. Nobody knew anything; Christmas had put the city into a lugubrious trance of hopelessness. Chirac took

Sophia's arm across the Place Blanche, and a few yards up the Rue Lepic he stopped at a small restaurant, famous among the initiated, and known as "The Little Louis." They entered, descending by two steps into a confined and sombrely picturesque interior.

Sophia saw that they were expected. Chirac must have paid a previous visit to the restaurant that morning. Several disordered tables showed that people had already lunched, and left; but in the corner was a table for two, freshly laid in the best manner of such restaurants; that is to say, with a red-and-white checked cloth, and two other red-and-white cloths, almost as large as the table-cloth, folded as serviettes and arranged flat on two thick plates between solid steel cutlery; a salt-cellar, out of which one ground rock-salt by turning a handle, a pepper-castor, two knife-rests, and two common tumblers. The phenomena which differentiated this table from the ordinary table were a champagne bottle and a couple of champagne glasses. Champagne was one of the few items which had not increased in price during the siege.

The landlord and his wife were eating in another corner, a fat, slatternly pair, whom no privations of a siege could have emaciated. The landlord rose. He was dressed as a chef, all in white, with the sacred cap; but a soiled white. Everything in the place was untidy, unkempt and more or less unclean, except just the table upon which champagne was waiting. And yet the restaurant was agreeable, reassuring. The landlord greeted his customers as honest friends. His greasy face was honest, and so was the pale, weary, humorous face of his wife. Chirac saluted her.

"You see," said she, across from the other corner, indicating a bone on her plate. "This is Diane!"

"Ah! the poor animal!" exclaimed Chirac, sympathetically

"What would you?" said the landlady. "It cost too dear to feed her. And she was so *mignonne*! One could not watch her grow thin!"

"I was saying to my wife," the landlord put in, "how she would have enjoyed that bone—Diane!" He roared with laughter.

Sophia and the landlady exchanged a curious sad smile at this pleasantry, which had been re-discovered by the landlord for perhaps the thousandth time during the siege, but which he evidently regarded as quite new and original.

"Eh, well!" he continued confidentially to Chirac. "I have found for you something very good-half a duck." And in a still lower tone: "And it will not cost you too dear."

No attempt to realize more than a modest profit was ever made in that restaurant. It possessed a regular clientele who knew the value of the little money they had, and who knew also how to appreciate sincere and accomplished cookery. The landlord was the chef, and he was always referred to as the chef, even by his wife.

"How did you get that?" Chirac asked.

"Ah!" said the landlord, mysteriously. "I have one of my friends, who comes from Villeneuve St. Georges—refugee, you know. In fine. ..." A wave of the fat hands, suggesting that Chirac should not inquire too closely.

"In effect!" Chirac commented. "But it is very chic, that!"

"I believe you that it is *chid"* said the landlady, sturdily.

"It is charming," Sophia murmured politely.

"And then a quite little salad!" said the landlord.

"But that—that is still more striking!" said Chirac.

The landlord winked. The fact was that the commerce which resulted in fresh green vegetables in the heart of a beleaguered town was notorious.

"And then also a quite little cheese!" said Sophia, slightly imitating the tone of the landlord, as she drew from the inwardness of her cloak a small round parcel. It contained a Brie cheese, in fairly good condition. It was worth at least fifty francs, and it had cost Sophia less than two francs. The landlady joined the landlord in inspecting this wondrous jewel. Sophia seized a knife and cut a slice for the landlady's table.

"Madame is too good!" said the landlady, confused by this noble generosity, and bearing the gift off to her table as a fox-terrier will hurriedly seek solitude with a sumptuous morsel. The landlord beamed. Chirac was enchanted. In the intimate and unaffected cosiness of that interior the vast, stupefied melancholy of the city seemed to be forgotten, to have lost its sway.

Then the landlord brought a hot brick for the feet of madame. It was more an acknowledgment of the slice of cheese than a necessity, for the restaurant was very warm; the tiny kitchen opened directly into it, and the door between the two was open; there was no ventilation whatever.

"It is a friend of mine," said the'landlord, proudly, in the way of gossip, as he served an undescribed soup, "a butcher in the Faubourg St. Honore, who has bought the three elephants of the Jardin des Plantes for twenty-seven thousand francs."

Eyebrows were lifted. He uncorked the champagne.

As she drank the first mouthful (she had long lost her youthful aversion for wine), Sophia had a glimpse of herself in a tilted mirror hung rather high on the opposite wall. It was several months since she had attired herself with ceremoniousness. The sudden unexpected vision of elegance and pallid beauty pleased her. And the instant effect of the champagne was to renew in her mind a for-

gotten conception of the goodness of life and of the joys which she had so long missed.

§5

At half-past two they were alone in the little salon of the restaurant, and vaguely in their dreamy and feverish minds that were too preoccupied to control with precision their warm, relaxed bodies, there floated the illusion that the restaurant belonged to them and that in it they were at home. It was no longer a restaurant, but a retreat and shelter from hard life. The chef and his wife were dozing in an inner room. The champagne was drunk; the adorable cheese was eaten; and they were sipping Marc de Bourgogne. They sat at right angles to one another, close to one another, with brains aswing; full of good nature and quick sympathy; their flesh content and yet expectant. In a pause of the conversation (which, entirely banal and fragmentary, had seemed to reach the acme of agreeableness), Chirac put his hand on the hand of Sophia as it rested limp on the littered table. Accidentally she caught his eye; she had not meant to do so. They both became self-conscious. His thin, bearded face had more than ever that wistfulness which always softened towards him the uncompromisingness of her character. He had the look of a child. For her, Gerald had sometimes shown the same look. But indeed she was now one of those women for whom all men, and especially all men in a tender mood, are invested with a certain incurable quality of childishness. She had not withdrawn her hand at once, and so she could not withdraw it at all.

He gazed at her with timid audacity. Her eyes were liquid.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"I was asking myself what I should have done if you had refused to come."

"And what *should* you have done?"

"Assuredly something terribly inconvenient," he replied, with the large importance of a man who is in the domain of pure supposition. He leaned towards her. "My very dear friend," he said in a different voice, getting bolder.

It was infinitely sweet to her, voluptuously sweet, this basking in the heat of temptation. It certainly did seem to her, then, the one real pleasure in the world. Her body might have been saying to his: "See how ready I am!" Her body might have been saying to his: "Look into my mind. For you I have no modesty. Look and see all that is there." The veil of convention seemed to have been rent. Their attitude to each other was almost that of lover and mistress, between whom a single glance may be charged with the secrets of the past and promises for the future. Morally she was his mistress in that moment.

He released her hand and put his arm round her waist.

"I love thee," he whispered with great emotion.

Her face changed and hardened. "You must not do that," she said, coldly, unkindly, harshly. She scowled. She would not abate one crease in her forehead to the appeal of his surprised glance. Yet she did not want to repulse him. The instinct which repulsed him was not within her control. Just as a shy man will obstinately refuse an invitation which he is hungering to accept, so, though not from shyness, she was compelled to repulse Chirac. Perhaps if her desires had not been laid to sleep by excessive physical industry and nervous strain, the sequel might have been different.

Chirac, like most men who have once found a woman weak, imagined that he understood women profoundly. He thought of women as the Occidental thinks of the

Chinese, as a race apart, mysterious but capable of being infallibly comprehended by the application of a few leading principles of psychology. Moreover he was in earnest; he was hard driven, and he was honest. He continued, respectfully obedient in withdrawing his arm:

"Very dear friend," he urged with undaunted confidence, "you must know that I love you."

She shook her head impatiently, all the time wondering what it was that prevented her from slipping into his arms. She knew that she was treating him badly by this brusque change of front; but she could not help it. Then she began to feel sorry for him.

"We have been very good friends," he said. "I have always admired you enormously. I did not think that I should dare to love you until that day when I overheard that old villain Niepce make his advances. Then, when I perceived my acute jealousy, I knew that I was loving you. Ever since, I have thought only of you. I swear to you that if you will not belong to me, it is already finished for me! Altogether! Never have I seen a woman like you! So strong, so proud, so kind, and so beautiful! You are astonishing, yes, astonishing! No other woman could have drawn herself out of an impossible situation as you have done, since the disappearance of your husband. For me, you are a woman unique. I am very sincere. Besides, you know it. … Dear friend!"

She shook her head passionately.

She did not love him. But she was moved. And she wanted to love him. She wanted to yield to him, only liking him, and to love afterwards. But this obstinate instinct held her back.

"I do not say, now," Chirac went on. "Let me hope."

The Latin theatricality of his gestures and his tone made her sorrowful for him.

"My poor Chirac!" she plaintively murmured, and began to put on her gloves.

"I shall hope!" he persisted.

She pursed her lips. He seized her violently by the waist. She drew her face away from his, firmly. She was not hard, not angry now. Disconcerted by her compassion, he loosed her.

"My poor Chirac," she said, "I ought not to have come. I must go. It is perfectly useless. Believe me."

"No, no!" he whispered fiercely.

She stood up and the abrupt movement pushed the table gratingly across the floor. The throbbing spell of the flesh was snapped like a stretched string, and the scene over. The landlord, roused from his doze, stumbled in. Chirac had nothing but the bill as a reward for his pains. He was baffled.

They left the restaurant, silently, with a foolish air.

Dusk was falling on the mournful streets, and the lamplighters were lighting the miserable oil lamps that had replaced gas. They two, and the lamplighters, and an omnibus were alone in the streets. The gloom was awful; it was desolating. The universal silence seemed to be the silence of despair. Steeped in woe, Sophia thought wearily upon the hopeless problem of existence. For it seemed to her that she and Chirac had created this woe out of nothing, and yet it was an incurable woe!

CHAPTER VII: SUCCESS

§ 1

SOPHIA lay awake one night in the room lately quitted by Carlier. That silent negation of individuality had come and gone, and left scarcely any record of himself either in his room or in the memories of those who had surrounded his existence in the house. Sophia had decided to descend from the sixth floor, partly because the temptation of a large room, after months in a cubicle, was rather strong; but more because of late she had been obliged to barricade the door of the cubicle with a chest of drawers, owing to the propensities of a new tenant of the sixth floor. It was useless to complain to the concierge; the sole effective argument was the chest of drawers, and even that was frailer than Sophia could have wished. Hence, finally, her retreat.

She heard the front-door of the flat open; then it was shut with nervous violence. The resonance of its closing would have certainly wakened less accomplished sleepers than M. Niepce and his friend, whose snores continued with undisturbed regularity. After a pause of shuffling, a match was struck, and feet crept across the corridor with the most exaggerated precautions against noise. There followed the unintentional bang of another door. It was decidedly the entry of a man without the slightest natural aptitude for furtive irruptions. The clock in M. Niepce's room, which the grocer had persuaded to exact time-keeping, chimed three with its delicate *ting.*

For several days past Chirac had been mysteriously engaged very late at the bureaux of the *Debdts.* No one knew the nature of his employment; he said nothing, except to inform Sophia that he would continue to come

home about three o'clock until further notice. She had insisted on leaving in his room the materials and apparatus for a light meal. Naturally he had protested, with the irrational obstinacy of a physically weak man who sticks to it that he can defy the laws of nature. But he had protested in vain.

His general conduct since Christmas Day had frightened Sophia, in spite of her tendency to stifle facile alarms at their birth. He had eaten scarcely anything at all, and he went about with the face of a man dying of a broken heart. The change in him was indeed tragic. And instead of improving, he grew worse. "Have I done this?" Sophia asked herself. "It is impossible that I should have done this! It is absurd and ridiculous that he should behave so!" Her thoughts were employed alternately in sympathizing with him and in despising him, in blaming herself and in blaming him. When they spoke, they spoke awkwardly, as though one or both of them had committed a shameful crime, which could not even be mentioned. The atmosphere of the flat was tainted by the horror. And Sophia could not offer him a bowl of soup without wondering how he would look at her or avoid looking, and without carefully arranging in advance her own gestures and speech. Existence was a nightmare of self-consciousness.

"At last they have unmasked their batteries!" he had exclaimed with painful gaiety two days after Christmas, when the besiegers had recommenced their cannonade. He tried to imitate the strange, general joy of the city, which had been roused from apathy by the recurrence of a familiar noise; but the effort was a deplorable failure. And Sophia condemned not merely the failure of Chirac's imitation, but the thing imitated. "Childish!" she thought. Yet, despise the feebleness of Chirac's behaviour as she might, she was deeply impressed, genuinely astonished, by

the gravity and persistence of the symptoms. "He must have been getting himself into a state about me for a long time," she thought. "Surely he could not have gone mad like this all in a day or two! But I never noticed anything. No; honestly I never noticed anything!" And just as her behaviour in the restaurant had shaken Chirac's confidence in his knowledge of the other sex, so now the singular behaviour of Chirac shook hers. She was taken aback. She was frightened, though she pretended not to be frightened.

She had lived over and over again the scene in the restaurant. She asked herself over and over again if really she had not beforehand expected him to make love to her in the restaurant. She could not decide exactly when she had begun to expect a declaration; but probably a long time before the meal was finished. She had foreseen it, and might have stopped it. But she had not chosen to stop it. Curiosity concerning not merely him, but also herself, had tempted her tacitly to encourage him. She asked herself over and over again why she had repulsed him. It struck her as curious that she had repulsed him.. Was it because she was a married woman? Was it because she had moral scruples? Was it at bottom because she did not care for him? Was it because she could not care for anybody? Was it because his fervid manner of love-making offended her English phlegm? And did she feel pleased or displeased by his forbearance in not renewing the assault? She could not answer. She did not know.

But all the time she knew that she wanted love. Only, she conceived a different kind of love: placid, regular, somewhat stern, somewhat above the plane of whims, moods, caresses, and all mere fleshly contacts. Not that she considered that she despised these things (though she did)! What she wanted was a love that was too proud, too independent, to exhibit frankly either its joy or its pain.

She hated a display of sentiment. And even in the most intimate abandonments she would have made reserves, and would have expected reserves, trusting to a lover's powers of divination, and to her own! The foundation of her character was a haughty moral independence, and this quality was what she most admired in others.

Chirac's inability to draw from his own pride strength to sustain himself against the blow of her refusal gradually killed in her the sexual desire which he had aroused, and which during a few days flickered up under the stimulus of fancy and of regret. Sophia saw with increasing clearness that her unreasoning instinct had been right in saying him nay. And when, in spite of this, regrets still visited her, she would comfort herself in thinking: "I cannot be bothered with all that sort of thing. It is not worth while. What does it lead to? Is not life complicated enough without that? No, no! I will stay as I am. At any rate I know what I am in for, as things are!" And she would reflect upon her hopeful financial situation, and the approaching prospect of a constantly syfficient income. And a little thrill of impatience against the interminable and gigantic foolishness of the siege would take her.

But her self-consciousness in presence of Chirac did not abate.

As she lay in bed she awaited accustomed sounds which should have connoted Chirac's definite retirement for the night. Her ear, however, caught no sound whatever from his room. Then she imagined that there was a smell of burning in the flat. She sat up, and sniffed anxiously, of a sudden wideawake and apprehensive. And then she was sure that the smell of burning was not in her imagination. The bedroom was in perfect darkness. Feverishly she searched with her right hand for the matches on the night-table, and knocked candlestick and matches to the floor.

She seized her dressing-gown, which was spread over the bed, and put it on, aiming for the door. Her feet were bare. She discovered the door. In the passage she could discern nothing at first, and then she made out a thin line of light, which indicated the bottom of Chirac's door. The smell of burning was strong and unmistakable. She went towards the faint light, fumbled for the door-handle with her palm, and opened. It did not occur to her to call out and ask what was the matter.

The house was not on fire; but it might have been. She had left on the table at the foot of Chirac's bed a small cooking-lamp, and a saucepan of bouillon. All that Chirac had to do was to ignite the lamp and put the saucepan on it. He had ignited the lamp, having previously raised the double wicks, and had then dropped into the chair by the table just as he was, and sunk forward and gone to sleep with his head lying sideways on the table. He had not put the saucepan on the lamp; he had not lowered the wicks, and the flames, capped with thick black smoke, were waving slowly to and fro within a few Cinches of his loose hair. His hat had rolled along the floor; he was wearing his great overcoat and one woollen glove; the other glove had lodged on his slanting knee. A candle was also burning.

Sophia hastened forward, as it were surreptitiously, and with a forward-reaching movement turned down the wicks of the lamp; black specks were falling on the table; happily the saucepan was covered, or the bouillon would have been ruined.

Chirac made a heart-rending spectacle, and Sophia was aware of deep and painful emotion in seeing him thus. He must have been utterly exhausted and broken by loss of sleep. He was a man incapable of regular hours, incapable of treating his body with decency. Though going to bed at three o'clock, he had continued to rise at his usual hour.

He looked like one dead; but more sad, more wistful. Outside in the street a fog reigned, and his thin draggled beard was jewelled with the moisture of it. His attitude had the unconsidered and violent prostration of an overspent dog. The beaten animal in him was expressed in every detail of that posture. It showed even in his white, drawn eyelids, and in the falling of a ringer. All his face was very sad. It appealed for mercy as the undefended face of sleep always appeals; it was so helpless, so exposed, so simple. It recalled Sophia to a sense of the inner mysteries of life, reminding her somehow that humanity walks ever on a thin crust over terrific abysses. She did not physically shudder; but her soul shuddered.

She mechanically placed the saucepan on the lamp, and the noise awakened Chirac. He groaned. At first he did not perceive her. When he saw that someone was looking down at him, he did not immediately realize who this someone was. He rubbed his eyes with his fists, exactly like a baby, and sat up, and the chair cracked.

"What then?" -he demanded. "Oh, madame, I ask pardon. What?"

"You have nearly destroyed the house," she said. "I smelt fire, and I came in. I was just in time. There is no danger now. But please be careful." She made as if to move towards the door.

"But what did I do?" he asked, his eyelids wavering.

She explained.

He rose from his chair unsteadily. She told him to sit down again, and he obeyed as though in a dream.

"I can go now," she said.

"Wait one moment," he murmured. "I ask pardon. I should not know how to thank you. You are truly too good. Will you wait one moment?"

His tone was one of supplication. He gazed at her, a little

dazzled by the light and by her. The lamp and the candle illuminated the lower part of her face, theatrically, and showed the texture of her blue flannel peignoir; the pattern of a part of the lace collar was silhouetted in shadow on her cheek. Her face was flushed, and her hair hung down unconfmed. Evidently he could not recover from his excusable astonishment at the apparition of such a figure in his room.

"What is it—now?" she said. The faint, quizzical emphasis which she put on the 'now' indicated the essential of her thought. The sight of him touched her and filled her with a womanly sympathy. But that sympathy was only the envelope of her disdain of him. She could not admire weakness. She could but pity it with a pity in which scorn was mingled. Her instinct was to treat him as a child. He had failed in human dignity. And it seemed to her as if she had not previously been quite certain whether she could not love him, but that now she was quite certain. She was close to him. She saw the wounds of a soul that could not hide its wounds, and she resented the sight. She was hard. She would not make allowances. And she revelled in her hardness. Contempt-a good-natured, kindly, forgiving contempt—that was the kernel of the sympathy which exteriorly warmed her! Contempt for the lack of self-control which had resulted in this swift degeneration of a man into a tortured victim! Contempt for the lack of perspective which magnified a mere mushroom passion till it filled the whole field of life! Contempt for this feminine slavery to sentiment! She felt that she might have been able to give herself to Chirac as one gives a toy to an infant. But of loving him. . . ! No! She was conscious of an immeasurable superiority to him, for she was conscious of the freedom of a strong mind,

"I wanted to tell you," said he, "I am going away."

"Where?" she asked.

"Out of Paris."

"Out of Paris? How?"

"By balloon! My journal. . . ! It is an affair of great importance. You understand. I offered myself. What would you?"

"It is dangerous," she observed, waiting to see if he would put on the silly air of one who does not understand fear.

"Oh!" the poor fellow muttered with a fatuous intonation and snapping of the fingers. "That is all the same to me. Yes, it is dangerous. Yes, it is dangerous!" he repeated. "But what would you. . . ? For me. . . !"

She wished that she had not mentioned danger. It hurt her to watch him incurring her ironic disdain.

"It will be the night after to-morrow," he said. "In the courtyard of the Gare du Nord. I want you to come and see me go. I particularly want you to come and see me go. I have asked Carlier to escort you."

He might have been saying, "I am offering myself to martyrdom, and you must assist at the spectacle."

She despised him yet more.

"Oh! Be tranquil," he said. "I shall not worry you. Never shall I speak to you again of my love. I know you. I know it would be useless. But I hope you will come and wish me bon voyage."

"Of course, if you really wish it," she replied with cheerful coolness.

He seized her hand and kissed it.

Once it had pleased her when he kissed her hand. But now she did not like it. It seemed hysterical and foolish to her. She felt her feet to be stone-cold on the floor.

"I'll leave you now," she said. "Please eat your soup."

She escaped, hoping he would not espy her feet.

§ 2

The courtyard of the Nord Railway Station was lighted by oil-lamps taken from locomotives; their silvered reflectors threw dazzling rays from all sides on the under portion of the immense yellow mass of the balloon; the upper portion was swaying to and fro with gigantic ungainliness in the strong breeze. It was only a small balloon, as balloons are measured, but it seemed monstrous as it wavered over the human forms that were agitating themselves beneath it. The cordage was silhouetted against the yellow taffetas as high up as the widest diameter of the balloon, but above that all was vague, and even spectators standing at a distance could not clearly separate the summit of the great sphere from the darkly moving sky. The car, held by ropes fastened to stakes, rose now and then a few inches uneasily from the ground. The sombre and severe architecture of the station-buildings enclosed the balloon on every hand; it had only one way of escape. Over the roofs of that architecture, which shut out the .sounds of the city, came the irregular booming of the bombardment. Shells were falling in the southern quarters of Paris, doing perhaps not a great deal of damage, but still plunging occasionally into the midst of some domestic interior and making a sad mess of it. The Parisians were convinced that the shells were aimed maliciously at hospitals and museums; and when a child happened to be blown to pieces their unspoken comments upon the Prussian savagery were bitter. Their faces said: "Those barbarians cannot even spare our children!" They amused themselves by creating a market in shells, paying more for a live shell than a dead one, and modifying the tariff according to the supply. And as the cattle-market was empty, and the vegetable-market was empty, and beasts no longer pastured on the grass of the

parks, and the twenty-five million rats of the metropolis were too numerous to furnish interest to spectators, and the Bourse was practically deserted, the traffic in shells sustained the starving mercantile instinct during a very dull period. But the effect on the nerves was deleterious. The nerves of everybody were like nothing but a raw wound. Violent anger would spring up magically out of laughter, and blows out of caresses. This indirect consequence of the bombardment was particularly noticeable in the group of men under the balloon. Each behaved as if he were controlling his temper in the most difficult circumstances. Constantly they all gazed upwards into the sky, though nothing could possibly be distinguished there save the blurred edge of a flying cloud. But the booming came from that sky; the shells that were dropping on Montrouge came out of that sky; and the balloon was going up into it; the balloon was ascending into its mysteries, to brave its dangers, to sweep over the encircling ring of fire and savages.

Sophia stood apart with Carlier. Carlier had indicated a particular spot, under the shelter of the colonnade, where he said it was imperative that they should post themselves. Having guided Sophia to this spot, and impressed upon her that they were not to move, he seemed to consider that the activity of his *role* was finished, and spoke no word. With the very high silk hat which he always wore, and a thin old-fashioned overcoat whose collar was turned up, he made a rather grotesque figure. Fortunately the night was not very cold, or he might have passively frozen to death on the edge of that feverish group. Sophia soon ignored him. She watched the balloon. An aristocratic old man leaned against the car, watch in hand; at intervals he scowled, or stamped his foot. An old sailor, tranquilly smoking a pipe walked round and round the balloon, staring at it; once he climbed up into the rigging, and once he jumped into the

car and angrily threw out of it a bag, which someone had placed in it. But for the most part he was calm. Other persons of authority hurried about, talking and gesticulating; and a number of workmen waited idly for orders.

"Where is Chirac?" suddenly cried the old man with the watch.

Several voices deferentially answered, and a man ran away into the gloom on an errand.

Then Chirac appeared, nervous, self-conscious, restless. He was enveloped in a fur coat that Sophia had never seen before, and he carried dangling in his hand a cage containing six pigeons whose whiteness stirred uneasily within it. The sailor took the cage from him and all the persons of authority gathered round to inspect the wonderful birds upon which, apparently, momentous affairs depended. When the group separated, the sailor was to be seen bending over the edge of the car to deposit the cage safely. He then got into the car, still smoking his pipe, and perched himself negligently on the wicker-work. The man with the watch was conversing with Chirac; Chirac nodded his head frequently in acquiescence, and seemed to be saying all the time: "Yes, sir! Perfectly sir! I understand, sir! Yes, sir!"

Suddenly Chirac turned to the car and put a question to the sailor, who shook his head. Whereupon Chirac gave a gesture of submissive despair to the man with the watch. And in an instant the whole throng was in a ferment.

"The victuals!" cried the man with the watch. "The victuals, name of God! Must one be indeed an idiot to forget the victuals! Name of God—of God!"

Sophia smiled at the agitation, and at the inefficient management which had never thought of food. For it appeared that the food had not merely been forgotten; it was a question which had not even been considered. She

could not help despising all that crowd of self-important and fussy males to whom the idea had not occurred that even balloonists must eat. And she wondered whether everything was done like that. After a delay that seemed very long, the problem of victuals was solved, chiefly, as far as Sophia could judge, by means of cakes of chocolate and bottles of wine.

"It is enough! It is enough!" Chirac shouted passionately several times to a knot of men who began to argue with him.

Then he gazed round furtively, and with an inflation of the chest and a patting of his fur coat he came directly towards Sophia. Evidently Sophia's position had been prearranged between him and Carlier. They could forget food, but they could think of Sophia's position!

All eyes followed him. Those eyes could not, in the gloom, distinguish Sophia's beauty, but they could see that she was young and slim and elegant, and of foreign carriage. That was enough. The very air seemed to vibrate with the intense curiosity of those eyes. And immediately Chirac grew into the hero of some brilliant and romantic adventure. Immediately he was envied and admired by every man of authority present. What was she? Who was she? Was it a serious passion or simply a caprice? Had she flung herself at him? It was undeniable that lovely creatures did sometimes fling themselves at lucky mediocrities. Was she a married woman? An artiste? A girl? Such queries thumped beneath overcoats, while the correctness of a ceremonious demeanour was strictly observed.

Chirac uncovered, and kissed her hand. The wind disarranged his hair. She saw that his face was very pale and anxious beneath the swagger of a sincere desire to be brave.

"Well, it is the moment!" he said.

"Did you all forget the food?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "What will you? One cannot think of everything."

"I hope you will have a safe voyage," she said.

She had already taken leave of him once, in the house, and heard all about the balloon and the sailor-aeronaut and the preparations; and now she had nothing to say, nothing whatever.

He shrugged his shoulders again. "I hope so!" He murmured, but in a tone to convey that he had no such hope.

"The wind isn't too strong?" she suggested.

He shrugged his shoulders again. "What would you?"

"Is it in the direction you want?"

"Yes, nearly," he admitted unwillingly. Then rousing himself: "Eh, well, madame. You have been extremely amiable to come. I held to it very much—that you should come. It is because of you I quit Paris."

She resented the speech by a frown.

"Ah!" he implored* in a whisper. "Do not do that. Smile on me. After all, it is not my fault. Remember that this may be the last time I see you, the last time I regard your eyes."

She smiled. She was convinced of the genuineness of the emotion which expressed itself in all this flamboyant behaviour. And she had to make excuses to herself on behalf of Chirac. She smiled to give him pleasure. The hard commonsense in her might sneer, but indubitably she was the centre of a romantic episode. The balloon darkly swinging there! The men waiting! The secrecy of the mission! And Chirac, bareheaded in the wind that was to whisk him away, telling her in fatalistic accents that her image had devastated his life, while envious aspirants watched their colloquy! Yes, it was romantic. And she was beautiful! Her beauty was an active reality that went about the world playing tricks in spite of herself. The

thoughts that passed through her mind were the large, splendid thoughts of romance. And it was Chirac who had aroused them! A real drama existed, then, triumphing over the accidental absurdities and pettinesses of the situation. Her final words to Chirac were tender and encouraging.

He hurried back to the balloon, resuming his cap. He was received with the respect due to one who comes fresh from conquest. He was sacred.

Sophia rejoined Carlier, who had withdrawn, and began to talk to him with a self-conscious garrulity. She spoke without reason and scarcely noticed what she was saying. Already Chirac was snatched out of her life, as other beings, so many of them, had been snatched. She thought of their first meetings, and of the sympathy which had always united them. He had lost his simplicity, now, in the self-created crisis of his fate, and had sunk in her esteem. And she was determined to like him all the more because he had sunk in her esteem. She wondered whether he really had undertaken this adventure from sentimental disappointment. She wondered whether, if she had not forgotten to wind her watch one night, they would still have been living quietly under the same roof in the Rue Breda.

The sailor climbed definitely into the car; he had covered himself with a large cloak. Chirac had got one leg over the side of the car, and eight men were standing by the ropes, when a horse's hoofs clattered through the guarded entrance to the courtyard, amid an uproar of sudden excitement. The shiny chest of the horse was flecked with the classic foam.

"A telegram from the Governor of Paris!"

As the orderly, checking his mount, approached the group, even the.old man with the watch raised his hat. The orderly responded, bent down to make an inquiry, which Chirac answered, and then, with another exchange of

salutes, the official telegram was handed over to Chirac, and the horse backed away from the crowd. It was quite thrilling. Carlier was thrilled.

"He is never too prompt, the Governor. It is a quality!" said Carlier, with irony.

Chirac entered the car. And then the old man with the watch drew a black bag from the shadow behind him and entrusted it to Chirac, who accepted it with a profound deference and hid it. The sailor began to issue commands. The men at the ropes were bending down now. Suddenly the balloon rose about a foot and trembled. The sailor continued to shout. All the persons of authority gazed motionless at the balloon. The moment of suspense was eternal.

"Let go all!" cried the sailor, standing up, and clinging to the cordage. Chirac was seated in the car, a mass of dark fur with a small patch of white in it. The men at the ropes were a knot of struggling confused figures.

One side of the car tilted up, and the sailor was nearly pitched out. Three men at the other side had failed to free the ropes.

"Let go, corpses!" the sailor yelled at them.

The balloon jumped, as if it were drawn by some terrific impulse from the skies.

"Adieu!" called Chirac, pulling his cap off and waving it. "Adieu!"

"Bon voyage! Bon voyage!" the little crowd cheered. And then, *"Vive la France!"* Throats tightened, including Sophia's.

But the top of the balloon had leaned over, destroying its pear-shape, and the whole mass swerved violently towards the wall of the station, the car swinging under it like a toy, and an anchor under the car. There was a cry of alarm. Then the great ball leaped again, and swept over the high

glass roof, escaping by inches the spouting. The cheers expired instantly. . . . The balloon was gone. It was spirited away as if by some furious and mighty power that had grown impatient in waiting for it. There remained for a few seconds on the collective retina of the spectators a vision of the inclined car swinging near the roof like the tail of a kite. And then nothing! Blankness! Blackness! Already the balloon was lost to sight in the vast stormy ocean of the night, a plaything of the winds. The spectators became once more aware of the dull booming of the cannonade. The balloon was already perhaps flying unseen amid the wrack over those guns.

Sophia involuntarily caught her breath. A chill sense of loneliness, of purposelessness, numbed her being.

Nobody ever saw Chirac or the old sailor again. The sea must have swallowed them. Of the sixty-five balloons that left Paris during the siege, two were not heard of. This was the first of the two. Chirac had, at any rate, not magnified the peril, though his intention was undoubtedly to magnify it.

§ 3

This was the end of Sophia's romantic adventures in France, Soon afterwards the Germans entered Paris, by mutual agreement, and made a point of seeing the Louvre, and departed, amid the silence of a city. For Sophia the conclusion of the siege meant chiefly that prices went down. Long before supplies from outside could reach Paris, the shop-windows were suddenly full of goods which had arrived from the shopkeepers alone knew where. Sophia, with the stock in her cellar, could have held out for several weeks more, and it annoyed her that she had not sold more of her good things while good things were worth gold. The signing

of a treaty at Versailles reduced the value of Sophia's two remaining hams from about five pounds apiece to the usual price of hams. However, at the end of January she found herself in possession of a capital of about eight thousand francs, all the furniture of the flat, and a reputation. She had earned it all. Nothing could destroy the structure of her beauty, but she looked worn and appreciably older. She wondered often when Chirac would return. She might have written to Carlier or to the paper; but she did not. It was Niepce who discovered in a newspaper that Chirac's balloon had miscarried. At the moment the news did not affect her at all; but after several days she began to feel her loss in a dull sort of way; and she felt it more and more, though never acutely. She was perfectly convinced that Chirac could never have attracted her powerfully. She continued to dream, at rare intervals, of the kind of passion that would have satisfied her, glowing but banked down like a fire in some fine chamber of a rich but careful household.

She was speculating upon what her future would be, and whether by inertia she was doomed to stay for ever in the Rue Breda, when the Commune caught her. She was more vexed than frightened by the Commune; vexed that a city so in need of repose and industry should indulge in such antics. For many people the Commune was a worse experience than the siege; but not for Sophia. She was a woman and a foreigner. Niepce was infinitely more disturbed than Sophia; he went in fear of his life. Sophia would go out to market and take her chances. It is true that during one period the whole population of the house went to live in the cellars, and orders to the butcher and other tradesmen were given over the party-wall into the adjoining courtyard, which communicated with an alley. A strange existence, and possibly perilous! But the women who passed through it and had also passed through the siege,

were not very much intimidated by it, unless they happened to have husbands or lovers who were active politicians.

Sophia did not cease, during the greater part of the year 1871, to make a living and to save money. She watched every sou, and she developed a tendency to demand from her tenants all that they could pay. She excused this to herself by ostentatiously declaring every detail of her prices in advance. It came to the same thing in the end, with this advantage, that the bills did not lead to unpleasantness. Her difficulties commenced when Paris at last definitely resumed its normal aspect and life, when all the women and children came back to those city termini which they had left in such huddled, hysterical throngs, when flats were re-opened that had long been shut, and men who for a whole year had had the disadvantages and the advantages of being without wife and family, anchored themselves once more to the hearth. Then it was that Sophia failed to keep all her rooms let. She could have let them easily and constantly and at high rents; but not to men without encumbrances. Nearly every day she refused attractive tenants in pretty hats, or agreeable gentlemen who only wanted a room on condition that they might offer hospitality to a dashing petticoat. It was useless to proclaim aloud that her house was 'serious.' The ambition of the majority of these joyous persons was to live in a 'serious' house, because each was sure that at bottom he or she was a 'serious' person, and quite different from the rest of the joyous world. The character of Sophia's flat, instead of repelling the wrong kind of aspirant, infallibly drew just that kind. Hope was inextinguishable in these bosoms. They heard that there would be no chance for them at Sophia's; but they tried nevertheless. And occasionally Sophia would make a mistake, and grave unpleasantness would occur before the

mistake could be rectified. The fact was that the street was too much for her. Few people would credit that there was a serious boarding-house in the Rue Brèda. The police themselves would not credit it. And Sophia's beauty was against her. At that time the Rue Breda was perhaps the most notorious street in the centre of Paris; at the height of its reputation as a warren of individual improprieties; most busily creating that prejudice against itself which, over thirty years later, forced the authorities to change its name in obedience to the wish of its tradesmen. When Sophia went out at about eleven o'clock in the morning with her reticule to buy, the street was littered with women who had gone out with reticules to buy. But whereas Sophia was fully dressed, and wore headgear, the others were in dressing-gown and slippers, or opera-cloak and slippers, having slid directly out of unspeakable beds and omitted to brush their hair out of their puffy eyes. In the little shops of the Rue Breda, the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, and the Rue des Martyrs, you were very close indeed to the primitive instincts of human nature. It was wonderful; it was amusing; it was excitingly picturesque; and the universality of the manners rendered moral indignation absurd. But the neighbourhood was certainly not one in which a woman of Sophia's race, training, and character, could comfortably earn a living, or even exist. She could not fight against the entire street. She, and not the street, was out of place and in the wrong. Little wonder that the neighbours lifted their shoulders when they spoke of her! What beautiful woman but a mad Englishwoman would have had the idea of establishing herself in the Rue Breda with the intention of living like a nun and compelling others to do the same?

By dint of continual ingenuity, Sophia contrived to win somewhat more than her expenses, but she was slowly driven to admit to herself that the situation could not last.

Then one day she saw in *Galignani's Messenger* an advertisement of an English pension for sale in the Rue Lord Byron, in the Champs Elysees quarter. It belonged to some people named Frensham, and had enjoyed a certain popularity before the war. The proprietor and his wife, however, had not sufficiently allowed for the vicissitudes of politics in Paris. Instead of saving money during their popularity they had put it on the back and on the fingers of Mrs. Frensham. The siege and the Commune had almost ruined them. With capital they might have restored themselves to their former pride; but their capital was exhausted. Sophia answered the advertisement. She impressed the Frenshams, who were delighted with the prospect of dealing in business with an honest English face. Like many English people abroad they were most strangely obsessed by the notion that they had quitted an island of honest men to live among thieves and robbers. They always implied that dishonesty was unknown in Britain. They offered, if she would take over the lease, to sell all their furniture and their renown for ten thousand francs. She declined, the price seeming absurd to her. When they asked her to name a price, she said that she preferred not to do so. Upon entreaty, she said four thousand francs. They then allowed her to see that they considered her to have been quite right in hesitating to name a price so ridiculous. And their confidence in the honest English face seemed to have been shocked. Sophia left. When she got back to the Rue Breda she was relieved that the matter had come to nothing. She did not precisely foresee what her future was to be, but at any rate she knew she shrank from the responsibility of the Pension Frensham. The next morning she received a letter offering to accept six thousand. She wrote and declined. She was indifferent and she would not budge from four thousand. The Frenshams gave way. They were pained,

but they gave way. The glitter of four thousand francs in cash, and freedom, was too tempting.

Thus Sophia became the proprietress of the Pension Frensham in the cold and correct Rue Lord Byron. She made room in it for nearly all her other furniture, so that instead of being under-furnished, as pensions usually are, it was over-furnished. She was extremely timid at first, for the rent alone was four thousand francs a year; and the prices of the quarter were alarmingly different from those of the Rue Breda. She lost a lot of sleep. For some nights, after she had been installed in the Rue Lord Byron about a fortnight, she scarcely slept at all, and she ate no more than she slept. She cut down expenditure to the very lowest, and frequently walked over to the Rue Breda to do her marketing. With the aid of a charwoman at six sous an hour she accomplished everything. And though clients were few, the feat was in the nature of a miracle; for Sophia had to cook.

The articles which George Augustus Sala wrote under the title "Paris herself again" ought to have been paid for in gold by the hotel and pension-keepers of Paris. They awakened English curiosity and the desire to witness the scene of terrible events. Their effect was immediately noticeable. In less than a year after her adventurous purchase, Sophia had acquired confidence, and she was employing two servants, working them very hard at low wages. She had also acquired the landlady's manner. She was known as Mrs. Frensham. Across the balconies of two windows the Frenshams had left a gilded sign, "Pension Frensham," and Sophia had not removed it. She often explained that her name was not Frensham; but in vain. Every visitor inevitably and persistently addressed her according to the sign. It was past the general comprehension that the proprietress of the Pension Frensham might

bear another name than Frensham. But later there came into being a class of persons, habitue's of the Pension Frensham, who knew the real name of the proprietress and were proud of knowing it, and by this knowledge were distinguished from the herd. What struck Sophia was the astounding similarity of her guests. They all asked the same questions, made the same exclamations, went out on the same excursions, returned with the same judgments, and exhibited the same unimpaired assurance that foreigners were really very peculiar people. They never seemed to advance in knowledge. There was a constant stream of explorers from England who had to be set on their way to the Louvre or the Bon Marche".

Sophia's sole interest was in her profits. The excellence of her house was firmly established. She kept it up, and she kept the modest prices up. Often she had to refuse guests. She naturally did so with a certain distant condescension. Her manner to guests increased in stiff formality; and she was excessively firm with undesirables. She grew to be seriously convinced that no pension as good as hers existed in the world, or ever had existed, or ever could exist. Hers was the acme of niceness and respectability. Her preference for the respectable rose to a passion. And there were no faults in her establishment. Even the once despised showy furniture of Madame Foucault had mysteriously changed into the best conceivable furniture; and its cracks were hallowed.

She never heard a word of Gerald nor of her family. In the thousands of people who stayed under her perfect roof, not one mentioned Bursley nor disclosed a knowledge of anybody that Sophia had known. Several men had the wit to propose marriage to her with more or less skilfulness, but none of them was skilful enough to perturb her heart. She had forgotten the face of love. She was a landlady. She

was *the* landlady: efficient, stylish, diplomatic, and tremendously experienced. There was no trickery, no baseness of Parisian life that she was not acquainted with and armed against. She could not be startled and she could not be swindled.

Years passed, until there was a vista of years behind her. Sometimes she would think, in an unoccupied moment, "How strange it is that I should be here, doing what I am doing!" But the regular ordinariness of her existence would instantly seize her again. At the end of 1878, the Exhibition Year, her Pension consisted of two floors instead of one, and she had turned the two hundred pounds stolen from Gerald into over two thousand.

BOOK IV: WHAT LIFE IS

CHAPTER I: FRENSHAM'S

§ 1

MATTHEW PEEL-SWYNNERTON sat in the long dining-room of the Pension Frensham, Rue Lord Byron, Paris; and he looked out of place there. It was an apartment about thirty feet in length, and of the width of two windows, which sufficiently lighted one half of a very long table with round ends. The gloom of the other extremity was illumined by a large mirror in a tarnished gilt frame, which filled a good portion of the wall opposite the windows. Near the mirror was a high folding-screen of four leaves, and behind this screen could be heard the sound of a door continually shutting and opening. In the long wall to the left of the windows were two doors, one dark and important, a door of state, through which a procession of hungry and a procession of sated solemn self-conscious persons passed twice daily, and the other, a smaller door, glazed, its glass painted with wreaths of roses, not an original door of the house, but a late breach in the wall, that seemed to lead to the dangerous and to the naughty. The wall-paper and the window drapery were rich and forbidding, dark in hue, mysterious of pattern. Over the state-door was a pair of antlers. And at intervals, so high up as to defy inspection, engravings and oil-paintings made oblong patches on the walls. They were hung from immense nails with porcelain heads, and they appeared to depict the more majestic aspect of man and nature. One engraving, over the mantelpiece and nearer earth than the rest, unmistakably showed Louis Philippe

and his family in attitudes of virtue. Beneath this Royal group, a vast gilt clock, flanked by pendants of the same period, gave the right time—a quarter past seven.

And down the room, filling it, ran the great white table, bordered with bowed heads and the backs of chairs. There were over thirty people at the table, and the peculiarly restrained noisiness of their knives and forks on the plates proved that they were a discreet and a correct 'people. Their clothes—blouses, bodices, and jackets—did not flatter the lust of the eye. Only two or three were in evening dress. They spoke little, and generally in a timorous tone, as though silence had been enjoined. Somebody would half-whisper a remark, and then his neighbour, absently fingering her bread and lifting gaze from her plate into vacancy, would conscientiously weigh the remark and half-whisper in reply : "I dare say." But a few spoke loudly and volubly, and were regarded by the rest, who envied them, as underbred.

Food was quite properly the chief preoccupation. The diners ate as those eat who are paying a fixed price per day for as much as they can consume while observing the rules of the game. Without moving their heads they glanced out of the corners of their eyes, watching the manoeuvres of the three starched maids who served. They had no conception of food save as portions laid out in rows on large silver dishes, and when a maid bent over them deferentially, balancing the dish, they summed up the offering in an instant, and in an instant decided how much they could decently take, and to what extent they could practise the theoretic liberty of choice. And if the food for any reason did not tempt them, or if it egregiously failed to coincide with their aspirations, they considered themselves aggrieved. For, according to the game, they might not command; they had the right to seize all that was presented under their noses, like genteeJ

tigers; and they had the right to refuse: that was all. The dinner was thus a series of emotional crises for the diners, who knew only that full dishes and clean plates came endlessly from the banging door behind the screen, and that ravaged dishes and dirty plates vanished endlessly through the same door. They were all eating similar food simultaneously; they began together and they finished together. The files that haunted the paper-bunches which hung from the chandeliers to the level of the flower-vases, were more free. The sole event that chequered the exact regularity of the repast was the occasional arrival of a wine-bottle for one of the guests. The receiver of the wine-bottle signed a small paper in exchange for it and wrote largely a number on the label of the bottle; then, staring at the number and fearing that after all it might be misread by a stupid maid or an unscrupulous compeer, he would re-write the number on another part of the label, even more largely.

Matthew Peel-Swynnerton obviously did not belong to this world. He was a young man of twenty-five or so, not handsome, but elegant. Though he was not in evening dress, though he was, as a fact, in a very light grey suit, entirely improper to a dinner, he was elegant. The suit was admirably cut, and nearly new; but he wore it as though he had never worn anything else. Also his demeanour, reserved yet free from self-consciousness, his method of handling a knife and fork, the niceties of his manner in transferring food from the silver dishes to his plate, the tone in which he ordered half a bottle of wine—all these details infallibly indicated to the company that Matthew Peel-Swynnerton was their superior. Some folks hoped that he was the son of a lord, or even a lord. He happened to be fixed at the end of the table, with his back to the window, and there was a vacant chair on either side of him; this situation favoured the hope of his high rank. In truth, he was the son, the grandson,

and several times the nephew, of earthenware manufacturers. He noticed that the large 'compote' (as it was called in his trade) which marked the centre of the table, was the production of his firm. This surprised him, for Peel, Swynnerton and Co., known and revered throughout the Five Towns as 'Peels,' did not cater for cheap markets.

A late guest startled the room, a fat, flabby, middle-aged man whose nose would have roused the provisional hostility of those who have convinced themselves that Jews are not as other men. His nose did not definitely brand him as a usurer and a murderer of Christ, but it was suspicious. His clothes hung loose, and might have been anybody's clothes. He advanced with brisk assurance to the table, bowed, somewhat too effusively, to several people, and sat down next to Peel-Swynnerton. One of the maids at once brought him a plate of soup, and he said: "Thank you, Marie," smiling at her. He was evidently a habitue of the house. His spectacled eyes beamed the superiority which comes of knowing girls by their names. He was seriously handicapped in the race for sustenance, being two and a half courses behind, but he drew level with speed and then, having accomplished this, he sighed, and pointedly engaged Peel-Swynnerton with his sociable glance.

"Ah!" he breathed out. "Nuisance when you come in late, sir!"

Peel-Swynnerton gave a reluctant affirmative.

"Doesn't only upset you! It upsets the house! Servants don't like it!"

"No," murmured Peel-Swynnerton, "I suppose not."

"However, it's not often /'m late," said the man. "Can't help it sometimes. Business! Worst of these French business people is that they've no notion of time. Appointments . . . ! God bless my soul!"

"Do you come here often?" asked Peel-Swynnerton. He

detested the fellow, quite inexcusably, perhaps because his serviette was tucked under his chin; but he saw that the fellow was one of your determined talkers, who always win in the end. Moreover, as being clearly not an ordinary tourist in Paris, the fellow mildly excited his curiosity.

"I live here," said the other. "Very convenient for a bachelor, you know. Have done for years. My office is just close by. You may know my name—Lewis Mardon."

Peel-Swynnertoii hesitated. The hesitation convicted him of not 'knowing his Paris' well.

"House-agent," said Lewis Mardon, quickly.

"Oh yes," said Peel-Swynnerton, vaguely recalling a vision of the name among the advertisements on newspaper kiosks.

"I expect," Mr. Mardon went on, "my name is as well-known as anybody's in Paris."

"I suppose so," assented Peel-Swynnerton.

The conversation fell for a few moments.

"Staying here long?" Mr. Mardon demanded, having added up Peel-Swynnerton as a man of style and of means, and being puzzled by his presence at that table.

"I don't know," said Peel-Swynnerton.

This was a lie, justified in the utterer's opinion as a repulse to Mr. Mardon's vulgar inquisitiveness, such inquisitiveness as might have been expected from a fellow who tucked his serviette under his chin. Peel-Swynnerton knew exactly how long he would stay. He would stay until the day after the morrow; he had only about fifty francs in his pocket. He had been making a fool of himself in another quarter of Paris, and he had descended to the Pension Frensham as a place where he could be absolutely sure of spending not more than twelve francs a day. Its reputation was high, and it was convenient for the Galliera Museum, where he was making some drawings which he had come to Paris ex-

pressly to make, and without which he could not reputably return to England. He was capable of foolishness, but he was also capable of wisdom, and scarcely any pressure of need would have induced him to write home for money to replace the money spent on making himself into a fool.

Mr. Mardon was conscious of a check. But, being of an accommodating disposition, he at once tried another direction.

"Good food here, eh?" he suggested.

"Very," said Peel-Swynnerton, with sincerity. "I was quite——"

At that moment, a tall straight woman of uncertain age pushed open the principal door and stood for an instant in the doorway. Peel-Swynnerton had just time to notice that she was handsome and pale, and that her hair was black, and then she was gone again, followed by a clipped poodle that accompanied her. She had signed with a brief gesture to one of the servants, who at once set about lighting the gas-jets over the table.

"Who is that?" asked Peel-Swynnerton, without reflecting that it was now he who was making advances to the fellow whose napkin covered all his shirt-front.

"That's the missis, that is," said Mr. Mardon, in a lower and semi-confidential voice.

"Oh! Mrs. Frensham?"

"Yes. But her real name is Scales," said Mr. Mardon, proudly.

"Widow, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"And she runs the whole show?"

"She runs the entire contraption," said Mr. Mardon, solemnly; "and don't you make any mistake!" He was getting familiar.

Peel-Swynnerton beat him off once more, glancing with

careful, uninterested nonchalance at the gas-burners which exploded one after another with a little plop under the application of the maid's taper. The white table gleamed more whitely than ever under the flaring gas. People at the end of the room away from the window instinctively smiled, as though the sun had begun to shine. The aspect of the dinner was changed, ameliorated; and with the reiterated statement that the evenings were drawing in though it was only July, conversation became almost general. In two minutes Mr. Mardon was genially talking across the whole length of the table. The meal finished in a state that resembled conviviality.

Matthew Peel-Swynnerton might not go out into the crepuscular delights of Paris. Unless he remained within the shelter of the Pension, he could not hope to complete successfully his re-conversion from folly to wisdom. So he bravely passed through the small rose-embroidered door into a small glass-covered courtyard, furnished with palms, wicker armchairs, and two small tables; and he lighted a pipe and pulled out of his pocket a copy *of The Referee.* That retreat was called the Lounge; it was the only part of the Pension where smoking was not either a positive crime or a transgression against good form. He felt lonely. He said to himself grimly in one breath that pleasure was all rot, and in the next he sullenly demanded of the universe how it was that pleasure could not go on for ever, and why he was not Mr. Barney Barnato. Two old men entered the retreat and burnt cigarettes with many precautions. Then Mr. Lewis Mardon appeared and sat down boldly next to Matthew, like a privileged friend. After all, Mr. Mardon was better than nobody whatever, and Matthew decided to suffer him, especially as he began without preliminary skirmishing to talk about life in Paris. An irresistible subject! Mr. Mardon said in a worldly tone that the existence of a bachelor in

Paris might easily be made agreeable. But that, of course, for himself—well, he preferred, as a general rule, the Pension Frensham sort of thing; and it was excellent for his business. Still he could not . . . he knew. . . . He compared the advantages of what he called 'knocking about' in Paris, with the equivalent in London. His information about London was out of date, and Peel-Swynnerton was able to set him right on important details. But his information about Paris was infinitely precious and interesting to the younger man, who saw that he had hitherto lived under strange misconceptions.

"Have a whiskey?" asked Mr. Mardon, suddenly. "Very good here!" he added.

"Thanks!" drawled Peel-Swynncrton.

The temptation to listen to Mr. Mardon as long as Mr. Mardon would talk was not to be overcome. And presently, when the old men had departed, they were frankly telling each other stories in the dimness of the retreat. Then, when the supply of stories came to an end, Mr. Mardon smacked his lips over the last drop of whiskey and ejaculated: "Yes!" as if giving a general confirmation to all that had been said.

"Do have one with me," said Matthew, politely. It was the least he could do.

The second supply of whiskies was brought into the Lounge by Mr. Mardon's Marie. He smiled on her familiarly, and remarked that he supposed she would soon be going to bed after a hard day's work. She gave a *moue* and a flounce in reply, and swished out.

"Carries herself well, doesn't she?" observed Mr. Mardon, as though Marie had been an exhibit at an agricultural show. "Ten years ago she was very fresh and pretty, but of course it takes it out of 'em, a place like this!"

"But still," said Peel-Swynnerton, "they must like it or

they wouldn't stay—that is, unless things are very different here from what they are in England."

The conversation seemed to have stimulated him to examine the woman question in all its bearings, with philosophic curiosity.

"Oh! They *like* it," Mr. Mardon assured him, as one who knew. "Besides, Mrs. Scales treats 'em very well. I know *that.* She's told me. She's very particular"—he looked around to see if walls had ears—"and, by jove, you've got to be: but she treats 'em well. You'd scarcely believe the wages they get, and pickings. Now at the Hotel Moscow—know the Hotel Moscow?"

Happily Peel-Swynnerton did. He had been advised to avoid it because it catered exclusively for English visitors, but in the Pension Frensham he had accepted something even more exclusively British than the Hotel Moscow. Mr. Mardon was quite relieved at his affirmative.

"The Hotel Moscow is a limited company now," said he; "English."

"Really?"

"Yes. I floated it. It was my idea. A great success! That's how I know all about the Hotel Moscow." He looked at the walls again. "I wanted to do the same here," he murmured, and Peel-Swynnerton had to show that he appreciated this confidence. "But she never would agree. I've tried her all ways. No go! It's a thousand pities."

"Paying thing, eh?"

"This place? I should say it was! And I ought to be able to judge, I reckon. Mrs. Scales is one of the shrewdest women you'd meet in a day's march. She's made a lot of money here, a lot of money. And there's no reason why a place like this shouldn't be five times as big as it is. Ten times. The scope's unlimited, my dear sir. All that's wanted is capital. Naturally she has capital of her own,

and she could get more. But then, as she says, she doesn't want the place any bigger. She says it's now just as big as she can handle. That isn't so. She's a woman who could handle anything—a born manager—but even if it was so, all she would have to do would be to retire—only leave us the place and the name. It's the name that counts. And she's made the name of Frensham worth something, I can tell you!"

"Did she get the place from her husband?" asked Peel-Swynnerton. Her own name of Scales intrigued him.

Mr. Mardon shook his head. "Bought it on her own, after the husband's time, for a song—a song! I know, because I knew the original Frenshams."

"You must have been in Paris a long time," said Peel-Swynnerton.

Mr. Mardon could never resist an opportunity to talk about himself. His was a wonderful history. And Peel-Swynnerton, while scorning the man for his fatuity, was impressed. And when that was finished—

"Yes!" said Mr. Mardon after a pause, reaffirming everything in general by a single monosyllable.

Shortly afterwards he rose, saying that his habits were regular.

"Good-night," he said, with a mechanical smile.

"G-good-riight," said Peel-Swynnerton, trying to force the tone of fellowship and not succeeding. Their intimacy, which had sprung up like a mushroom, suddenly fell into dust. Peel-Swynnerton's unspoken comment to Mr. Mardon's back was: "Ass!" Still, the sum of Peel-Swynnerton's knowledge had indubitably been increased during the evening. And the hour was yet early. Half-past ten! The Folies-Marigny, with its beautiful architecture and its crowds of white toilettes, and its frothing of champagne and of beer, and its musicians in tight red coats, was just be-

ginning to be alive—and at a distance of scarcely a stone's-throw! Peel-Swynnerton pictured the terraced, glittering hall, which had been the prime origin of his exceeding foolishness. And he pictured all the other resorts, great and small, garlanded with white lanterns, in the Champs Elyse"es; and the sombre aisles of the Champs Elysees where mysterious pale figures walked troublingly under the shade of trees, while snatches of wild song or absurd brassy music floated up from the resorts and restaurants. He wanted to go out and spend those fifty francs that remained in his pocket. After all, why not telegraph to England for more money? "Oh, damn it!" he said savagely, and stretched his arms and got up. The Lounge was very small, gloomy and dreary.

One brilliant incandescent light burned in the hall, crudely illuminating the wicker fauteuils, a corded trunk with a blue-and-red label on it, a Fitzroy barometer, a map of Paris, a coloured poster of the Compagnie Transatlantique, and the mahogany retreat of the hall-portress. In that retreat was not only the hall-portress—an aged woman with a white cap above her wrinkled pink face—but the mistress of the establishment. They were murmuring together softly; they seemed to be well disposed to one another. The portress was respectful, but the mistress was respectful also.,. The hall, with its one light tranquilly burning, was bathed in an honest calm, the calm of a day's work accomplished, of gradual relaxation from tension, of growing expectation of repose. In its simplicity it affected Peel-Swynnerton as a medicine tonic for nerves might have affected him. In that hall, though exterior nocturnal life was but just stirring into activity, it seemed that the middle of the night had come, and that these two women alone watched in a mansion full of sleepers. And all the recitals which Peel-Swynnerton and Mr. Mardon had exchanged sank to the level of pitiably foolish gossip. Peel-Swynnerton

felt that his duty to the house was to retire to bed. He felt, too, that he could not leave the house without saying that he was going out, and that he lacked the courage deliberately to tell these two women that he was going out—at that time of night! He dropped into one of the chairs and made a second attempt to peruse *The Referee*. Useless! Either his mind was outside in the Champs Elysees, or his gaze would wander surreptitiously to the figure of Mrs. Scales. He could not well distinguish her face because it was in the shadow of the mahogany.

Then the portress came forth from her box, and, slightly bent, sped actively across the hall, smiling pleasantly at the guest as she passed him, and disappeared up the stairs. The mistress was alone in the retreat. Peel-Swynnerton jumped up brusquely, dropping the paper with a rustle, and approached her.

"Excuse me," he said deferentially. "Have any letters come for me to-night?"

He knew that the arrival of letters for him was impossible, since nobody knew his address.

"What name?" The question was coldly polite, and the questioner looked him full in the face. Undoubtedly she was a handsome woman. Her hair was greying at the temples, and the skin was withered and crossed with lines. But she was handsome. She was one of those women of whom to their last on earth the stranger will say: "When she was young she must have been worth looking at!"—with a little transient regret that beautiful young women cannot remain for ever young. Her voice was firm and even, sweet in tone, and yet morally harsh from incessant traffic with all varieties of human nature. Her eyes were the impartial eyes of one who is always judging. And evidently she was a proud, even a haughty creature, with her careful, controlled politeness. Evidently she considered herself superior to no

matter what guest. Her eyes announced that she had lived and learnt, that she knew more about life than anyone whom she was likely to meet, and that having pre-eminently succeeded in life, she had tremendous confidence in herself. The proof of her success was the unique Frensham's. A consciousness of the uniqueness of Frensham's was also in those eyes. Theoretically Matthew Peel-Swynnerton's mental attitude towards lodging-house keepers was condescending, but here it was not condescending. It had the real respectfulness of a man who for the moment at any rate is impressed beyond his calculations. His glance fell as he said:

"Peel-Swynnerton." Then he looked up again.

He said the words awkwardly, and rather fearfully, as if aware that he was playing with fire. If this Mrs. Scales was the long-vanished aunt of his friend, Cyril Povey, she must know those two names, locally so famous. Did she start? Did she show a sign of being perturbed? At first he thought he detected a symptom of emotion, but in an instant he was sure that he had detected nothing of the sort, and that it was silly to suppose that he was treading on the edge of a romance. Then she turned towards the letter-rack at her side, and he saw her face in profile. It bore a sudden and astonishing likeness to the profile of Cyril Povey; a resemblance unmistakable and finally decisive. The nose, and the curve of the upper lip were absolutely Cyril's. Matthew Peel-Swynnerton felt very queer. He felt like a criminal in peril of being caught in the act, and he could not understand why he should feel so. The landlady looked in the 'P' pigeon-hole, and in the 'S' pigeon-hole.

"No," she said quietly, "I see nothing for you."

Taken with a swift rash audacity, he said: "Have you had anyone named Povey here recently?"

"Povey?"

"Yes. Cyril Povey, of Bursley—in the Five Towns."

He was very impressionable, very sensitive, was Matthew Peel-Swynnerton. His voice trembled as he spoke. But hers also trembled in reply.

"Not that I remember! No! Were you expecting him to be here?"

"Well, it wasn't at all sure," he muttered. "Thank you. Good-night."

"Good-night," she said, apparently with the simple perfunctoriness of the landlady who says good-night to dozens of strangers every evening.

He hurried away upstairs, and met the portress coming down. "Well, well!" he thought. "Of all the queer things——!" And he kept nodding his head. At last he had encountered something *really* strange in the spectacle of existence. It had fallen to him to discover the legendary woman who had fled from Bursley before he was born, and of whom nobody knew anything. What news for Cyril! What a staggering episode! He had scarcely any sleep that night. He wondered whether he would be able to meet Mrs. Scales without self-consciousness on the morrow. However, he was spared the curious ordeal of meeting her. She did not appear at all on the following day; nor did he see her before he left. He could not find a pretext for asking why she was invisible.

§ 2

The hansom of Matthew Peel-Swynnerton drew up in front of No. 26, Victoria Grove, Chelsea; his kit-bag was on the roof of the cab. The cabman had a red flower in his buttonhole. Matthew leaped out of the vehicle, holding his straw hat on his head with one hand. On reaching the pavement he checked himself suddenly and became care-

lessly calm. Another straw-hatted and grey-clad figure was standing at the side-gate of No. 26 in the act of lighting a cigarette.

"Hello, Matt!" exclaimed the second figure, languidly, and in a veiled voice due to the fact that he was still holding the match to the cigarette and puffing. "What's the meaning of all this fluster? You're just the man I want to see."

He threw away the match with a wave of the arm, and took Matthew's hand for a moment, blowing a double shaft of smoke through his nose.

"I want to see you, too," said Matthew. "And I've only got a minute. I'm on my way to Euston. I must catch the twelve-five."

He looked at his friend, and could positively see no feature of it that was not a feature of Mrs. Scales's face. Also, the elderly woman held her body in exactly the same way as the young man. It was entirely disconcerting.

"Have a cigarette," answered Cyril Povey, imperturbably. He was two years younger than Matthew, from whom he had acquired most of his vast and intricate knowledge of life and art, with certain leading notions of deportment; whose pupil indeed he was in all the things that matter to young men. But he had already surpassed his professor. He could pretend to be old much more successfully than Matthew could.

The cabman approvingly watched the ignition of the second cigarette, and then the cabman pulled out a cigar, and showed his large, white teeth, as he bit the end off it. The appearance and manner of his fare, the quality of the kit-bag, and the opening gestures of the interview between the two young dukes, had put the cabman in an optimistic mood. He had no apprehensions of miserly and ungentlemanly conduct by his fare upon the arrival at Euston. He knew the language of the tilt of a straw hat. And it was a

magnificent day in London. The group of the two elegances dominated by the perfection of the cabman made a striking tableau of triumphant masculinity, content with itself, and needing nothing.

Matthew lightly took Cyril's arm and drew him further down the street, past the gate leading to the studio (hidden behind a house) which Cyril rented.

"Look here, my boy," he began, "I've found your aunt."

"Well, that's very nice of you," said Cyril, solemnly. "That's a friendly act. May I ask what aunt?"

"Mrs. Scales," said Matthew. "You know——"

"Not the——" Cyril's face changed.

"Yes, precisely!" said Matthew, feeling that he was not being cheated of the legitimate joy caused by making a sensation. Assuredly he had made a sensation in Victoria Grove.

When he had related the whole story, Cyril said: "Then she doesn't know you know?"

"I don't think so. No, I'm sure she doesn't. She may guess."

"But how can you be certain you haven't made a mistake? It may be that——•"

"Look here, my boy," Matthew interrupted him. "I've not made any mistake."

"But you've no proof."

"Proof be damned!" said Matthew, nettled. "I tell you *iCsher!"*

"Oh! All right! All right! What puzzles me most is what the devil you were doing in a place like that. According to your description of it, it must be a——"

"I went there because I was broke," said Matthew.

"Razzle?"

Matthew nodded.

"Pretty stiff, that!" commented Cyril, when Matthew had narrated the prologue to Frensham's.

"Well, she absolutely swore she never took less than two hundred francs. And she looked it, too! And she was worth it! I had the time of my life with that woman. I can tell you one thing—no more English for me! They simply aren't in it."

"How old was she?"

Matthew reflected judicially. "I should say she was thirty." The gaze of admiration and envy was upon him. He had the legitimate joy of making a second sensation. "I'll let you know more about that when I come back," he added. "I can open your eyes, my child."

Cyril smiled sheepishly. "Why can't you stay now?" he asked. "I'm going to take the cast of that Verrall girl's arm this afternoon, and I know I can't do it alone. And Robson's no good. You're just the man I want."

"Can't!" said Matthew.

"Well, come into the studio a minute, anyhow."

"Haven't time; I shall miss my train."

"I don't care if you miss forty trains. You must come in. You've got to see that fountain," Cyril insisted crossly.

Matthew yielded. When they emerged into the street again, after six minutes of Cyril's savage interest in his own work, Matthew remembered Mrs. Scales.

"Of course you'll write to your mother?" he said.

"Yes," said Cyril, "I'll write; but if you happen to see her, you might tell her."

"I will," said Matthew. "Shall you go over to Paris?"

"What! To see Auntie?" He smiled. "I don't know. Depends. If the mater will fork out all my exes . . . it's an idea," he said lightly, and then without any change of tone, "Naturally, if you're going to idle about here all morning you aren't likely to catch the twelve-five."

Matthew got into the cab, while the driver, the stump of a

cigar between his exposed teeth, leaned forward and lifted the reins away from the tilted straw hat.

"By-the-by, lend me some silver," Matthew demanded. "It's a good thing I've got my return ticket. I've run it as fine as ever I did in my life."

Cyril produced eight shillings in silver. Secure in the possession of these riches, Matthew called to the driver—

"Euston-likehell!"

"Yes, sir," said the driver, calmly.

"Not coming my way I suppose?" Matthew shouted as an afterthought, just when the cab began to move.

"No. Barber's," Cyril shouted in answer, and waved his hand. The horse rattled into Fulham Road.

§3

Three days later Matthew Peel-Swynnerton was walking along Bursley Market Place when, just opposite the Town Hall, he met a short, fat, middle-aged lady dressed in black, with a black embroidered mantle, and a small bonnet tied with black ribbon and ornamented with jet fruit and crape leaves. As she stepped slowly and carefully forward she had the dignified, important look of a provincial woman who has always been accustomed to deference in her native town, and whose income is ample enough to extort obsequiousness from the vulgar of all ranks. But immediately she caught sight of Matthew, her face changed. She became simple and naive. She blushed slightly, smiling with a timid pleasure. For her, Matthew belonged to a superior race. He bore the almost sacred name of Peel. His family had been distinguished in the district for generations. Teel!' You could without impropriety utter it in the same breath with 'Wedgwood.' And 'Swynnerton' stood not much lower. Neither her self-respect, which was great, nor her

commonsense, which far exceeded the average, could enable her to extend as far as the Peels the theory that one man is as good as another. The Peels never shopped in St. Luke's Square. Even in its golden days the Square could not have expected such a condescension. The Peels shopped in London or in Stafford; at a pinch in Oldcastle. That was the distinction for the ageing stout lady in black. Why, she had not in six years recovered from her surprise that her son and Matthew Peel-Swynnerton treated each other rudely as equals! She and Matthew did not often meet, but they liked each other. Her involuntary meekness flattered him. And his rather elaborate homage flattered her. He admired her fundamental goodness, and her occasional raps at Cyril seemed to put him into ecstasies ofjoy.

"Well, Mrs. Povey," he greeted her, standing over her with his hat raised. (It was a fashion he had picked up in Paris.) "Here I am, you see."

"You're quite a stranger, Mr. Matthew. I needn't ask you how you are. Have you been seeing anything of my boy lately?"

"Not since Wednesday," said Matthew. "Of course he's written to you?"

"There's no 'of course' about it," she laughed faintly. "I had a short letter from him on Wednesday morning. He said you were in Paris."

"But since that—hasn't he written?"

"If I hear from him on Sunday I shall be lucky, bless ye!" said Constance, grimly. "It's not letter-writing that will kill Cyril."

"But do you mean to say he hasn't——" Matthew stopped.

"Whatever's amiss?" asked Constance.

Matthew was at a loss to know what to do or say. "Oh, nothing."

"Now, Mr. Matthew, do please——" Constance's tone had suddenly quite changed. It had become firm, commanding, and gravely suspicious. The conversation had ceased to be small-talk for her.

Matthew saw how nervous and how fragile she was. He had never noticed before that she was so sensitive to trifles, though it was notorious that nobody could safely discuss Cyril with her in terms of chaff. He was really astounded at that youth's carelessness, shameful carelessness. That Cyril's attitude to his mother was marked by a certain benevolent negligence—this Matthew knew; but not to have written to her with the important news concerning Mrs. Scales was utterly inexcusable; and Matthew determined that he would tell Cyril so. He felt very sorry for Mrs. Povey. She seemed pathetic to him, standing there in ignorance of a tremendous fact which she ought to have been aware of. He was very content that he had said nothing about Mrs. Scales to anybody except his own mother, who had prudently enjoined silence upon him, saying that his one duty, having told Cyril, was to keep his mouth shut until the Poveys talked. Had it not been for his mother's advice he would assuredly have spread the amazing tale, and Mrs. Povey might have first heard of it from a stranger's gossip, which would have been too cruel upon her.

"Oh!" Matthew tried to smile gaily, archly. "You're bound to hear from Cyril to-morrow."

He wanted to persuade her that he was concealing merely some delightful surprise from her. But he did not succeed. With all his experience of the world and of women he was not clever enough to deceive that simple woman.

"I'm waiting, Mr. Matthew," she said, in a tone that flattened the smile out of Matthew's sympathetic face. She was ruthless. The fact was, she had in an instant convinced

herself that Cyril had met some girl and was engaged to be married. She could think of nothing else. "What has Cyril been doing?" she added, after a pause.

"It's nothing to do with Cyril," said he.

"Then what is it?"

"It was about—Mrs. Scales," he murmured, nearly trembling. As she offered no response, merely looking around her in a peculiar fashion, he said: "Shall we walk along a bit?" And he turned in the direction in which she had been going. She obeyed the suggestion.

"What did ye say?" she asked. The name of Scales for a moment had no significance for her. But when she comprehended it she was afraid, and so she said vacantly, as though wishing to postpone a shock: "What did ye say?"

"I said it was about Mrs. Scales. You know I m-met her in Paris." And he was saying to himself: "I ought not to be telling this poor old thing here in the street. But what can I do?"

"Nay, nay!" she muttered.

She stopped and looked at him with a worried expression. Then he observed that the hand that carried her reticule was making strange purposeless curves in the air, and her rosy face went the colour of cream, as though it had been painted with one stroke of an unseen brush. Matthew was very much put about.

"Hadn't you better——" he began.

"Eh," she said; "I must sit me——" Her bag dropped.

He supported her to the door of Allman's shop, the ironmonger's. Unfortunately, there were two steps up into the shop, and she could not climb them. She collapsed like a sack of flour on the first step. Young Edward Allman ran to the door. He was wearing a black apron and fidgeting with it in his excitement.

"Don't lift her up-don't try to lift her up, Mr. Peel-

Swynnerton!" he cried, as Matthew instinctively began to do the wrong thing.

Matthew stopped, looking a fool and feeling one, and he and young Allman contemplated each other helpless for a second across the body of Constance Povey. A part of the Market Place now perceived that the unusual was occurring. It was Mr. Shawcross, the chemist next door to Allman's, who dealt adequately with the situation. He had seen all, while selling a Kodak to a young lady, and he ran out with salts. Constance recovered very rapidly. She had not quite swooned. She gave a long sigh, and whispered weakly that she was all right. The three men helped her into the lofty dark shop, which smelt of nails and of stove-polish, and she was balanced on a rickety chair.

"My word!" exclaimed young Allman, in his loud voice, when she could smile and the pink was returning reluctantly to her cheeks. "You mustn't frighten us like that, Mrs. Povey!"

Matthew said nothing. He had at last created a genuine sensation. Once again he felt like a criminal, and could not understand why.

Constance announced that she would walk slowly home, down the Cock-yard and along Wedgwood Street. But when, glancing round in her returned strength, she saw the hedge of faces at the doorway, she agreed with Mr. Shawcross that she would do better to have a cab. Young Allman went to the door and whistled to the unique cab that stands for ever at the grand entrance to the Town Hall.

"Mr. Matthew will come with me," said Constance.

"Certainly, with pleasure," said Matthew.

And she passed through the little crowd of gapers on Mr. Shawcross's arm.

"Just take care of yourself, missis," said Mr. Shawcross to

her, through the window of the cab. "It's fainting weather, and we're none of us any younger, seemingly."

She nodded.

"I'm awfully sorry I upset you, Mrs. Povey," said Matthew, when the cab moved.

She shook her head, refusing his apology as unnecessary. Tears filled her eyes. In less than a minute the cab had stopped in front of Constance's light-grained door. She demanded her reticule from Matthew, who had carried it since it fell. She would pay the cabman. Never before had Matthew permitted a woman to pay for a cab in which he had ridden; but there was no arguing with Constance. Constance was dangerous.

Amy Bates, still inhabiting the cave, had seen the cab-wheels through the grating of her window and had panted up the kitchen stairs to open the door ere Constance had climbed the steps. Amy, decidedly over forty, was a woman of authority. She wanted to know what was the matter, and Constance had to tell her that she had 'felt unwell.' Amy took the hat and mantle and departed to prepare a cup of tea. When they were alone Constance said to Matthew:

"Now, Mr. Matthew, will you please tell me?"

"It's only this," he began.

And as he told it, in quite a few words, it indeed had the air of being 'only that.' And yet his voice shook, in sympathy with the ageing woman's controlled but visible emotion. It seemed to him that gladness should have filled the absurd little parlour, but the spirit that presided had no name; it was certainly not joy. He himself felt very sad, desolated. He would have given much money to have been spared the experience. He knew simply that in the memory of the stout, comical, nice woman in the rocking-chair he had stirred old, old things, wakened slumbers that might have been eternal. He did not know that he was sitting on

the very spot where the sola had been on which Samuel Povey lay when a beautiful and shameless young creature of fifteen extracted his tooth. He did not know that Constance was sitting in the very chair in which the memorable Mrs. Baines had sat in vain conflict with that same unconquerable girl. He did not know ten thousand matters that were rushing violently about in the vast heart of Constance.

She cross-questioned him in detail. But she did not put the questions which he in his innocence expected; such as, if her sister looked old, if her hair was grey, if she was stout or thin. And until Amy, mystified and resentful, had served the tea, on a little silver tray, she remained comparatively calm. It was in the middle of a gulp of tea that she broke down, and Matthew had to take the cup from her.

"I can't thank you, Mr. Matthew," she wept. "I couldn't thank you enough."

"But I've done nothing," he protested.

She shook her head. "I never hoped for this. Never hoped for it!" she went on. "It makes me so happy—in a way. . . . You mustn't take any notice of me. I'm silly. You must kindly write down that address for me. And I must write to Cyril at once. And I must see Mr. Critchlow."

"It's really very funny that Cyril hasn't written to you," said Matthew.

"Cyril has not been a good son," she said with sudden, solemn coldness. "To think that he should have kept that . . . !" She wept again.

At length Matthew saw the possibility of leaving. He felt her warm, soft, crinkled hand round his fingers.

"You've behaved very nicely over this," she said. "And very cleverly. In *every* thing—both over there and here. Nobody could have shown a nicer feeling than you've

shown. It's a great comfort to me that my son has got you for a friend."

When he thought of his escapades, and of all the knowledge, unutterable in Bursley, fantastically impossible in Bursley, which he had imparted to her son, he marvelled that the maternal instinct should be so deceived. Still, he felt that her praise of him was deserved.

Outside, he gave vent to a Phew' of relief. He smiled, in his worldliest manner. But the smile was a sham. A pretence to himself! A childish attempt to disguise from himself how profoundly he had been moved by a natural scene!

§4

On the night when Matthew Pecl-Swynnerton spoke to Mrs. Scales, Matthew was not the only person in the Pension Frensham who failed to sleep. When the old portress came downstairs from her errand, she observed that her mistress was leaving the mahogany retreat.

"She is sleeping tranquilly, the poor one!" said the portress, discharging her commission, which had been to learn the latest news of the mistress's indisposed dog, Fossette. In saying this her ancient, vibrant voice was rich with sympathy for the suffering animal. And she smiled. She was rather like a figure out of an almshouse, with her pink, apparently brittle skin, her tight black dress, and frilled white cap. She stooped habitually, and always walked quickly, with her head a few inches in advance of her feet. Her grey hair was scanty. She was old; nobody perhaps knew exactly how old. Sophia had taken her with the Pension, over a quarter of a century before, because she was old and could not easily have found another place. Although the clientele was almost exclusively English, she

spoke only French, explaining herself to Britons by means of benevolent smiles.

"I think I shall go to bed, Jacqueline," said the mistress, in reply.

A strange reply, thought Jacqueline. The unalterable custom of Jacqueline was to retire at midnight and to rise at five-thirty. Her mistress also usually retired about midnight, and during the final hour mistress and portress saw a good deal of each other. And considering that Jacqueline had just been sent up into the mistress's own bedroom to glance at Fossette, and that the bulletin was satisfactory, and that madame and Jacqueline had several customary daily matters to discuss, it seemed odd that madame should thus be going instantly to bed. However, Jacqueline said nothing but:

"Very well, madame. And the number 32?"

"Arrange yourself as you can," said the mistress, curtly.

"It is well, madame. Good evening, madame, and a good night,"

Jacqueline, alone in the hall, re-entered her box and set upon one of those endless, mysterious tasks which occupied her when she was not rushing to and fro or whistling up the tubes.

Sophia, scarcely troubling even to glance into Fossette's round basket, undressed, put out the light, and got into bed. She felt extremely and inexplicably gloomy. She did not wish to reflect; she strongly wished not to reflect; but her mind insisted on reflection—a monotonous, futile, and distressing reflection. Povey! Povey! Could this be Constance's Povey, the unique Samuel Povey? That is to say, not he, but his son, Constance's son. Had Constance a grown-up son? Constance must be over fifty now, perhaps a grandmother! Had she really married Samuel Povey? Possibly she was dead. Certainly her mother must

be dead, and Aunt Harriet and Mr. Critchlow. If alive, her mother must be at least eighty years of age.

The cumulative effect of merely remaining inactive when one ought to be active, was terrible. Undoubtedly she should have communicated with her family. It was silly not to have done so. After all, even if she had, as a child, stolen a trifle of money from her wealthy aunt, what would that have mattered? She had been proud. She was criminally proud. That was her vice. She admitted it frankly. But she could not alter her pride. Everybody had some weak spot. Her reputation for sagacity, for common-sense, was, she knew, enormous; she always felt, when people were talking to her, that they regarded her as a very unusually wise woman. And yet she had been guilty of the capital folly of cutting herself off from her family. She was ageing, and she was alone in the world. She was enriching herself; she had the most perfectly managed and the most respectable Pension in the world (she sincerely believed), and she was alone in the world. Acquaintances she had—French people who never offered nor accepted hospitality other than tea or wine, and one or two members of the English commercial colony—but her one friend was Fossette, aged three years! She was the most solitary person on earth. She had heard no word of Gerald, no word of anybody. Nobody whatever could truly be interested in her fate. This was what she had achieved after a quarter of a century of ceaseless labour and anxiety, during which she had not once been away from the Rue Lord Byron for more than thirty hours at a stretch. It was appalling—the passage of years; and the passage of years would grow more appalling. Ten years hence, where would she be? She pictured herself dying. Horrible!

Of course there was nothing to prevent her from going back to Bursley and repairing the grand error of her girl-

hood. No, nothing except the fact that her whole soul recoiled from the mere idea of any such enterprise! She was a fixture in the Rue Lord Byron. She was a part of the street. She knew all that happened or could happen there. She was attached to it by the heavy chains of habit. In the chill way of long use she loved it. There! The incandescent gas-burner of the street-lamp outside had been turned down, as it was turned down every night! If it is possible to love such a phenomenon, she loved that phenomenon. That phenomenon was a portion of her life, dear to her.

An agreeable young man, that Peel-Swynnerton! Then evidently, since her days in Bursley, the Peels and the Swynnertons, partners in business, must have intermarried, or there must have been some affair of a will. Did he suspect who she was? He had had a very self-conscious, guilty look. No! He could not have suspected who she was. The idea was ridiculous. Probably he did not even know that her name was Scales. And even if he knew her name, he had probably never heard of Gerald Scales, or the story of her flight. Why, he could not have been born until after she had left Bursley! Besides, the Peels were always quite aloof from the ordinary social life of the town. No! He could not have suspected her identity. It was infantile to conceive such a thing.

And yet, she inconsequently proceeded in the tangle of her afflicted mind, supposing he had suspected it! Supposing by some queer chance, he had heard her forgotten story, and casually put two and two together! Supposing even that he were merely to mention in the Five Towns that the Pension Frensham was kept by a Mrs. Scales. 'Scales? Scales?' people might repeat. 'Now, what does that remind me of?' And the ball might roll and roll till Constance or somebody picked it up! And then. . . .

Moreover—a detail of which she had at first unaccount-

ably failed to mark the significance—this Peel-Swynnerton was a friend of the Mr. Povey as to whom he had inquired. … In that case it could not be the same Povey. Impossible that the Peels should be on terms of friendship with Samuel Povey or his connections! But supposing after all they were! Supposing something utterly unanticipated and revolutionary had happened in the Five Towns!

She was disturbed. She was insecure. She foresaw inquiries being made concerning her. She foresaw an immense family fuss, endless tomfoolery, the upsetting of her existence, the destruction of her calm. And she sank away from that prospect. She could not face it. She did not want to face it. "No," she cried passionately in her soul, "I've lived alone, and I'll stay as I am. I can't change at my time of life." And her attitude towards a possible invasion of her solitude became one of resentment. "I won't have it! I won't have it! I will be left alone. Constance! What can Constance be to me, or I to her, now?" The vision of any change in her existence was in the highest degree painful to her. And not only painful! It frightened her. It made her shrink. But she could not dismiss it. … She could not argue herself out of it. The apparition of Matthew Peel-Swynnerton had somehow altered the very stuff of her fibres.

And surging on the outskirts of the central storm of her brain were ten thousand apprehensions about the management of the Pension. All was black, hopeless. The Pension might have been the most complete business failure that gross carelessness and incapacity had ever provoked. Was it not the fact that she had to supervise everything herself, that she could depend on no one? Were she to be absent even for a single day the entire structure would inevitably fall. Instead of working less she worked harder. And who could guarantee that her investments were safe?

When dawn announced itself, slowly discovering each object in the chamber, she was ill. Fever seemed to rage in her head. And in and round her mouth she had strange sensations. Fossette stirred in the basket near the large desk on which multifarious files and papers were ranged with minute particularity.

"Fossette!" she tried to call out; but no sound issued from her lips. She could not move her tongue. She tried to protrude it, and could not. For hours she had been conscious of a headache. Her heart sank. She was sick with fear. Her memory flashed to her father and his seizure. She was his daughter! Paralysis! "Ça scrait le comble!" she thought in French, horrified. Her fear became abject! "Can I move at all?" she thought, and madly jerked her head. Yes, she could move her head slightly on the pillow, and she could stretch her right arm, both arms. Absurd cowardice! Of course it was not a seizure! She reassured herself. Still, she could not put her tongue out. Suddenly she began to hiccough, and she had no control over the hiccough. She put her hand to the bell, whose ringing would summon the man who slept in a pantry off the hall, and suddenly the hiccough ceased. Her hand dropped. She was better. Besides, what use in ringing for a man if she could not speak to him through the door? She must wait for Jacqueline. At six o'clock every morning, summer and winter, Jacqueline entered her mistress's bedroom to release the dog for a moment's airing under her own supervision. The clock on the mantelpiece showed five minutes past three. She had three hours to wait. Fossette pattered across the room, and sprang on to the bed and nestled down. Sophia ignored her, but Fossette, being herself unwell and torpid, did not seem to care

Jacqueline was late. In the quarter of an hour between six o'clock and a quarter past, Sophia suffered the supreme

pangs of despair and verged upon insanity. It appeared to her that her cranium would blow off under pressure from within. Then the door opened silently, a few inches. Usually Jacqueline came into the room, but sometimes she stood behind the door and called in her soft, trembling voice, "Fossette! Fossette!" And on this morning she did not come into the room. The dog did not immediately respond. Sophia was in an agony. She marshalled all her volition, all her self-control and strength, to shout:

"Jacqueline!"

It came out of her, a horribly difficult and misshapen birth, but it came. She was exhausted.

"Yes, madame." Jacqueline entered.

As soon as she had a glimpse of Sophia she threw up her hands. Sophia stared at her, wordless.

"I will fetch the doctor—myself," whispered Jacqueline, and fled.

"Jacqueline!" The woman stopped. Then Sophia determined to force herself to make a speech, and she braced her muscles to an unprecedented effort. "Say not a word to the others." She could not bear that the whole household should know of her illness. Jacqueline nodded and vanished, the dog following. Jacqueline understood. She lived in the place with her mistress as with a fellow-conspirator.

Sophia began to feel better. She could get into a sitting posture, though the movement made her dizzy. By working to the foot of the bed she could see herself in the glass of the wardrobe. And she saw that the lower part of her face was twisted out of shape.

The doctor, who knew her, and who earned a lot of money in her house, told her frankly what had happened. *Paralysie glosso-labio-laryngee* was the phrase he used. She understood. A very slight attack; due to overwork and worry. He ordered absolute rest and quiet.

"Impossible!" she said, genuinely convinced that she alone was indispensable.

"Repose the most absolute!" he repeated.

She marvelled that a few words with a man who chanced to be named Peel-Swynnerton could have resulted in such a disaster, and drew a curious satisfaction from this fearful proof that she was so highly-strung. But even then she did not realize how profoundly she had been disturbed.

§5

"My darling Sophia——"

The inevitable miracle had occurred. Her suspicions concerning that Mr. Peel-Swynnerton were well-founded, after all! Here was a letter from Constance! The writing on the envelope was not Constance's; but even before examining it she had had a peculiar qualm. She received letters from England nearly every day asking about rooms and prices (and on many of them she had to pay threepence excess postage, because the writers carelessly or carefully forgot that a penny stamp was not sufficient); there was nothing to distinguish this envelope, and yet her first glance at it had startled her; and when, deciphering the smudged post-mark, she made out the word 'Bursley,' her heart did literally seem to stop, and she opened the letter in quite violent tremulation, thinking to herself: "The doctor would say this is very bad for me." Six days had elapsed since her attack, and she was wonderfully better; the distortion oi rnr face had almost disappeared. But the doctor was grave; he ordered no medicine, merely a tonic; and monotonously insisted on 'repose the most absolute,' on perfect mental calm. He said little else, allowing Sophia to judge from his silences the seriousness of her condition. Yes, the receipt of such a letter must be bad for her!

She controlled herself while she read it, lying in her dressing-gown against several pillows on the bed; a mist did not form in her eyes, nor did she sob, nor betray 'physically that she was not reading an order for two rooms for a week. But the expenditure of nervous force necessary to self-control was terrific.

Constance's handwriting had changed; it was, however, easily recognizable as a development of the neat caligraphy of the girl who could print window-tickets. The 'S' of Sophia was formed in the same way as she had formed it in the last letter which she had received from her at Axe!

"Mv DARLING SOPHIA,

"I cannot tell you how overjoyed I was to learn that after all these years you are alive and well, and doing so well too. I long to see you, my dear sister. It was Mr. Peel-Swynnerton who told me. He is a friend of Cyril's. Cyril is the name of my son. I married Samuel in 1867. Cyril was born in 1874 at Christmas. He is now twenty-two, and doing very well in London as a student of sculpture, though so young. He won a National Scholarship. There were only eight, of which he won one, in all England. Samuel died in 1888. If you read the papers you must have seen about the Povey affair. I mean of course Mr. Daniel Povey, Confectioner. It was that that killed poor Samuel. Poor mother died in 1875. It doesn't seem so long. Aunt Harriet and Aunt Maria are both dead. Old Dr. Harrop is dead, and his son has practically retired. He has a partner, a Scotchman. Mr. Critchlow has married Miss Insull. Did you ever hear of such a thing? They have taken over the shop, and I live in the house part, the other being bricked up. Business in the Square is not what it used to be. The steam trams take all the custom to Hanbridge, and they are talking of electric trams, but I dare

say it is only talk. I have a fairly good servant. She has been with me a long time, but servants are not what they were. I keep pretty well, except for my sciatica and palpitation. Since Cyril went to London I have been very lonely. But I try to cheer up and count my blessings. I am sure I have a great deal to be thankful for. And now this news of you! Please write to me a long letter, and tell me all about yourself. It is a long way to Paris. But surely now you know I am still here, you will come and pay me a visit—at least. Everybody would be *most* glad to see you. And I should be so proud and glad. As I say, I am all alone. Mr. Critchlow says I am to say there is a deal of money waiting for you. You know he is the trustee. There is the half-share of mother's and also of Aunt Harriet's, and it has been accumulating. By the way, they are getting up a subscription for Miss Chetwynd, poor old thing. Her sister is dead, and she is in poverty. I have put myself down for £20. Now, my dear sister, please do write to me at once. You see it is still the old address. I remain, my darling Sophia, with much love, your affectionate sister,

"CONSTANCE POVEY.

"P.S.—I should have written yesterday, but I was not fit. Every time I sat down to write, I cried."

"Of course," said Sophia to Fossette, "she expects me to go to her, instead of her coming to me! And yet who's the busiest?"

But this observation was not serious. It was merely a trifle of affectionate malicious embroidery that Sophia put on the edge of her deep satisfaction. The very spirit of simple love seemed to emanate from the paper on which Constance had written. And this spirit woke suddenly and completely Sophia's love for Constance. Constance! At

that moment there was assuredly for Sophia no creature in the world like Constance. Constance personified for her the qualities of the Baines family. Constance's letter was a great letter, a perfect letter, perfect in its artlessness; the natural expression of the Baines character at its best. Not an awkward reference in the whole of it! No clumsy expression of surprise at anything that she, Sophia, had done, or failed to do! No mention of Gerald! Just a sublime acceptance of the situation as it was, and the assurance of undiminished love! Tact? 'No; it was something finer than tact! Tact was conscious, skilful. Sophia was certain that the notion of tactfulness had not entered Constance's head. Constance had simply written out of her heart. And that was what made the letter so splendid. Sophia was convinced that no one but a Baines could have written such a letter.

She felt that she must rise to the height of that letter, that she too must show her Baines blood. And she went primly to her desk, and began to write (on private notepaper) in that imperious large hand of hers that was so different from Constance's. She began a little stiffly, but after a few lines her generous and passionate soul was responding freely to the appeal of Constance. She asked that Mr. Critchlow should pay £20 for her to the Miss Chetwynd fund. She spoke of her Pension and of Paris, and of her pleasure in Constance's letter. But she said nothing as to Gerald, nor as to the possibility of a visit to the Five Towns. She finished the letter in a blaze of love, and passed from it as from a dream to the sterile banality of the daily life of the Pension Frensham, feeling that, compared to Constance's affection, nothing else had any worth.

But she would not consider the project of going to Bursley. Never, never would she go to Bursley. If Constance chose to come to Paris and see her, she would be delighted, but

she herself would not budge. The mere notion of any change in her existence intimidated her. And as for returning to Bursley itself . . . no, no!

Nevertheless, at the Pension Frensham, the future could not be as the past. Sophia's health forbade that. She knew that the doctor was right. Every time that she made an effort, she knew intimately and speedily that the doctor was right. Only her will-power was unimpaired; the machinery by which will-power is converted into action was mysteriously damaged. She was aware of the fact. But she could not face it yet. Time would have to elapse before she could bring herself to face that fact. She was getting an old woman. She could no longer draw on reserves. Yet she persisted to everyone that she was quite recovered and was abstaining from her customary work simply from an excess of prudence. Certainly her face had recovered. And the Pension, being a machine all of whose parts were in order, continued to run, apparently, with its usual smoothness. It is true that the excellent chef began to peculate, but as his cuisine did not suffer, the result was not noticeable for a long period. The whole staff and many of the guests knew that Sophia had been indisposed; and they knew no more.

When by hazard Sophia observed a fault in the daily conduct of the house, her first impulse was to go to the root of it and cure it, her second was to leave it alone, or to palliate it by some superficial remedy. Unperceived, and yet vaguely suspected by various people, the decline of the Pension Frensham had set in. The tide, having risen to its highest, was receding, but so little that no one could be sure that it had turned. Every now and then it rushed up again and washed the furthest stone.

Sophia and Constance exchanged several letters. Sophia said repeatedly that she could not leave Paris. At length she roundly asked Constance to come and pay her a visit.

She made the suggestion with fear—for the prospect of actually seeing her beloved Constance alarmed her—but she could do no less than make it. And in a few days she had a reply to say that Constance would have come, under Cyril's charge, but that her sciatica was suddenly much worse, and she was obliged to lie down every day after dinner to rest her legs. Travelling was impossible for her. The fates were combining against Sophia's decision.

And now Sophia began to ask herself about her duty to Constance. The truth was that she was groping round to find an excuse for reversing her decision. She was afraid to reverse it, yet tempted. She had the desire to do something which she objected to doing. It was like the desire to throw one's self over a high balcony. It drew her, drew her, and she drew back against it. The Pension was now tedious to her. It bored her even to pretend to be the supervising head of the Pension. Throughout the house discipline had loosened.

She wondered when Mr. Mardon would renew his overtures for the transformation of her enterprise into a limited company. In spite of herself she would deliberately cross his path and give him opportunities to begin on the old theme. He had never before left her in peace for so long a period. No doubt she had, upon his last assault, absolutely convinced him that his efforts had no smallest chance of success, and he had made up his mind to cease them. With a single word she could wind him up again. The merest hint, one day when he was paying his bill, and he would be beseeching her. But she could not utter the word.

Then she began to say openly that she did not feel well, that the house was too much for her, and that the doctor had imperatively commanded rest. She said this to everyone except Mardon. And everyone somehow persisted in not saying it to Mardon. The doctor having advised that

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she should spend more time in the open air, she would take afternoon drives in the Bois with Fossette. It was October. But Mr. Mardon never seemed to hear of those drives.

One morning he met her in the street outside the house.

"I'm sorry to hear you're so unwell," he said confidentially, after they had discussed the health of Fossette.

"So unwell!" she exclaimed as if resenting the statement. "Who told you I was so unwell?"

"Jacqueline. She told me you often said that what you needed was a complete change. And it seems the doctor says so, too."

"Oh! doctors!" she murmured, without however denying the truth of Jacqueline's assertion. She saw hope in Mr. Mardon's eyes.

"Of course, you know," he said, still more confidentially, "if you *should* happen to change your mind, I'm always ready to form a little syndicate to take this"—he waved discreetly at the Pension—"off your hands."

She shook her head violently, which was strange, considering that for weeks she had been wishing to hear such words from Mr. Mardon.

"You needn't give it up altogether," he said. "You could retain your hold on it. We'd make you manageress, with a salary and a share in the profits. You'd be mistress just as much as you are now."

"Oh!" said she carelessly. *"If I gave it up, I should give it up entirely.* No half measures for me."

With the utterance of that sentence, the history of Frensham's as a private understanding was brought to a close. Sophia knew it. Mr. Mardon knew it. Mr. Mardon's heart leapt. He saw in his imagination the formation of the preliminary syndicate, with himself as its head, and then the re-sale by the syndicate to a limited company at a profit. He saw a nice little profit for his own private

personal self of a thousand or so—gained in a moment. The plant, his hope, which he had deemed dead, blossomed with miraculous suddenness.

"Well," he said. "Give it up entirely, then! Take a holiday for life. You've deserved it, Mrs. Scales."

She shook her head once again.

"Think it over," he said.

'I gave you my answer years ago," she said obstinately, while fearing lest he should take her at her word.

"Oblige me by thinking it over," he said. "I'll mention it to you again in a few days."

"It will be no use," she said.

He took his leave, waddling down the street in his vague clothes, conscious of his fame as Lewis Mardon, the great house-agent of the Champs Elysees, known throughout Europe and America.

In a few days he did mention it again.

"There's only one thing that makes me dream of it even for a moment," said Sophia. "And that is my sister's health."

"Your sister!" he exclaimed. He did not know she had a sister. Never had she spoken of her family.

"Yes. Her letters are beginning to worry me."

"Does she live in Paris?"

"No. In Staffordshire. She has never left home."

And to preserve her pride intact she led Mr. Mardon to think that Constance was in a most serious way, whereas in truth Constance had nothing worse than her sciatica, and even that was somewhat better.

Thus she yielded.

CHAPTER II: THE MEETING

§1

SOON after dinner one day in the following spring, Mr. Critchlow knocked at Constance's door. She was seated in the rocking-chair in front of the fire in the parlour. She wore a large 'rough' apron, and with the outlying parts of the apron she was nibbing the moisture out of the coat of a young wire-haired fox-terrier, for whom no more original name had been found than 'Spot.' It is true that he had a spot. Constance had more than once called the world to witness that she would never have a young dog again, because, as she said, she could not be always running about after them, and they ate the stuffing out of the furniture. But her last dog had lived too long; a dog can do worse things than eat furniture; and, in her natural reaction against age in dogs, and also in the hope of postponing as long as possible the inevitable sorrow and upset which death causes when it takes off a domestic pet, she had not known how to refuse the very desirable fox-terrier aged ten months that an acquaintance had offered to her. Spot's beautiful pink skin could be seen under his disturbed hair; he was exquisitely soft to the touch, and to himself he was loathsome. His eyes continually peeped forth between corners of the agitated towel, and they were full of inquietude and shame.

Amy was assisting at this performance, gravely on the watch to see that Spot did not escape into the coal-cellar. She opened the door to Mr. Critchlow's knock. Mr. Critchlow entered without any formalities, as usual. He did not seem to have changed. He had the same quantity of white hair, he wore the same long white apron, and his voice

(which showed however an occasional tendency to shrillness) had the same grating quality. He stood fairly straight. He was carrying a newspaper in his vellum hand.

"Well, missis!" he said.

"That will do, thank you, Amy," said Constance, quietly. Amy went slowly.

"So you're washing him for her!" said Mr. Critchlow.

[4] Yes," Constance admitted. Spot glanced sharply at the aged man

"An* ye seen this bit in the paper about Sophia?" he asked, holding the *Signal* for her inspection.

"About Sophia?" cried Constance. "What's amiss?"

"Nothing's amiss. But they've got it It's in the 'Staffordshire day by day' column. Here! I'll read it ye." He drew a long wooden spectacle-case from his waistcoat pocket, and placed a second pair of spectacles on his nose. Then he sat down on the sofa, his knees sticking out pointedly, and read: " 'We understand that Mrs. Sophia Scales, proprietress of the famous Pension Frensham in the Rue Lord Byron, Paris'—it's that famous that nobody in th' Five Towns has ever heard of it—'is about to pay a visit to her native town, Bursley, after an absence of over thirty years. Mrs. Scales belonged to the well-known and highly respected family of Baines. She has recently disposed of the Pension Frensham to a limited company, and we are betraying no secret in stating that the price paid ran well into five figures.' So ye see!" Mr. Critchlow commented.

"How do those *Signal* people find out things?" Constance murmured.

"Eh, bless ye, I don't know," said Mr. Critchlow.

This was an untruth. Mr. Critchlow had himself given the information to the new editor of the *Signal,* who had soon been made aware of Critchlow's passion for the press, and who knew how to make use of it.

"I wish it hadn't appeared just to-day," said Constance.

"Why?"

"Oh! I don't know, I wish it hadn't."

"Well, I'll be touring on, missis," said Mr. Critchlow, meaning that he would go.

He left the paper, and descended the steps with senile deliberation. It was characteristic that he had shown no curiosity whatever as to the details of Sophia's arrival.

Constance removed her apron, wrapped Spot up in it, and put him in a corner of the sofa She then abruptly sent Amy out to buy a penny time-table.

"I thought you were going by tram to Knype," Amy observed.

"I have decided to go by train," said Constance, with cold dignity, as if she had decided the fate of nations. She hated such observations from Amy, who unfortunately lacked, in an increasing degree, the supreme gift of unquestioning obedience.

When Amy came breathlessly back, she found Constance in her bedroom, withdrawing crumpled balls of paper from the sleeves of her second-best mantle. Constance scarcely ever wore this mantle. In theory it was destined for chapel on wet Sundays; in practice it had remained long in the wardrobe, Sundays having been obstinately fine for weeks and weeks together. It was a mantle that Constance had never really liked. But she was not going to Knype to meet Sophia in her everyday mantle; and she had no intention of donning her best mantle for such an excursion. To make her first appearance before Sophia in the best mantle she had—this would have been a sad mistake of tactics! Not only would it have led to an anti-climax on Sunday, but it would have given to Constance the air of being in awe of Sophia. Now Constance was in truth a little afraid of Sophia; in thirty years Sophia might have grown into any-

thing, whereas Constance had remained just Constance. Paris was a great place; and it was immensely far off. And the mere sound of that limited company business was intimidating. Imagine Sophia having by her own efforts created something which a real limited company wanted to buy and had bought! Yes, Constance was afraid, but she did not mean to show her fear in her mantle. After all, she was the elder. And she had her dignity too—and a lot of it—tucked away in her secret heart, hidden within the mildness of that soft exterior. So she had decided on the second-best mantle, which, being seldom used, had its sleeves stuffed with paper to the end that they might keep their shape and their 'fall.' The little balls of paper were strewed over the bed.

*'There's a train at a quarter to three, gets to Knype at ten minutes past," said Amy, officiously. "But supposing it was only three minutes late and the London train was prompt, then you might miss her. Happen you'd better take the two fifteen to be on the safe side."

"Let me look," said Constance, firmly. "Please put all this paper in the wardrobe."

She would have preferred not to follow Amy's suggestion, but it was so incontestably wise that she was obliged to accept it.

"Unless ye go by tram," said Amy. "That won't mean starting quite so soon."

But Constance would not go by tram. If she took the tram she would be bound to meet people who had read the *Signal*, and who would say, with their stupid vacuity: "Going to meet your sister at Knype?" And then tiresome conversations would follow. Whereas, in the train, she would choose a compartment, and would be far less likely to encounter chatterers.

There was now not a minute to lose. And the excitement which had been growing in that house for days past, under

a pretence of calm, leapt out swiftly into the light of the sun, and was unashamed. Amy had to help her mistress make herself as comely as she could be made without her best dress, mantle, and bonnet. Amy was frankly consulted as to effects. The barrier of class was lowered for a space. Many years had elapsed since Constance had been conscious of a keen desire to look smart. She was reminded of the days when, in full fig for chapel, she would dash dovvn-stairs on a Sunday morning, and, assuming a pose for inspection at the threshold of the parlour, would demand of Samuel: "Shall I do?" Yes, she used to dash downstairs, like a child, and yet in those days she had thought herself so sedate and mature! She sighed, half with lancinating regret, and half in gentle disdain of that mercurial creature aged less than thirty. At fifty-one she regarded herself as old. And she was old. And Amy had the tricks and manners of an old spinster. Thus the excitement in the house was an 'old' excitement, and, like Constance's desire to look smart, it had its ridiculous side, which was also its tragic side, the side that would have made a boor guffaw, and a hysterical fool cry, and a wise man meditate sadly upon the earth's fashion of renewing itself.

At half-past one Constance was dressed, with the exception of her gloves. She looked at the clock a second time to make sure that she might safely glance round the house without fear of missing the train. She went up into the bedroom on the second-floor, her and Sophia's old bedroom, which she had prepared with enormous care for Sophia. The airing of that room had been an enterprise of days, for, save by a minister during the sittings of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference at Bursley, it had never been occupied since the era when Maria Insull used occasionally to sleep in the house. Cyril clung to his old room on his visits. Constance had an ample supply of solid

and stately furniture, and the chamber destined for Sophia was lightened in every corner by the reflections of polished mahogany. It was also fairly impregnated with the odour of furniture paste—an odour of which no housewife need be ashamed. Further, it had been re-papered in a delicate blue, with one of the new 'art' patterns. It was a 'Baines' room. And Constance did not care where Sophia came from, nor what Sophia had been accustomed to, nor into what limited company Sophia had been transformed—that room was adequate! It could not have been improved upon. You had only to look at the crocheted mats—even those on the washstand under the white-and-gold ewer and other utensils. It was folly to expose such mats to the splashings of a washstand, but it was sublime folly. Sophia might remove them if she cared. Constance was house-proud; house-pride had slumbered within her; now it blazed forth.

A fire brightened the drawing-room, which was a truly magnificent apartment, a museum of valuables collected by the Baines and the Maddack families since the year 1840, tempered by the latest novelties in antimacassars and cloths. In all Bursley there could have been few drawing-rooms to compare with Constance's. Constance knew it. She was not afraid of her drawing-room being seen by anybody.

She passed for an instant into her own bedroom, where Amy was patiently picking balls of paper from the bed.

"Now you quite understand about tea?" Constance asked.

"Oh yes, 'm," said Amy, as if to say: "How much oftener are you going to ask me that question?" "Are you off now, 'm?"

"Yes," said Constance. "Come and fasten the front-door after me."

They descended together to the parlour. A white cloth

for tea lay folded on the table. It was of the finest damask that skill could choose and money buy. It was fifteen years old, and had never been spread. Constance would not have produced it for the first meal, had she not possessed two other of equal eminence. On the harmonium were ranged several jams and cakes, a Bursley pork-pie, and some pickled salmon; with the necessary silver. All was there. Amy could not go wrong. And crocuses were in the vases on the mantelpiece. Her 'garden,' in the phrase which used to cause Samuel to think how extraordinarily feminine she was! It was a long time since she had had a 'garden' on the mantelpiece. Her interest in her chronic sciatica and in her palpitations had grown at the expense of her interest in gardens. Often, when she had finished the complicated processes by which her furniture and other goods were kept in order, she had strength only to 'rest.' She was rather a fragile, small, fat woman, soon out of breath, easily marred. This business of preparing for the advent of Sophia had appeared to her genuinely colossal. However, she had come through it very well. She was in pretty good health; only a little tired, and more than a little anxious and nervous, as she gave the last glance.

"Take away that apron, do!" she said to Amy, pointing to the rough apron in the corner of the sofa. "By the way, where is Spot?"

"Spot, m'm?" Amy ejaculated.

Both their hearts jumped. Amy instinctively looked out of the window. He was there, sure enough, in the gutter, studying the indescribabilities of King Street. He had obviously escaped when Amy came in from buying the time-table. The woman's face was guilty.

"Amy, I wonder *at* you!" exclaimed Constance, tragically. She opened the door.

"Well, I never did see the like of that dog!" murmured Amy.

"Spot!" his mistress commanded. "Gome here at once. Do you hear me?"

Spot turned sharply and gazed motionless at Constance. Then with a toss of the head he dashed off to the corner of the Square, and gazed motionless again. Amy went forth to catch him. After an age she brought him in, squealing. He was in a state exceedingly offensive to the eye and to the nose. He had effectively got rid of the smell of soap, which he loathed. Constance could have wept. It did really appear to her that nothing had gone right that day. And Spot had the most innocent, trustful air. Impossible to make him realize that his Aunt Sophia was coming. He would have sold his entire family into servitude in order to buy ten yards of King Street gutter.

"You must wash him in the scullery, that's all there is for it," said Constance, controlling herself. "Put that apron on, and don't forget one of your new aprons when you open the door. Better shut him up in Mr. Cyril's bedroom when you've dried him."

And she went, charged with worries, clasping her bag and her umbrella and smoothing her gloves, and spying downwards at the folds of her mantle.

"That's a funny way to go to Bursley Station, that is," said Amy, observing that Constance was descending King Street instead of crossing it into Wedgwood Street. And she caught Spot 'a fair clout on the head,' to indicate to him that she had him alone in the house now.

Constance was taking a round-about route to the station, so that, if stopped by acquaintances, she should not be too obviously going to the station. Her feelings concerning the arrival of Sophia, and concerning the town's attitude towards it, were very complex.

She was forced to hurry. And she had risen that morning with plans perfectly contrived for the avoidance of hurry. She disliked hurry because it always 'put her about.'

§2

The express from London was late, so that Constance had three-quarters of an hour of the stony calmness of Knype platform when it is waiting for a great train. At last the porters began to cry, "Macclesfield, Stockport, and Manchester train"; the immense engine glided round the curve, dwarfing the carriages behind it, and Constance had a supreme tremor. The calmness of the platform was transformed into a *melee.* Little Constance found herself left on the fringe of a physically agitated crowd which was apparently trying to scale a precipice surmounted by windows and doors from whose apertures looked forth defenders of the train. Knype platform seemed as if it would never be reduced to order again. And Constance did not estimate highly the chances of picking out an unknown Sophia from that welter. She was very seriously perturbed. All the muscles of her face were drawn as her gaze wandered anxiously from end to end of the train.

Presently she saw a singular dog. Other people also saw it. It was of the colour of chocolate; it had a head and shoulders richly covered with hair that hung down in thousands of tufts like the tufts of a modern mop such as is bought in shops. This hair stopped suddenly rather less than halfway along the length of the dog's body, the remainder of which was naked and as smooth as marble. The effect was to give to the inhabitants of the Five Towns the impression that the dog had forgotten an essential part of its attire and was outraging decency. The ball of hair which had been allowed to grow on the dog's tail, and the

circles of hair which ornamented its ankles, only served to intensify the impression of indecency. A pink ribbon round its neck completed the outrage. The animal had absolutely the air of a decked trollop. A chain ran taut from the creature's neck into the middle of a small crowd of persons gesticulating over trunks, and Constance traced it to a tall and distinguished woman in a coat and skirt with a rather striking hat. A beautiful and aristocratic woman, Constance thought, at a distance! Then the strange idea came to her: "That's Sophia!" She was sure. . . . She was not sure. . . . She was sure. The woman emerged from the crowd. Her eye fell on Constance. They both hesitated, and, as it were, wavered uncertainly towards each other.

"I should have known you anywhere," said Sophia, with apparently careless tranquillity, as she stooped to kiss Constance, raising her veil.

Constance saw that this marvellous tranquillity must be imitated, and she imitated it very well. It was a 'Baines' tranquillity. But she noticed a twitching of her sister's lips. The twitching comforted Constance, proving to her that she was not alone in foolishness. There was also something queer about the permanent lines of Sophia's mouth. That must be due to the 'attack' about which Sophia had written.

"Did Cyril meet you?" asked Constance. It was all that she could think of to say.

"Oh yes!" said Sophia, eagerly. "And I went to his studio, and he saw me off at Euston. He is a *very* nice boy. I love him."

She said I love him' with the intonation of Sophia aged fifteen. Her tone and imperious gesture sent Constance flying back to the 'sixties. "She hasn't altered one bit," Constance thought with joy. "Nothing could change Sophia." And at the back of that notion was a more

general notion: "Nothing could change a Baines." It was true that Constance's Sophia had not changed. Powerful individualities remain undisfigured by no matter what vicissitudes. After this revelation of the original Sophia, arising as it did out of praise of Cyril, Constance felt easier, felt reassured.

"This is Fossette," said Sophia, pulling at the chain.

Constance knew not what to reply. Surely Sophia could not be aware what she did in bringing such a dog to a place where people were so particular as they are in the Five Towns.

"Fossette!" She repeated the name in an endearing accent, half stooping towards the dog. After all, it was not the dog's fault. Sophia had certainly mentioned a dog in her letters, but she had not prepared Constance for the spectacle of Fossette.

All that happened in a moment. A porter appeared with two trunks belonging to Sophia. Constance observed that they were superlatively 'good' trunks; also that Sophia's clothes, though 'on the showy side,' were superlatively 'good.' The getting of Sophia's ticket to Bursley occupied them next, and soon the first shock of meeting had worn off.

In a second-class compartment of the Loop Line train, with Sophia and Fossette opposite to her, Constance had leisure to 'take in' Sophia. She came to the conclusion that, despite her slenderness and straightness and the general effect of the long oval of her face under the hat, Sophia looked her age. She saw that Sophia must have been through a great deal; her experiences were damagingly printed in the details of feature. Seen at a distance, she might have passed for a woman of thirty, even for a girl, but seen across a narrow railway carriage she was a woman whom suffering had aged. Yet obviously her spirit was

unbroken. Hear her tell a doubtful porter that of course she should take Fossette with her into the carriage! See her shut the carriage door with the expressed intention of keeping other people out! She was accustomed to command. At the same time her face had an almost set smile, as though she had said to herself: "I will die smiling." Constance felt sorry for her. While recognizing in Sophia a superior in charm, in experience, in knowledge of the world and in force of personality, she yet with a kind of undisturbed, fundamental superiority felt sorry for Sophia.

"What do you think?" said Sophia, absently fingering Fossette. "A man came up to me at Euston, while Cyril was getting my ticket, and said, 'Eh, Miss Baines, I haven't seen ye for over thirty years, but I know you're Miss Baines, or *were-and* you're looking bonny.' Then he went off. I think it must have been Holl, the grocer."

"Had he got a long white beard?"

"Yes."

"Then it was Mr. Holl. He's been Mayor twice. He's an alderman, you know."

"Really!" said Sophia. "But wasn't it queer?"

"Eh! Bless us!" exclaimed Constance. "Don't talk about queer! It's terrible how time flies."

The conversation stopped, and it refused to start again. Two women who are full of affectionate curiosity about each other, and who have not seen each other for thirty years, and who are anxious to confide in each other, ought to discover no difficulty in talking; but somehow these two could not talk. Constance perceived that Sophia was impeded by the same awkwardness as herself.

"Well I never!" cried Sophia, suddenly. She had glanced out of the window and had seen two camels and an elephant in a field close to the line, amid manufactories and warehouses and advertisements of soap.

"Oh!" said Constance. "That's Barnum's, you know. They have what they call a central depot here, because it's the middle of England." Constance spoke proudly. (After all, there can be only one middle.) It was on her tongue to say, in her 'tart' manner, that Fossette ought to be with the camels, but she refrained. Sophia hit on the excellent idea of noting all the buildings that were new to her and all the landmarks that she remembered. It was surprising how little the district had altered.

"Same smoke!" said Sophia.

"Same smoke!" Constance agreed.

"It's even worse," said Sophia.

"Do you think so?" Constance was slightly piqued. "But they're doing something now for smoke abatement."

"I must have forgotten how dirty it was!" said Sophia. "I suppose that's it. I'd no *idea*. . . !"

"Really!" said Constance. Then, in candid admission, "The fact is, it *is* dirty. You can't imagine what work it makes, especially with window-curtains."

As the train puffed under Trafalgar Road, Constance pointed to a new station that was being built there, to be called 'Trafalgar Road' station.

"Won't it be strange?" said she, accustomed to the eternal sequence of Loop Line stations—Turnhill, Bursley, Bleakridge, Hanbridge, Cauldon, Knype, Trent Vale, and Longshaw. A 'Trafalgar Road' inserting itself between Bleakridge and Hanbridge seemed to her excessively curious.

"Yes, I suppose it will," Sophia agreed.

"But of course it's not the same to you," said Constance, dashed. She indicated the glories of Bursley Park, as the train slackened for Bursley, with modesty. Sophia gazed, and vaguely recognized the slopes where she had taken her first walk with Gerald Scales.

Nobody accosted them at Bursley Station, and they drove to the Square in a cab. Amy was at the window; she held up Spot, who was in a plenary state of cleanliness, rivalling the purity of Amy's apron.

"Good afternoon, m'm," said Amy, officiously, to Sophia, as Sophia came up the steps.

"Good afternoon, Amy," Sophia replied. She flattered Amy in thus showing that she was acquainted with her name; but if ever a servant was put into her place by mere tone, Amy was put into her place on that occasion. Constance trembled at Sophia's frigid and arrogant politeness. Certainly Sophia was not used to being addressed first by servants. But Amy was not quite the ordinary servant. She was much older than the ordinary servant, and she had acquired a partial moral dominion over Constance, though Constance would have warmly denied it. Hence Constance's apprehension. However, nothing happened. Amy apparently did not feel the snub.

"Take Spot and put him in Mr. Cyril's bedroom," Constance murmured to her, as if implying: "Have I not already told you to do that?" The fact was, she was afraid for Spot's life.

"Now, Fossette!" She welcomed the incoming poodle kindly; the poodle began to sniff.

The fat, red cabman was handling the trunks on the pavement, and Amy was upstairs. For a moment the sisters were alone together in the parlour.

"So here I am!" exclaimed the tall, majestic woman of fifty. And her lips twitched again as she looked round the room—so small to her.

"Yes, here you are!" Constance agreed. She bit her lip, and, as a measure of prudence to avoid breaking down, she bustled out to the cabman. A passing instant of emotion, like a fleck of foam on a wide and calm sea!

The cabman blundered up and downstairs with trunks, and saluted Sophia's haughty generosity, and then there was quietness. Amy was already brewing the tea in the cave. The prepared tea-table in front of the fire made a glittering array.

"Now, what about Fossette?" Constance voiced anxieties that had been growing on her.

"Fossette will be quite right with me," said Sophia, firmly.

They ascended to the guest's room, which drew Sophia's admiration for its prettiness. She hurried to the window and looked out into the Square.

"Would you like a fire?" Constance asked, in a rather perfunctory manner. For a bedroom fire, in seasons of normal health, was still regarded as absurd in the Square.

"Oh, no!" said Sophia; but with a slight failure to rebut the suggestion as utterly ridiculous.

"Sure?" Constance questioned.

"Quite, thank you," said Sophia.

"Well, I'll leave you. I expect Amy will have tea ready directly." She went down into the kitchen. "Amy," she said, "as soon as we've finished tea, light a fire in Mrs. Scales's bedroom."

"In the top bedroom, m'm?"

"Yes."

Constance climbed again to her own bedroom, and shut the door. She needed a moment to herself, in the midst of this terrific affair. She sighed with relief as she removed her mantle. She thought: "At any rate we've met, and I've got her here. She's very nice. No, she isn't a bit altered." She hesitated to admit that to her Sophia was the least in the world formidable. And so she said once more: "She's very nice. She isn't a bit altered." And then: "Fancy her being here! She really is here." With her perfect simplicity it

did not occur to Constance to speculate as to what Sophia thought of her.

Sophia was downstairs first, and Constance found her looking at the blank wall beyond the door leading to the kitchen steps.

"So this is where you had it bricked up?" said Sophia.

"Yes," said Constance. "That's the place."

"It makes me feel like people feel when they have tickling in a limb that's been cut off!" said Sophia.

"Oh, Sophia!"

The tea received a great deal of praise from Sophia, but neither of them ate much. Constance found that Sophia was like herself: she had to be particular about her food. She tasted dainties for the sake of tasting, but it was a bird's pecking. Not the twelfth part of the tea was consumed. They dared not indulge caprices. Only their eyes could feed.

After tea they went up to the drawing-room, and in the corridor had the startling pleasure of seeing two dogs who scurried about after each other in amity. Spot had found Fossette, with the aid of Amy's incurable carelessness, and had at once examined her with great particularity. She seemed to be of an amiable disposition, and not averse from the lighter distractions. For a long time the sisters sat chatting together in the lit drawing-room to the agreeable sound of happy dogs playing in the dark corridor. Those dogs saved the situation, because they needed constant attention. When the dogs dozed, the sisters began to look through photograph albums, of which Constance had several, bound in plush or morocco. Nothing will sharpen the memory, evoke the past, raise the dead, rejuvenate the ageing, and cause both sighs and smies, like a collection of photographs gathered together during long years of life. Constance had an astonishing menagerie of

unknown cousins and their connections, and of townspeople; she had Cyril at all ages; she had weird daguerreotypes of her parents and their parents. The strangest of all was a portrait of Samuel Povey as an infant in arms. Sophia checked an impulse to laugh at it. But when Constance said: "Isn't it funny?" she did allow herself to laugh. A photograph of Samuel in the year before his death was really imposing. Sophia stared at it, impressed. It was the portrait of an honest man.

"How long have you been a widow?" Constance asked in a low voice, glancing at upright Sophia over her spectacles, a leaf of the album raised against her finger.

Sophia unmistakably flushed. "I don't know that I am a widow," said she, with an air. "My husband left me in 1870, and I've never seen nor heard of him since."

"Oh, my dear!" cried Constance, alarmed and deafened as by a clap of awful thunder. "I thought ye were a widow. Mr. Peel-Swynnerton said he was told positively ye were a widow. That's why I never. …" She stopped. Her face was troubled.

"Of course I always passed for a widow, over there," said Sophia.

"Of course," said Constance quickly. "I see. . . ."

"And I may be,a widow," said Sophia.

Constance made no remark. This was a blow. Bursley was such a particular place. Doubtless, Gerald Scales had behaved like a scoundrel. That was sure!

When, immediately afterwards, Amy opened the drawing-room door (having first knocked—the practice of encouraging a servant to plunge without warning of any kind into a drawing-room had never been favoured in that house) she saw the sisters sitting rather near to each other at the walnut oval table, Mrs. Scales very upright, and staring into the fire, and Mrs. Povey 'bunched up' and staring at the

photograph album; both seeming to Amy aged and apprehensive; Mrs. Povey's hair was quite grey, though Mrs. Scales's hair was nearly as black as Amy's own. Mrs. Scales started at the sound of the knock, and turned her head.

"Here's Mr. and Mrs. Critchlow, m'm," announced Amy.

The sisters glanced at one another, with lifted foreheads. Then Mrs. Povey spoke to Amy as though visits at half-past eight at night were a customary phenomenon of the household. Nevertheless, she trembled to think what outrageous thing Mr. Critchlow might say to Sophia after thirty years' absence. The occasion was great, and it might also be terrible.

"Ask them to come up," she said calmly.

But Amy had the best of that encounter. "I have done," she replied, and instantly produced them out of the darkness of the corridor. It was providential: the sisters had made no remark that the Critchlows might not hear.

Then Maria Critchlow, simpering, had to greet Sophia. Mrs. Critchlow was very agitated, from sheer nervousness. She curvetted; she almost pranced; and she made noises with her mouth as though she saw someone eating a sour apple. She wanted to show Sophia how greatly she had changed from the young, timid apprentice. Certainly since her marriage she had changed. As manager of other people's business she had not felt the necessity of being effusive to customers, but as proprietress, anxiety to succeed had dragged her out of her capable and mechanical indifference. It was a pity. Her consistent dullness had had a sort of dignity; but genial, she was merely ridiculous. Animation cruelly displayed her appalling commonness and physical shabbiness. Sophia's demeanour was not

chilly; but it indicated that Sophia had no wish to be eyed over as a freak of nature.

Mr. Critchlow advanced very slowly into the room. "Ye still carry your head on a stiff neck," said he, deliberately examining Sophia. Then with great care he put out his long thin arm and took her hand. "Well, I'm rare and glad to see ye!"

Everyone was thunderstruck at this expression 01 joy. Mr. Critchlow had never been known to be glad to see anybody.

"Yes," twittered Maria, "Mr. Critchlow would come in to-night. Nothing would do but he must come in to-night."

"You didn't tell me this afternoon," said Constance, "that you were going to give us the pleasure of your company like this."

He looked momentarily at Constance. "No," he grated, "I don't know as I did."

His gaze flattered Sophia. Evidently he treated this experienced and sad woman of fifty as a young girl. And in presence of his extreme age she felt like a young girl, remembering the while how as a young girl she had hated him. Repulsing the assistance of his wife, he arranged an armchair in front of the fire and meticulously put himself into it. Assuredly he was much older in a drawing-room than behind the counter of his shop. Constance had noticed that in the afternoon. A live coal fell out of the fire. He bent forward, wet his fingers, picked up the coal and threw it back into the fire.

"Well," said Sophia. "I wouldn't have done that."

"I never saw Mr. Critchlow's equal for picking up hot cinders," Maria giggled.

Mr. Critchlow deigned no remark. "When did ye leave this Paris?" he demanded of Sophia, leaning back, and putting his hands on the arms of the chair.

"Yesterday morning," said Sophia.

"And what'n ye been doing with yeself since yesterday morning?"

"I spent last night in London," Sophia replied.

"Oh, in London, did ye?"

"Yes. Cyril and I had an evening together."

"Eh? Cyril! What's yer opinion o' Cyril, Sophia?"

"I'm very proud to have Cyril for a nephew," said Sophia.

"Oh! Are ye?" The old man was obviously ironic.

"Yes I am," Sophia insisted sharply. "I'm not going to hear a word said against Cyril."

She proceeded to an enthusiastic laudation of Cyril which rather overwhelmed his mother. Constance was pleased; she was delighted. And yet somewhere in her mind was an uncomfortable feeling that Cyril, having taken a fancy to his brilliant aunt, had tried to charm her as he seldom or never tried to charm his mother. Cyril and Sophia had dazzled and conquered each other; they were of the same type; whereas she, Constance, being but a plain person, could not glitter.

She rang the bell and gave instructions to Amy about food—fruit cakes, coffee and hot milk, on a tray; and Sophia also spoke to Amy murmuring a request as to Fossette.

"Yes, Mrs. Scales," said Amy, with eager deference.

Mrs. Critchlow smiled vaguely from a low chair near the curtained window. Then Constance lit another burner of the chandelier. In doing so, she gave a little sigh; it was a sigh of relief. Mr. Critchlow had behaved himself. Now that he and Sophia had met, the worst was over. Had Constance known beforehand that he would pay a call, she would have been agonized by apprehensions, but now that he had actually come she was glad he had come.

When he had silently sipped some hot milk, he drew a

thick bunch of papers, white and blue, from his bulging breast-pocket.

"Now, Maria Critchlow," he called, edging round his chair slightly. "Ye'd best go back home."

Maria Critchlow was biting at a bit of walnut cake, while in her right hand, all seamed with black lines, she held a cup of coffee.

"But, Mr. Critchlow——!" Constance protested.

"I've got business with Sophia, and I must get it done. I've got for to render an account of my stewardship to Sophia, under her father's will, and her mother's will, and her aunt's will, and it's nobody's business but mine and Sophia's, I reckon. Now then," he glanced at his wife, "off with ye!"

Maria rose, half-kittenish and half-ashamed.

"Surely you don't want to go into all that to-night," said Sophia. She spoke softly, for she had already fully perceived that Mr. Critchlow must be managed with the tact which the capricious obstinacies of advanced age demanded. "Surely you can wait a day or two. I'm in no hurry."

"Haven't I waited long enough?" he retorted fiercely.

There was a pause. Maria Critchlow moved.

"As for you being in no hurry, Sophia," the old man went on, "nobody can say *as you've* been in a hurry."

Sophia had suffered a check. She glanced hesitatingly at Constance.

"Mrs. Critchlow and I will go down into the parlour," said Constance, quickly. "There is a bit of fire there."

"Oh no. I won't hear of such a thing!"

"Yes, we will, won't we, Mrs. Critchlow?" Constance insisted, cheerfully, but firmly. She was determined that in her house Sophia should have all the freedom and conveniences that she could have had in her own. If a private room was needed for discussions between Sophia and her

trustee, Constance's pride was piqued to supply that room. Further, Constance was glad to get Maria out of Sophia's sight. She was accustomed to Maria; with her it did not matter; but she did not care that the teeth of Sophia should be set on edge by the ridiculous demeanour of Maria. So those two left the drawing-room, and the old man began to open the papers which he had been preparing for weeks.

There was very little fire in the parlour, and Constance, in addition to being bored by Mrs. Critchlow's inane and inquisitive remarks, felt chilly, which was bad for her sciatica. She wondered whether Sophia would have to confess to Mr. Critchlow that she was not certainly a widow. She thought that steps ought to be taken to ascertain, through Birkinshaws, if anything was known of Gerald Scales. But even that course was set with perils. Supposing that he still lived, an unspeakable villain (Constance could only think of him as an unspeakable villain), and supposing that he molested Sophia,—what scenes! What shame in the town! Such frightful thoughts ran endlessly through Constance's mind as she bent over the fire endeavouring to keep alive a silly conversation with Maria Critchlow.

Amy passed through the parlour to go to bed. There was no other way of reaching the upper part of the house.

"Are you going to bed, Amy?"

"Yes'm."

"Where is'Fossette?"

"In the kitchen, m'm," said Amy, defending herself. "Mrs. Scales told me the dog might sleep in the kitchen with Spot, as they was such good friends. I've opened the bottom drawer, and Fossit is lying in that."

"Mrs. Scales has brought a dog with her!" exclaimed Maria.

"Yes'm!" said Amy, drily, before Constance could answer. She implied everything in that affirmative.

"You *are* a family for dogs," said Maria. "What sort of dog is it?"

"Well," said Constance. "I don't know exactly what they call it. It's a French dog, one of those French dogs." Amy was lingering at the stairfoot. "Good night, Amy, thank you."

Amy ascended, shutting the door.

"Oh! I see!" Maria muttered. "Well, I never!"

It was ten o'clock before sounds above indicated that the first interview between trustee and beneficiary was finished.

"I'll be going on to open our side-door," said Maria. "Say good night to Mrs. Scales for me." She was not sure whether Charles Critchlow had really meant her to go home, or whether her mere absence from the drawing-room had contented him. So she departed. He came down the stairs with the most tiresome slowness, went through the parlour in silence, ignoring Constance, and also Sophia, who was at his heels, and vanished.

As Constance shut and bolted the front-door, the sisters looked at each other, Sophia faintly smiling. It seemed to them that they understood each other better when they did not speak. With a glance, they exchanged their ideas on the subject of Charles Critchlow and Maria, and learnt that their ideas were similar. Constance said nothing as to the private interview. Nor did Sophia. At present, on this the first day, they could only achieve intimacy by intermittent flashes.

"What about bed?" asked Sophia.

"You must be tired," said Constance.

Sophia got to the stairs, which received a little light from the corridor gas, 'before Constance, having tested the window-fastening, turned out the gas in the parlour. They climbed the lower flight of stairs together.

"I must just see that your room is all right," Constance said.

"Must you?" Sophia smiled.

They climbed the second flight, slowly. Constance was out of breath.

"Oh, a fire! How nice!" cried Sophia. "But why did you go to all that trouble? I told you not to."

"It's no trouble at all," said Constance, raising the gas in the bedroom. Her tone implied that bedroom fires were a quite ordinary incident of daily life in a place like Bursley.

"Well, my dear, I hope you'll find everything comfortable," said Constance.

"I'm sure I shall. Good night, dear."

"Good night, then."

They looked at each other again, with timid affectionateness. They did not kiss. The thought in both their minds was: "We couldn't keep on kissing every day." But there was a vast amount of quiet, restrained affection, of mutual confidence and respect, even of tenderness, in their tones.

About half an hour later a dreadful hullaballoo smote the ear of Constance. She was just getting into bed. She listened intently, in great alarm. It was undoubtedly those dogs fighting, and fighting to the death. She pictured the kitchen as a battlefield, and Spot slain. Opening the door, she stepped out into the corridor.

"Constance," said a low voice above her. She jumped. "Is that you?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't bother to go down to the dogs; they'll stop in a moment. Fossette won't bite. I'm so sorry she's upsetting the house."

Constance stared upwards, and discerned a pale shadow. The dogs did soon cease their altercation. This short colloquy in the dark affected Constance strangely.

§3

The next morning, after a night varied by periods of wakefulness not unpleasant, Sophia arose and, taking due precautions against cold, went to the window. It was Saturday; she had left Paris on the Thursday. She looked forth upon the Square, holding aside the blind. She had expected, of course, to find that the Square had shru-ak in size; but nevertheless she was startled to see how small it was. It seemed to her scarcely bigger than a courtyard. She could remember a winter morning when from the window she had watched the Square under virgin snow in the lamplight, and the Square had been vast, and the first wayfarer, crossing it diagonally and leaving behind him the irregular impress of his feet, had appeared to travel for hours over an interminable white waste before vanishing past Holl's shop in the direction of the Town Hall. She chiefly recalled the Square under snow; cold mornings, and the coldness of the oil-cloth at the window, and the draught of cold air through the ill-fitting sash (it was put right now)! These visions of herself seemed beautiful to her; her childish existence seemed beautiful; the storms and tempests of her girlhood seemed beautiful; even the great sterile expanse of tedium when, after giving up a scholastic career, she had served for two years in the shop—even this had a strange charm in her memory.

And she thought that not for millions of pounds would she live her life over again.

In its contents the Square had not surprisingly changed during the immense, the terrifying interval that separated her from her virginity. On the east side, several shops had been thrown into one, and forced into a semblance of eternal unity by means of a coat of stucco. And there was a fountain at the north end which was new to her. No other

constructional change! But the moral change, the sad declension from the ancient proud spirit of the Square—this was painfully depressing. Several establishments lacked tenants, had obviously lacked tenants for a long time; 'To let' notices hung in their stained and dirty upper windows, and clung insecurely to their closed shutters. And on the sign-boards of these establishments were names that Sophia did not know. The character of most of the shops seemed to have worsened; they had become petti-fogging little holes, unkempt, shabby, poor; they had no brightness, no feeling of vitality. And the floor of the Square was littered with nondescript refuse. The whole scene, paltry, confined, and dull, reached for her the extreme of provinciality. It was what the French called, with a pregnant intonation, *la province.* This being said, there was nothing else to say. Bursley, of course, was in the provinces; Bursley must, in the nature of things, be typically provincial. But in her mind it had always been differentiated from the common *province;* it had always had an air, a distinction, and especially St. Luke's Square! That illusion was now gone. Still, the alteration was not wholly in herself; it was not wholly subjective. The Square really had changed for the worse; it might not be smaller, but it had deteriorated. As a centre of commerce it had assuredly approached very near to death. On a Saturday morning thirty years ago it would have been covered with linen-roofed stalls, and chattering country-folk, and the stir of bargains. Now, Saturday morning was like any other morning in the Square, and the glass-roof of St. Luke's market in Wedgwood Street, which she could see from her window, echoed to the sounds of noisy commerce. In that instance business had simply moved a few yards to the east; but Sophia knew, from hints in Constance's letters and in her talk, that business in

general had moved more than a few yards, it had moved a couple of miles—to arrogant and pushing Hanbridge, with its electric light and its theatres and its big, advertising shops. The heaven of thick smoke over the Square, the black deposit on painted woodwork, the intermittent hooting of steam syrens, showed that the wholesale trade of Bursley still flourished. But Sophia had no memories of the wholesale trade of Bursley; it meant nothing to the youth of her heart; she was attached by intimate links to the retail traffic of Bursley, and as a mart old Bursley was done for.

She thought: "It would kill me if I had to live here. It's deadening. It weighs on you. And the dirt, and the horrible ugliness! And the way they talk, and the way they think! I felt it first at Knype station. The Square is rather picturesque, but it's such a poor, poor little thing! Fancy having to look at it every morning of one's life! No!" She almost shuddered.

For the time being she had no home. To Constance she was 'paying a visit/

Constance did not appear to realize the awful conditions of dirt, decay, and provinciality in which she was living. Even Constance's house was extremely inconvenient, dark, and no doubt unhealthy. Cellar-kitchen, no hall, abominable stairs, and as to hygiene, simply mediaeval. She could not understand why Constance had remained in the house. Constance had plenty of money and might live where she liked, and in a good modern house. Yet she stayed in the Square. "I daresay she's got used to it," Sophia thought leniently. "I daresay I should be just the same in her place." But she did not really think so, and she could not understand Constance's state of mind.

Certainly she could not claim to have 'added up' Constance yet. She considered that her sister was in some re-

spects utterly provincial—what they used to call in the Five Towns a 'body.' Somewhat too diffident, not assertive enough, not erect enough; with curious provincial pronunciations, accents, gestures, mannerisms, and inarticulate ejaculations; with a curious narrowness of outlook! But at the same time Constance was very shrewd, and she was often proving by some bit of a remark that she knew what was what, despite her provinciality. In judgments upon human nature they undoubtedly thought alike, and there was a strong natural general sympathy between them. And at the bottom of Constance was something fine. At intervals Sophia discovered herself secretly patronizing Constance, but reflection would always cause her to cease from patronage and to examine her own defences. Constance, besides being the essence of kindness, was no fool. Constance could see through a pretence, an absurdity, as quickly as anyone. Constance did honestly appear to Sophia to be superior to any Frenchwoman that she had ever encountered. She saw supreme in Constance that quality which she had recognized in the porters at Newhaven on landing—the quality of an honest and naive goodwill, of powerful simplicity. That quality presented itself to her as the greatest in the world, and it seemed to be in the very air of England. She could even detect it in Mr. Critchlow, whom, for the rest, she liked, admiring the brutal force of his character. She pardoned his brutality to his wife. She found it proper. "After all," she said, "supposing he hadn't married her, what would she have been? Nothing but a slave! She's infinitely better off as his wife. In fact she's lucky. And it would be absurd for him to treat her otherwise than he does treat her." (Sophia did not divine that her masterful Critchlow had once wanted Maria as one might want a star.)

But to be always with such people! To be always with

Constance! To be always in the Bursley atmosphere, physical and mental!

She pictured Paris as it would be on that very morning—bright, clean, glittering; the neatness of the Rue Lord Byron, and the magnificent slanting splendour of the Champs Elysées. Paris had always seemed beautiful to her; but the life of Paris had not seemed beautiful to her. Yet now it did seem beautiful. She could delve down into the earlier years of her ownership of the Pension, and see a regular, placid beauty in her daily life there. Her life there, even so late as a fortnight ago, seemed beautiful; sad, but beautiful. It had passed into history. She sighed when she thought of the innumerable interviews with Mardon, the endless formalities required by the English and the French law and by the particularity of the Syndicate. She had been through all that. She had actually been through it and it was over. She had bought the Pension for a song and sold it for great riches. She had developed from a nobody into the desired of Syndicates. And after long, long, monotonous, strenuous years of possession the day had come, the emotional moment had come, when she had yielded up the keys of ownership to Mr. Mardon and a man from the Hotel Moscow, and had paid her servants for the last time and signed the last receipted bill. The men had been very gallant, and had requested her to stay in the Pension as their guest until she was ready to leave Paris. But she had declined that. She could not have borne to remain in the Pension under the reign of another. She had left at once and gone to a hotel with her few goods while finally disposing of certain financial questions. And one evening Jacqueline had come to see her, and had wept.

Her exit from the Pension Frensham struck her now as poignantly pathetic, in its quickness and its absence of ceremonial. Ten steps, and her career was finished, closed.

Astonishing, with what liquid tenderness she turned and looked back on that hard, fighting, exhausting life in Paris! For, even if she had unconsciously liked it, she had never enjoyed it. She had always compared France disadvantageously with England, always resented the French temperament in business, always been convinced that 'you never knew where you were' with French tradespeople. And now they flitted before her endowed with a wondrous charm; so polite in their lying, so eager to spare your feelings and to reassure you, so neat and prim. And the French shops, so exquisitely arranged! Even a butcher's shop in Paris was a pleasure to the eye, whereas the butcher's shop in Wedgwood Street, which she remembered of old, and which she had glimpsed from the cab—what a bloody shambles! She longed for Paris again. She longed to stretch her lungs in Paris. These people in Bursley did not suspect what Paris was. They did not appreciate and they never would appreciate the marvels that she had accomplished in a theatre of marvels. They probably never realized that the whole of the rest of the world was not more or less like Bursley. They had no curiosity. Even Constance was a thousand times more interested in relating trifles of Bursley gossip than in listening to details of life in Paris. Occasionally she had expressed a mild, vapid surprise at things told to her by Sophia; but she was not really impressed, because her curiosity did not extend beyond Bursley. She, like the rest, had the formidable, thrice-callous egotism of the provinces. And if Sophia had informed her that the heads of Parisians grew out of their navels she would have murmured: "Well, well! Bless us! I never heard of such things! Mrs. Brindley's second boy has got his head quite crooked, poor little fellow!"

Why should Sophia feel sorrowful? She did not know. She was free; free to go where she liked and do what she

liked. She had no responsibilities, no cares. The thought of her husband had long ago ceased to rouse in her any feeling of any kind. She was rich. Mr. Critchlow had accumulated for her about as much money as she had herself acquired. Never could she spend her income! She did not know how to spend it. She lacked nothing that was procurable. She had no desires except the direct desire for happiness. If thirty thousand pounds or so could have bought a son like Cyril, she would have bought one for herself. She bitterly regretted that she had no child. In this, she envied Constance. A child seemed to be the one commodity worth having. She was too free, too exempt from responsibilities. In spite of Constance she was alone in the world. The strangeness of the hazards of life overwhelmed her. Here she was at fifty, alone.

But the idea of leaving Constance, having once rejoined her, did not please Sophia. It disquieted her. She could not see herself living away from Constance. She was alone —but Constance was there.

She was downstairs first, and she had a little conversation with Amy. And she stood on the step of the front-door while Fossette made a preliminary inspection of Spot's gutter. She found the air nipping.

Constance, when she descended, saw stretching across one side of the breakfast-table an umbrella, Sophia's present to her from Paris. It was an umbrella such that a better could not be bought. It would have impressed even Aunt Harriet. The handle was of gold, set with a circlet of opalines. The tips of the ribs were also of gold. It was this detail which staggered Constance. Frankly, this development of luxury had been unknown and unsuspected in the Square. That the tips of the ribs should match the handle . . . that did truly beat everything! Sophia said calmly that the device was quite common. But she did not conceal that the

umorclla was strictly of the highest class and that it might be shown to queens without shame, She intimated that the frame (a 'Fox's Paragon'), handle, and tips, would outlast many silks. Constance was childish with pleasure.

They decided to go out marketing together. The unspoken thought in their minds was that as Sophia would have to be introduced to the town sooner or later, it might as well be sooner.

Constance looked at the sky. "It can't possibly rain," she said. "I shall take my umbrella."

CHAPTER III: TOWARDS HOTEL LIFE

§ 1

SOPHIA wore list slippers in the morning. It was a habit which she had formed in the Rue Lord Byron—by accident rather than with an intention to utilize list slippers for "the effective supervision of servants. These list slippers were the immediate cause of important happenings in St. Luke's Square. Sophia had been with Constance one calendar month—it was, of course, astonishing how quickly the time had passed!—and she had become familiar with the house. Restraint had gradually ceased to mark the relations of the sisters. Constance, in particular, hid nothing from Sophia, who was made aware of the minor and major defects of Amy and all the other crcakings of the household machine. Meals were eaten off the ordinary tablecloths, and on the days for 'turning out' the parlour, Constance assumed, with a little laugh, that Sophia would excuse Amy's apron, which she had not had time to change. In brief, Sophia was no longer a stranger, and nobody felt bound to pretend that things were not exactly what they were. In spite of the foulness and the provinciality of Bursley, Sophia enjoyed the intimacy with Constance. As for Constance, she was enchanted. The inflections of their voices, when they were talking to each other very privately, were often tender, and these sudden surprising tendernesses secretly thrilled both of them.

On the fourth Sunday morning Sophia put on her dressing-gown and those list slippers very early, and paid a visit to Constance's bedroom. She was somewhat concerned about Constance, and her concern was pleasurable to her. She made the most of it. Amy, with her lifelong careless-

ness about doors, had criminally failed to latch the street-door of the parlour on the previous morning, and Constance had only perceived the omission by the phenomenon of frigidity in her legs at breakfast. She always sat with her back to the door, in her mother's fluted rocking-chair; and Sophia on the spot, but not in the chair, occupied by John Baines in the forties, and in the seventies and later by Samuel Povey. Constance had been alarmed by that frigidity. "I shall have a return of my sciatica!" she had exclaimed, and Sophia was startled by the apprehension in her tone. Before evening the sciatica had indeed revisited Constance's sciatic nerve, and Sophia for the first time gained an idea of what a pulsating sciatica can do in the way of torturing its victim. Constance, in addition to the sciatica, had caught a sneezing cold, and the act of sneezing caused her the most acute pain. Sophia had soon stopped the sneezing. Constance was got to bed. Sophia wished to summon the doctor, but Constance assured her that the doctor would have nothing new to advise. Constance suffered angelically. The weak and exquisite sweetness of her smile, as she lay in bed under the stress of twinging pain amid hot-water bottles, was amazing to Sophia. It made her think upon the reserves of Constance's character, and upon the variety of the manifestations of the Baines's blood.

So on the Sunday morning she had arisen early, just after Amy.

She discovered Constance to be a little better, as regards the neuralgia, but exhausted by the torments of a sleepless night. Sophia, though she had herself not slept well, felt somehow conscience-stricken for having slept at all.

"You poor dear!" she murmured, brimming with sympathy. "I shall make you some tea at once, myself."

"Oh, Amy will do it," said Constance.

Sophia repeated with a resolute intonation: "I shall make

it myself." And after being satisfied that there was no instant need for a renewal of hot-water bottles, she went further downstairs in those list slippers.

As she was descending the dark kitchen steps she heard Amy's voice in pettish exclamation: "Oh, get out, *you\"* followed by a yelp from Fossette. She had a swift movement of anger, which she controlled. The relations between her and Fossette were not marked by transports, and he& rule-over dogs in general was severe; even when alone she very seldom kissed the animal passionately, according to the general habit of people owning dogs. But she loved Fossette. And, moreover, her love for Fossette had been lately sharpened by the ridicule which Bursley had showered upon that strange beast. Happily for Sophia's *amour propre*, there was no means of getting Fossette shaved in Bursley, and thus Fossette was daily growing less comic to the Bursley eye. Sophia could therefore without loss of dignity yield to force of circumstances what she would not have yielded to popular opinion. She guessed that Amy had no liking for the dog, but the accent which Amy had put upon the *'you'* seemed to indicate that Amy was making distinctions between Fossette and Spot, and this disturbed Sophia much more than Fossette's yelp.

Sophia coughed, and entered the kitchen.

Spot was lapping his morning milk out of a saucer, while Fossette stood wistfully, an amorphous mass of thick hair, under the table.

"Good morning, Amy," said Sophia, with dreadful politeness.

"Good morning, m'm," said Amy, glumly.

Amy knew that Sophia had heard that yelp, and Sophia knew that she knew. The pretence of politeness was horrible. Both the women felt as though the kitchen was sanded with gunpowder and there were lighted matches

about. Sophia had a very proper grievance against Amy on account of the open door of the previous day. Sophia thought that, after such a sin, the least Amy could do was to show contrition and amiability and an anxiety to please: which things Amy had not shown. Amy had a grievance against Sophia because Sophia had recently thrust upon her a fresh method of cooking green vegetables. Amy was a strong opponent of new or foreign methods. Sophia was not aware of this grievance, for Amy had hidden it under her customary cringing politeness to Sophia.

They surveyed each other like opposing armies.

"What a pity you have no gas-stove here! I want to make some tea at once for Mrs. Povey," said Sophia, inspecting the just-born fire.

"Gas-stove, m'm?" said Amy, hostilely. It was Sophia's list slippers which had finally decided Amy to drop the mask of deference.

She made no effort to aid Sophia; she gave no indication as to where the various necessaries for tea were to be found. Sophia got the kettle, and washed it out. Sophia got the smallest tea-pot, and, as the tea-leaves had been left in it, she washed out the teapot also, with exaggerated noise and meticulousness. Sophia got the sugar and the other trifles, and Sophia blew up the fire with the bellows. And Amy did nothing in particular except encourage Spot to drink.

"Is that all the milk you give to Fossette?" Sophia demanded coldly, when it had come to Fossette's turn. She was waiting for the water to boil. The saucer for the bigger dog, who would have made two of Spot, was not half full.

"It's all there is to spare, m'm," Amy rasped.

Sophia made no reply. Soon afterwards she departed, with the tea successfully made. If Amy had not been a

mature woman of over forty she would have snorted as Sophia went away. But Amy was scarcely the ordinary silly girl.

Save for a certain primness as she offered the tray to her sister, Sophia's demeanour gave no sign whatever that the Amazon in her was aroused. Constance's eager trembling pleasure in the tea touched her deeply, and she was exceedingly thankful that Constance had her, Sophia, as a succour in time of distress.

A few minutes later, Constance, having first asked Sophia what time it was by the watch in the watch-case on the chest of drawers (the Swiss clock had long since ceased to work) pulled the red tassel of the bell-cord over her bed. A bell tinkled far away in the kitchen.

"Anything I can do?" Sophia inquired.

"Oh no, thanks," said Constance. "I only want my letters, if the postman has come. He ought to have been here long ago."

Sophia had learned during her stay that Sunday morning was the morning on which Constance expected a letter from Cyril. It was a definite arrangement between mother and son that Cyril should write on Saturdays, and Constance on Sundays. Sophia knew that Constance set store by this letter, becoming more and more preoccupied about Cyril as the end of the week approached. Since Sophia's arrival Cyril's letter had not failed to come, but once it had been naught save a scribbled line or two, and Sophia gathered that it was never a certainty, and that Constance was accustomed, though not reconciled, to disappointments. Sophia had been allowed to read the letters. They left a faint impression on her mind that her favourite was perhaps somewhat negligent in his relations with his mother.

There was no reply to the bell. Constance rang again without effect.

With a brusque movement Sophia left the bedroom by way of Cyril's room.

"Amy," she called over the banisters, "do you not hear your mistress's bell?"

"I'm coming as quick as I can, m'm." The voice was still very glum.

Sophia murmured something inarticulate, staying till assured that Amy really was coming, and then she passed back into Cyril's bedroom. She waited there, hesitant, not exactly on the watch, not exactly unwilling to assist at an interview between Amy and Amy's mistress; indeed, she could not have surely analyzed her motive for remaining in Cyril's bedroom, with the door ajar between that room and Constance's.

Amy reluctantly mounted the stairs and went into her mistress's bedroom with her chin in the air. She thought that Sophia had gone up to the second storey, where she 'belonged.' She stood in silence by the bed, showing no sympathy with Constance, no curiosity as to the indisposition. She objected to Constance's attack of sciatica, as being a too permanent reproof of her carelessness as to doors.

Constance also waited, for the fraction of a second, as if expectant.

"Well, Amy," she said at length in her voice weakened by fatigue and pain. "The letters?"

"There ain't no letters," said Amy, grimly. "You might have known, if there'd been any, I should have brought 'em up. Postman went past twenty minutes agone. I'm always being interrupted, and it isn't as if I hadn't got enough to do-now 1"

She turned to leave, and was pulling the door open.

"Amy!" said a voice sharply. It was Sophia's.

The servant jumped, and in spite of herself obeyed the implicit, imperious command to stop.

"You will please not speak to your mistress in that tone, at any rate while I'm here," said Sophia, icily. "You know she is ill and weak. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I never——" Amy began.

"I don't want to argue," Sophia said angrily. "Please leave the room."

Amy obeyed. She was cowed, in addition to being staggered.

To the persons involved in it, this episode was intensely dramatic. Sophia had surmised that Constance permitted liberties of speech to Amy; she had even guessed that Amy sometimes took licence to be rude. But that the relations between them were such as to allow the bullying of Constance by an Amy downright insolent-this had shocked and wounded Sophia, who suddenly had a vision of Constance as the victim of a reign of terror. "If the creature will do this while I'm here," said Sophia to herself, "what does she do when they are alone together in the house?"

"Well," she exclaimed, "I never heard of such goings-on. And you let her talk to you in that style! My dear Constance!"

Constance was sitting up in bed, the small tea-tray on her knees. Her eyes were moist. The tears had filled them when she knew that there was no letter. Ordinarily the failure of Cyril's letter would not have made her cry, but weakness had impaired her self-control. And the tears having once got into her eyes, she could not dismiss them. There they were!

"She's been with me such a long time," Constance murmured. "She takes liberties. I've corrected her once or twice."

"Liberties!" Sophia repeated the word. "Liberties!"

"Of course I really ought not to allow it," said Constance. "I ought to have put a stop to it long since."

"Well," said Sophia, rather relieved by this symptom of Constance's secret mind, "I do hope you won't think I'm meddlesome, but truly it was too much for me. The words were out of my mouth before I——" She stopped.

"You were quite right, quite right," said Constance, seeing before her in the woman of fifty the passionate girl of fifteen.

"I've had a good deal of experience of servants," said Sophia.

"I know you have," Constance put in.

"And I'm convinced that it never pays to stand any sauce. Servants don't understand kindness and forbearance. And this sort of thing grows and grows till you can't call your soul your own."

"You are quite right," Constance said again, with even more positivencss.

Not merely the conviction that Sophia was quite right, but the desire to assure Sophia that Sophia was not meddlesome, gave force to her utterance. Amy's allusion to extra work shamed Amy's mistress as a hostess, and she was bound to make amends.

"Now as to that woman," said Sophia in a lower voice, as she sat down confidentially on the edge of the bed. And she told Constance about Amy and the dogs, and about Amy's rudeness in the kitchen. "I should never have *dreamt* of mentioning such things," she finished. "But under the circumstances I feel it right that you should know. I feel you ought to know."

And Constance nodded her head in thorough agreement. She did not trouble to go into articulate apologies to her guest for the actual misdeeds of her servant. The sisters were now on a plane of intimacy where such apologies would have been supererogatory. Their voices fell lower and

lower, and the case of Amy was laid bare and discussed to the minutest detail.

Gradually they realized that what had occurred was a crisis. They were both very excited, apprehensive, and rather too consciously defiant. At the same time they were drawn very close to each other, by Sophia's generous indignation and by Constance's absolute loyalty.

A long time passed before Constance said, thinking about something else:

"I expect it's been delayed in the post."

"Cyril's letter? Oh, no doubt! If you knew the posts in France, my word!"

Then they determined, with little sighs, to face the crisis cheerfully.

In truth it was a crisis, and a great one. 1 he sensation of the crisis affected the atmosphere of the entire house. Constance got up for tea and managed to walk to the drawing-room. And when Sophia, after an absence in her own room, came down to tea and found the tea all served, Constance whispered:

"She's given notice! And Sunday too!"

"What did she say?"

"She didn't say much," Constance replied vaguely, hiding from Sophia that Amy had harped on the too great profusion of mistresses in that house. "After all, it's just as well. She'll be all right. She's saved a good bit of money, and she has friends."

"But how foolish of her to give up such a good place!"

"She simply doesn't care," said Constance, who was a little hurt by Amy's defection. "When she takes a thing into her head she simply doesn't care. She's got no common sense. I've always known that."

"So you're going to leave, Amy?" said Sophia that evcn-

ing, as Amy was passing through the parlour on her way to bed. Constance was already arranged for the night.

"I am, m'm," answered Amy, precisely.

Her tone was not rude, but it was firm. She had apparently reconnoitred her position in calmness.

"I'm sorry I was obliged to correct you this morning," said Sophia, with cheerful amicableness, pleased in spite of herself with the woman's tone. "But I think you will see that I had reason to."

"I've been thinking it over, m'm," said Amy, with dignity, "and I see as I must leave."

There was a pause.

"Well, you know best. . . . Good night, Amy."

"Good night, m'm."

"She's a decent woman," thought Sophia, "but hopeless for this place now."

The sisters were fronted with the fact that Constance had a month in which to find a new servant, and that a new servant would have to be trained in well-doing and might easily prove disastrous. Both Constance and Amy were profoundly disturbed by the prospective dissolution of a bond which dated from the seventies. And both were decided that there was no alternative to the dissolution. Outsiders knew merely that Mrs. Povey's old servant was leaving. Outsiders merely saw Mrs. Povey's advertisement in the *Signal* for a new servant. They could not read hearts. Some of the younger generation even said superiorly that old-fashioned women like Mrs. Povey seemed to have servants on the brain, etc., etc.

§2

"Well, have you got your letter?" Sophia demanded cheerfully of Constance when she entered the bedroom the the next morning.

Constance merely shook her head. She was very depressed. Sophia's cheerfulness died out. As she hated to be insincerely optimistic, she said nothing. Otherwise she might have remarked: "Perhaps the afternoon post will bring it." Gloom reigned. To Constance particularly, as Amy had given notice and as Cyril was 'remiss,' it seemed really that the time was out ofjoint and life unworth living. Even the presence of Sophia did not bring her much comfort. Immediately Sophia left the room Constance's sciatica began to return, and in a severe form. She had regretted this, less for the pain than because she had just assured Sophia, quite honestly, that she was not suffering; Sophia had been sceptical. After that it was of course imperative that Constance should get up as usual. She had said that she would get up as usual. Besides, there was the immense enterprise of obtaining a new servant! Worries loomed mountainous. Suppose Cyril were dangerously ill, and unable to write! Suppose something had happened to him! Supposing she never did obtain a new servant!

Sophia, up in her room, was endeavouring to be philosophical, and to see the world brightly. She was saying to herself that she must take Constance in hand, that what Constance lacked was energy, that Constance must be stirred out of her groove. And in the cavernous kitchen Amy, preparing the nine-o'clock breakfast, was meditating upon the ingratitude of employers and wondering what the future held for her. She had a widowed mother in the picturesque village of Sneyd, where the mortal and immortal welfare of every inhabitant was watched over by God's vicegerent, the busy Countess of Chell; she possessed about two hundred pounds of her own; her mother for years had been begging Amy to share her home free of expense. But nevertheless Amy's mind was black with foreboding and vague dejection. The house was a house of sorrow, and

these three women, each solitary, the devotees of sorrow. And the two dogs wandered disconsolate up and down, aware of the necessity for circumspection, never guessing that the highly peculiar state of the atmosphere had been brought about by nothing but a half-shut door and an incorrect tone.

As Sophia, fully dressed this time, was descending to breakfast, she heard Constance's voice, feebly calling her, and found the convalescent still in bed. The truth could not be concealed. Constance was once more in great pain, and her moral condition was not favourable to fortitude.

"I wish you had told me, to begin with," Sophia could *not* help saying, "then I should have known what to do."

Constance did not defend herself by saying that the pain had only recurred since their first interview that morning. She just wept.

"I'm very low!" she blubbered.

Sophia was surprised. She felt that this was not 'being a Baines.'

During the progress of that interminable April morning, her acquaintance with the possibilities of sciatica as an agent destructive of moral fibre was further increased. Constance had no force at all to resist its activity. The sweetness of her resignation seemed to melt into nullity. She held to it that the doctor could do nothing for her.

About noon, when Sophia was moving anxiously around her, she suddenly screamed.

"I feel as if my leg was going to burst!" she cried.

That decided Sophia. As soon as Constance was a little easier she went downstairs to Amy.

"Amy," she said, "it's a Doctor Stirling that your mistress has when she's ill, isn't it?"

"Yes, m'm."

"Where is his surgery?"

"Well, m'm, he did live just opposite, with Dr. Harrop, but latterly he's gone to live at Bleakridge."

"I wish you would put your things on, and run up there and ask him to call as soon as he can."

"I will, m'm," said Amy, with the greatest willingness. "I thought I heard missis cry out." She was not effusive. She was better than effusive: kindly and helpful with a certain reserve.

"There's something about that woman I like," said Sophia to herself. For a proved fool, Amy was indeed holding her own rather well.

Dr. Stirling drove down about two o'clock. He had now been established in the Five Towns for more than a decade, and the stamp of success was on his brow and on the proud forehead of his trotting horse. He had, in the phrase of the *Signal*, 'identified himself with the local life of the district.' He was liked, being a man of broad sympathies. In his rich Scotch accent he could discuss with equal ability the flavour of whisky or of a sermon, and he had more than sufficient tact never to discuss either whiskies or sermons in the wrong place. He had made a speech (responding for the learned professions) at the annual dinner of the Society for the Prosecution of Felons, and this speech (in which praise of red wine was rendered innocuous by praise of books—his fine library was notorious) had classed him as a wit with the American consul, whose post-prandial manner was modelled on Mark Twain's. He was thirty-five years of age, tall and stoutish, with a chubby boyish face that the razor left chiefly blue every morning.

The immediate effect of his arrival on Constance was miraculous. His presence almost cured her for a moment, just as though her malady had been toothache and he a dentist. Then, when he had finished his examination, the pain resumed its sway over her.

In talking to her and to Sophia, he listened very seriously to all that they said; he seemed to regard the case as the one case that had ever aroused his genuine professional interest; but as it unfolded itself, in all its difficulty and urgency, so he seemed, in his mind, to be discovering wondrous ways of dealing with it; these mysterious discoveries seemed to give him confidence, and his confidence was communicated to the patient by means of faint sallies of humour. He was a highly skilled doctor. This fact, however, had no share in his popularity; which was due solely to his rare gift of taking a case very seriously while remaining cheerful.

He said he would return in a quarter of an hour, and he returned in thirteen minutes with a hypodermic syringe, with which he attacked the pain in its central strongholds.

"What is it?" asked Constance, breathing gratitude for the relief.

He paused, looking at her roguishly from under lowered eyelids.

"I'd better not tell ye," he said. "It might lead ye into mischief."

"Oh, but you must tell me, doctor," Constance insisted, anxious that he should live up to his reputation for Sophia's benefit.

"It's hydrochloride of cocaine," he said, and lifted a finger. "Beware of the cocaine habit. It's ruined many a respectable family. But if I hadn't had a certain amount of confidence in yer strength of character, Mrs. Povey, I wouldn't have risked it."

"He will have his joke, will the doctor!" Constance smiled, in a brighter world.

He said he should come again about half-past five, and he arrived about half-past six, and injected more cocaine. The special importance of the case was thereby established. On this second visit, he and Sophia soon grew rather friendly.

When she conducted him downstairs again he stopped chatting with her in the parlour for a long time, as though he had nothing else on earth to do, while his coachman walked the horse to and fro in front of the door.

His attitude to her flattered Sophia, for it showed that he took her for no ordinary woman. It implied a continual assumption that she must be a mine of interest for anyone who was privileged to delve into her memory. So far, among Constance's acquaintance, Sophia had met no one who showed more than a perfunctory curiosity as to her life. Her return was accepted with indifference. Her escapade of thirty years ago had entirely lost its dramatic quality. Many people indeed had never heard that she had run away from home to marry a commercial traveller; and to those who remembered, or had been told, it seemed a sufficiently banal exploit—after thirty years! Her fear, and Constance's, that the town would be murmurous with gossip was ludicrously unfounded. The effect of time was such that even Mr. Critchlow appeared to have forgotten even that she had been indirectly responsible for her father's death. She had nearly forgotten it herself; when she happened to think of it she felt no shame, no remorse, seeing the death as purely accidental, and not altogether unfortunate. On two points only was the town inquisitive: as to her husband, and as to the precise figure at which she had sold the pension. The town knew that she was probably not a widow, for she had been obliged to tell Mr. Critchlow, and Mr. Critchlow in some hour of tenderness had told Maria. But nobody had dared to mention the name of Gerald Scales to her. With her fashionable clothes, her striking mien of command, and the legend of her wealth, she inspired respect, if not awe, in the townsfolk. In the doctor's attitude there was something of amaze; she felt it. Though the dull apathy of the people she had hitherto met

was assuredly not without its advantageous side for her tranquillity of mind, it had touched her vanity, and the gaze of the doctor soothed the smart. He had so obviously divined her interestingness; he so obviously wanted to enjoy it.

"I've just been reading Zola's *Downfall"* he said.

Her mind searched backwards, and recalled a poster.

"Oh!" she replied. *"La Debacle?"*

"Yes. What do ye think of it?" His eyes lighted at the prospect of a talk. He was even pleased to hear her give him the title in French.

"I haven't read it," she said, and she was momentarily sorry that she had not read it, for she could see that he was dashed. The doctor had supposed that residence in a foreign country involved a knowledge of the literature of that country. Yet he had never supposed that residence in England involved a knowledge of English literature. Sophia had read practically nothing since 1870; for her the latest author was Cherbuliez. Moreover, her impression of Zola was that he was not at all nice, and that he was the enemy of his race, though at that date the world had scarcely heard of Dreyfus. Dr. Stirling had too hastily assumed that the opinions of the bourgeois upon art differ in different countries.

"And ye actually were in the siege of Paris?" he questioned, trying again.

"Yes."

"And the commune?"

"Yes, the commune, too."

"Well!" he exclaimed. "It's incredible! When I was reading the *Downfall* the night before last, I said to myself that you must have been through a lot of all that. I didn't know I was going to have the pleasure of a chat with ye so soon."

She smiled. "But how did you know I was in the siege of Paris?" she asked, curious.

"How do I know? I know because I've seen that birthday card ye sent to Mrs. Povey in 1871, after it was over. It's one of her possessions, that card is. She showed it me one day when she told me ye were coming."

Sophia started. She had quite forgotten that card. It had not occurred to her that Constance would have treasured all those cards that she had despatched during the early years of her exile. She responded as well as she could to his eagerness for personal details concerning the siege and the commune. He might have been disappointed at the prose of her answers, had he not been determined not to be disappointed.

"Ye seem to have taken it all very quietly," he observed.

"Eh yes!" she agreed, not without pride. "But it's a long time since."

Those events, as they existed in her memory, scarcely warranted the tremendous fuss subsequently made about them. What were they, after all? Such was her secret thought. Chirac himself was now nothing but a faint shadow. Still, were the estimate of those events true or false, she was a woman who had been through them, and Dr. Stirling's high appreciation of that fact was very pleasant to her. Their friendliness approached intimacy. Night had fallen. Outside could be heard the champing of a bit.

"I must be getting on," he said at last; but he did not move.

"Then there is nothing else I am to do for my sister?" Sophia inquired.

"I don't think so," said he "It isn't a question of medicine."

"Then what is it a question of?" Sophia demanded bluntly.

"Nerves," he said. "It's nearly all nerves. I know something about Mrs. Povey's constitution now, and I was hoping that your visit would do her good."

"She's been quite well—I mean what you may call quite well—until the day before yesterday, when she sat in that draught. She was better last night, and then this morning I find her ever so much worse."

"No worries?" The doctor looked at her confidentially.

"What *can* she have in the way of worries?" exclaimed Sophia. "That's to say—real worries."

"Exactly!" the doctor agreed.

"I tell her she doesn't know what worry is," said Sophia.

"So do I!" said the doctor, his eyes twinkling.

"She was a little upset because she didn't receive her usual Sunday letter from Cyril yesterday. But then she was weak and low."

"Clever youth, Cyril!" mused the doctor.

"I think he's a particularly nice boy," said Sophia, eagerly.

"So you've seen him?"

"Of course," said Sophia, rather stiffly. Did the doctor suppose that she did not know her own nephew? She went back to the subject of her sister. "She is also a little bothered, I think, because the servant is going to leave."

"Oh! So Amy is going to leave, is she?" He spoke still lower. "Between you and me, it's no bad thing."

"I'm so glad you think so."

"In another few years the servant would have been the mistress here. One can see these things coming on, but it's so difficult to do anything. In fact ye can't do anything "

"I did something," said Sophia, sharply. "I told the woman straight that it shouldn't go on while I was in the

house. I didn't suspect it at first—but when I found it out. ... I can tell you!" She let the doctor imagine what she could tell him.

He smiled. "No," he said. "I can easily understand that ye didn't suspect anything at first. When she's well and bright Mrs. Povey could hold her own—so I'm told. But it was certainly slowly getting worse."

"Then people talk about it?" said Sophia, shocked/

"As a native of Bursley, Mrs. Scales," said the doctor, "ye ought to know what people in Bursley do!" Sophia put her lips together. The doctor rose, smoothing his waistcoat. "What does she bother with servants at all for?" he burst out. "She's perfectly free. She hasn't got a care in the world, if she only knew it. Why doesn't she go out and about, and enjoy herself? She wants stirring up, that's what your sister wants."

"You're quite right," Sophia burst out in her turn. "That's precisely what I say to myself; precisely! I was thinking it over only this morning. She wants stirring up. She's got into a rut."

"She needs to be jolly. Why doesn't she go to some seaside place, and live in a hotel, and enjoy herself? Is there anything to prevent her?"

"Nothing whatever."

"Instead of being dependent on a servant! I believe in enjoying one's self—when ye've got the money to do it with! Can ye imagine anybody living in Bursley, for pleasure? And especially in St. Luke's Square, right in the thick of it all! Smoke! Dirt! No air! No light! No scenery! No amusements! What does she do it for? She's in a rut."

"Yes, she's in a rut," Sophia repeated her own phrase, which he had copied.

"My word!" said the doctor. "Wouldn't I clear out and enjoy myself if I could! Your sister's a young woman."

"Of course she is!" Sophia concurred, feeling that she herself was even younger. "Of course she is!"

"And except that she's nervously organized, and has certain predispositions, there's nothing the matter with her. This sciatica—I don't say it would be cured, but it might be, by a complete change and throwing off all these ridiculous worries. Not only does she live in the most depressing conditions, but she suffers tortures for it, and there's absolutely no need for her to be here at all."

"Doctor," said Sophia, solemnly, impressed, "you are quite right, I agree with every word you say."

"Naturally she's attached to the place," he continued, glancing round the room. "I know all about that. After living here all her life! But she's got to break herself of her attachment. It's her duty to do so. She ought to show a little energy. I'm deeply attached to my bed in the morning, but I have to leave it."

"Of course," said Sophia, in an impatient tone, as though disgusted with every person who could not perceive, or would not subscribe to, these obvious truths that the doctor was uttering. "Of course!"

"What she needs is the bustle of life in a good hotel, a good hydro, for instance. Among jolly people. Parties! Games! Excursions! She wouldn't be the same woman. You'd see. Wouldn't I do it, if I could? Strathpeffer. She'd boon forget her sciatica. I don't know what Mrs. Povey's annual income is, but I expect that if she took it into her head to live in the dearest hotel in England, there would be no reason why she shouldn't."

Sophia lifted her head and smiled in calm amusement. "I expect so," she said superiorly.

"A hotel—that's the life. No worries. If ye want anything ye ring a bell. If a waiter gives notice, it's someone

else who has the worry, not you. But you know all about that, Mrs. Scales."

"No one better," murmured Sophia.

"Good evening," he said abruptly, sticking out his hand. "I'll be down in the morning."

"Did you ever mention this to my sister.[3]" Sophia asked him, rising.

"Yes," said he. "But it's no use. Oh yes, I've told her. But she does really think it's quite impossible. She wouldn't even hear of going to live in London with her beloved son. She won't listen."

"I never thought of that," said Sophia. "Good-night."

Their hand-grasp was very intimate and mutually comprehending. He was pleased by the quick responsiveness of her temperament, and the masterful vigour which occasionally flashed out in her replies. He noticed the hardly perceptible distortion of her handsome, worn face, and he said to himself: "She's been through a thing or two," and: "She'll have to mind her p's and q's." Sophia was pleased because he admired her, and because with her he dropped his bedside jocularities, and talked plainly as a sensible man will talk when he meets an uncommonly wise woman, and because he echoed and amplified her own thoughts. She honoured him by standing at the door till he had driven off.

For a few moments she mused solitary in the parlour, and then, lowering the gas, she went upstairs to her sister, who lay in the dark. Sophia struck a match.

"You've been having quite a long chat with the doctor," said Constance. "He's very good company, isn't he? What did he talk about this time?"

"He wanted to know about Paris and so on," Sophia answered.

"Oh! I believe he's a rare student."

Lying there in the dark, the simple Constance never

suspected that those two active and strenuous ones had been arranging her life for her, so that she should be jolly and live for twenty years yet. She did not suspect that she had been tried and found guilty of sinful attachments, and of being in a rut, and of lacking the elements of ordinary sagacity. It had not occurred to her that if she was worried and ill, the reason was to be found in her own blind and stupid obstinacy. She had thought herself a fairly sensible kind of creature.

§3

The sisters had an early supper together in Constance's bedroom. Constance was much easier. Having a fancy that a little movement would be beneficial, she had even got up for a few moments and moved about the room. Now she sat ensconced in pillows. A fire burned in the old-fashioned ineffectual grate. From the Sun Vaults opposite came the sound of a phonograph singing an invitation to God to save its gracious queen. This phonograph was a wonderful novelty, and filled the Sun nightly. For a few evenings it had interested the sisters, in spite of themselves, but they had soon sickened of it and loathed it. Sophia became more and more obsessed by the monstrous absurdity of the simple fact that she and Constance were there, in that dark inconvenient house, wearied by the gaiety of public-houses, blackened by smoke, surrounded by mud, instead of being luxuriously installed in a beautiful climate, amid scenes of beauty and white cleanliness. Secretly she became more and more indignant.

Amy entered, bearing a letter in her coarse hand. As Amy unceremoniously handed the letter to Constance, Sophia thought: "If she was my servant she would hand letters on a tray." (An advertisement had already been sent to the *Signal.)*

Constance took the letter trembling. "Here it is at last," she cried.

When she had put on her spectacles and read it, she rx-claimed:

"Bless us! Here's news! He's coming down! That's why he didn't write on Saturday as usual."

She gave the letter to Sophia to read. It ran—

"Sunday midnight.

"DEAR MOTHER,

"Just a line to say I am coming down to Bursley on Wednesday, on business with Peels. I shall get to Knype at 5.28, and take the Loop. I've been very busy, and as I was coming down I didn't write on Saturday. I hope you didn't worry. Love to yourself and Aunt Sophia.

"Yours, C."

"I must send him a line," said Constance, excitedly.

"What? To-night?"

"Yes. Amy can easily catch the last post with it. Otherwise he won't know that I've'got his letter."

She rang the bell.

Sophia thought: "His coming down is really no excuse for his not writing on Saturday. How could she guess that he was coming down? I shall have to put in a little word to that young man. I wonder Constance is so blind. She is quite satisfied now that his letter has come." On behalf of the elder generation she rather resented Constance's eagerness to write in answer.

But Constance was not so blind. Constance thought exactly as Sophia thought. In her heart she did not at all justify or excuse Cyril. She remembered separately almost every instance of his carelessness in her regard. "Hope I

didn't worry, indeed!" she said to herself with a faint touch of bitterness, apropos of the phrase in his letter.

Nevertheless she insisted on writing at once. And Amy had to bring the writing materials.

"Mr. Cyril is coming down on Wednesday," she said to Amy with great dignity.

Amy's stony calmness was shaken, for Mr. Cyril was a great deal to Amy. Amy wondered how she would be able to look Mr. Cyril in the face when he knew that she had given notice.

In the middle of writing, on her knee, Constance looked up at Sophia, and said, as though defending herself against an accusation: "I didn't write to him yesterday, you know, or to-day."

"No," Sophia murmured assentingly.

Constance rang the bell yet again, and Amy was sent out to the post.

Soon afterwards the bell was rung for a fourth lime, and not answered.

"I suppose she hasn't come back yet. But I thought I heard the door. What a long time she is!"

"What do you want?" Sophia asked.

"I just want to speak to her," said Constance.

When the bell had been rung seven or eight times, Amy at length re-appeared, somewhat breathless.

"Amy," said Constance, "let me examine those sheets, will you?"

"Yes'm," said Amy, apparently knowing what sheets, of all the various and multitudinous sheets in that house.

"And the pillow-cases," Constance added as Amy left the room.

So it continued. The next day the fever heightened. Constance was up early, before Sophia, and trotting about the house like a girl. Immediately after breakfast Cyril's

bedroom was invested and revolutionized; not till evening was order restored in that chamber. And on the Wednesday morning it had to be dusted afresh. Sophia watched the preparations, and the increasing agitation of Constance's demeanour, with an astonishment which she had real difficulty in concealing. "Is the woman absolutely mad?" she asked herself. The spectacle was ludicrous: or it seemed so to Sophia, whose career had not embraced much experience of mothers. It was not as if the manifestations of Constance's anxiety were dignified or original or splendid. They were just silly, ordinary fussinesses; they had no sense in them. Sophia was very careful to make no observation. She felt that before she and Constance were very much older she had a very great deal to do, and that a subtle diplomacy and wary tactics would be necessary. Moreover, Constance's angelic temper was slightly affected by the strain of expectation. She had a tendency to rasp. After the high-tea was set she suddenly sprang on to the sofa and lifted down the 'Stag at Eve' engraving. The dust on the top of the frame incensed her.

"What are you going to do?" Sophia asked, in a final marvel.

"I'm going to change it with that one," said Constance, pointing to another engraving opposite the fireplace. "He said the effect would be very much better if they were changed. And his lordship is very particular."

Constance did not go to Bursley station to meet her son. She explained that it upset her to do so, and that Cyril also preferred her not to come.

"Suppose I go to meet him," said Sophia, at half-past five. The idea had visited her suddenly. She thought: "Then I could talk to him before anyone else."

"Oh, *dor* Constance agreed.

Sophia put her things on with remarkable expedition. She

arrived at the station a minute before the train came in. Only a few persons emerged from the train, and Cyril was not among them. A porter said that there was not supposed to be any connection between the Loop Line trains and the main line expresses, and that probably the express had missed the Loop. She waited thirty-five minutes for the next Loop, and Cyril did not emerge from that train either.

Constance opened the front-door to her, and showed a telegram—

"Sorry prevented last moment. Writing. CYRIL."

Sophia had known it. Somehow she had known that it was useless to wait for the second train. Constance was silent and calm; Sophia also.

"What a shame! What a shame!" thumped Sophia's heart.

It was the most ordinary episode. But beneath her calm she was furious against her favourite. She hesitated.

"I'm just going out a minute," she said.

"Where?" asked Constance. "Hadn't we better have tea? I suppose we must have tea."

"I shan't be long. I want to buy something."

Sophia went to the post-office and despatched a telegram. Then, partially eased, she returned to the arid and painful desolation of the house.

§4

The next evening Cyril sat at the tea-table in the parlour with his mother and his aunt. To Constance his presence there had something of the miraculous in it. He had come, after all! Sophia was in a rich robe, and for ornament wore an old silver-gilt neck-chain, which was clasped at the throat, and fell in double to her waist, where it was caught in her belt. This chain interested Cyril. He referred to it

once or twice, and then he said: "Just let me have a *look* at that chain," and put out his hand; and Sophia leaned forward so that he could handle it. His fingers played with it thus for some seconds; the picture strikingly affected Constance. At length he dropped it, and said: "H'm!" After a pause he said: "Louis Sixteenth, eh?" and Sophia said:

"They told me so. But it's nothing; it only cost thirty francs, you know." And Cyril took her up sharply: /

"What does that matter?" Then after another pause he asked: "How often do you break a link of it?"

"Oh, often," she said. "It's always getting shorter."

And he murmured mysteriously: "H'm!"

He was still mysterious, withdrawn within himself, extraordinarily uninterested in his physical surroundings. But that evening he talked more than he usually did. He was benevolent, and showed a particular benevolence towards his mother, apparently exerting himself to answer her questions with fullness and heartiness, as though admitting frankly her right to be curious. He praised the tea; he seemed to notice what he was eating. He took Spot on his knee, and gazed in admiration at Fossette.

"By Jove!" he said, "that's a dog, that is! ... All the same. . . ." And he burst out laughing.

"I won't have Fossette laughed at," Sophia warned him.

"No, seriously," he said, in his quality of an amateur of dogs; "she is very fine." Even then he could not help adding: "What you can see of her!"

Whereupon Sophia shook her head, deprecating such wit. Sophia was very lenient towards him. Her leniency could be perceived in her eyes, which followed his movements all the time. "Do you think he is like me, Constance?" she asked.

"I wish I was half as good-looking," said Cyril, quickly; and Constance said:

"As a baby he was very like you. He was a handsome baby. He wasn't at all like you when he was at school. These last few years he's begun to be like you again. He's very much changed since he left school; he was rather heavy and clumsy then."

"Heavy and clumsy!" exclaimed Sophia. "Well, I should never have believed it!"

"Oh, but he was!" Constance insisted.

"Now, mater," said Cyril, "it's a pity you don't want that cake cutting into. I think I could have eaten a bit of that cake. But of course if it's only for show. . . !"

Constance sprang up, seizing a knife.

"You shouldn't tease your mother," Sophia told him. "He doesn't really want any, Constance; he's regularly stuffed himself."

And Cyril agreed, "No, no, mater, don't cut it; I really couldn't. I was only gassing."

But Constance could never clearly see through humour of that sort. She cut three slices of cake, and she held the plate towards Cyril.

"I tell you I really couldn't!" he protested.

"Come!" she said obstinately. "I'm waiting! How much longer must I hold this plate?"

And he had to take a slice. So had Sophia. When she was roused, they both of them had to yield to Constance.

With the dogs, and the splendour of the tea-table under the gas, and the distinction of Sophia and Cyril, and the conversation, which on the whole was gay and free, rising at times to jolly garrulity, the scene in her parlour ought surely to have satisfied Constance utterly. She ought to have been quite happy, as her sciatica had raised the siege for a space. But she was not quite happy. The circumstances of Cyril's arrival had disturbed her; they had in fact wounded her, though she would scarcely admit the wound.

In the morning she had received a brief letter from Cyril to say that he had not been able to come, and vaguely promising, or half-promising, to run down at a later date. That letter had the cardinal defects of all Cyril's relations with his mother; it was casual, and it was not candid. It gave no hint of the nature of the obstacle which had prevented him from coming. Cyril had always been too secretive. She was gravely depressed by the letter, which she did not show to Sophia, because it impaired her dignity as a mother, and displayed her son in a bad light. Then about eleven o'clock a telegram had come for Sophia.

"That's all right," Sophia had said, on reading it. "He'll be here this evening!" And she had handed over the telegram, which read—

"Very well. Will come same train to-day."

And Constance learned that when Sophia had rushed out ju^t before tea on the previous evening, it was to telegraph to Cyril.

"What did you say to him?" Constance asked.

"Oh!" said Sophia, with a careless air, "I told him I thought he ought to come. After all, you're more impoi tant than any *business,* Constance! And I don't like him behaving like that. I was determined he should come!"

Sophia had tossed her proud head.

Constance had pretended to be pleased and grateful. But the existence of a wound was incontestable. Sophia, then, could do more with Cyril than she could! Sophia had only met him once, and could simply twist him round her little finger. He would never have done so much for his mother. A fine sort of an obstacle it must have been, if a single telegram from Sophia could overcome it. . . ! And Sophia, too, was secretive. She had gone out and had telegraphed, and had not breathed a word until she got the reply, sixteen hours later. She was secretive, and Cyril

was secretive. They resembled one another. They had taken to one another. But Sophia was a curious mixture. When Constance had asked her if she should go to the station again to meet Cyril, she had replied scornfully: "No, indeed! I've done going to meet Cyril. People who don't arrive must not expect to be met."

When Cyril drove up to the door, Sophia had been in attendance. She hurried down the steps. "Don't say anything about my telegram," she had rapidly whispered to Cyril; there was no time for further explanation. Constance was at the top of the steps. Constance had not heard the whisper, but she had seen it; and she saw a guilty, puzzled look on Cyril's face, afterwards an ineffectively concealed conspiratorial look on both their faces. They had 'something between them,' from which she, the mother, was shut out! Was it not natural that she should be wounded? She was far too proud to mention the telegrams. And as neither Cyril nor Sophia mentioned them, the circumstances leading to Cyril's change of plan were not referred to at all, which was very curious. Then Cyril was more sociable than he had ever been; he was different, under his aunt's gaze. Certainly he treated his mother faultlessly. But Constance said to herself: "It is because she is here that he is so specially nice to me."

When tea was finished and they were going upstairs to the drawing-room, she asked him, with her eye on the 'Stag at Eve' engraving:

"Well, is it a success?"

"What?" His eye followed hers. "Oh, youVe changed it! What did you do that for, mater?"

"You said it would be better like that," she reminded him.

"Did I?" He seemed genuinely surprised. "I don't remember. I believe it is better, though," he added. "It might be even better still if you turned it the other way up."

He pulled a face to Sophia, and screwed up his shoulders, as if to indicate: "I've done it, this time!"

"How? The other way up?" Constance queried. Then as she comprehended that he was teasing her, she said: "Get away with you!" and pretended to box his ears. "You were fond enough of that picture at one time!" she said ironically.

"Yes, I was, mater," he submissively agreed. "There's no getting over that." And he pressed her cheeks between his hands and kissed her.

In the drawing-room he smoked cigarettes and played the piano—waltzes of his own composition. Constance and Sophia did not entirely comprehend those waltzes. But they agreed that all were wonderful and that one was very pretty indeed. (It soothed Constance that Sophia's opinion coincided with hers.) He said that that waltz was the worst of the lot. When he had finished with the piano, Constance informed him about Amy. "Oh! She told me," he said, "when she brought me my water. I didn't mention it because I thought it would be rather a sore subject." Beneath the casualness of his tone there lurked a certain curiosity, a willingness to hear details. He heard them.

At five minutes to ten, when Constance had yawned, he threw a bomb among them on the hearthrug.

"Well," he said, "I've got an appointment with Matthew at the Conservative Club at ten o'clock, I must go. Don't wait up for me."

Both women protested, Sophia the more vivaciously. It was Sophia now who was wounded.

"It's business," he said, defending himself. "He's going away early to-morrow, and it's my only chance." And as Constance did not brighten he went on: "Business has to be attended to. You mustn't think I've got nothing to do but enjoy myself."

No hint of the nature of the business! He never explained.

As to business, Constance knew only that she allowed him three hundred a year, and paid his local tailor. The sum had at first seemed to her enormous, but she had grown accustomed to it.

"I should have preferred you to see Mr. Peel-Swynnerton here," said Constance. "You could have had a room to yourselves. I do not like you going out at ten o'clock at night to a club."

"Well, good-night, mater," he said, getting up. "See you to-morrow. I shall take the key out of the door. It's true my pocket will never be the same again."

Sophia saw Constance into bed, and provided her with two hot-water bottles against sciatica. They did not talk much.

§5

Sophia sat waiting on the sofa in the parlour. It appeared to her that, though little more than a month had elapsed since her arrival in Bursley, she had already acquired a new set of interests and anxieties. Paris and her life there had receded in the strangest way. Sometimes for hours she would absolutely forget Paris. Thoughts of Paris were disconcerting; for either Paris or Bursley must surely be unreal! As she sat waiting on the sofa Paris kept coming into her mind. Certainly it was astonishing that she should be just as preoccupied with her schemes for the welfare of Constance as she had ever been preoccupied with schemes for the improvement of the Pension Frensham. She said to herself: "My life has been so queer—and yet every part of it separately seemed ordinary enough—how will it end?"

Then there were footfalls on the steps outside, and a key was put into the door, which she at once opened.

"Oh!" exclaimed Cyril, startled, and also somewhat out

of countenance. "You're still up! Thanks." He came in, smoking the end of a cigar. "Fancy having to cart that about!" he murmured, holding up the great old-fashioned key before inserting it in the lock on the inside.

"I stayed up," said Sophia, "because I wanted to talk to you about your mother, and it's so difficult to get a chance."

Cyril smiled, not without self-consciousness, and dropped into his mother's rocking-chair, which he had twisted round with his feet to face the sofa.

"Yes," he said. "I was wondering what was the real meaning of your telegram. What was it?" He blew out a lot of smoke and waited for her reply.

"I thought you ought to come down," said Sophia, cheerfully but firmly. "It was a fearful disappointment to your mother that you didn't come yesterday. And when she's expecting a letter from you and it doesn't come, it makes her ill."

"Oh, well!" he said. "I'm glad it's no worse. I thought from your telegram there was something seriously wrong. And then when you told me not to mention it—when I came in. . . !"

She saw that he failed to realize the situation, arid she lifted her head challengingly.

"You neglect your mother, young man," she said.

"Oh, come now, auntie!" he answered quite gently. "You mustn't talk like that. I write to her every week. I've never missed a week. I come down as often as——"

"You miss the Sunday sometimes," Sophia interrupted him.

"Perhaps," he said doubtfully. "But what——"

"Don't you understand that she simply lives for your letters? And if one doesn't come, she's very upset indeed—can't eat! And it brings on her sciatica, and I don't know what!"

He was taken aback by her boldness, her directness.

"But how silly of her! A fellow can't always——"

"It may be silly. But there it is. You can't alter her. And, after all, what would it cost you to be more attentive, even to write to her twice a week? You aren't going to tell me you're so busy as all that! I know a great deal more about young men than your mother does." She smiled like an aunt.

He answered her smile sheepishly.

"If you'll only put yourself in your mother's place. . . !"

"I expect you're quite right," he said at length. "And I'm much obliged to you for telling me. How was I to know?" He threw the end of the cigar with a large sweeping gesture, into the fire.

"Well, anyhow, you know now!" she said curtly; and she thought: "You *ought* to have known. It was your business to know." But she was pleased with the way in which he had accepted her criticism, and the gesture with which he threw away the cigar-end struck her as very distinguished.

"That's all right!" he said dreamily, as if to say: "That's done with." And he rose.

Sophia, however, did not stir.

"Your mother's health is not what it ought to be," she went on, and gave him a full account of her conversation with the doctor.

"Really!" Cyril murmured, leaning on the mantel-piece with his elbow and looking down at her. "Stirling said that, did he? I should have thought she would have been better where she is, in the Square."

"Why better in the Square?"

"Oh, I don't know!"

"Neither do I!"

"She's always been here."

"**Yes,**" said Sophia, "she's been here a great deal too long."

"What *do you* suggest?" Cyril asked, with impatience in his voice against this new anxiety that was being thrust upon him.

"Well," said Sophia, "what should you say to her coming to London and living with you?"

Cyril started back. Sophia could see that he was genuinely shocked. "I don't think that would do at all," he said.

"Why?"

"Oh! I don't think it would. London wouldn't suit her. She's not that sort of woman. I really thought she was quite all right down here. She wouldn't like London." He shook his head, looking up at the gas; his eyes had a dangerous glare.

"But supposing she said she did?"

"Look here," Cyril began in a new and brighter tone. "Why don't you and she keep house together somewhere? That would be the very-——"

He turned his head sharply. There was a noise on the staircase, and the staircase door opened with its eternal creak.

"Yes," said Sophia. "The Champs Elysées begins at the Place de la Concorde, and ends——. Is that you, Constance?"

The figure of Constance filled the doorway. Her face was troubled. She had heard Cyril in the street, and had come down to see why he remained so long in the parlour. She was astounded to find Sophia with him. There they were, as intimate as cronies, chattering about Paris! Undoubtedly she was jealous! Never did Cyril talk like that to her!

"I thought you were in bed and asleep, Sophia," she said weakly. "It's nearly one o'clock."

"No," said Sophia. "I didn't seem to feel like going to bed; and then Cyril happened to come in."

But neither she nor Cyril could look innocent. And Constance glanced from one to the other apprehensively.

The next morning Cyril received a letter which, he said—with no further explanation—forced him to leave at once. He intimated that there had been danger in his coming just then, and that matters had turned out as he had feared.

"You think over what I said," he whispered to Sophia when they were alone for an instant, "and let me know."

§6

A week before Easter the guests of the Rutland Hotel in the Broad Walk, Buxton, being assembled for afternoon tea in the 'lounge' of that establishment, witnessed the arrival of two middle-aged ladies and two dogs. Critically to examine newcomers was one of the amusements of the occupants of the lounge. This apartment, furnished 'in the oriental style,' made a pretty show among the photographs in the illustrated brochure of the hotel, and, though draughty, it was of all the public rooms the favourite. It was draughty because only separated from the street (if the Broad Walk can be called a street) by two pairs of swinging-doors—in charge of two page-boys. Every visitor entering the hotel was obliged to pass through the lounge, and for newcomers the passage was an ordeal; they were made to feel that they had so much to learn, so much to get accustomed to; like passengers who join a ship at a port of call, they felt that the business lay before them of creating a niche for themselves in a hostile and haughty society. The two ladies produced a fairly favourable impression at the outset by reason of their two dogs. It is not everyone who has the courage to bring dogs into an expensive private hotel; to bring one dog indicates that you are not accustomed to deny yourself small pleasures for the sake of a few

extra shillings; to bring two indicates that you have no fear of hotel-managers and that you are in the habit of regarding your own whim as nature's law. The shorter and stouter of the two ladies did not impose herself with much force on the collective vision of the Rutland; she was dressed in black, not fashionably, though with a certain unpretending richness; her gestures were timid and nervous; evidently she relied upon her tall companion to shield her in 'the first trying contacts of hotel life. The tall lady was of a different stamp. Handsome, stately, deliberate, and handsomely dressed in colours, she had the assured hard gaze of a person who is thoroughly habituated to the inspection of strangers. She curtly asked one of the page-boys for the manager, and the manager's wife tripped rapidly down the stairs in response, and was noticeably deferential. Her voice was quiet and commanding, the voice of one who gives orders that are obeyed. The opinion of the lounge was divided as to whether or not they were sisters.

They vanished quietly upstairs in convoy of the manager's wife, and they did not re-appear for the lounge tea, which in any case would have been undrinkably stewed. It then became known, by the agency of one of those guests, to be found in every hotel, who acquire all the secrets of the hotel by the exercise of unabashed curiosity on the personnel, that the two ladies had engaged two bedrooms, Nos. 17 and 18, and the sumptuous private parlour with a balcony on the first floor, styled "C" in the nomenclature of rooms. This fact definitely established the position of the new arrivals in the moral fabric of the hotel. They were wealthy. They had money to throw away. For even in a select hotel like the Rutland it is not everybody who indulges in a private sitting-room; there were only four such apartments in the hotel, as against fifty bedrooms.

At dinner they had a small table to themselves in a corner. The short lady wore a white shawl over her shoulders. Her almost apologetic manner during the meal confirmed the view that she must be a very simple person, unused to the world and its ways. The other continued to be imperial. She ordered half-a-bottle of wine and drank two glasses. She stared about her quite self-unconsciously, whereas the littL woman divided her glances between her companion and her plate. They did not talk much. Immediately after dinner they retired. 'Widows in easy circumstances' was the verdict; but the contrast between the pair hold puzzles that piqued the inquisitive.

Sophia had conquered again. Once more Sophia had resolved to accomplish a thing and she had accomplished it. Events had fallen out thus. "The advertisement for a general servant in the *Signal* had been a disheartening failure. A few answers were received, but of an entirely unsatisfactory character. Constance, a great deal more than Sophia, had been astounded by the bearing and the demands of modern servants. Constance was in despair. If Constance had not had an immense pride she would have been ready to suggest to Sophia that Amy should be asked to 'stay on.' But Constance would have accepted a modern impudent wench first. It was Maria Critchlow who got Constance out of her difficulty by giving her particulars of a reliable servant who was about to leave a situation in which she had stayed for eight years. Constance did not imagine that a servant recommended by Maria Critchlow would suit her, but, being in a quandary, she arranged to see the servant, and both she and Sophia were very pleased with the girl—Rose Bennion by name. The mischief was that Rose would not be free until about a month after Amy had left. Rose would have left her old situation, but she had a fancy to go and spend a fortnight with a married

sister at Manchester before settling into new quarters. Constance and Sophia felt that this caprice of Rose's was really very tiresome and unnecessary. Of course Amy might have been asked to 'stay on' just for a month. Amy would probably have volunteered to do so had she been aware of the circumstances. She was not, however, aware of the circumstances. And Constance was determined not to be beholden to Amy for anything. What could the sisters do? Sophia, who conducted all the interviews with Rose and other candidates, said that it would be a grave error to let Rose slip. Besides, they had no one to take her place, no one who could come at once.

The dilemma was appalling. At least, it seemed appalling to Constance, who really believed that no mistress had ever been so 'awkwardly fixed.' And yet, when Sophia first proposed her solution, Constance considered it to be a quite impossible solution. Sophia's idea was that they should lock up the house and leave it on the same day as Amy left it, to spend a few weeks in some holiday resort. To begin with, the idea of leaving the house empty seemed to Constance a mad idea. The house had never been left empty. And then—going for a holiday in April! Constance had never been for a holiday except in the month of August. No! The project was beset with difficulties and dangers which could not be overcome nor provided against. For example, "We can't come back to a dirty house," said Constance. "And we can't have a strange servant coming here before us." To which Sophia had replied: "Then what *shall* you do?" And Constance, after prodigious reflection on the frightful pass to which destiny had brought her, had said that she supposed she would have to manage with a charwoman until Rose's advent. She asked Sophia if she remembered old Maggie. Sophia, of course, perfectly remembered. Old Maggie was dead, as well as the drupken,

amiable Hollins, but there was a young Maggie (wife of a bricklayer) who went out charing in the spare time left from looking after seven children. The more Constance meditated upon young Maggie, the more was she convinced that young Maggie would meet the case. Constance felt she could trust young Maggie.

This expression of trust in Maggie was Constance's undoing. Why should they not go away, and arrange with Maggie to come to the house a few days before their return, to clean and ventilate? The weight of reason overbore Cgnstance. She yielded unwillingly, but she yielded. It was the mention of Buxton that finally moved her. She knew Buxton. Her old landlady at Buxton was dead, and Constance had not visited the place since before Samuel's death; nevertheless its name had a reassuring sound to her ears, and for sciatica its waters and climate were admitted to be the best in England. Gradually Constance permitted herself to be embarked on this perilous enterprise of shutting up the house for twenty-five days. She imparted the information to Amy, who was astounded. Then she commenced upon her domestic preparations. She wrapped Samuel's Family Bible in brown paper; she put Cyril's straw-framed copy of Sir Edwin Landseer away in a drawer, and she took ten thousand other precautions. It was grotesque; it was farcical; it was what you please. And when, with the cab at the door and the luggage on the cab, and the dogs chained together, and Maria Critchlow waiting on the pavement to receive the key, Constance put the key into the door on the outside, and locked up the empty house, Constance's face was tragic with innumerable apprehensions. And Sophia felt that she had performed a miracle. She had.

On the whole the sisters were well received in the hotel, though they were not at an age which commands popu-

larity. In the criticism which was passed upon them—the free, realistic and relentless criticism of private hotels—Sophia was at first set down as overbearing. But in a few days this view was modified, and Sophia rose in esteem. The fact was that Sophia's behaviour changed after forty-eight hours. The Rutland Hotel was very good. It was so good as to disturb Sophia's profound beliefs that there was in the world only one truly high-class pension, and that nobody could teach the creator of that unique pension anything about the art of management. The food was excellent; the attendance in the bedrooms was excellent (and Sophia knew how difficult of attainment was excellent bedroom attendance); and to the eye the interior of the Rutland presented a spectacle far richer than the Pension Frensham could show. The standard of comfort was higher. The guests had a more distinguished appearance. It is true that the prices were much higher. Sophia was humbled. She had enough sense to adjust her perspective. Further, she found herself ignorant of many matters which by the other guests were taken for granted and used as a basis for conversation. Prolonged residence in Paris would not justify this ignorance; it seemed rather to intensify its strangeness. Thus, when someone of cosmopolitan experience, having learnt that she had lived in Paris for many years, asked what had been going on lately at the Comedie Fransaise, she had to admit that she had not been in a French theatre for nearly thirty years. And when, on a Sunday, the same person questioned her about the English chaplain in Paris, lo! she knew nothing but his name, had never even seen him. Sophia's life, in its way, had been as narrow as Constance's. Though her experience of human nature was wide, she had been in a groove as deep as Constance's. She had been utterly absorbed in doing one single thing.

By tacit agreement she had charge of the expedition. She paid all the bills. Constance protested against the expensiveness of the affair several times, but Sophia quietened her by sheer force of individuality. Constance had one advantage over Sophia. She knew Buxton and its neighbourhood intimately, and she was therefore in a position to show off the sights and to deal with local peculiarities. In all other respects Sophia led.

They very soon became acclimatized to the hotel. They moved easily between Turkey carpets and sculptured ceilings; their eyes grew used to the eternal vision of themselves and other slow-moving dignities in gilt mirrors, to the heaviness of great oil-paintings of picturesque scenery, to the indications of surreptitious dirt behind massive furniture, to the grey-brown of the shirt-fronts of the waiters, to the litter of trays, boots and pails in long corridors; their ears were always awake to the sounds of gongs and bells. They consulted the barometer and ordered the daily carriage with the perfunctoriness of habit. They discovered what can be learnt of other people's needlework in a hotel on a wet day. They performed co-operative outings with fellow-guests. They invited fellow-guests into their sitting-room. When there was an entertainment they did not avoid it. Sophia was determined to do everything that could with propriety be done, partly as an outlet for her own energy (which since she left Paris had been accumulating), but more on Constance's account. She remembered all that Dr. Stirling had said, and the heartiness of her own agreement with his opinions. It was a great day when, under tuition of an aged lady and in the privacy of their parlour, they both began to study the elements of Patience. Neither had ever played at cards. Constance was almost afraid to touch cards, as though in the very cardboard there had been something unrighteous and

perilous. But the respectability of a luxurious private hotel makes proper every act that passes within its walls. And Constance plausibly argued that no harm could come from a game which you played by yourself. She acquired with some aptitude several varieties of Patience. She said: "I think I could enjoy that, if I kept at it. But it does make my head whirl."

Nevertheless Constance was not happy in the hotel. She worried the whole time about her empty house. She anticipated difficulties and even disasters. She wondered again and again whether she could trust the second Maggie in her house alone, whether it would not be better to return home earlier and participate personally in the cleaning. She would have decided to do so had it not been that she hesitated to subject Sophia to the inconvenience of a house upside down. The matter was on her mind, always. Always she was restlessly anticipating the day when they would leave. She had carelessly left her heart behind in St. Luke's Square. She had never stayed in a hotel before, and she did not like it. Sciatica occasionally harassed her. Yet when it came to the point she would not drink the waters. She said she never had drunk them, and seemed to regard that as a reason why she never should. Sophia had achieved a miracle in getting her to Buxton for nearly a month, but the ultimate grand effect lacked brilliance.

Then came the fatal letter, the desolating letter, which vindicated Constance's dark apprehensions. Rose Bennion calmly wrote to say that she had decided not to come to St. Luke's Square. She expressed regret for any inconvenience which might possibly be caused; she was polite. But the monstrousness of it! Constance felt that this actually and truly was the deepest depth of her calamities. There she was, far from a dirty home, with no servant and no prospect of a servant! She bore herself bravely, nobly;

but she was stricken. She wanted to return to the dirty home at once.

Sophia felt that the situation created by this letter would demand her highest powers of dealing with situations, and she determined to deal with it adequately. Great measures were needed, for Constance's health and happiness were at stake. She alone could act. She knew that she could not rely upon Cyril. She still had an immense partiality for Cyril; she thought him the most charming young man she had ever known; she knew him to be industrious and clever; but in his relations with his mother there was a hardness, a touch of callousness. She explained it vaguely by saying that 'they did not get on well together'; which was strange, considering Constance's sweet affectionateness. Still, Constance could be a little trying—at times. Anyhow, it was soon clear to Sophia that the idea of mother and son living together in London was entirely impracticable. No! If Constance was to be saved from herself, there was no one but Sophia to save her.

After half a morning spent chiefly in listening to Constance's hopeless comments on the monstrous letter, Sophia said suddenly that she must take the dogs for an airing. Constance did not feel equal to walking out, and she would not drive. She did not want Sophia to Venture,' because the sky threatened. However, Sophia did venture, and she returned a few minutes late for lunch, full of vigour, with two happy dogs. Constance was moodily awaiting her in the dining-room. Constance could not eat. But Sophia ate, and she poured out cheerfulness and energy as from a source inexhaustible. After lunch it began to rain. Constance said she thought she should retire directly to the sitting-room. "I'm coming too," said Sophia, who was still wearing her hat and coat and carried her gloves in her hand. In the pretentious and banal

sitting-room they sat down on either side the fire. Constance put a little shawl round her shoulders, pushed her spectacles into her grey hair, folded her hands, and sighed an enormous sigh: "Oh, dear!" She was the tragic muse, aged, and in black silk.

"I tell you what I've been thinking," said Sophia, folding up her gloves.

"What?" asked Constance, expecting some wonderful solution to come out of Sophia's active brain.

"There's no earthly reason why you should go back to Bursley. The house won't run away, and it's costing nothing but the rent. Why not take things easy for a bit?"

"And stay here?" said Constance, with an inflection that enlightened Sophia as to the intensity of her dislike of the existence at the Rutland.

"No, not here," Sophia answered with quick depecation. "There are plenty of other places we could go to."

"I don't think I should be easy in my mind," said Constance. "What with nothing being settled, the house——"

"What does it matter about the house?"

"It matters a great deal," said Constance, seriously, and slightly hurt. "I didn't leave things as if we were going to be away for a long time. It wouldn't do."

"I don't see that anything could come to any harm, I really don't!" said Sophia, persuasively. "Dirt can always be cleaned, after all. I think you ought to go about more. It would do you good—all the good in the world. And there is no reason why you shouldn't go about. You are perfectly free. Why shouldn't we go abroad together, for instance, you and I? I'm sure you would enjoy it very much."

"Abroad?" murmured Constance, aghast, recoiling from the proposition as from a grave danger.

"Yes," said Sophia, brightly and eagerly. She was

determined to take Constance abroad. "There are lots of places we could go to, and live very comfortably among nice English people/' She thought of the resorts she had visited with Gerald in the sixties. They seemed to her like cities of a dream. They came back to her as a dream recurs.

"I don't think going abroad would suit me," said Constance.

'[4]But why not? You don't know. You've never tried, my dear." She smiled encouragingly. But Constance did not smile. Constance was inclined to be grim.

"I don't think it would," said she, obstinately. "I'm one of your stay-at-homes. I'm not like you. We can't all be alike," she added, with her 'tart' accent.

Sophia suppressed a feeling of irritation. She knew that she had a stronger individuality than Constance's.

"Well, then," she said, with undiminished persuasiveness, "in England or Scotland. There are several places I should like to visit—Torquay, Tunbridge Wells. I've always understood that Tunbridge Wells is a very nice town indeed, with very superior people, and a beautiful climate."

"I think I shall have to be getting back to St. Luke's Square," said Constance, ignoring all that Sophia had said. "There's so much to be done."

Then Sophia looked at Constance with a more serious and resolute air; but still kindly, as though looking thus at Constance for Constance's own good.

"You are making a mistake, Constance," she said, "if you will allow me to say so."

"A mistake!" exclaimed Constance, startled.

"A very great mistake," Sophia insisted, observing that she was creating an effect.

"I don't see how I can be making a mistake," Constance said, gaining confidence in herself, as she thought the matter over.

"No," said Sophia, "I'm sure you don't see it. But you are. You know, you are just a little apt to let yourself be a slave to that house of yours. Instead of the house existing for you, you exist for the house."

"Oh! Sophia!" Constance muttered awkwardly. "What ideas you do have, to be sure!" In her nervousness she rose and picked up some embroidery, adjusting her spectacles and coughing. When she sat down she said: "No one could take things easier than I do as regards housekeeping. I can assure you I let dozens of little matters go, rather than bother myself."

"Then why do you bother now?" Sophia posed her.

"I can't leave the place like that." Constance was hurt.

"There's one thing I can't understand," said Sophia, raising her head and gazing at Constance again, "and that is, why you live in St. Luke's Square at all."

"I must live somewhere. And I'm sure it's very pleasant."

"In all that smoke! And with that dirt! And the house is very old."

"It's a great deal better built than a lot of those new houses by the Park," Constance sharply retorted. In spite of herself she resented any criticism of her house. She even resented the obvious truth that it was old.

"You'll never get a servant to stay in that cellar-kitchen, for one thing," said Sophia, keeping calm.

"Oh! I don't know about that! I don't know about that! That Bennion woman didn't object to it, anyway. It's all very well for you, Sophia, to talk like that. But I know Bursley perhaps better than you do." She was tart again. "And I can assure you that my house is looked upon as a very good house indeed."

"Oh! I don't say it isn't; I don't say it isn't. But you would be better away from it. Everyone says that."

"Everyone?" Constance looked up, dropping her work. "Who? Who's been talking about me?"

"Well," said Sophia, "the doctor, for instance."

"Dr. Stirling? I like that! He's always saying that Bursley is one of the healthiest climates in England. He's always sticking up for Bursley."

VDr. Stirling thinks you ought to go away more—not stay always in that dark house." If Sophia had sufficiently reflected she would not have used the adjective 'dark.' It did not help her cause.

"Oh, does he!" Constance fairly snorted. "Well, if it's of any interest to Dr. Stirling, I like my dark house."

"Hasn't he ever told you you ought to go away more?" Sophia persisted.

"He may have mentioned it," Constance reluctantly admitted.

"When he was talking to me he did a good deal more than mention it. And I've a good mind to tell you what he said."

"Do!" said Constance, politely.

"You don't realize how serious it is, I'm afraid," said Sophia. "You can't see yourself." She hesitated a moment. Her blood being stirred by Constance's peculiar inflection of the phrase 'my dark house,' her judgment was slightly obscured. She decided to give Constance a fairly full version of the conversation between herself and the doctor.

"It's a question of your health," she finished. "I think it's my duty to talk to you seriously, and I have done. I hope you'll take it as it's meant."

"Oh, of course!'* Constance hastened to say. And she thought: "It isn't yet three months that we've been together, and she's trying already to get me under her thumb."

A pause ensued. Sophia at length said: "There's no

doubt that both your sciatica and your palpitations are due to nerves. And you let your nerves get into a state because you worry over trifles. A change would do you a tremendous amount of good. It's just what you need. Really, you must admit, Constance, that the idea of living always in a place like St. Luke's Square, when you are perfectly free to do what you like and go where you like—you rmist admit it's rather too much."

Constance put her lips together, and bent over her embroidery.

"Now, what do you say?" Sophia gently entreated.

"There's some of us like Bursley, black as it is!" said Constance. And Sophia was surprised to detect tears in her sister's voice.

"Now, my dear Constance," she remonstrated.

"It's no use!" cried Constance, flinging away her work, and letting her tears flow suddenly. Her face was distorted. She was behaving just like a child. "It's no use! I've got to go back home and look after things. It's no use. Here we are pitching money about" in this place. It's perfectly sinful. Drives, carriages, extras! A shilling a day extra for each dog. I never heard of such goings-on. And I'd sooner be at home. That's it. I'd sooner be at home." This was the first reference that Constance had made for a long time to the question of expense, and incomparably the most violent. It angered Sophia.

"We will count it that you are here as my guest," said Sophia, loftily, "if that is how you look at it."

"Oh no!" said Constance. "It isn't the money I grudge. Oh no, we won't." And her tears were falling thick.

"Yes, we will," said Sophia, coldly. "I've only been talking to you for your own good. I——"

"Well," Constance interrupted her despairingly, "I wish you wouldn't try to domineer over me!"

"Domineer!" exclaimed Sophia, aghast. "Well, Constance, I do think——"

She got up and went to her bedroom, where the dogs were imprisoned. They escaped to the stairs. She was shaking with emotion. This was what came of trying to help other people! Imagine Constance. . . ! Truly Constance was most unjust, and quite unlike her usual self! And Sophia encouraged in her breast the feeling of injustice suffered. But a voice kept saying to her: "You've made a mess of this. You've not conquered this time. You're beaten. And the situation is unworthy of you, of both of you. Two women of fifty quarrelling like this! It's undignified. You've made a mess of things." And to strangle the voice, she did her best to encourage the feeling of injustice suffered.

'Domineer!'

And Constance was absolutely in the wrong. She had not argued at all. She had merely stuck to her idea like a mule! How difficult and painful would be the next meeting with Constance, after this grievous miscarriage!

As she was reflecting thus the door burst open, and Constance stumbled, as it were blindly, into the bedroom. She was sail weeping.

"Sophia!" she sobbed, supplicatingly, and all her fat body was trembling. "You mustn't kill me. . . . I'm like that—you can't alter me. I'm like that. I know I'm silly. But it's no use!" She made a piteous figure.

Sophia was aware of a lump in her throat.

"It's all right, Constance; it's all right. I quite understand. Don't bother any more."

Constance, catching her breath at intervals, raised her wet, worn face and kissed her.

Sophia remembered the very words, 'You can't alter her,' which she had used in remonstrating with Cyril. And now

she had been guilty of precisely the same unreason as that with which she had reproached Cyril! She was ashamed, both for herself and for Constance. Assuredly it had not been such a scene as women of their age would want to go through often. It was humiliating. She wished that it could have been blotted out as though it had never happened. Neither of them ever forgot it. They had had a lesson. And particularly Sophia had had a lesson. Having learnt, they left the Rutland, amid due ceremonies, and returned to St. Luke's Square.

CHAPTER IV: END OF SOPHIA

§ 1

THE kitchen steps were as steep, dark, and difficult as ever. Up those steps Sophia Scales, nine years older than when she had failed to persuade Constance to leave the Square, was carrying a large basket, weighted with all the heaviness of Fossette. Sophia, despite her age, climbed the steps violently, and burst with equal violence into the parlour, where she deposited the basket on the floor near the empty fireplace. She was triumphant and breathless. She looked at Constance, who had been standing near the door in the attitude of a shocked listener.

"There!" said Sophia. "Did you hear how she talked?"

"Yes," said Constance. "What shall we do?"

"Well," said Sophia. "I had a very good mind to order her out of the house at once. But then I thought I would take no notice. Her time will be up in three weeks. It's best to be indifferent. If once they see they can upset you. . . . However, I wasn't going to leave Fossette down there to her tender mercies a moment longer. She's simply not looked after her at all."

Sophia went on her knees to the basket, and, pulling aside the dog's hair, round about the head, examined the skin. Fossette was a sick dog and behaved like one. Fossette, too, was nine years older, and her senility was offensive. She was to no sense a pleasant object.

"See here," said Sophia.

Constance also knelt to the basket.

"And here," said Sophia. "And here."

The dog sighed, the insincere and pity-seeking sigh of a spoilt animal. Fossette foolishly hoped by such appeals to

be spared the annoying treatment prescribed for her by the veterinary surgeon.

While the sisters were coddling her, and protecting her from her own paws, and trying to persuade her that all was for the best, another aged dog wandered vaguely into the room: Spot. Spot had very few teeth, arid his legs were stiff. He had only one vice, jealousy. Fearing that Fossette might be receiving the entire attention of his mistresses/he had come to inquire into the situation. When he found the justification of his gloomiest apprehensions, he nosed obstinately up to Constance, and would not be put off. In vain Constance told him at length that he was interfering with the treatment. In vain Sophia ordered him sharply to go away. He would not listen to reason, being furious with jealousy. He got his foot into the basket.

"Will you!" exclaimed Sophia angrily, and gave him a clout on his old head. He barked snappishly, and retired to the kitchen again, disillusioned, tired of the world, and nursing his terrific grievance. "I do declare," said Sophia, "that dog gets worse and worse."

Constance said nothing.

When everything was done that could be done for the aged virgin in the basket, the sisters rose from their knees, stiffly; and they began to whisper to each other about the prospects of obtaining a fresh servant. They also debated whether they could tolerate the criminal eccentricities of the present occupant of the cave for yet another three weeks. Evidently they were in the midst of a crisis. To judge from Constance's face every imaginable woe had been piled on them by destiny without the slightest regard for their powers of resistance. Her eyes had the permanent look of worry, and there was in them also something of the self-defensive. Sophia had a bellicose air, as though the creature in the cave had squarely challenged her, and she was

decided to take up the challenge. Sophia's tone seemed to imply an accusation of Constance. The general tension was acute.

Then suddenly their whispers expired, and the door opened and the servant came in to lay the supper. Her nose was high, her gaze cruel, radiant, and conquering. She was a pretty and an impudent girl of about twenty-three. She knew she was torturing her old and infirm mistresses. She did not care. She did it purposely. Her motto was: War on employers, get all you can out of them, for they will get all they can out of you. On principle—the sole principle she possessed—she would not stay in a place more than six months. She liked change. And employers did not like change. She was shameless with men. She ignored all orders as to what she was to eat and what she was not to eat. She lived up to the full resources of her employers. She could be to the last degree slatternly. Or she could be as neat as a pin, with an apron that symbolized purity and propriety, as to-night. She could be idle during a whole day, accumulating dirty dishes from morn till eve. On the other hand she could, when she chose, work with astonishing celerity and even thoroughness. In short, she was born to infuriate a mistress like Sophia and to wear out a mistress like Constance. Her strongest advantage in the struggle was that she enjoyed altercation; she revelled in a brawl; she found peace tedious. She was perfectly calculated to convince the sisters that times had worsened, and that the world would never again be the beautiful, agreeable place it once had been.

Her gestures as she laid the table were very graceful, in the pert style. She dropped forks into their appointed positions with disdain; she made slightly too much noise; when she turned she manoeuvred her swelling hips as though for the benefit of a soldier in a handsome uniform.

Nothing but the servant had been changed in that house. The harmonium on which Mr. Povey used occasionally to play was still behind the door; and on the harmonium was the tea-caddy of which Mrs. Baines used to carry the key on her bunch. In the corner to the right of the fireplace still hung the cupboard where Mrs. Baines stored her pharmacopoeia. The rest of the furniture was arranged as it had been arranged when the death of Mrs. Baines endowed Mr. and Mrs. Povey with all the treasures of the house at Axe. And it was as good as ever; better than ever. Dr. Stirling often expressed the desire for a corner cupboard like Mrs. Baines's corner cupboard. One item had been added: the 'Peel* compote which Matthew Peel-Swynnerton had noticed in the dining-room of the Pension Frensham. This majestic piece, which had been reserved by Sophia in the sale of the pension, stood alone on a canterbury in the drawing-room. She had stored it, with a few other trifles, in Paris, and when she sent for it and the packing-case arrived, both she and Constance became aware that they were united for the rest of their lives. Of worldly goods, except money, securities, and clothes, that compote was practically all that Sophia owned. Happily it was a first-class item, doing no shame to the antique magnificence of the drawing-room.

In yielding to Constance's terrible inertia, Sophia had meant nevertheless to work her own will on the interior of the house. She had meant to bully Constance into modernizing the dwelling. She did bully Constance, but the house defied her. Nothing could be done to that house. If only it had had a hall or lobby a complete transformation would have been possible. But there was no access to the upper floor except through the parlour. The parlour could not therefore be turned into a kitchen and the basement suppressed, and the ladies of the house could not live

entirely on the upper floor. The disposition of the rooms had to remain exactly as it had always been. There was the same draught under the door, the same darkness on the kitchen stairs, the same difficulties with tradesmen in the distant backyard, the same twist in the bedroom stairs, the same eternal ascending and descending of pails. An efficient cooking-stove, instead of the large and capacious range, alone represented the twentieth century in the fixtures of the house.

Buiied at the root of the relations between the sisters was Sophia's grudge against Constance for refusing to leave the Square. Sophia was loyal. She would not consciously give with one hand while taking away with the other, and in accepting Constance's decision she honestly meant to close her eyes to its stupidity. But she could not entirely succeed. She could not avoid thinking that the angelic Constance had been strangely and monstrously selfish in refusing to quit the Square. She marvelled that a woman of Constance's sw'eet and calm disposition should be capable of so vast and ruthless an egotism. Constance must have known that Sophia would not leave her, and that the habitation of the Square was a continual irk to Sophia. Constance had never been able to advance a single argument for remaining in the Square. And yet she would not budge. It was so inconsistent with the rest of Constance's behaviour. See Sophia sitting primly there by the table, a woman approaching sixty, with immense experience written on the fine hardness of her worn and distinguished face! Though her hair is not yet all grey, nor her figure bowed, you would imagine that she would, in her passage through the world, have learnt better than to expect a character to be consistent. But no! She was ever disappointed and hurt by Constance's inconsistency! And see Constance, stout and bowed, looking more than her age with hair nearly white

and slightly trembling hands! See that face whose mark is meekness and the spirit of conciliation, the desire for peace —you would not think that that placid soul could, while submitting to it, inly rage against the imposed weight of Sophia's individuality. "Because I wouldn't turn out of my house to please her," Constance would say to herself, "she fancies she is entitled to do just as she likes." Not often did she secretly rebel thus, but it occurred sometimes. They never quarrelled. They would have regarded separation as a disaster. Considering the difference of their lives, they agreed marvellously in their judgment of things. But that buried question of domicile prevented a complete unity between them. And its suble effect was to influence both of them to make the worst, instead of the best, of the trifling mishaps that disturbed their tranquillity. When annoyed, Sophia would meditate upon the mere fact that they lived in the Square for no reason whatever, until it grew incredibly shocking to her. After all it was scarcely conceivable that they should be living in the very middle of a dirty, ugly, industrial town simply because Constance mulishly declined to move. Another thing that curiously exasperated both of them upon occasion was that, owing to a recurrence of her old complaint of dizziness after meals, Sophia had been strictly forbidden to drink tea, which she loved. Sophia chafed under the deprivation, and Constance's pleasure was impaired because she had to drink it alone.

While the brazen and pretty servant, mysteriously smiling to herself, dropped food and utensils on to the table, Constance and Sophia attempted to converse with negligent ease upon indifferent topics, as though nothing had occurred that day to mar the beauty of ideal relations between employers and employed. The pretence was ludicrous. The young wench saw through it instantly, and her mysterious smile developed almost into a laugh.

"Please shut the door after you, Maud,[55] said Sophia, as the girl picked up her empty tray.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Maud, politely.

She went out and left the door open.

It was a defiance, offered from sheer, youthful, wanton mischief.

The sisters looked at each other, their faces gravely troubled, aghast, as though they had glimpsed the end of civilized society, as though they felt that they had lived too long into an age of decadence and open shame. Constance's face showed despair—she might have been about to be pitched into the gutter without a friend and without a shilling—but Sophia's had the reckless courage that disaster breeds.

Sophia jumped up, and stepped to the door. "Maud," she called out.

No answer.

"Maud, do you hear me?"

The suspense was fearful.

Still no answer.

Sophia glanced at Constance. "Either she shuts this door, or she leaves this house at once, even if I have to fetch a policeman!"

And Sophia disappeared down the kitchen steps. Constance trembled with painful excitement. The horror of existence closed in upon her. She could imagine nothing more appalling than the pass to which they had been brought by the modern change in the lower classes.

In the kitchen, Sophia, conscious that the moment held the future of at least the next three weeks, collected her forces.

"Maud," she said, "did you not hear me call you?[55]

Maud looked up from a book-doubtless a wicked book.

"No, ma'am."

"You liar!" thought Sophia. And she said: "I asked you to shut the parlour door, and I shall be obliged if you will do so."

Now Maud would have given a week's wages for the moral force to disobey Sophia. There was nothing to compel her to obey. She could have trampled on the fragile and weak Sophia. But something in Sophia's gaze compelled her to obey. She flounced; she bridled; she mumbled; she unnecessarily disturbed the venerable Spot; but she obeyed. Sophia had risked all, and she had won something.

"And you should light the gas in the kitchen," said Sophia magnificently, as Maud followed her up the steps. "Your young eyes may be very good now, but you are not going the way to preserve them. My sister and I have often told you that we do not grudge you gas."

With stateliness she rejoined Constance, and sat down to the cold supper. And as Maud clicked the door to, the sisters breathed relief. They envisaged new tribulations, but for a brief instant there was surcease.

Yet they could not eat. Neither of them, when it came to the point, could swallow. The day had been too exciting, too distressing. They were at the end of their resources. And they did not hide from each other that they were at the end of their resources. The illness of Fossette, without anything else, had been more than enough to ruin their tranquillity. But the illness of Fossette was as nothing to the ingenious naughtiness of the servant. Maud had a sense of temporary defeat, and was planning fresh operations; but really it was Maud who had conquered. Poor old things, they were in such a 'state' that they could not eat!

"I'm not going to let her think she can spoil my appetite!" said Sophia, dauntless. Truly that woman's spirit was unquenchable.

She cut a couple of slices off the cold fowl; she cut a tomato into slices; she disturbed the butter; she crumbled bread on the cloth, and rubbed bits of fowl over the plates, and dirtied knives and forks. Then she put the slices of fowl and bread and tomato into a piece of tissue paper, and silently went upstairs with the parcel and came down again a moment afterwards empty-handed.

After an interval she rang the bell, and lighted the gas.

"We've finished, Maud. You can clear away."

Constance thirsted for a cup of tea. She felt that a cup of tea was the one thing that would certainly keep her alive. She longed for it passionately. But she would not demand it from Maud. Nor would she mention it to Sophia, lest Sophia, flushed by the victory of the door, should incur new risks. She simply did without. On empty stomachs they tried pathetically to help each other in games of Patience. And when the blithe Maud passed through the parlour on the way to bed, she saw two dignified and apparently calm ladies, apparently absorbed in a delightful game of cards, apparently without a worry in the world. They said "Good night, Maud," cheerfully, politely, and coldly. It was a heroic scene. Immediately afterwards Sophia carried Fossette up to her own bedroom.

§ 2

The next afternoon the sisters, in the drawing-room, saw Dr. Stirling's motor-car speeding down the Square. The doctor's partner, young Harrop, had died a few years before at the age of over seventy, and the practice was much larger than it had ever been, even in the time of old Harrop. Instead of two or three horses, Stirling kept a car, which was a constant spectacle in the streets of the district.

"I do hope he'll call in," said Mrs. Povey, and sighed.

Sophia smiled to herself with a little scorn. She knew that Constance's desire for Dr. Stirling was due simply to the need which she felt of telling someone about the great calamity that had happened to them that morning. Constance was utterly absorbed by it, in the most provincial way. Sophia had said to herself at the beginning of her sojourn in Bursley, and long afterwards, that she should never get accustomed to the exasperating provinciality of the town, exemplified by the childish preoccupation of the inhabitants with their own two-penny affairs. No characteristic of life in Bursley annoyed her more than this. None had oftener caused her to yearn in a brief madness for the desert-like freedom of great cities. But she had got accustomed to it. Indeed, she had almost ceased to notice it. Only occasionally, when her nerves were more upset than usual, did it strike her.

She went into Constance's bedroom to see whether the doctor's car halted in King Street. It did.

"He's here," she called out to Constance.

"I wish you'd go down, Sophia," said Constance. "I can't trust that minx——"

So Sophia went downstairs to superintend the opening of the door by the minx.

The doctor was radiant, according to custom.

"I thought I'd just see how that dizziness was going on," said he as he came up the steps.

"I'm glad you've come," said Sophia, confidentially. Since the first days of their acquaintanceship they had always been confidential. "You'll do my sister good to-day."

Just as Maud was closing the door a telegraph-boy arrived, with a telegram addressed to Mrs. Scales. Sophia read it and then crumpled it in her hand.

"What's wrong with Mrs. Povey to-day?" the doctor asked, when the servant had withdrawn.

"She only wants a bit of your society," said Sophia. "Will you go up? You know the way to the drawing-room. I'll follow."

As soon as he had gone she sat down on the sofa, staring out of the window. Then with a grunt: "Well, that's no use, anyway!" she went upstairs after the doctor. Already Constance had begun upon her recital.

"Yes," Constance was saying. "And when I went down this morning to keep an eye on the breakfast, I thought Spot was very quiet——" She paused. "He was dead in the drawer. She pretended she didn't know, but I'm sure she did. Nothing will convince me that she didn't poison that dog with the mice-poison we had last year. She was vexed because Sophia took her up sharply about Fossette last night, and she revenged herself on the other dog. It would just be like her. Don't tell me! I know. I should have packed her off at once, but Sophia thought better not. We couldn't *prove* anything, as Sophia says. Now, what do you think of it, doctor?"

Constance's eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"Ye'd had Spot a long time, hadn't ye?" he said sympathetically.

She nodded. "When I was married," said she, "the first thing my husband did was to buy a fox-terrier, and ever since we've always had a fox-terrier in the house." This was not true, but Constance was firmly convinced of its truth.

"It's very trying," said the doctor. "I know when my Airedale died, I said to my wife I'd never have another dog —unless she could find me one that would live for ever. Ye remember my Airedale?"

"Oh, quite well!"

"Well, my wife said I should be bound to have another one sooner or later, and the sooner the better. She went straight off to Oldcastle and bought me a spaniel pup, and

there was such a to-do training it that we hadn't too much time to think about Piper."

Constance regarded this procedure as somewhat callous and she said so, tartly. Then she recommenced the tale of Spot's death from the beginning, and took it as far as his burial, that afternoon, by Mr. Critchlow's manager, in the yard. It had been necessary to remove and replace paving-stones.

"Of course," said Dr. Stirling, "ten years is a long time. He was an old dog. Well, you've still got the celebrated Fossette." He turned to Sophia.

"Oh yes," said Constance, perfunctorily. "Fossette's ill. The fact is that if Fossette hadn't been ill, Spot would probably have been alive and well now."

Her tone exhibited a grievance. She could not forget that Sophia had harshly dismissed Spot to the kitchen, thus practically sending him to his death. It seemed very hard to her that Fossette, whose life had once been despaired of, should continue to exist, while Spot, always healthy and unspoilt, should die untended, and by treachery. For the rest, she had never liked Fossette. On Spot's behalf she had always been jealous of Fossette.

"Probably alive and well now!" she repeated, with a peculiar accent.

Observing that Sophia maintained a strange silence, Dr. Stirling suspected a slight tension in the relations of the sisters, and he changed the subject. One of his great qualities was that he refrained from changing a subject introduced by a patient unless there was a professional reason for changing it.

"I've just met Richard Povey in the town," said he. "He told me to tell ye that he'll be round in about an hour or so to take you for a spin. He was in a new car, which he did his best to sell to me, but he didn't succeed."

"It's very kind of Dick," said Constance. "But this afternoon really we're not——"

"I'll thank ye to take it as a prescription, then," replied the doctor. "I told Dick I'd see that ye went. Splendid June weather. No dust after all that rain. It'll do ye all the good in the world. I must exercise my authority. The truth is, I've gradually been losing all control over ye. Ye do just as ye like."

"Oh, doctor, how you do run on!" murmured Constance, not quite well pleased to-day by his tone.

After the scene between Sophia and herself at Buxton, Constance had always, to a certain extent, in the doctor's own phrase, 'got her knife into him.' Sophia had, then, in a manner betrayed him. Constance and the doctor discussed that matter with frankness, the doctor humorously accusing her of being 'hard* on him. Nevertheless the little cloud between them was real, and the result was often a faint captiousness on Constance's part in judging the doctor's behaviour.

"He's got a surprise for ye, has Dick!" the doctor added.

Dick Povey, after his father's death and his own partial recovery, had set up in Hanbridge as a bicycle agent. He was permanently lamed, and he hopped about with a thick stick. He had succeeded with bicycles and had taken to automobiles, and he was succeeding with automobiles. People were at first startled that he should advertise himself in the Five Towns. There was an obscure general feeling that because his mother had been a drunkard and his father a murderer, Dick Povey had no right to exist. However, when it had recovered from the shock of seeing Dick Povey's announcement of bargains in the *Signal,* the district most sensibly decided that there was no reason why Dick Povey should not sell bicycles as well as a man with normal parents. He was now supposed to be acquiring

wealth rapidly. It was said that he was a marvellous chauffeur, at once daring and prudent. He had one day, several years previously, overtaken the sisters in the rural neighbourhood of Sneyd, where they had been making an afternoon excursion. Constance had presented him to Sophia, and he had insisted on driving the ladies home. They had been much impressed by his cautious care of them, and their natural prejudice against anything so new as a motor-car had been conquered instantly. Afterwards he had taken them out for occasional runs. He had a great admiration for Constance, founded on gratitude to Samuel Povey; and as for Sophia, he always said to her that she would be an ornament to any car.

"You haven't heard his latest, I suppose?" said the doctor, smiling.

"What is it?" Sophia asked perfunctorily.

"He wants to take to ballooning. It seems he's been up once."

Constance made a deprecating noise with her lips.

"However, that's not his surprise," the doctor added, smiling again at the floor. He was sitting on the music-stool, and saying to himself, behind his mask of effulgent good-nature: "It gets more and more uphill work, cheering up these two women. I'll try them on Federation."

Federation was the name given to the scheme for blending the Five Towns into one town, which would be the twelfth largest town in the kingdom. It aroused fury in Bursley, which saw in the suggestion nothing but the extinction of its ancient glory to the aggrandizement of Hanbridge. Hanbridge had already, with the assistance of electric cars that whizzed to and fro every five minutes, robbed Bursley of two-thirds of its retail trade—as witness the steady decadence of the Square!—and Bursley had no mind to

swallow the insult and become a mere ward of Hanbridge. Bursley would die fighting. Both Constance and Sophia were bitter opponents of Federation. They would have been capable of putting Federationists to the torture. Sophia in particular, though so long absent from her native town, had adopted its cause with characteristic vigour. And when Dr. Stirling wished to practise his curative treatment of taking the sisters 'out of themselves,' he had only to start the hare of Federation and the hunt would be up in a moment. But this afternoon he did not succeed with Sophia, and only partially with Constance. When he stated that there was to be a public meeting that very night, and that Constance as a ratepayer ought to go to it and vote, if her convictions were genuine, she received his chaff with a mere murmur to the effect that she did not think she should go. Had the man forgotten that Spot was dead? At length he became grave, and examined them both as to their ailments, and nodded his head, and looked into vacancy while meditating upon each case. And then, when he had inquired where they meant to go for their summer holidays, he departed.

"Aren't you going to see him out?" Constance whispered to Sophia, who had shaken hands with him at the drawing-room door. It was Sophia who did the running about, owing to the state of Constance's sciatic nerve. Constance had, indeed, become extraordinarily inert, leaving everything to Sophia.

Sophia shook her head. She hesitated; then approached Constance, holding out her hand and disclosing the crumpled telegram.

"Look at that!" said she.

Her face frightened Constance, who was always expectant of new anxieties and troubles. Constance straightened out the paper with difficulty, and read—

"Mr. Gerald Scales is dangerously ill here. Boldero, 49, Deansgate, Manchester."

All through the inexpressibly tedious and quite unnecessary call of Dr. Stirling—(Why had he chosen to call just then? Neither of them was ill)—Sophia had held that telegram concealed in her hand and its information concealed in her heart. She had kept her head up, offering a calm front to the world. She had given no hint of the terrible explosion—for an explosion it was. Constance was astounded at her sister's self-control, which entirely passed her comprehension. Constance felt that worries would never cease, but would rather go on multiplying until death ended all. First, there had been the frightful worry of the servant; then the extremely distressing death and burial of Spot—and now it was Gerald Scales turning up again! With what violence was the direction of their thoughts now shifted! The wickedness of maids was a trifle; the death of pets was a trifle. But the reappearance of Gerald Scales! . . . That involved the possibility of consequences which could not even be named, so afflictive was the mere prospect to them. Constance was speechless, and she saw that Sophia was also speechless.

Of course the event had been bound to happen. People do not vanish never to be heard of again. The time surely arrives when the secret is revealed. So Sophia said to herself— now!

She had always refused to consider the effect of Gerald's reappearance. She had put the idea of it away from her, determined to convince herself that she had done with him finally and for ever. She had forgotten him. It was years since he had ceased to disturb her thoughts—many years. "He *must* be dead," she had persuaded herself. "It is inconceivable that he should have lived on and never come

across me. If he had been alive and learnt that I had made money, he would assuredly have come to me. No, he must be dead!"

And he was not dead! The brief telegram overwhelmingly shocked her. Her life had been calm, regular, monotonous. And now it was thrown into an indescribable turmoil by five words of a telegram, suddenly, with no warning whatever. Sophia had the right to say to herself: "I have had my share of trouble, and more than my share!" The end of her life promised to be as awful as the beginning. The mere existence of Gerald Scales was a menace to her. But it was the simple impact of the blow that affected her supremely, beyond ulterior things. One might have pictured fate as a cowardly brute who had struck this ageing woman full in the face, a felling blow, which however had not felled her. She staggered, but she stuck on her legs. It seemed a shame—one of those crude, spectacular shames which make the blood boil—that the gallant, defenceless creature should be so maltreated by the bully, destiny.

"Oh, Sophia!" Constance moaned. "What trouble is this?"

Sophia's lip curled with a disgusted air. Under that she hid her suffering.

She had not seen him for thirty-six years. He must be over seventy years of age, and he had turned up again like a bad penny, doubtless a disgrace! What had he been doing in those thirty-six years? He was an old, enfeebled man now! He must be a pretty sight! And he lay at Manchester, not two hour's away!

Whatever feelings were in Sophia's heart, tenderness was not among them. As she collected her wits from the stroke, she was principally aware of the sentiment of fear. She recoiled from the future.

"What shall you do?" Constance asked. Constance was weeping.

Sophia tapped her foot, glancing out of the window.

"Shall you go to see him?" Constance continued.

"Of course," said Sophia. "I must!"

She hated the thought of going to see him. She flinched from it. She felt herself under no moral obligation to go. Why should she go? Gerald was nothing to her, and had no claim on her of any kind. This she honestly believed. And yet she knew that she must go to him. She knew it to be impossible that she should not go.

"Now?" demanded Constance.

Sophia nodded.

"What about the trains? . . . Oh, you poor dear!" The mere idea of the journey to Manchester put Constance out of her wits, seeming a business of unparalleled complexity and difficulty.

"Would you like me to come with you?"

"Oh no! I must go by myself."

Constance was relieved by this. They could not have left the servant in the house alone, and the idea of shutting up the house without notice or preparation presented itself to Constance as too fantastic.

By a common instinct they both descended to the parlour.

"Now, what about a time-table? What about a time-table?" Constance mumbled on the stairs. She wiped her eyes resolutely. "I wonder whatever in this world has brought him at last to that Mr. Boldero's in Deansgate?" she asked the walls.

As they came into the parlour, a great motor-car drove up before the door, and when the pulsations of its engine had died away, Dick Povey hobbled from the driver's seat to the pavement. In an instant he was hammering at the door in his lively style. There was no avoiding him. The door had to be opened. Sophia opened it. Dick Povey was over forty, but he looked considerably younger. Despite

his lameness, and the fact that his lameness tended to induce corpulence, he had a dashing air, and his face, with its short, light moustache, was boyish. He seemed to be always upon some joyous adventure.

"Well, aunties," he greeted the sisters, having perceived Constance behind Sophia; he often so addressed them. "Has Dr. Stirling warned you that I was coming? Why haven't you got your things on?"

Sophia observed a young woman in the car.

"Yes," said he, following her gaze, "you may as well look. Come down, miss. Come down, Lily. You've got to go through with it." The young woman, delicately confused and blushing, obeyed. "This is Miss Lily Holl," he went on. "I don't know whether you would remember her. I don't think you do. It's not often she comes to the Square. But, of course, she knows you by sight. Granddaughter of your old neighbour, Alderman Holl! We are engaged to be married, if you please."

Constance and Sophia could not decently pour out their griefs on the top of such news. The betrothed pair had to come in and be congratulated upon their entry into the large realms of mutual love. But the sisters, even in their painful quandary, could not help noticing what a nice, quiet, ladylike girl Lily Holl was. Her one fault appeared to be that she was too quiet. Dick Povey was not the man to pass time in formalities, and he was soon urging departure.

"I'm sorry we can't come," said Sophia. "I've got to go to Manchester now. We are in great trouble."

"Yes, in great trouble," Constance weakly echoed.

Dick's face clouded sympathetically. And both the affianced began to see that to which the egotism of their happiness had blinded them. They felt that long, long years had elapsed since these ageing ladies had experienced the delights which they were feeling.

"Trouble? I'm sorry to hear that!" said Dick.

"Can you tell me the trains to Manchester?" asked Sophia.

"No," said Dick, quickly, "but I can drive you there quicker than any train, if it's urgent. Where do you want to go to?"

"Deansgate," Sophia faltered.

"Look here," said Dick, "it's half-past three. Put yourself in my hands; I'll guarantee at Deansgate you shall be before half-past five. I'll look after you."

"But—"

"There isn't any 'but.' I'm quite free for the afternoon and evening."

At first the suggestion seemed absurd, especially to Constance. But really it was too tempting to be declined. While Sophia made ready for the journey, Dick and Lily Holl and Constance conversed in low, solemn tones. The pair were waiting to be enlightened as to the nature of the trouble; Constance, however, did not enlighten them. How could Constance say to them: "Sophia has a husband that she hasn't seen for thirty-six years, and he's dangerously ill, and they've telegraphed for her to go?" Constance could not. It did not even occur to Constance to order a cup of tea.

§ 3

Dick Povey kept his word. At a quarter-past five he drew up in front of No. 49, Deansgate, Manchester. "There you are!" he said, not without pride. "Now, we'll come back in about a couple of hours or so, just to take your orders, whatever they are." He was very comforting, with his suggestion that in him Sophia had a sure support in the background.

Without many words Sophia went straight into the shop. It looked like a jeweller's shop, and a shop for bargains

generally. Only the conventional sign over a side-entrance showed that at heart it was a pawnbroker's. Mr. Till Boldero did a nice business in the Five Towns, and in other centres near Manchester, by selling silver-ware second-hand, or nominally second-hand, to persons who wished to make presents to other persons or to themselves. He would send anything by post on approval. Occasionally he came to the Five Towns, and he had once, several years before, met Constance. They had talked. He was the son of a cousin of the late great and wealthy Boldero, sleeping partner in Birkinshaws, and Gerald's uncle. It was from Constance that he had learnt of Sophia's return to Bursley. Constance had often remarked to Sophia what a superior man Mr. Till Boldero was.

The shop was narrow and lofty. It seemed like a menagerie for trapped silver-ware. In glass cases right up to the dark ceiling silver vessels and instruments of all kinds lay confined. The top of the counter was a glass prison containing dozens of gold watches, together with snuff-boxes, enamels, and other antiquities. The front of the counter was also glazed, showing vases and large pieces of porcelain. A few pictures in heavy gold frames were perched about. There was a case of umbrellas with elaborate handles and rich tassels. There were a couple of statuettes. The counter, on the customers' side, ended in a glass screen on which were the words 'Private Office.' On the seller's side the prospect was closed by a vast safe. A tall young man was fumbling in this safe. Two women sat on customers' chairs, leaning against the crystal counter. The young man came towards them from the safe, bearing a tray.

"How much is that goblet?" asked one of the women, raising her parasol dangerously among such fragility and pointing to one object among many in a case high up from the ground.

"That, madame?"

"**Yes.**"

*"Thirty-five pounds."

The young man disposed his tray on the counter. It was packed with more gold watches, adding to the extraordinary glitter and shimmer of the shop. He chose a small watch from the regiment.

"Now, this is something I can recommend," he said. "It's made by Cuthbert Butler of Blackburn. I can guarantee you that for five years." He spoke as though he were the accredited representative of the Bank of England, with calm and absolute assurance.

The effect upon Sophia was mysteriously soothing. She felt that she was among honest men. The young man raised his head towards her with a questioning, deferential gesture.

"Can I see Mr. Boldero?" she asked. "Mrs. Scales."

The young man's face changed instantly to a sympathetic comprehension.

"Yes, madam. I'll fetch him at once," said he, and he disappeared behind the safe. The two customers discussed the watch. Then the door opened in the glass screen, and a portly, middle-aged man showed himself. He was dressed in blue broad-cloth, with a turned-down collar and a small black tie. His waistcoat displayed a plain but heavy gold watch-chain, and his cuff-links were of plain gold. His eye-glasses were gold-rimmed. He had grey hair, beard and moustache, but on the backs of his hands grew a light brown hair. His appearance was strangely mild, dignified, and confidence-inspiring. He was, in fact, one of the most respected tradesmen in Manchester.

He peered forward, looking over his eye-glasses, which he then took off, holding them up in the air by their short handle. Sophia had approached him.

"Mrs. Scales?" he said, in a very quiet, very benevolent

voice. Sophia nodded. "Please come this way." He took her hand, squeezing it commiseratingly, and drew her into the sanctum. "I didn't expect you so soon," he said. "I looked up th' trains, and I didn't see how you could get here before six."

Sophia explained.

He led her further, through the private office, into a sort of parlour, and asked her to sit down. And he too sat down. Sophia waited, as it were, like a suitor.

"I'm afraid I've got bad news for you, Mrs. Scales," he said, still in that mild, benevolent voice.

"He's dead?" Sophia asked.

Mr. Till Boldcro nodded. "He's dead. I may as well tell you that he had passed away before I telegraphed. It all happened very, very suddenly." He paused. "Very, very suddenly."

"Yes," said Sophia, weakly. She was conscious of a profound sadness which was not grief, though it resembled grief. And she had also a feeling that she was responsible to Mr. Till Boldero for anything untoward that might have occurred to him by reason of Gerald.

"Yes," said Mr. Till Boldero, deliberately and softly. "He came in last night just as we were closing. We had very heavy rain here. I don't know how it was with you. He was wet, in a dreadful state, simply dreadful. Of course, I didn't recognize him. I'd never seen him before, so far as my recollection goes. He asked me if I was the son of Mr. Till Boldero that had this shop in 1866. I said I was. 'Well,' he says, 'you're the only connection I've got. My name's Gerald Scales. My mother was your father's cousin. Can you do anything for me?' he says. I could see he was ill. I had him in here. When I found he couldn't eat nor drink I thought I'd happen better send for th' doctor. The doctor got him to bed. He passed away at one o'clock this after-

noon. I was very sorry my wife wasn't here to look after things a bit better. But she's at Southport, not well at all."

"What was it?" Sophia asked briefly.

Mr. Boldero indicated the enigmatic. "Exhaustion, I suppose," he replied.

"He's here?" demanded Sophia, lifting her eyes to possible bedrooms.

"Yes," said Mr. Boldero. "I suppose you would wish to see him?"

"Yes," said Sophia.

"You haven't seen him for a long time, your sister told me?" Mr. Boldero murmured, sympathetically.

"Not since 'seventy," said Sophia.

"Eh, dear! Eh, dear!" ejaculated Mr. Boldero. "I fear it's been a sad business for ye, Mrs. Scales. Not since 'seventy!" He sighed. "You must take it as well as you can. I'm not one as talks much, but I sympathize with you. I do that! I wish my wife had been here to receive you."

Tears came into Sophia's eyes.

"Nay, nay!" he said. "You must bear up now!"

"It's you that make me cry," said Sophia, gratefully. "You were very good to take him in. It must have been exceedingly trying for you."

"Oh," he protested, "you mustn't talk like that. I couldn't leave a Boldero on the pavement, and an old man at that! . . . Oh, to think that if he'd only managed to please his uncle he might ha' been one of the richest men in Lancashire. But then there'd ha' been no Boldero Institute at Strangeways!" he added.

They both sat silent a moment.

"Will you come now? Or will you wait a bit?" asked Mr. Boldero, gently. "Just as you wish. I'm sorry as my wife's away, that I am!"

"I'll come now;" said Sophia, firmly. But she was stricken.

He conducted her up a short, dark flight of stairs, which gave on a passage, and at the end of the passage was a door ajar. He pushed the door open.

"I'll leave you for a moment," he said, always in the same very restrained tone. "You'll find me downstairs, there, if you want me." And he moved away with hushed, deliberate tread.

Sophia went into the room, of which the white blind was drawn. She appreciated Mr. Boldero's consideration in leaving her. She was trembling. But when she saw, in the pale gloom, the face of an aged man peeping out from under a white sheet on a naked mattress, she started back, trembling no more—rather transfixed into an absolute rigidity. That was no conventional, expected shock that she had received. It was a genuine unforeseen shock, the most violent that she had ever had. In her mind she had not pictured Gerald as a very old man. She knew that he was old; she had said to herself that he must be very old, well over seventy. But she had not pictured him. This face on the bed was painfully, pitiably old. A withered face, with the shiny skin all drawn into wrinkles! The stretched skin under the jaw was like the skin of a plucked fowl. The cheek-bones stood up, and below them were deep hollows, almost like egg-cups. A short, scraggy white beard covered the lower part of the face. The hair was scanty, irregular, and quite white; a little white hair grew in the ears. The shut mouth obviously hid toothless gums, for the lips were sucked in. The eyelids were as if pasted down over the eyes, fitting them like kid. All the skin was extremely pallid; it seemed brittle. The body, whose outlines were clear under the sheet, was very small, thin, shrunk, pitiable as the face. And on the face was a general expression of final fatigue, of tragic and acute exhaustion; such as made

Sophia pleased that the fatigue and exhaustion had been assuaged in rest, while all the time she kept thinking to herself horribly: "Oh! how tired he must have been!"

Sophia then experienced a pure and primitive emotion, uncoloured by any moral or religious quality. She was not sorry that Gerald had wasted his life, nor that he was a shame to his years and to her. The manner of his life was of no importance. What affected her was that he had once been young, and that he had grown old, and was now dead. That was all. Youth and vigour had come to that. Youth and vigour always came to that. Everything came to that. He had ill-treated her; he had abandoned her; he had been a devious rascal; but how trivial were such accusations against him! The whole of her huge and bitter grievance against him fell to pieces and crumbled. She saw him young, and proud, and strong, as for instance when he had kissed her lying on the bed in that London hotel—she forgot the name—in 1866; and now he was old, and worn, and horrible, and dead. It was the riddle of life that was puzzling and killing her. By the corner of her eye, reflected in the mirror of a wardrobe near the bed, she glimpsed a tall, forlorn woman, who had once been young and now was old; who had once exulted in abundant strength, and trodden proudly on the neck of circumstance, and now was old. He and she had once loved and burned and quarrelled in the glittering and scornful pride of youth. But time had worn them out. "Yet a little while," she thought, "and I shall be lying on a bed like that! And what shall I have lived for? What is the meaning of it?" The riddle of life itself was killing her, and she seemed to drown in a sea of inexpressible sorrow.

Her memory wandered hopelessly among those past years. She saw Chirac with his wistful smile. She saw him whipped over the roof of the Gare du Nord at the tail of a balloon.

She saw old Niepce. She felt his lecherous arm round her. She was as old now as Niepce had been then. Could she excite lust now? Ah! the irony of such a question! To be young and seductive, to be able to kindle a man's eye—that seemed to her the sole thing desirable. Once she had been so! . . . Niepce must certainly have been dead for years. Niepce, the obstinate and hopeful voluptuary, was nothing but a few bones in a coffin now!

She was acquainted with affliction in that hour. All that she had previously suffered sank into insignificance by the side of that suffering.

She turned to the veiled window and idly pulled the blind and looked out. Huge red and yellow cars were swimming in thunder along Deansgate; lorries jolted and rattled; the people of Manchester hurried along the pavements, apparently unconscious that all their doings were vain. Yesterday he too had been in Deansgate, hungry for life, hating the idea of death! What a figure he must have made! Her heart dissolved in pity for him. She dropped the blind.

"My life has been too terrible!" she thought. "I wish I was dead. I have been through too much. It is monstrous, and I cannot stand it. I do not want to die, but I wish I was dead."

There was a discreet knock on the door.

"Gome in," she said, in a calm, resigned, cheerful voice. The sound had recalled her with the swiftness of a miracle to the unconquerable dignity of human pride.

Mr. Till Boldero entered.

"I should like you to come downstairs and drink a cup of tea," he said. He was a marvel of tact and good nature. "My wife is unfortunately not here, and the house is rather at sixes and sevens; but I have sent out for some tea."

She followed him downstairs into the parlour. He poured out a cup of tea.

"I was forgetting," she said. "I am forbidden tea. I mustn't drink it."

She looked at the cup, tremendously tempted. She longed for tea. An occasional transgression could not harm her. But no! She would not drink it.

"Then what can I get you?"

"If I could have just milk and water," she said meekly.

Mr. Boldero emptied the cup into the slop basin, and began to fill it again.

"Did he tell you anything?" she asked, after a considerable silence.

"Nothing," said Mr. Boldero in his low, soothing tones. "Nothing except that he had come from Liverpool. Judging from his shoes I should say he must have walked a good bit of the way."

"At his age!" murmured Sophia, touched.

"Yes," sighed Mr. Boldero. "He must have been in great straits. You know, he could scarcely talk at all. By the way, here are his clothes. I have had them put aside."

Sophia saw a small pile of clothes on a chair. She examined the suit, which was still damp, and its woeful shabbiness pained her. The linen collar was nearly black, its stud of bone. As for the boots, she had noticed such boots on the feet of tramps. She wept now. These were the clothes of him who had once been a dandy living at the rate of fifty pounds a week.

"No luggage or anything, of course?" she muttered.

"No," said Mr. Boldero. "In the pockets there was nothing whatever but this."

He went to the mantelpiece and picked up a cheap, cracked letter case, which Sophia opened. In it were a visiting card—'Senorita Clemenzia Borja'—and a bill-head of the Hotel of the Holy Spirit, Concepcion del Uruguay, on the back of which a lot of figures had been scrawled.

"One would suppose," said Mr. Boldero, "that he had come from South America."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

Gerald's soul had not been compelled to abandon much in the haste of its flight.

A servant announced that Mrs. Scales's friends were waiting for her outside in the motor-car. Sophia glanced at Mr. Till Boldero with an exacerbated anxiety on her face.

"Surely they don't expect me to go back with them to-night!" she said. "And look at all there is to be done!"

Mr. Till Boldero's kindness was then redoubled. "You can do nothing for *him* now," he said. "Tell me your wishes about the funeral. I will arrange everything. Go back to your sister to-night. She will be nervous about you. And return to-morrow or the day after. . . . No! It's no trouble, I assure you!"

She yielded.

Thus towards eight o'clock, when Sophia had eaten a little under Mr. Boldero's superintendence, and the pawnshop was shut up, the motor-car started again for Bursley, Lily Holl being beside her lover and Sophia alone in the body of the car. Sophia had told them nothing of the nature of her mission. She was incapable of talking to them. They saw that she was in a condition of serious mental disturbance. Under cover of the noise of the car, Lily said to Dick that she was sure Mrs. Scales was ill, and Dick, putting his lips together, replied that he meant to be in King Street at nine-thirty at the latest. From time to time Lily surreptitiously glanced at Sophia—a glance of apprehensive inspection, or smiled at her silently; and Sophia vaguely responded to the smile.

In half an hour they had escaped from the ring of Manchester and were on the county roads of Cheshire, polished,

flat, sinuous. It was the season of the year when there is no night—only daylight and twilight; when the last silver of dusk remains obstinately visible for hours. And in the open country, under the melancholy arch of evening, the sadness of the earth seemed to possess Sophia anew. Only then did she realize the intensity of the ordeal through which she was passing.

To the south of Congleton one of the tyres softened immediately after Dick had lighted his lamps. He stopped the car and got down again. They were two miles from Astbury, the nearest village. He had just, with the resignation of experience, reached for the tool-bag, when Lily exclaimed: "Is she asleep, or what?" Sophia was not asleep, but she was apparently not conscious.

It was a difficult and a trying situation for two lovers. Their voices changed momentarily to the tone of alarm and consternation, and then grew firm again. Sophia showed life but not reason. Lily could feel the poor old lady's heart.

"Well, there's nothing for it!" said Dick, briefly, when all their efforts failed to rouse her.

"What-shall you do?"

"Go straight home as quick as I can on three tyres. We must get her over to this side, and you must hold her. Like that we shall keep the weight off the other side."

He pitched back the tool-bag into its box. Lily admired his decision.

It was in this order, no longer under the spell of the changing beauty of nocturnal landscapes, that they finished the journey. Constance had opened the door before the car came to a stop in the gloom of King Street. The young people considered that she bore the shock well, though the carrying into the house of Sophia's inert, twitching body, with its hat forlornly awry, was a sight to harrow a soul sturdier than Constance.

When that was done, Dick said curtly: "I'm off. You stay here, of course."

"Where are you going?" asked Lily.

"Doctor!" snapped Dick, hobbling rapidly down the steps.

§4

The extraordinary violence in the turn of affairs was what chiefly struck Constance, though it did not overwhelm her. Less than twelve hours before—nay, scarcely six hours before—she and Sophia had been living their placid and monotonous existence, undisturbed by anything worse than the indisposition or death of dogs, or the perversity of a servant. And now, the menacing Gerald Scales having reappeared, Sophia's form lay mysterious and affrightening on the sofa; and she and Lily Holl, a girl whom she had not met till that day, were staring at Sophia side by side, intimately sharing the same alarm. Constance rose to the crisis. She no longer had Sophia's energy and decisive peremptoriness to depend on, and the Baines in her was awakened. All her daily troubles sank away to their proper scale of unimportance. Neither the young woman nor the old one knew what to do. They could loosen clothes, vainly offer restoratives to the smitten mouth: that was all. Sophia was not unconscious, as could be judged from her eyes; but she could not speak, nor make signs; her body was frequently convulsed. So the two women waited, and the servant waited in the background. The sight of Sophia had effected an astonishing transformation in Maud. Maud was a changed girl. Constance could not recognize, in her eager deferential anxiety to be of use, the pert naughtiness of the minx. She was altered as a wanton of the middle ages would have been altered by some miraculous visitation. It might have been the turning-point in Maud's career!

Doctor Stirling arrived in less than ten minutes. Dick Povey had had the wit to look for him at the Federation meeting in the Town Hall. And the advent of the doctor and Dick, noisily, at breakneck speed in the car, provided a second sensation. The doctor inquired quickly what had occurred. Nobody could tell him anything. Constance had already confided to Lily Holl the reason of the visit to Manchester; but that was the extent of her knowledge. Not a single person in Bursley, except Sophia, knew what had happened in Manchester. But Constance conjectured that Gerald Scales was dead—or Sophia would never have returned so soon. Then the doctor suggested that on the contrary Gerald Scales might be out of danger. And all then pictured to themselves this troubling Gerald Scales, this dark and sinister husband that had caused such a violent upheaval.

Meanwhile the doctor was at work. He sent Dick Povey to knock up Critchlow's, if the shop should be closed, and obtain a drug. Then, after a time, he lifted Sophia, just as she was, like a bundle on his shoulder, and carried her single-handed upstairs to the second floor. He had recently been giving a course of instruction to enthusiasts of the St. John's Ambulance Association in Bursley. The feat had an air of the superhuman. Above all else it remained printed on Constance's mind: the burly doctor treading delicately and carefully on the crooked, creaking stairs, his precautions against damaging Sophia by brusque contacts, his stumble at the two steps in the middle of the corridor; Sophia's horribly limp head and loosened hair; and then the tender placing of her on the bed, and the doctor's long breath and flourish of his large handkerchief, all that under the crude lights and shadows of gas jets! The doctor was nonplussed. Constance gave him a second-hand account of Sophia's original attack in Paris, roughly as she had heard it from

Sophia. He at once said that it could not have been what the French doctor had said it was. Constance shrugged her shoulders. She was not surprised. For her there was necessarily something of the charlatan about a French doctor. She said she only knew what Sophia had told her. After a time Dr. Stirling determined to try electricity, and Djck Povey drove him up to the surgery to fetch his apparatus. The women were left alone again. Constance was very deeply impressed by Lily Roll's sensible, sympathetic attitude. "Whatever I should have done without Miss Lily I don't know!" she used to exclaim afterwards. Even Maud was beyond praise. It seemed to be the middle of the night when Dr. Stirling came back, but it was barely eleven o'clock, and people were only just returning from Hanbridge Theatre and Hanbridge Music Hall. The use of the electrical apparatus was a dead spectacle. Sophia's inertness under it was agonizing. They waited, as it were, breathless for the result. And there was no result. Both injections and electricity had entirely failed to influence the paralysis of Sophia's mouth and throat. Everything had failed. "Nothing to do but wait a bit!" said the doctor quietly. They waited in the chamber. Sophia seemed to be in a kind of coma. The distortion of her handsome face was more marked as time passed. The doctor spoke now and then in a low voice. He said that the attack had ultimately been determined by cold produced by rapid motion in the automobile. Dick Povey whispered that he must run over to Hanbridge and let Lily's parents know that there was no cause for alarm on her account, and that he would return at once. He was very devoted. On the landing outside the bedroom, the doctor murmured to him: "U.P." And Dick nodded. They were great friends.

At intervals the doctor, who never knew when he was beaten, essayed new methods of dealing with Sophia's case.

New symptoms followed. It was half-past twelve when, after gazing with prolonged intensity at the patient, and after having tested her mouth and heart, he rose slowly and looked at Constance.

"It's over?" said Constance.

And he very slightly moved his head. "Come downstairs, please," he enjoined her, in a pause that ensued. Constance was amazingly courageous. The doctor was very solemn and very kind; Constance had never before seen him to such heroic advantage. He led her with infinite gentleness out of the room. There was nothing to stay for; Sophia had gone. Constance wanted to stay by Sophia's body; but it was the rule that the stricken should be led away, the doctor observed this classic rule, and Constance felt that he was right and that she must obey. Lily Holl followed. The servant, learning the truth by the intuition accorded to primitive natures, burst into loud sobs, yelling that Sophia had been the most excellent mistress that servant ever had. The doctor angrily told her not to stand blubbering there, but to go into her kitchen and shut the door if she couldn't control herself. All his accumulated nervous agitation was discharged on Maud like a thunderclap. Constance continued to behave wonderfully. She was the admiration of the doctor and Lily Holl. Then Dick Povey came back. It was settled that Lily should pass the night with Constance. At last the doctor and Dick departed together, the doctor undertaking the mortuary arrangements. Maud was hunted to bed.

Early in the morning Constance rose up from her own bed. It was five o'clock, and there had been daylight for two hours already. She moved noiselessly and peeped over the foot of the bed at the sofa. Lily was quietly asleep there, breathing with the softness of a child. Lily would have deemed that she was a very mature woman, who had seen

life and much of it. Yet to Constance her face and attitude had the exquisite quality of a child's. She was not precisely a pretty girl, but her features, the candid expression of her disposition, produced an impression that was akin to that of beauty. Her abandonment was complete. She had gone through the night unscathed, and was now renewing herself in calm, oblivious sleep. Her ingenuous girlishness was apparent then. It seemed as if all her wise and sweet behaviour of the evening could have been nothing but so many imitative gestures. It seemed impossible that a being so young and fresh could have really experienced the mood of which her gestures had been the expression. Her strong virginal simplicity made Constance vaguely sad for her.

Creeping out of the room, Constance climbed to the second floor in her dressing-gown, and entered the other chamber. She was obliged to look again upon Sophia's body. Incredible swiftness of calamity! Who could have foreseen it? Constance was less desolated than numbed. She was as yet only touching the fringe of her bereavement. She had not begun to think of herself. She was drenched, as she gazed at Sophia's body, not by pity for herself, but by compassion for the immense disaster of her sister's life. She perceived fully now for the first time the greatness of that disaster. Sophia's charm and Sophia's beauty—what profit had they been to their owner? She saw pictures of Sophia's career, distorted and grotesque images formed in her untraveiled mind from Sophia's own rare and compressed recitals. What a career! A brief passion, and then nearly thirty years in a boarding-house! And Sophia had never had a child; had never known either the joy or the pain of maternity. She had never even had a true home till, in all her sterile splendour, she came to Bursley. And she had ended—thus! This was the piteous, ignominious end of Sophia's wondrous gifts of body and soul. Hers had not been

a life at all. And the reason? It is strange how fate persists in justifying the harsh generalizations of Puritan morals, of the morals in which Constance had been brought up by her stern parents! Sophia had sinned. It was therefore inevitable that she should suffer. An adventure such as she had in wicked and capricious pride undertaken with Gerald Scales, could not conclude otherwise than it had concluded. It could have brought nothing but evil. There was no getting away from these verities, thought Constance. And she was to be excused for thinking that all modern progress and cleverness was as naught, and that the world would be forced to return upon its steps and start again in the path which it had left.

Up to within a few days of her death people had been wont to remark that Mrs. Scales looked as young as ever, and that she was as bright and energetic as ever. And truly, regarding Sophia from a little distance—that handsome oval, that erect carriage of a slim body, that challenging eye!—no one would have said that she was in her sixtieth year. But look at her now, with her twisted face, her sightless orbs, her worn skin—she did not seem sixty, but seventy! She was like something used, exhausted, and thrown aside! Yes, Constance's heart melted in an anguished pity for that stormy creature. And mingled with the pity was a stern recognition of the handiwork of divine justice. To Constance's lips came the same phrase as had come to the lips of Samuel Povey on a different occasion: God is not mocked! The ideas of her parents and her grandparents had survived intact in Constance. It is true that Constance's father would have shuddered in Heaven could he have seen Constance solitarily playing cards of a night. But in spite of cards, and of a son who never went to chapel, Constance, under the various influences of destiny, had remained essentially what her father had been. Not

in her was the force of evolution manifest. There are thousands such.

Lily, awake, and reclothed with that unreal mien of a grown and comprehending woman, stepped quietly into the room, searching for the poor old thing, Constance. The layer-out had come.

By the first post was delivered a letter addressed to Sophia by Mr. Till Boldero. From its contents the death of Gerald Scales was clear. There seemed then to be nothing else for Constance to do. What had to be done was done for her. And stronger wills than hers put her to bed. Cyril was telegraphed for. Mr. Critchlow called, Mrs. Critchlow following—a fussy infliction, but useful in certain matters. Mr. Critchlow was not allowed to see Constance. She could hear his high grating voice in the corridor. She had to lie calm, and the sudden tranquillity seemed strange after the feverish violence of the night. Only twenty-four hours since,-and she had been worrying about the death of a dog! With a body crying for sleep, she dozed off, thoughts of the mystery of life merging into the incoherence of dreams.

The news was abroad in the Square before nine o'clock. There were persons who had witnessed the arrival of the motor-car, and the transfer of Sophia to the house. Untruthful rumours had spread as to the manner of Gerald Scales's death. Some said that he had dramatically committed suicide. But the town, though titillated, was not moved as it would have been moved by a similar event twenty years, or even ten years earlier. Times had changed in Bursley. Bursley was more sophisticated than in the old days.

Constance was afraid lest Cyril, despite the seriousness of the occasion, might exhibit his customary tardiness in coming. She had long since learnt not to rely upon him. But he came the same evening. His behaviour was in every

way perfect. He showed quiet but genuine grief for the death of his aunt, and he was a model of consideration for his mother. Further, he at once assumed charge of all the arrangements, in regard both to Sophia and to her husband. Constance was surprised at the ease which he displayed in the conduct of practical affairs, and the assurance with which he gave orders. She had never seen him direct anything before. He said, indeed, that he had never directed anything before, but that there appeared to him to be no difficulties. Whereas Constance had figured a tiresome series of varied complications. As to the burial of Sophia, Cyril was vigorously in favour of an absolutely private funeral; that is to say, a funeral at which none but himself should be present. He seemed to have a passionate objection to any sort of parade. Constance agreed with him. But she said that it would be impossible not to invite Mr. Critchlow, Sophia's trustee, and that if Mr. Critchlow were invited certain others must be invited. Cyril asked: "Why impossible?" Constance said: "Because it *would* be impossible. Because Mr. Critchlow would be hurt." Cyril asked: "What does it matter if he is hurt?" and suggested that Mr. Critchlow would get over his damage. Constance grew more serious. The discussion threatened to be warm. Suddenly Cyril yielded. "All right, Mrs. Plover, all right! It shall be exactly as you choose," he said, in a gentle, humouring tone. He had not called her 'Mrs. Plover' for years. She thought the hour badly chosen for verbal pleasantry, but he was so kind that she made no complaint. Thus there were six people at Sophia's funeral, including Mr. Critchlow. No refreshments were offered. The mourners separated at the church. When both funerals were accomplished Cyril sat down and played the harmonium softly, and said that it had kept well in tune. He was extraordinarily soothing.

He had now reached the age of thirty-three. His habits were as industrious as ever, his preoccupation with his art as keen. But he had achieved no fame, no success. He earned nothing, living in comfort on an allowance from his mother. He seldom spoke of his plans and never of his hopes. He had in fact settled down into a dilettante, having learnt gently to scorn the triumphs which he lacked the force to win. He imagined that industry and a regular existence were sufficient justification in themselves for any man's life. Constance had dropped the habit of expecting him to astound the world. He was rather grave and precise in manner, courteous and tepid, with a touch of condescension towards his environment; as though he were continually permitting the perspicacious to discern that he had nothing to learn—if the truth were known! His humour had assumed a modified form. He often smiled to himself. He was unexceptionable.

On the day after Sophia's funeral he set to work to design a simple stone for his aunt's tomb. He said he could not tolerate the ordinary gravestone, which always looked, to him, as if the wind might blow it over, thus negativing the idea of solidity. His mother did not in the least understand him. She thought the lettering of his tombstone affected and finicking. But she let it pass without comment, being secretly very flattered that he should have deigned to design a stone at all.

Sophia had left all her money to Cyril, and had made him the sole executor of her will. This arrangement had been agreed with Constance. The sisters thought it was the best plan. Cyril ignored Mr. Critchlow entirely, and went to a young lawyer at Hanbridge, a friend of his and of Matthew Peel-Swynnerton's. Mr. Critchlow, aged and unaccustomed to interference, had to render accounts of his trusteeship to this young man, and was incensed. The estate was proved

at over thirty-five thousand pounds. In the main, Sophia had been careful, and had even been parsimonious. She had often told Constance that they ought to spend money much more freely, and she had had a few brief fits of extravagance. But the habit of stern thrift, begun in 1870 and practised without any intermission till she came to England in 1897, had been too strong for her theories. The squandering of money pained her. And she could not, in her age, devise expensive tastes.

Cyril showed no emotion whatever on learning himself the inheritor of thirty-five thousand pounds. He did not seem to care. He spoke of the sum as a millionaire might have spoken of it. In justice to him it is to be said that he cared nothing for wealth, except in so far as wealth could gratify his eye and ear trained to artistic voluptuousness. But, for his mother's sake, and for the sake of Bursley, he might have affected a little satisfaction. His mother was somewhat hurt. His behaviour caused her to revert in meditation again and again to the futility of Sophia's career, and the waste of her attributes. She had grown old and hard in joyless years in order to amass this money which Cyril would spend coldly and ungratefully, never thinking of the immense effort and endless sacrifice which had gone to its collection. He would spend it as carelessly as though he had picked it up in the street. As the days went by and Constance realized her own grief, she also realized more and more the completeness of the tragedy of Sophia's life. Headstrong Sophia had deceived her mother, and for the deception had paid with thirty years of melancholy and the entire frustration of her proper destiny.

After haunting Bursley for a fortnight in elegant black, Cyril said, without any warning, one night: "I must go the day after to-morrow, mater." And he told her of a journey to Hungary which he had long since definitely planned with

Matthew Peel-Swynrierton, and which could not be postponed, as it comprised ' business.' He had hitherto breathed no word of this. He was as secretive as ever. As to her holiday, he suggested that she should arrange to go away with the Holls and Dick Povey. He approved of Lily Holl and of Dick Povey. Of Dick Povey he said: "He's one of the most remarkable chaps in the Five Towns." And he had the air of having made Dick's reputation. Constance, knowing there was no appeal, accepted the sentence of loneliness. Her health was singularly good.

When he was gone she said to herself: "Scarcely a fortnight and Sophia was here at this table!" She would remember every now and then, with a faint shock, that poor, proud, masterful Sophia was dead.

CHAPTER V: END OF CONSTANCE

§ 1

WHEN, on a June afternoon about twelve months later, Lily Holl walked into Mrs. Povey's drawing-room overlooking the Square, she found a calm, somewhat optimistic old lady —older than her years—which were little more than sixty- whose chief enemies were sciatica and rheumatism. The sciatica was a dear enemy of long standing, always affectionately referred to by the forgiving Constance as *'my* sciatica'; the rheumatism was a new-comer, unprivileged, spoken of by its victim apprehensively and yet disdainfully as 'this *rheumatism.'* Constance was now very stout. She sat in a low easy-chair between the oval table and the window, arrayed in black silk. As the girl Lily came in, Constance lifted her head with a bland smile, and Lily kissed her, contentedly. Lily knew that she was a welcome visitor. These two had become as intimate as the difference between their ages would permit; of the two, Constance was the more frank. Lily as well as Constance was in mourning. A few months previously her aged grandfather, 'Holl, the grocer,' had died. The second of his two sons, Lily's father, had then left the business established by the brothers at Hanbridge in order to manage, for a time, the parent business in St. Luke's Square. Alderman Holl's death had delayed Lily's marriage. Lily took tea with Constance, or at any rate paid a call, four or five times a week. She listened to Constance.

Everybody considered that Constance had 'come splendidly through' the dreadful affair of Sophia's death. Indeed it was observed that she was more philosophic, more cheerful, more sweet, than she had been for many years. The truth was that, though her bereavement had been the cause

of a most genuine and durable sorrow, it had been a relief to her. When Constance was over fifty, the energetic and masterful Sophia had burst in upon her lethargic tranquillity and very seriously disturbed the flow of old habits. Certainly Constance had fought Sophia on the main point, and won; but on a hundred minor points she had either lost or had not fought. Sophia had been 'too much' for Constance, and it had been only by a wearying expenditure of nervous force that Constance had succeeded in holding a small part of her own against the unconscious domination of Sophia. The death of Mrs. Scales had put an end to all the strain, and Constance had been once again mistress in Constance's house. Constance would never have admitted these facts, even to herself; and no one would ever have dared to suggest them to her. For with all her temperamental mildness she had her formidable side.

She was slipping a photograph into a plush-covered photograph album.

"More photographs?" Lily questioned. She had almost exactly the same benignant smile that Constance had. She seemed to be the personification of gentleness—one of those featherbeds that some capricious men occasionally have the luck to marry. She was capable, with a touch of honest, simple stupidity. All her character was displayed in the tone in which she said: "More photographs?" It showed an eager responsive sympathy with Constance's cult for photographs, also a slight personal fondness for photographs, also a dim perception that a cult for photographs might be carried to the ridiculous, and a kind desire to hide all trace of this perception. The voice was thin, and matched the pale complexion of her delicate face.

Constance's eyes had a quizzical gleam behind her spectacles as she silently held up the photograph for Lily's inspection.

Lily, sitting down, lowered the corners of her soft lips when she beheld the photograph, and nodded her head several times, scarce perceptibly.

"Her ladyship has just given it to me," whispered Constance.

"Indeed!" said Lily, with an extraordinary accent.

'Her ladyship' was the last and best of Constance's servants, a really excellent creature of thirty, who had known misfortune, and who must assuredly have been sent to Constance by the old watchful Providence. They 'got on together' nearly perfectly. Her name was Mary. After ten years of turmoil, Constance in the matter of servants was now at rest.

"Yes," said Constance. "She's named it to me several times—about having her photograph taken, and last week I let her go. I told you, didn't I? I always consider her in every way, all her little fancies and everything. And the copies came to-day. I wouldn't hurt her feelings for anything. You may be sure she'll take a look into the album next time she cleans the room."

Constance and Lily exchanged a glance agreeing that Constance had affably stretched a point in deciding to put the photograph of a servant between the same covers with photographs of her family and friends. It was doubtful whether such a thing had ever been done before.

One photograph usually leads to another, and one photograph album to another photograph album.

"Pass me that album on the second shelf of the Canterbury, my dear," said Constance.

Lily rose vivaciously, as though to see the album on the second shelf of the Canterbury had been the ambition of her life.

They sat side by side at the table, Lily turning over the pages. Constance, for all her vast bulk, continually made

little nervous movements. Occasionally she would sniff and occasionally a mysterious noise would occur in her chest; she always pretended that this noise was a cough, anal would support the pretence by emitting a real cough immediately after it.

"Why!" exclaimed Lily. "Have I seen that before?"

"I don't know, my dear," said Constance. *"Have* you?"

It was a photograph of Sophia taken a few years previously by 'a very nice gentleman,' whose acquaintance the sisters had made during a holiday at Harrogate. It portrayed Sophia on a knoll, fronting the weather.

"It's Mrs. Scales to the life—I can see that," said Lily.

"Yes," said Constance. "Whenever there was a wind she always stood like that, and took long deep breaths of it."

This recollection of one of Sophia's habits recalled the whole woman to Constance's memory, and drew a picture of her character for the girl who had scarcely known her.

"It's not like ordinary photographs. There's something special about it," said Lily, enthusiastically. "I don't think I ever saw a photograph like that."

"I've got another copy of it in my bedroom," said Constance. "I'll give you this one."

"Oh, Mrs. Povey! I couldn't think——!"

"Yes, yes!" said Constance, removing the photograph from the page.

"Oh, *thank* you!" said Lily.

"And that reminds me," said Constance, getting up with great difficulty from her chair.

"Can I find anything for you?" Lily asked.

"No, no!" said Constance, leaving the room.

She returned in a moment with her jewel-box, a receptacle of ebony with ivory ornamentations.

"I've always meant to give you this," said Constance, taking from the box a fine cameo brooch. "I don't seem to

fancy wearing it myself. And I should like to see you wearing it. It was my mother's. I believe they're coming into fashion again. I don't see why you shouldn't wear it while you're in mourning. They aren't half so strict now about mourning as they used to be."

"Truly!" murmured Lily, ecstatically. They kissed. Constance seemed to breathe out benevolence, as with trembling hands she pinned the brooch at Lily's neck. She lavished the warm treasure of her heart on Lily, whom she regarded as an almost perfect girl, and who had become the idol of her latter years.

"What a magnificent old watch!" said Lily, as they delved together in the lower recesses of the box. *"And* the chain to it!"

"That was father's," said Constance. "He always used to swear by it. When it didn't agree with the Town Hall, he used to say: 'Then th' Town Hall's wrong.' And it's curious, the Town Hall *was* wrong. You know the Town Hall clock has never been a good timekeeper. I've been thinking of giving that watch and chain to Dick."

"Have you?" said Lily.

"Yes. It's just as good as it was when father wore it. My husband never would wear it. He preferred his own. He had little fancies like that. And Cyril takes after his father." She spoke in her 'dry' tone. "I've almost decided to give it to Dick—that is, if he behaves himself. Is he still on with this ballooning?"

Lily smiled guiltily: "Oh yes!"

"Well," said Constance, "I never heard the like! If he's been up and come down safely, that ought to be enough for him. I wonder you let him do it, my dear."

"But how can I stop him? I've no control over him?"

"But do you mean to say that he'd still do it if you told him seriously you didn't want him to?"

"Yes," said Lily; and added: "So I shan't tell him."

Constant nodded her head, musing over the secret nature of"men. She remembered too well the cruel obstinacy of Samuel, who had nevertheless loved her. And Dick Povey was a thousand times more bizarre than Samuel. She saw him vividly, a little boy, whizzing down King Street on a boneshaker, and his cap flying off. Afterwards it had been motor-cars! Now it was balloons! She sighed. She was struck by the profound instinctive wisdom just enunciated by the girl.

"Well," she said, "I shall see. I've not made up my mind yet. What's the young man doing this afternoon, by the way?"

"He's gone to Birmingham to try to sell two motor-lorries. He won't be back home till late. He's coming over here to-morrow."

It was an excellent illustration of Dick Povey's methods that at this very moment Lily heard in the Square the sound of a motor-car, which happened to be Dick's car. She sprang up to look.

"Why!" she cried, flushing. "Here he is now!"

"Bless us, bless us!" muttered Constance, closing the box.

When Dick, having left his car in King Street, limped tempestuously into the drawing-room, galvanizing it by his abundant vitality into a new life, he cried joyously: "Sold my lorries! Sold my lorries!" And he explained that by a charming accident he had disposed of them to a chance buyer in Hanbridge, just before starting for Birmingham. So he had telephoned to Birmingham that the matter was 'off,' and then, being 'at a loose end,' he had come over to Bursley in search of his betrothed. At Holl's shop they had told him that she was with Mrs. Povey. Constance glanced at him, impressed by his jolly air of success. He seemed exactly like his breezy and self-confident advertisements in

the *Signal.* He was absolutely pleased with himself. He triumphed over his limp—that ever-present reminder of a tragedy. Who would dream, to look at his blond, laughing, scintillating face, astonishingly young for his years, that he had once passed through such a night as that on which his father had killed his mother while he lay immovable and cursing, with a broken knee, in bed? Constance had heard all about that scene from her husband, and she paused in wonder at the contrasting hazards of existence.

Dick Povey brought his hands together with a resounding smack, and then rubbed them rapidly.

"And a good price, too!" he exclaimed blithely. "Mrs. Povey, I don't mind telling you that I've netted seventy pounds odd this afternoon."

Lily's eyes expressed her proud joy.

"I hope pride won't have a fall," said Constance, with a calm smile out of which peeped a hint of a rebuke. "That's what I hope. I must just go and see about tea."

"I can't stay for tea—really," said Dick.

"Of course you can," said Constance, positively. "Suppose you'd been at Birmingham? It's weeks since you stayed to tea."

"Oh, well, thanks!" Dick yielded rather snubbed.

"Can't I save you a journey, Mrs. Povey?" Lily asked, eagerly thoughtful.

"No, thank you, my dear. There are one or two little things that need my attention." And Constance departed with her jewel-box.

Dick, having assured himself that the door was closed, assaulted Lily with a kiss.

"Been here long?" he inquired.

"About an hour and a half."

"Glad to see me?"

"Oh, Dick!" she protested.

"Old lady's in one of her humours, eh?"

"No, no! Only she was just talking about balloons—you know. She's very much up in arms."

"You ought to keep her off balloons. Balloons may be the ruin of her wedding-present to us, my child."

"Dick! How can you talk like that? . . . It's all very well saying I ought to keep her off balloons. You try to keep her off balloons when once she begins, and see!"

"What started her?"

"She said she was thinking of giving you old Mr. Baines's gold watch and chain—if you behaved yourself."

"Thank you for nothing!" said Dick. "I don't want it."

"Have you seen it?"

"Have I seen it? I should say I had seen it. She's mentioned it once or twice before."

"Oh! I didn't know."

"I don't see myself carting that thing about. I much prefer my own. What do you think of it?"

"Of course it is rather clumsy," said Lily. "But if she offered it to you, you couldn't refuse it, and you'd simply have to wear it."

"Well, then," said Dick, "I must try to behave myself just badly enough to keep off the watch, but not badly enough to upset her notions about wedding-presents."

"Poor old thing!" Lily murmured, compassionately.

Then Lily put her hand silently to her neck.

"What's that?"

"She's just given it to me."

Dick approached very near to examine the cameo brooch. "Hm!" he murmured. It was an adverse verdict. And Lily coincided with it by a lift of the eyebrows.

"And I suppose you'll have to wear that!" said Dick.

"She values it as much as anything she's got, poor old thing!" said Lily. "It belonged to her mother. And she

says cameos are coming into fashion again. It really is rather good, you know."

"I wonder where she learnt that!" said DICK, drily. "I see you've been suffering from the photographs again."

"Well," said Lily, "I much prefer the photographs to helping her to play Patience. The way she cheats herself—it's too silly! I——"

She stopped. The door which had after all not been latched, was pushed open, and the antique Fossette introduced herself painfully into the room. Fossette had an affection for Dick Povey.

"Well, Methusaleh!" he greeted the animal loudly. She could scarcely wag her tail, nor shake the hair out of her dim eyes in order to look up at him. He stooped to pat her.

"That dog does smell," said Lily, bluntly.

"What do you expect? What she wants is the least dose of prussic acid. She's a burden to herself."

"It's funny that if you venture to hint to Mrs. Povey that the dog is offensive she gets quite peppery," said Lily.

"Well, that's very simple," said Dick. "Don't hint, that's all! Hold your nose and your tongue too."

"Dick, I do wish you wouldn't be so absurd."

Constance returned into the room, cutting short the conversation.

"Mrs. Povey," said Dick, in a voice full of gratitude, "Lily has just been showing me her brooch——"

He noticed that she paid no heed to him, but passed hurriedly to the window.

"What's amiss in the Square?" Constance exclaimed. "When I was in the parlour just now I saw a man running along Wedgwood Street, and I said to myself, what's amiss?"

Dick and Lily joined her at the window.

Several people were hurrying down the Square, and then a man came running with a doctor from the market-place.

All these persons disappeared from view under the window of Mrs. Povey's drawing-room, which was over part of Mrs. Critcnlow's shop. As the windows of the shop projected beyond the walls of the house it was impossible, from the drawing-room window, to see the pavement in front of the shop.

"It must be something on the pavement—or in the shop!" murmured Constance.

"Oh, ma'am!" said a startled voice behind the three. It was Mary, original of the photograph, who had run unperceived into the drawing-room. "They say as Mrs. Critchlow has tried to commit suicide!"

Constance started back. Lily went towards her, with an instinctive gesture of supporting consolation.

"Maria Critchlow tried to commit suicide!" Constance muttered.

"Yes, ma'am! But they say she's not done it."

"By Jove! I'd better go and see if I can help, hadn't I?" cried Dick Povey, hobbling off, excited and speedy. "Strange, isn't it?" he exclaimed afterwards, "how I manage to come in for things? Sheer chance that I was here to-day! But it's always like that! Somehow something extraordinary is always happening where I am." And this too ministered to his satisfaction, and to his zest for life.

§2

When, in the evening, after all sorts of comings and goings, he finally returned to the old lady and the young one, in order to report the upshot, his demeanour was suitably toned to Constance's mood. The old lady had been very deeply disturbed by the tragedy, which, as she said, had passed under her very feet while she was calmly talking to Lily.

The whole truth came out in a short space of time. Mrs.

Critchlow was suffering from melancholia. It appeared that for long she had been depressed by the failing trade of the shop, which was none of her fault. The s.ate of the Square had steadily deteriorated. Even the 'Vaults' were not what they once were. Four or five shops had been shut up, as it were definitely, the landlords having given up hope of discovering serious tenants. And, of those kept open, the majority were struggling desperately to make ends meet. Only Holl's and a new upstart draper, who had widely advertised his dress-making department, were really flourishing. The confectionery half of Mr. Brindley's business was disappearing. People would not go to Hanbridge for their bread or for their groceries, but they would go for their cakes. These electric trams had simply carried to Hanbridge the cream, and much of the milk, of Bursley's retail trade. There were unprincipled tradesmen in Hanbridge ready to pay the car-fares of any customer who spent a crown in their establishments. Hanbridge was the geographical centre of the Five Towns, and it was alive to its situation. Useless for Bursley to compete! If Mrs. Critchlow had been a philosopher, if she had known that geography had always made history, she would have given up her enterprise a dozen years ago. But Mrs. Critchlow was merely Maria Insull. She had seen Baines's in its magnificent prime, when Baines's almost conferred a favour on customers in serving them. At the time when she took over the business under the wing of her husband, it was still a good business. But from that instant the tide had seemed to turn. She had fought, and she kept on fighting, stupidly. She was not aware that she was fighting against evolution, not aware that evolution had chosen her for one of its victims! She could understand that all the other shops in the Square should fail, but not that Baines's should fail! She was as industrious as ever, as good a buyer, as good a seller,

as keen for novelties, as economical, as methodical! And yet the returns dropped and dropped.

She naturally had no sympathy from Charles, who now took small interest even in his own business, or what was left of it, and who was coldly disgusted at the ultimate cost of his marriage. Charles gave her no money that he could avoid giving her. The crisis had been slowly approaching for years. The assistants in the shop had said nothing, or hac(only whispered among themselves, but now that the crisis had flowered suddenly in an attempted self-murder, they all spoke at once, and the evidences were pieced together into a formidable proof of the strain which Mrs. Critchlow had suffered. It appeared that for many months she had been depressed and irritable, that sometimes she would sit down in the midst of work and declare, with every sign of exhaustion, that she could do no more. Then with equal briskness she would arise and force herself to labour. She did not sleep for whole nights. One assistant related how she had complained of having had no sleep whatever for four nights consecutively. She had noises in the ears and a chronic headache. Never very plump, she had grown thinner and thinner. And she was for ever taking pills; this information came from Charles's manager. She had had several outrageous quarrels with the redoubtable Charles, to the stupefaction of all who heard or saw them. . . . Mrs. Critchlow standing up to her husband! Another strange thing was that she thought the bills of several of the big Manchester firms were unpaid, when as a fact they had been paid. Even when shown the receipts she would not be convinced, though she pretended to be convinced. She would recommence the next day. All this was sufficiently disconcerting for female assistants in the drapery. But what could they do?

Then Maria Critchlow had gone a step further. She had

summoned the eldest assistant to her corner and had informed her, with all the solemnity of a confe, sion made to assuage a conscience which has been tortured too long, that she had on many occasions been guilty of sexual irregularity with her late employer, Samuel Povey. There was no truth whatever in this accusation (which everybody, however, took care not to mention to Constance); it merely indicated, perhaps, the secret aspirations of Maria Insull, the virgin. The assistant was properly scandalized, more by the crudity of Mrs. Critchlow's language than by the alleged sin buried in the past. Goodness knows what the assistant would have done! But two hours later Maria Critchlow tried to commit suicide by stabbing herself with a pair of scissors. There was blood in the shop.

With as little delay as possible she had been driven away to the asylum. Charles Critchlow, enveloped safely in the armour of his senile egotism, had shown no emotion, and very little activity. The shop was closed. And as a general draper's it never opened again. That was the end of Raines's. Two assistants found themselves without a livelihood. The small tumble with the great.

Constance's emotion was more than pardonable; it was justified. She could not eat and Lily could not persuade her to eat. In an unhappy moment Dick Povey mentioned —he never could remember how, afterwards—the word Federation! And then Constance, from a passive figure of grief became a menace. She overwhelmed Dick Povey with her anathema of Federation, for Dick was a citizen of Hanbridge, where this detestable movement for Federation had had its birth. All the misfortunes of St. Luke's Square were due to that great, busy, grasping, unscrupulous neighbour. Had not Hanbridge done enough, without wanting to merge all the Five Towns into one town, of which of course itself would be the centre? For Constance,

Hanbridge was a borough of unprincipled adventurers, bent on ruini/ig the ancient 'Mother of the Five Towns' for its own glory and aggrandizement. Let Constance hear no more of Federation! Her poor sister Sophia had been dead against Federation, and she had been quite right! All really respectable people were against it! The attempted suicide of Mrs. Critchlow sealed the fate of Federation and damned it for ever, in Constance's mind. Her hatred of the idea of it was intensified into violent animosity; insomuch that in the result she died a martyr to the cause of Bursley's municipal independence.

§3

It was on a muddy day in October that the first great battle for and against Federation was fought in Bursley. Constance was suffering severely from sciatica. She was also suffering from disgust with the modern world.

Unimaginable things had happened in the Square. For Constance, the reputation of the Square was eternally ruined. Charles Critchlow, by that strange good fortune which always put him in the right when fairly he ought to have been in the wrong, had let the Baines shop and his own shop and house to the Midland Clothiers Company, which was establishing branches throughout Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Leicestershire, and adjacent counties. He had sold his own chemist's stock and gone to live in a little house at the bottom of King Street. It is doubtful whether he would have consented to retire had not Alderman Holl died earlier in the year, thus ending a long rivalry between the old men for the patriarchate of the Square. Charles Critchlow was as free from sentiment as any man, but no man is quite free from it, and the ancient was in a position to indulge sentiment had he chosen. His business was not a

source of loss, and he could still trust his skinny hands and peering eyes to make up a prescription. However, the offer of the Midland Clothiers Company tempted him, and as the undisputed 'father' of the Square he left the Square in triumph.

The Midland Clothiers Company had no sense of the proprieties of trade. Their sole idea was to sell good*;. Having possessed themselves of one of the finest sites in a town which, after all was said and done, comprised nearly forty thousand inhabitants, they set about to make the best of that site. They threw the two shops into one, and they caused to be constructed a sign compared to which the spacious old 'Baines' sign was a postcard. They covered the entire frontage with posters of a theatrical description—coloured posters! They occupied the front page of the *Signal,* and from that pulpit they announced that winter was approaching, and that they meant to sell ten thousand overcoats at their new shop in Bursley at the price of twelve and sixpence each. The tailoring of the world was loudly and coarsely defied to equal the value of those overcoats. On the day of opening they arranged an orchestra or artillery of phonographs upon the leads over the window of that part of the shop which had been Mr. Critchlow's. They also carpeted the Square with handbills, and flew flags from their upper storeys. The immense shop proved to be full of overcoats; overcoats were shown in all the three great windows; in one window an overcoat was disposed as a receptacle for water, to prove that the Midland twelve-and-sixpenny overcoats were impermeable by rain. Overcoats flapped in the two doorways. These devices woke and drew the town, and the town found itself received by bustling male assistants very energetic and rapid, instead of by demure anaemic virgins. At moments towards evening the shop was populous with custom; the number of over-

coats sold was prodigious. On another day the Midland sold trousrrs in a like manner, but without the phonographs. Unmistakably the Midland had shaken the Square and demonstrated that commerce was still possible to fearless enterprise.

Nevertheless the Square was not pleased. The Square was conscious of shame, of dignity departed. Constance was divided between pain and scornful wrath. For her, what the Midland had done was to desecrate a shrine. She hated those flags, and those flaring, staring posters on the honest old brick walls, and the enormous gilded sign, and the windows all filled with a monotonous repetition of the same article, and the bustling assistants. As for the phonographs, she regarded them as a grave insult; they had been within twenty feet of her drawing-room window! Twelve-and-sixpenny overcoats! It was monstrous, and equally monstrous was the gullibility of the people. How could an overcoat of twelve and sixpence be 'good.' She remembered the overcoats made and sold in the shop in the time of her father and her husband, overcoats of which the inconvenience was that they would not wear out! The Midland, for Constance, was not a trading concern, but something between a cheap-jack and a circus. She could scarcely bear to walk down the Square, to such a degree did the ignoble frontage of the Midland offend her eye and outrage her ancestral pride. She even said that she would give up her house.

But when, on the twenty-ninth of September, she received six months' notice, signed in Critchlow's shaky hand, to quit the house—it was wanted for the Midland's manager, the Midland having taken the premises on condition that they might eject Constance if they chose-the blow was an exceedingly severe one. She had sworn to go—but to be turned out, to be turned out of the house of her birth and

out of her father's home, that was different! Her pride, injured as it was, had a great deal to support. It became necessary for her to recollect that she was a Baines. She affected magnificently not to care. But she could not refrain from telling all her acquaintances that she was being turned out of her house, and asking them what they thought *of that;* and when she met Charles Critchlow in the street she seared him with the heat of her resentment. The enterprise of finding a new house and moving into it loomed before her gigantic, terrible, the idea of it was alone sufficient to make her ill.

Meanwhile, in the matter of Federation, preparations for the pitched battle had been going forward, especially in the columns of the *Signal,* where the scribes of each one of the Five Towns had proved that all the other towns were in the clutch of unscrupulous gangs of self-seekers. After months of argument and recrimination, all the towns except Bursley were either favourable or indifferent to the prospect of becoming a part of the twelfth largest town in the United Kingdom. But in Bursley the opposition was strong, and the twelfth largest town in the United Kingdom could not spring into existence without the consent of Bursley. The United Kingdom itself was languidly interested in the possibility of suddenly being endowed with a new town of a quarter of a million inhabitants. The Five Towns were frequently mentioned in the London dailies, and London journalists would write such sentences as: "The Five Towns, which are of course, *as everybody knows,* Hanbridge, Bursley, Knype, Longshaw, and Turnhill. ..." This was renown at last, for the most maligned district in the country! And then a Cabinet Minister had visited the Five Towns, and assisted at an official inquiry, and stated in his hammering style that he meant personally to do everything possible to accomplish the Federation of the

Five Towns: an incautious remark, which infuriated, while it flattered, tfye opponents of Federation in Bursley. Constance, with/many other sensitive persons, asked angrily what right a Cabinet Minister had to take sides in a purely local affair. But the partiality of the official world grew flagrant. The Mayor of Bursley openly proclaimed himself a Federationist, though there was a majority on the Council against him. Even ministers of religion permitted themselves to think and to express opinions. Well might the indignant Old Guard imagine that the end of public decency had come! The Federationists were very ingenious individuals. They contrived to enrol in their ranks a vast number of leading men. Then they hired the Covered Market, and put a platform in it, and put all these leading men on the platform, and made them all speak eloquently on the advantages of moving with the times. The meeting was crowded and enthusiastic, and readers of the *Signal* next day could not but see that the battle was won in advance, and that anti-Federation was dead. In the following week, however, the anti-Federationists held in the Covered Market an exactly similar meeting (except that the display of leading men was less brilliant), and demanded of a floor of serried heads whether the old Mother of the Five Towns was prepared to put herself into the hands of a crew of highly-paid bureaucrats at Hanbridge, and was answered by a wild defiant "No," that could be heard on Duck Bank. Readers of the *Signal* next day were fain to see that the battle had not been won in advance. Bursley was lukewarm on the topics of education, slums, water, gas, electricity. But it meant to fight for that mysterious thing, its identity. Was the name of Bursley to be lost to the world? To ask the question was to give the answer.,

Then dawned the day of battle, the day of the Poll, when the burgesses were to indicate plainly by means of a cross

on a voting paper whether or not they wanted Federation. And on this day Constance was almost incapacitated by sciatica. It was a heroic day. The walls of tLe town were covered with literature, and the streets dotted with motor-cars and other vehicles at the service of the voters. The greater number of these vehicles bore large cards with the words, "Federation this time." And hundreds of men walked briskly about with circular cards tied to their lapels, as though Bursley had been a race-course, and these cards too had the words, "Federation this time." (The reference was to a light poll which had been taken several years before, when no interest had been aroused and the immature project yet defeated by a six to one majority.) All partisans of Federation sported a red ribbon; allAnti-Federationists sported a blue ribbon. The schools were closed and the Federationists displayed their characteristic lack of scruple in appropriating the children. The Federationists, with devilish skill, had hired the Bursley Town Silver Prize Band, an organization of terrific respectability, and had set it to march playing through the town followed by wagonettes crammed with children, who sang:

Vote, vote, vote for Federation,
Don't be stupid, old and slow,
We are sure that it will be
Good for the communitie,
So vote, vote, vote, and make it go.

How this performance could affect the decision of grave burgesses at the polls was not apparent; but the Anti-Federationists feared that it might, and before noon was come they had engaged two bands and had composed in committee, the following lyric in reply to the first one:

Down, down, down, with Federation,
As we are we'd rather stay;
When the vote on Saturday's read
Federation will be dead,
Good old Bursley's sure to win the day.

They had also composed another song, entitled "Dear old Bursley," which, however, they made the fatal error of setting to the music of "Auld Lang Syne." The effect was that of a dirge, and it perhaps influenced many voters in favour of the more cheerful party. The Anti-Federationists, indeed, never regained the mean advantage filched by unscrupulous Federationists with the help of the Silver Prize Band and a few hundred infants. The odds were against the Anti-Federationists. The mayor had actually issued a letter to the inhabitants accusing the Anti-Federationists of unfair methods! This was really too much! The impudence of it knocked the breath out of its victims, and breath is very necessary in a polling contest. The Federationists, as one of their prominent opponents admitted, 'had it all their own way,' dominating both the streets and the walls. And when, early in the afternoon, Mr. Dick Povey sailed over the town in a balloon that was plainly decorated with the crimson of Federation, it was felt that the cause of Bursley's separate identity was for ever lost. Still, Bursley, with the willing aid of the public-houses, maintained its gaiety.

§4

Towards dusk a stout old lady, with grey hair, and a dowdy bonnet, and an expensive mantle, passed limping, very slowly, along Wedgwood Street and up the Cock Yard towards the Town Hall. Her wrinkled face had an anxious

look, but it was also very determined. The busy, joyous Federationists and Anti-Federationists who knew her not saw merely a stout old lady fussing forth, anc those who knew her saw merely Mrs. Povey and greeted her perfunctorily, a woman of her age and gait being rather out of place in that feverish altercation of opposed principles. But it was more than a stout old lady, it was more than Mrs. Povey, that waddled with such painful deliberation through the streets—it was a miracle.

In the morning Constance had been partially incapacitated by her sciatica; so much so, at any rate, that she had perceived the advisability of remaining on the bedroom floor instead of descending to the parlour. Therefore Mary had lighted the drawing-room fire, and Constance had ensconced herself by it, with Fossette in a basket. Lily Holl had called early, and had been very sympathetic, but rather vague. The truth was that she was concealing the imminent balloon ascent which Dick Povey, with his instinct for the picturesque, had somehow arranged, in conjunction with a well-known Manchester aeronaut, for the very day of the poll. That was one of various matters that had to be 'kept from' the old lady. Lily herself was much perturbed about the balloon ascent. She had to run off and see Dick before he started, at the Football Ground at Bleakridge, and then she had to live through the hours till she should receive a telegram to the effect that Dick had come down safely or that Dick had broken his leg in coming down, or that Dick was dead. It was a trying time for Lily. She had left Constance after a brief visit, with a preoccupied unusual air, saying that as the day was a special day, she should come in again 'if she could.' And she did not forget to assure Constance that Federation would beyond any question whatever be handsomely beaten at the poll; for this was another matter as to which it was deemed advisable

to keep the old lady 'in the dark,' lest the foolish old lady should worry and commit indiscretions.

After tha! Constance had been forgotten by the world of Bursley, which could pay small heed to sciatical old ladies confined to sofas and firesides. She was in acute pain, as Mary could see when at intervals she hovered round her. \ssuredly it was one of Constance's bad days, one of those days on which she felt that the tide of life had left her stranded in utter neglect. The sound of the Bursley Town Silver Prize Band aroused her from her mournful trance of suffering. Then the high treble of children's voices startled her. She defied her sciatica, and, grimacing, went to the window. And at the first glimpse she could see that the Federation Poll was going to be a much more exciting affair than she had imagined. The great cards swinging from the wagonettes showed her that Federation was at all events still sufficiently alive to make a formidable impression on the eye and the ear. The Square was transformed by this clamour in favour of Federation; people cheered, and sang also, as the procession wound down the Square. And she could distinctly catch the tramping, martial syllables, *"Vote, vote, vote."* She was indignant. The pother, once begun, continued. Vehicles flashed frequently across the Square, most of them in the crimson livery. Little knots and processions of excited wayfarers were a recurring feature of the unaccustomed traffic, and the large majority of them flaunted the colours of Federation. Mary, after some errands of shopping, came upstairs and reported that 'it was simply "Federation" everywhere,' and that Mr. Brindley, a strong Federationist, was 'above a bit above himself'; further, that the interest in the poll was tremendous and universal. She said there were 'crowds and crowds' round the Town Hall. Even Mary, generally a little placid and dull, had caught something of the contagious vivacity.

Constance remained at the window till dinner, and after dinner she went to it again. It was fortunate ithat she did not think of looking up into the sky when Die k's balloon sailed westwards; she would have guessed instantly that Dick was in that balloon, and her grievances would have been multiplied. The vast grievance of the Federation scheme weighed on her to the extremity of her power to bear. She was not a politician; she had no general ideas; she did not see the cosmic movement in large curves. She was incapable of perceiving the absurdity involved in perpetuating municipal divisions which the growth of the district had rendered artificial, vexatious, and harmful. She saw nothing but Bursley, and in Bursley nothing but the Square. She knew nothing except that the people of Bursley, who once shopped in Bursley, now shopped in Hanbridge, and that the Square was a desert infested by cheap-jacks. And there were actually people who wished to bow the neck to Hanbridge, who were ready to sacrifice the very name of Bursley to the greedy humour of that pushing Chicago! She could not understand such people. Did they know that poor Maria Critchlow was in a lunatic asylum because Hanbridge was so grasping? Ah, poor Maria was already forgotten! Did they know that, as a further indirect consequence, she, the daughter of Bursley's chief tradesman, was to be thrown out of the house in which she was born? She wished, bitterly, as she stood there at the window, watching the triumph of Federation, that she had bought the house and shop at the Mericarp sale years ago. She would have shown them, as owner, what was what! She forgot that the property which she already owned in Bursley was a continual annoyance to her, and that she was always resolving to sell it at no matter what loss.

She said to herself that she had a vote, and that if she had been 'at ail fit to stir out' she would certainly have voted.

She said to herself that it had been her duty to vote. And then by an illusion of her wrought nerves, tightened minute by minute throughout the day, she began to fancy that her sciatica was easier. She said: "If only I could go out!" She might have a cab, or any of the parading vehicles would be glad to take her to the Town Hall, and, perhaps, as a favour, to bring her back again. But no! She dared not go out. She was afraid, really afraid that even the mild Mary might stop her. Otherwise, she could have sent Mary for a cab. And supposing that Lily returned and caught her going out or coming in! She ought not to go out. Yet her sciatica was strangely better. It was folly to think of going out. Yet. . . ! And Lily did not come. She was rather hurt that Lily had not paid her a second visit. Lily was neglecting her. . . . She *would* go out. It was not four minutes' walk for her to the Town Hall, and she was better. And there had been no shower for a long time, and the wind was drying the mud in the roadways. Yes, she would go.

Like a thief she passed into her bedroom and put on her things; and like a thief she crept downstairs, and so, without a word to Mary, into the street. It was a desperate adventure. As soon as she was in the street she felt all her weakness, all the fatigue which the effort had already cost her. The pain returned. The streets were still wet and foul, the wind cold, and the sky menacing. She ought to go back. She ought to admit that she had been a fool to dream of the enterprise. The Town Hall seemed to be miles off, at the top of a mountain. She went forward, however, steeled to do her share in the killing of Federation. Every step caused her a gnashing of her old teeth. She chose the Cock Yard route, because if she had gone up the Square she would have had to pass Holl's shop, and Lily might have spied her.

This was the miracle that breezy politicians witnessed without being aware that it was a miracle. To have impressed them, Constance ought to have feinted before recording her vote, and made herself the centre of a crowd of gapers. But she managed, somehow, to reach home again on her own tortured feet, and an astounded and protesting Mary opened the door to her. Rain was descending. She was frightened, then, by the hardihood of her adventure, and by its atrocious results on her body. An appalling exhaustion rendered her helpless. But the deed was done.

§5

The next morning, after a night which she could not have described, Constance found herself lying flat in bed, with all her limbs stretched out straight. She was conscious that her face was covered with perspiration. The bell-rope hung within a foot of her head, but she had decided that, rather than move in order to pull it, she would prefer to wait for assistance until Mary came of her own accord. Her experiences of the night had given her a dread of the slightest movement; anything was better than movement. She felt vaguely ill, with a kind of subdued pain, and she was very thirsty and somewhat cold. She knew that her left arm and leg were extraordinarily tender to the touch. When Mary at length entered, clean and fresh and pale in all her mildness, she found the mistress the colour of a duck's egg, with puffed features, and a strangely anxious expression.

"Mary," said Constance, "I feel so queer. Perhaps you'd better run up and tell Miss Holl, and ask her to telephone for Dr. Stirling."

This was the beginning of Constance's last illness. Mary most impressively informed Miss Holl that her mistress had

been out on the previous afternoon in spite of her sciatica, and Lily telephoned the fact to the Doctor. Lily then came down to Zake charge of Constance. But she dared not upbraid the invalid.

"Is the result out?" Constance murmured.

"Oh yes," said Lily, lightly. "There's a majority of over twelve hundred against Federation. Great excitement last night! I told you yesterday morning that Federation was bound to be beaten."

Lily spoke as though the result throughout had been a certainty; her tone to Constance indicated: "Surely you don't imagine that I should have told you untruths yesterday morning merely to cheer you up!" The truth was, however, that towards the end of the day nearly everyone had believed Federation to be carried. The result had caused great surprise. Only the profoundest philosophers had not been surprised to see that the mere blind, deaf, inert forces of reaction, with faulty organization, and quite deprived of the aid of logic, had proved far stronger than all the alert enthusiasm arrayed against them. It was a notable lesson to reformers.

"Oh!" murmured Constance, startled. She was relieved; but she would have liked the majority to be smaller. Moreover, her interest in the question had lessened. It was her limbs that preoccupied her now.

"You look tired," she said feebly to Lily.

"Do I?" said Lily, shortly, hiding the fact that she had spent half the night in tending Dick Povey, who, in a sensational descent near Macclesfield, had been dragged through the tops of a row of elm trees to the detriment of an elbow-joint; the professional aeronaut had broken a leg.

Then Dr. Stirling came.

"I'm afraid my sciatica's worse, Doctor," said Constance, apologetically.

"Did you expect it to be better?" said he, gazing at her sternly. She knew then that someone had saved her the trouble of confessing her escapade.

However, her sciatica was not worse. Her sciatica had not behaved basely. What she was suffering from was the preliminary advances of an attack of acute rheumatism. She had indeed selected the right month and weather for her escapade! Fatigued by pain, by nervous agitation, and by the immense moral and physical effort needed to carry her to the Town Hall and back, she had caught a chill, and had got her feet damp. In such a subject as herself it was enough. The doctor used only the phrase 'acute rheumatism.' Constance did not know that acute rheumatism was precisely the same thing as that dread disease, rheumatic fever, and she was not informed. She did not surmise for a considerable period that her case was desperately serious. The doctor explained the summoning of two nurses, and the frequency of his own visits, by saying that his chief anxiety was to minimise the fearful pain as much as possible, and that this end could only be secured by incessant watchfulness. The pain was certainly formidable. But then Constance was well habituated to formidable pain. Sciatica, at its most active, cannot be surpassed even by rheumatic fever. Constance had been in nearly continuous pain for years. Her friends, however sympathetic, could not appreciate the intensity of her torture. They were just as used to it as she was. And the monotony and particularity of her complaints (slight though the complaints were in comparison with their cause) necessarily blunted the edge of compassion. "Mrs. Povey and her sciatica again! Poor thing, she really is a little tedious!" They were apt not to realise that sciatica is even more tedious than complaints about sciatica.

She asked one day that Dick should come to see her. He came with his arm in a sling, and told her charily that he

had hurt his elbow through dropping his stick and slipping downstairs.

"Lily never told me," said Constance, suspiciously.

"Oh, it's simply nothing!" said Dick. Not even the sick room could chasten him of his joy in the magnificent balloon adventure.

"I do hope you won't go running any risks!" said Constance.

"Never you fear!" said he. "I shall die in my bed."

And he was absolutely convinced that he would, and not as the result of any accident, either! The nurse would not allow him to remain in the room.

Lily suggested that Constance might like her to write to Cyril. It was only in order to make sure of Cyril's correct address. He had gone on a tour through Italy with some friends of whom Constance knew nothing. The address appeared to be very uncertain; there were several addresses, *paste restante* in various towns. Cyril had sent postcards to his mother. Dick and Lily went to the post-office and telegraphed to foreign parts.

Though Constance was too ill to know how ill she was, though she had no conception of the domestic confusion caused by her illness, her brain was often remarkably clear, and she could reflect in long, sane meditations above the uneasy sea of her pain. In the earlier hours of the nighty after the nurses had been changed, and Mary had gone to bed exhausted with stair-climbing, and Lily Holl was recounting the day to Dick up at the grocer's, and the day-nurse was already asleep, and the night-nurse had arranged the night, then, in the faintly-lit silence of the chamber, Constance would argue with herself for an hour at a time. She frequently thought of Sophia. In spite of the fact that Sophia was dead she still pitied Sophia as a woman whose life had been wasted. This idea of Sophia's wasted and sterile life,

and of the far-reaching importance of adhering to principles, recurred to her again and again. "Why did she run away with him? If only she had not run away!" she would repeat. And yet there had been something so fine about Sophia! Which made Sophia's case all the more pitiable! Constance never pitied herself. She did not consider that Fate had treated her very badly. She was not very discontented with herself. The invincible common sense of a sound nature prevented her, in her best moments, from feebly dissolving in self-pity. She had lived in honesty and kindliness for a fair number of years, and she had tasted triumphant hours. She was justly respected, she had a position, she had dignity, she was well-off. She possessed, after all, a certain amount of quiet self-conceit. There existed nobody to whom she would 'knuckle down,' or could be asked to 'knuckle down.' True, she was old! So were thousands of other people in Bursley. She was in pain. So there were thousands of other people. With whom would she be willing to exchange lots? She had many dissatisfactions. But she rose superior to them. When she surveyed her life, and life in general, she would think, with a sort of tart but not sour cheerfulness: *"Well, that is what life is!"* Despite her habit of complaining about domestic trifles, she was, in the essence of her character, 'a great body for making the best of things.' Thus she did not unduly bewail her excursion to the Town Hall to vote, which the sequel had proved to be ludicrously supererogatory. "How was I to know?" she said.

The one matter in which she had gravely to reproach herself was her indulgent spoiling of Cyril after the death of Samuel Povey. But the end of her reproaches always was: "I expect I should do the same again! And probably it wouldn't have made any difference if I hadn't spoiled him!" And she had paid tenfold for the weakness. She loved Cyril,

but she had no illusions about him; she saw both sides of him. She remembered all the sadness and all the humiliations which, he had caused her. Still, her affection was unimpaired. A son might be worse than Cyril was; he had admirable qualities. She did not resent his being away from England while she lay ill. "If it was serious," she said, "he would not lose a moment." And Lily and Dick were a treasure to her. In those two she really had been lucky. She took great pleasure in contemplating the splendour of the gift with which she would mark her appreciation of them at their approaching wedding. The secret attitude of both of them towards her was one of good-natured condescension, expressed in the tone in which they would say to each other, 'the old lady.' Perhaps they would have been startled to know that Constance lovingly looked down on both of them. She had unbounded admiration for their hearts; but she thought that Dick was a little too brusque, a little too clownish, to be quite a gentleman. And though Lily was perfectly ladylike, in Constance's opinion she lacked backbone, or grit, or independence of spirit. Further, Constance considered that the disparity of age between them was excessive. It is to be doubted whether, when all was said, Constance had such a very great deal to learn from the self-confident wisdom of these young things.

After a period of self-communion, she would sometimes fall into a shallow delirium. In all her delirium she was invariably wandering to and fro, lost, in the long underground passage heading from the scullery past the coal-cellar and the cinder-cellar to the backyard. And she was afraid of the vast-obscure of those regions, as she had been in her infancy.

It was not acute rheumatism, but a supervening pericarditis that in a few days killed her. She died in the night, alone with the night-nurse. By a curious chance the

Wesleyan minister, hearing that she was seriously ill, had called on the previous day. She had not asked for him; and this pastoral visit, from a man who had always said that the heavy duties of the circuit rendered pastoral visits almost impossible, made her think. In the evening she had requested that Fossette should be brought upstairs.

Thus she was turned out of her house, but not by the Midland Clothiers Company. Old people said to one another: "Have you heard that Mrs. Povey is dead? Eh, dear me! There'll be no one left soon." These old people were bad prophets. Her friends genuinely regretted her, and forgot the tediousness of her sciatica. They tried, in their sympathetic grief, to picture to themselves all that she had been through in her life. Possibly they imagined that they succeeded in this imaginative attempt. But they did not succeed. No one but Constance could realize all that Constance had been through, and all that life had meant to her.

Cyril was not at the funeral. He arrived three days later. (As he had no interest in the love affairs of Dick and Lily, the couple were robbed of their wedding-present. The will, fifteen years old, was in Cyril's favour.) But the immortal Charles Critchlow came to the funeral, full of calm, sardonic glee, and without being asked. Though fabulously senile, he had preserved and even improved his faculty for enjoying a catastrophe. He now went to funerals with gusto, contentedly absorbed in the task of burying his friends one by one. It was he who said, in his high, trembling, rasping, deliberate voice: "It's a pity her didn't live long enough to hear as Federation is going on after all! That would ha' worritted her." (For the unscrupulous advocates of Federation had discovered a method of setting at naught the decisive result of the referendum, and that day's *Signal* was fuller than ever of Federation.)

When the short funeral procession started, Mary and the infirm Fossette (sole relic of the connection between the Baines family and Paris) were left alone in the house. The tearful servant prepared the dog's dinner and laid it before her in the customary soup-plate in the customary corner. Fossette sniffed at it, and then walked away and lay down with a dog's sigh in front of the kitchen fire. She had been deranged in her habits that day; she was conscious of neglect, due to events which passed her comprehension. And she did not like it. She was hurt, and her appetite was hurt. However, after a few minutes, she began to reconsider the matter. She glanced at the soup-plate, and, on the chance that it might after all contain something worth inspection, she awkwardly balanced herself on her old legs and went to it again.

THE END