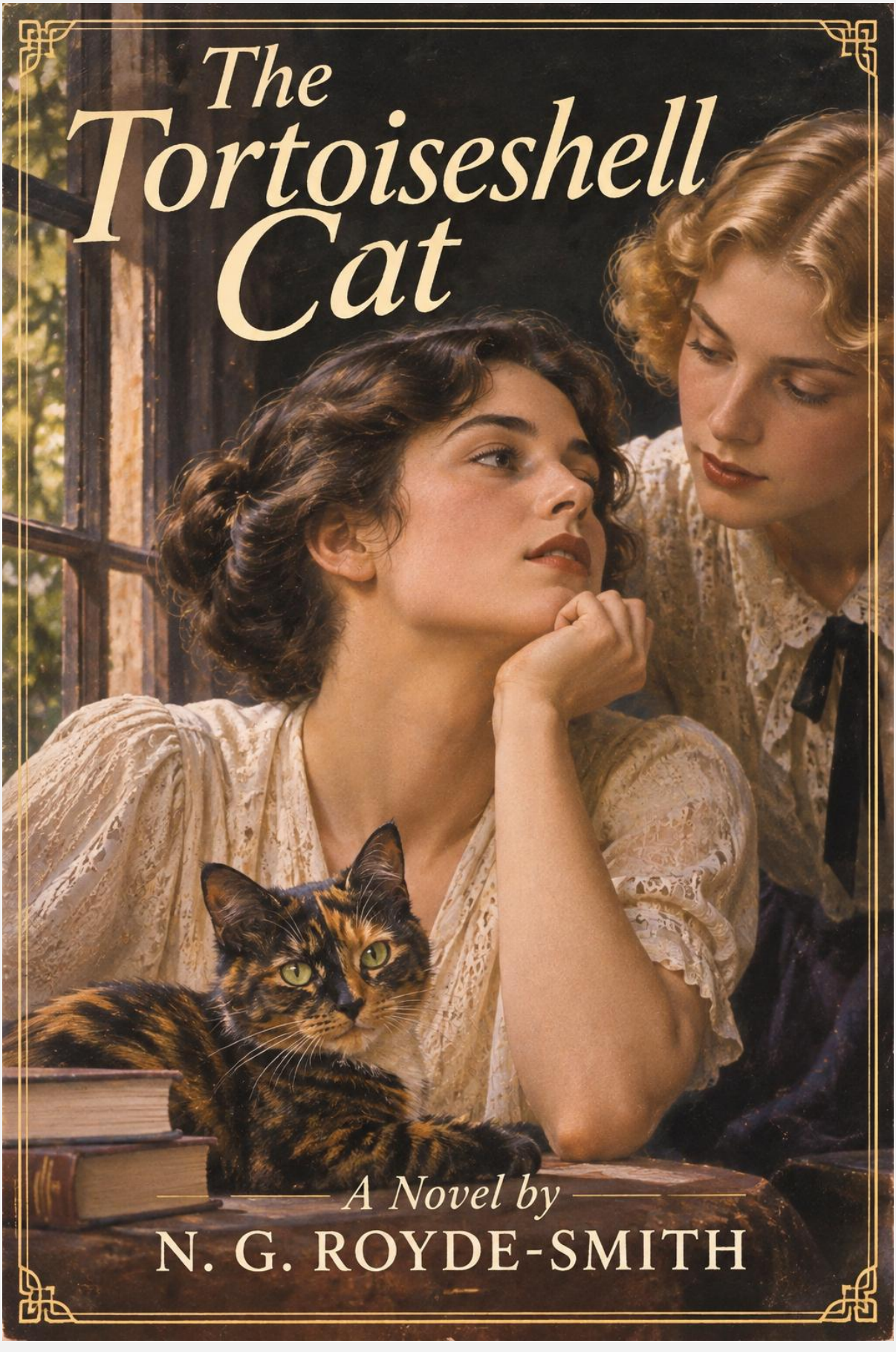
The Tortoiseshell Cat
A Novel by
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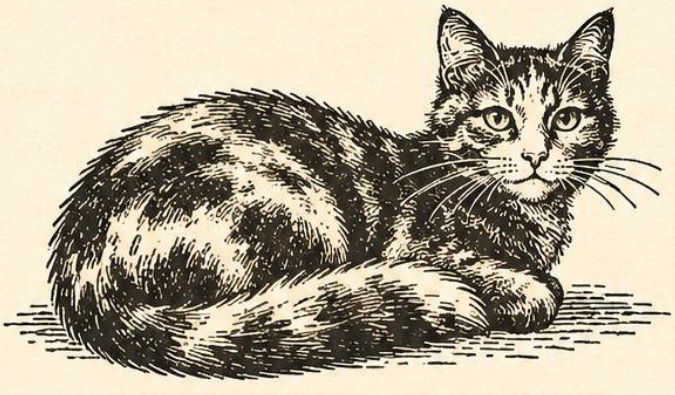

Back to Lesbos, back to the hills whereunder

Shone Mitylene—

Unbeloved, unseen in the ebb of twilight—

Purged not in Lethe.

TO
WALTER DE LA MARE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The action of this novel is set in London in 1912-13, but William is the only character in the tale who is drawn from life.

CHAPTER ONE.
VOWEL-SOUNDS

I

You could never be quite sure how Mrs. Lysaght would take anything. Even thin Miss Winter, the Secretary, who must have loved her or she could never have stood it, went about her duties murmuring, "I *hope* I've done right...." And, as Miss Fairfax said, you could feel the pit of the poor thing's stomach sink on *hope*. Miss Fairfax was a little coarse at times: like a man. It was the result of a classical tripos. Gillian had gathered this from Mrs. Lysaght on the bewildering occasion when she had first received the head mistress's instructions, at tea. Mrs. Lysaght had been in bed that afternoon.

"I seize every opportunity of rest—facing the light—so revealing—and thick bread and butter—you will not mind, dear."

Gillian did mind being called "dear," and the bread and butter was certainly thick; but she was so much engrossed in wondering how Mrs. Lysaght either rested or enjoyed whatever revelation the faced light might bring (though quite in bed) while eating thick bread and butter, interviewing a junior mistress and writing what might be a diary and again might at the same time be a prospectus, with one of those collapsible gold pencils which requires to be un-collapsed every half-page or so, that she missed the next two hundred words—you couldn't call any of Mrs. Lysaght's utterances sentences—and only caught up with those on which she left Miss Fairfax.

"Sound scholarship but coarseness—very sad—still the Greeks—*and* the Romans—passages in the Epistles—and the Joint Board's set-books this year—Satires, dear—Horace—*such* a pity—English purity—French refinement—Yours so different."

Gillian, whose subjects were English and Foreign Literature ("foreign" being a term comprehending French and German only), found her mind rocketing between *Le Misanthrope* and *Hamlet*, also "set-books" that year, with horrid memories of lines the full significance of which she had never quite explored herself, but which in her new capacity she was now

about to purvey to the young and inquisitive. What, for example, was the grosser name that liberal shepherds gave…?

“Correlate—always correlate.” Mrs. Lysaght was getting a little breathless and the lead had sunk below the rim of the gold case of her pencil. “References to History—dear Miss Parratt, so essentially refined—to Geography and Botany—the whole time-table—especially in the middle forms, and, whenever possible in *dramatic* form. The teaching of the Church, dear, Miracle and Mystery Plays—on the chest of drawers, dear—a little red box. Thank you—the school motto—*our utmost for the highest*—once a week for five minutes in every subject—and *low*-heeled shoes—ah! no—that was little Miss Battinson—but Saint Paul—infallible—if only *all* women—but you with such a father will know how right….”

On the way home Gillian met Miss Fairfax.

“Well, child,” said the classical mistress, “did you count the finite verbs? Parratt and I keep a book of them and the one who gets ten in one week wins. But she’s a great woman once you’ve got out of the mist.”

But Gillian never got out of the mist; not quite. It is true that the improbable connexion between her father (dead long ago of black-water fever in Burma) and Saint Paul, turned out, like the low-heeled shoes, to be proper to little Miss Battinson whose heels were very high and whose father was a well-known Dissenting Minister. And, little by little, she learnt to follow, with surprising success, the flying leaps taken by Mrs. Lysaght’s conversation from branch to branch of the Tree of Life, as she passed in and out of the great old Georgian house and across the spreading lawns, in which her famous school was lodged.

It was when the squirrel talk leapt—not only in the Tree of Life, but across the spaces which divide its branches from those of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that Gillian failed, and it was this failure which had brought her to the disaster she was now facing.

There was, Gillian had gathered this from the conversation in the Assistant Mistresses’ Room, one week in the year when Mrs. Lysaght deserted her post to make a pilgrimage. Colonel Lysaght was buried in

Jersey, where he had died, and his death had synchronized with the dates not only of his own, but of his mother's birthday as well. Old Lady Alice Lysaght, who had married at seventeen, was a woman of indomitable sentimentality, and, as her widowed daughter-in-law was her only surviving relative, the celebration of this triple anniversary on the spot where a comprehensive monument had been erected to it, was an event before which even the routine of Pelham House broke down.

In June, in the first week of June, Mrs. Lysaght always went to Jersey and left Miss Fairfax to rule in her stead. The one lesson a week which the head mistress gave in each form was distributed among the staff, and until you had occupied one of these forsaken posts during the annual retreat, you were not really established at Pelham House. It would generally take a new mistress eighteen months to attain what, in deference to the Colonel's military shade, was called her majority, especially if, as Gillian had, she only joined the staff at the beginning of the summer term. But in Gillian's case, the confirmation was swift and took place before she had been at Pelham House for more than six weeks.

"I *hope* I'm doing right in telling you, Miss Armstrong," poor Miss Winter had said, "but Mrs. Lysaght wishes you to take the Scripture Class in V.B. next week while she is away."

"Me?" said Gillian, looking up from the French Composition she was correcting. "What book are they doing?"

Miss Winter consulted her sheaf of notes.

"Psalms," she discovered; "but you are to do whatever you like. A single lesson is what Mrs. Lysaght always asks for. She prefers not to have her own treatment of the set-books interrupted. She thinks it might confuse the girls' minds." Miss Winter was incapable of disrespect and Gillian's gurgle of delight died away in the long silence into which it travelled.

"I'll do Naaman the Syrian," she said. "It's the finest short story in the world. I always want to send it in for one of those competitions."

“You’ve got a horrid, secular mind, my girl,” said Miss Fairfax. “And you don’t seem to realize the signal honour bestowed on you.”

“No,” said Gillian, “it doesn’t seem very honourable—extra work. That’s why I chose Naaman. I know him by heart. Besides, it’s so well done.”

Miss Fairfax snorted.

“The mind of your principal is still a sealed book to you,” and she left the room without further argument.

On the following Tuesday, after Recreation, Gillian took V.B. through the finest short story in the world and felt her own enthusiasm merge in the collective excitement of the class as the drama turned on itself and worked back from healing to destruction in the great anticlimax:—

“Went not my heart with thee when the man turned again from his chariot to meet thee?”

Miss Parratt, whose subject was History, and whose essential refinement was a quality attributed to her by Mrs. Lysaght on account of her fretful manner rather than in consequence of any real knowledge of her character, complained about it at luncheon:

“I took V.B. for the last lesson this morning, after you, Miss Armstrong. They were all quite excited. As though they’d been to the theatre.”

“Well, it was rather like that,” Gillian admitted; “it was bound to be. I got terribly excited myself.”

“It’s not at all the state I’m used to for that class,” said Miss Parratt.

“Do you think they *ought* to be excited after a Scripture lesson?” asked little Miss Battinson, not without malice.

“Don’t be silly, Battinson,” said Miss Fairfax; “all Armstrong’s lessons are exciting. I can’t hear myself speak in the Shell when the Third Form’s singing French verbs at her next door. I’m going to bring it up at the next mistresses’ meeting.”

Gillian apologized.

“They do make a noise, I know. But it was the only way I could think of to keep them quiet.”

“I do see what you mean, though I don’t think you put it very accurately; however, that is only a passing problem. What I really should like to know is why Mrs. Lysaght gave you, of all people, V.B. for her Scripture hour. The confirmation class. It was mine by right. You’ve cut me out. You’re a thruster. I’m now in the outer darkness with Science and Physical Exercise. Praise God!” and Miss Fairfax helped herself to a great deal of rather weak mustard which ran down into the gravy on her plate.

Two days later, Mrs. Lysaght having returned to Pelham House, Miss Fairfax learned the truth.

“It seems,” she told Gillian, “that she was looking in on your Literature lesson one day and found the Fourth Form standing in serried ranks saying as one girl:

‘“And so the whole round world in every way

Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.’

She says the deep devotional note you had so patiently got out of that particularly callous set—what’s the matter?”

“In the first place,” said Gillian, “how *do* you understand all that from what she says?”

“I’m used to it. How *did* you get the Fourth Form…?”

“But I was making them use their chest notes on all those o’s and ou’s, *whole*, *round*, *bound*, *gold*.”

“You’d chosen a particularly high-class sentiment.”

“Goodness!” Gillian was really alarmed. “But I’d just told them that the *meaning* didn’t matter. I’d told them—oh, Miss Fairfax—but I’d told them—I felt they were young and must be told—that what the words said was just silly—an image of God like a convict with a weight chained to *both* feet…. A God, a false image.”

“Well, I don’t know. It must be rather like hard labour—being responsible for the lot of us.”

“That isn’t how I think of God,” said Gillian; “and I don’t think it’s what Tennyson meant. He’d a silly mind. I was only using it as an exercise in vowel-sounds.”

“Bless the child! And it got her the confirmation class!”

“Anyhow they enjoyed it.”

“The vowel-sounds, or the confirmation class?”

“Both,” said Gillian and felt her cheeks burn again with the unfailing thrill of that tremendous tale.

“Well, it’s the aim of all you very modern people to make the children enjoy. I was brought up to teach them facts and make them sit up and work.” Miss Fairfax was fifty and made no bones about it. She belonged to a generation which kept Kindergarten methods well inside the Kindergarten. “I don’t coddle my classes,” had been her much-quoted observation, so ran the legend, when she made her first appearance at Pelham House. An undertone of the disapproving surprise and pain which such a statement must have caused her, always ran through any reference to Miss Fairfax when Mrs. Lysaght discussed her staff. And yet——

“Results, dear—scholarships—honours—even through the Universities. Classical tripos, every year since she has been with us.”

Gillian’s own education was a picaresque affair consisting of all her father had ever told her to read and a panoramic memory of class-rooms and lecture-theatres, art-galleries and concert-halls in Dresden, Munich, Vienna, Lausanne and Bournemouth through which she had followed her young, eager, inconsequent mother for six years after her father’s death. She envied Miss Fairfax the solid weight of Cheltenham and Girton, confirmed by a London degree. Professor Fairfax had not grudged the extra years necessary for this. He was not minded to leave his only daughter without the outward and visible recognition of those erudite inheritances of gifts and environment which she derived from him, and

which, as he was given to telling people, had she been a man, would have made her a Fellow of All Souls.

Miss Fairfax, however, did not pity Gillian for her lack of these regularized advantages.

“Your state is the more gracious,” she said when Gillian told her that she had not the ghost of a degree, not the half of a certificate to her name. “You’ll not stay here. How, with a face like the National Gallery Botticelli and the mind of a revolutionary baby, you ever got here I still wonder.”

“I think,” said Gillian, “I must be cheap, and I do a great deal of work for the money.”

“How much?” said Miss Fairfax.

Gillian told her.

“The sweater!” said Miss Fairfax.

“But I get extra for French Conversation twice a week,” said Gillian.

“So does she,” said Miss Fairfax.

Miss Fairfax was right. Gillian was not staying. There had been a letter from a Parent. As a matter of fact there had been two, but the first was really Mrs. Lysaght’s own affair, though the complaint had been launched at Gillian by name.

But it was not only the letters. Gillian had begun to lose ground on the very day of Mrs. Lysaght’s return. The head mistress had come back from Jersey invigorated by the journey and by the sense of duty done, and not at all chastened by memories of those humiliations inseparable from a Channel passage which affect less-balanced frames.

It was in connexion with this immunity that Gillian had been made aware of an error in tact.

“And, I suppose, as usual, you were quite well throughout both crossings.”

This was poor Miss Winter saying the right thing at luncheon on the day of Mrs. Lysaght’s return.

“Yes, indeed,” said Mrs. Lysaght. “Never on the horizon and—semi-horizontal—— But Dean Webster, so deplorable—the clergy—and on deck.”

“Mrs. Lysaght always lies in a deck-chair lowered as much as possible and keeps her eyes off the horizon through the whole crossing,” Miss Winter explained.

“Oh, Mrs. Lysaght, if you stood up suddenly and caught sight of the horizon, would you be sick?” asked Gillian, elated by the thought of a new and useful light on a problem, in which for the moment she was keenly interested.

Mrs. Lysaght flushed a stormy red and bit her bottom lip. Miss Winter took off her thick eye-glasses for a moment, revealing the singular blackness all short-sighted people show when their eyes are uncovered, and Miss Fairfax drank half a tumblerful of water with rather more noise than anyone not supported by a Classical Tripos would be allowed to make without reproof in such company. The conversation at the other side of the table swooned into the silence that emanated from Mrs. Lysaght. Gradually and astonishingly Gillian knew that she was being isolated, put into a moral cell and that every mouthful she raised from her plate was now an infraction of some Code for the Guilty of which until that moment she had been unaware. It was clearly wrong to go on eating, and yet Gillian was conscious of the old childish sense of ostracism attached to the end of nursery dinner when you were left alone at table and everyone was forbidden to speak to you until you *had* finished “every scrap of that good batter-pudding—and you eating all the raisins out of it first, you greedy little girl.”

It was batter-pudding again. And she had eaten all the raisins; not from conscious greed, but because they came that way, and, automatically, she was clearing her plate of the yellow residue, shovelling a path back to society again. And now *this* was wrong. Mrs. Lysaght’s mist was no longer an amusing vapour with image after image looming through; it had thickened and dulled into a fog in which Gillian had lost her way. But the old compulsion prevailed. Bad little girls redeemed themselves and became good little girls by swallowing mouthfuls of cold, displeasing

food in spite of stiff throats and mounting nausea; the way to salvation lay through physical anguish. By that old beacon she must steer across these unfamiliar waters. The unknown offence she had done must be mitigated by the known correctness. Gillian ate on. Around her spoons were laid down, forks mutely aligned with them, and the silence was augmented by this unanimous and simultaneous discarding of the tools of nutrition. But Gillian still ate with conscientious deliberation. One more spoonful and her plate would be cleared. As she pushed the yellow stickiness over the brim of the spoon, Gillian became aware of a pressure on her foot, slight but intentional. She looked up from her plate. Miss Fairfax was glaring at her.

"Put it down, you fool." She caught the undertone and dropped her spoon with a clatter. All the plates but hers had been cleared away. The youngest mistress was keeping the whole High Table waiting.

Jessie, the waitress, was standing at Gillian's elbow, and even as she whipped the plate away Mrs. Lysaght rose and pronounced an elaborate benediction on the meal her staff, with one exception, had only partially consumed.

"Gracious and most bountiful Father, we Thy most unworthy servants render unto Thee thanksgiving and praise for these Thy mercies vouchsafed so plenteously unto us alike both just and unjust, and by us received in the name of and for the sake of Thy dear Son our Lord. Amen."

"I've never heard that grace before," said Gillian to Miss Fairfax as the school filed out of the dining-hall.

"No," said Miss Fairfax, "it's the one used for criminals, and we've had very little crime this term, so far."

"But whose crime was she denouncing?"

"Yours, my blue-eyed angel. Yours."

"I felt I'd done *some*thing. Do you know what it was?"

"You asked Mrs. Lysaght at the top of your voice if she could be sea-sick—and at table. It isn't done."

“Well,” said Gillian, “my sister wouldn’t go to Mentone when she was ill in the winter because she’s always so horribly sick crossing the Channel, and I thought if keeping your eyes off the horizon really did——”

“You could have waited and asked the wretched Winter for details, and not suggested at the top of your voice that our august head could under any conditions whatever be sick in public. Didn’t you hear what she said about the Dean?”

“Not exactly—it was Miss Winter said—and I *do* think the punishment severe.”

“That wasn’t the punishment, it was only the tocsin. Danger lies ahead.”

II

Miss Fairfax was right. The staff took coffee in Mrs. Lysaght’s private room and melted away to their afternoon work or leisure. Gillian, who had Middle School preparation from 2:15 to 4 that day, was just about to leave when Mrs. Lysaght laid a white, detaining hand on her wrist.

“A moment, dear. The hymn! So many hymn-books—Prayer should be elastic, spontaneous. I want it known by heart. On Friday. I shall give out this week’s hymn on Monday and each class will learn a verse each day. On Friday. *No* hymn-books.”

“But, Mrs. Lysaght, some hymns have more than five verses.”

“That,” said Mrs. Lysaght with one of her astonishing lapses into clarity. “That will be your affair, dear. You will divide the hymn for me each week and repeat the day’s portion with the school in the Hall before Prayers.”

Gillian accepted her added burden and by the end of the week was enjoying the five minutes before Prayers, even though it took ten minutes off her breakfast-time to encompass the earlier arrival and the rounding up of stragglers for rehearsal. On Friday the school did her credit. Two hundred hymn-books made a black pyramid outside the Hall door and, when the note was struck, two hundred voices raised as one, sang in the clear cold tones of early youth the heated words:

My God how wonderful Thou art!

Thy Majesty how bright!

How radiant Thy mercy-seat

In depths of burning light!

In the second week, however, trouble came. Mrs. Lysaght, whose taste ran to sentiment, selected a fresh hymn, and the school did not take very kindly to it. There was trouble with the Fourth Form, headed by Madge Porter.

Madge Porter was not a pleasant child. She was always asking the kind of question which arises not from a desire for knowledge but out of a determination to put teachers in holes. She had completely routed Miss Parratt during a lesson on the Reformation by asking that unfortunate lady whether she believed in the Thirty-Nine Articles. Miss Parratt having given an emphatic assent, Madge Porter had told her she was wrong, as her father, who was in a position to know because he had taken a degree in Science, said they were nothing but a farrago of superstition, and please would Miss Parratt tell her what "farrago" meant.

And now Madge Porter was persuading the Middle School that this hymn-learning was extra-prep. So Gillian, on her own authority, took the ringleaders aside at Recreation on Wednesday and taught them their verses by rote. She sacrificed her own quarter of an hour to do it; but Madge Porter made her cross.

On Thursday morning Madge arrived at Prayers with a note for Mrs. Lysaght. It was from the parent who was in a position to know the truth about the Thirty-Nine Articles, and it ran:

Darwin Villa,
Putney Hill,
May 27th, 1912.

Dear Mrs. Lysaght,

Kindly allow me to make a most emphatic protest against the unwholesome restraint and unpedagogic waste of time at present

imposed on my young daughter Madge, by one of your junior mistresses called, I understand, Miss Armstrong.

It appears that this Miss Armstrong has curtailed my daughter's recreation and interfered with the consumption of half a pint of milk at 11 o'clock ordered by my doctor for her, by keeping her in to commit to memory some highly reprehensible lines.

My daughter has been obliged to burden her mind with such an incitement to laziness and lack of initiative as this:

O could we but relinquish all

Our earthly props and simply fall

On Thine almighty arms.

I make no complaint of the inculcation of Christian doctrine which I am aware is inseparable from the curriculum of your school, as I have taken due precaution to fortify Madge's mind against superstition by my own home teaching. But I do strongly protest against the insidious inertia advocated in the passage I have quoted and also against Miss Armstrong's tyranny, and must beg that Madge be removed from the classes in which she teaches.

Yours sincerely,
James Porter, B.Sc.

P.S. I shall be glad if, for the future, Madge may be excused from Prayers.

Mrs. Lysaght gave Gillian the letter to read.

"Most unwise—most unwise," she murmured and bit her lip as she waited for Gillian's comment.

"What a bad old man," said Gillian. "No wonder Madge is such a terror."

Mrs. Lysaght blushed. She always blushed when you said the wrong thing.

"Mr. Porter is a *parent*," she said with heat; "a *parent*—he has every right—and the milk—never forget the means of health."

"But—you said …" began Gillian.

Mrs. Lysaght waved her hand, the hand with the gold pencil in it.

“That has nothing to do with the question. Madge Porter does not take Scripture. You may go now, dear, but do not let it occur again.”

Madge Porter’s rebellion blew over, but “It” occurred again. It, as Miss Fairfax explained when Gillian had exhausted herself in wondering what she was expected to avoid, being a letter from a parent.

“You should never let it come to letters,” said Miss Fairfax. “A good assistant mistress consumes her own rows.”

“That’s what I was trying to do,” Gillian protested, “and even if I’d known that Mr. Porter was such a bigoted free-thinker, I don’t feel that I should have let Madge off. I don’t like this hymn business myself, but if I’m to do it it shall be done properly.”

“It won’t last,” Miss Fairfax promised her; “it’s your punishment for that impertinence of yours at luncheon last week. You’ll be let off if you’re properly good.”

The difficulty, however, was to be properly good in a world where all the values were so different from her own.

III

Gillian sat in the class-room after Mrs. Lysaght had left her. The three windows were wide open and the voices of the girls playing tennis in the courts beyond the lawn came up to her as they cried the score. It was after five o’clock and in half an hour the school-house would be closed. Already the sunlight was thrusting golden swords between the flat branches of the cedar-tree that darkened the window until evening, and the scent of the tobacco plants outside the Sixth Form Room was beginning to creep into the air which came in from the garden. And still she sat in the little chair on the teacher’s platform, her arms lying across the desk in front of her, her hands, smooth and beautiful and strange like the hands of some other woman, some woman whom she loved.

In her lap she held a fat, blue leather manuscript book with double brass clasps, the book her father had given her on her ninth birthday into which

she had copied prose and verse when she found it worthy, from the books she could not afford to buy. It lay in the green gingham valley of her dress, between her knees, and she had covered it with three rather fatigued roses and a bunch of pansies with black cotton round their brittle juicy stalks, the offerings of two of the class that afternoon. The pansies came from little Gertie Wentworth, a pink-faced, rather solemn child who made it her business to see that all the mistresses were supplied with flowers in turn, and who suited her offerings to the age and status of the recipient in a spirit of calculating frankness. The week usually opened or closed with fruit from the Wentworth hot-houses for Mrs. Lysaght. Miss Fairfax and Miss Parratt had hot-house flowers; so did Mademoiselle de Vanges, who had a tiny crown embroidered on her handkerchiefs. But, for Miss Winter and Miss Battinson, Gertie went into the open air and Fräulein Kühn had made a really dreadful scene on the morning on which the well-meaning Gertie brought her broad beans done up in brown paper. Pinks and lavender from the kitchen-garden borders, marsh-marigolds and scentless cabbage-roses did for Gillian; but they came more often than the nobler flowers, and Gertie, who had no veils over her heart, explained that she got them herself, the other flowers being her regular allowance for purposes of ingratiation ordered by her mother and supplied by the gardeners. In justice to Mrs. Wentworth it must be admitted that she had no idea of the scaling to which her daughter subjected the carrying out of her original half-shrewd half-kindly arrangement.

“You see, Mrs. Armstrong,” said Gertie, apologizing for the pinks, “you are new and I only get one bunch a day from Jennings. So I went into the kitchen garden and got these myself as I always give the irises to Miss Battinson and Jennings sent irises this morning.”

Gillian was so enchanted at this glimpse of a really ordered mind, as well as being glad to have the fragrant pinks, that she forebore to pick out Gertie’s “only” and replace it next the subject of this sentence as a good school-mistress is bound in duty to do. But she went about with a little grit in the wheels of her conscience for the rest of the day. “Why should I correct her grammar out of class?” she kept asking herself. “When she took all that trouble to be kind to me with flowers suitable to my station? I

hope she'll marry the Lord Mayor of London when she grows up, so as not to waste her instinct for suiting the gift to the taker."

So Gertie's pansies lay like a funeral wreath on the cover of Gillian's commonplace book, and beside them, Jane Bird's roses.

Jane Bird was one of Gillian's problems. Jane Bird was really the only problem of which Gillian had been consciously aware at Pelham House. The intricacies of Mrs. Lysaght's mind and conversation always presented themselves to her most junior mistress as amusements—labyrinths and jig-saws in which you wandered or which you took away with you to work out when you had time. But Jane Bird was a different, a rather frightening problem. She was also the only figure which stood out with any real distinction from the confused crowd of girls, mistresses, servants and visiting professors who surged on the attention of the dazed new-comer at Pelham House.

She was a tall, gaunt Sixth Form girl with a high colour and steel-black hair parted in the middle and twisted into hard round knobs over each ear, and she made her one-piece frocks herself, usually out of bright blue casement cloth. She wore round-glassed spectacles and no stays and was known to the Middle School as the Dutch Doll. To her coevals and to the staff she was "Bird" without a Christian name, the only girl in the school to be distinguished in that particular way. There were two legends about her: one that she bathed naked in the sea in Cornwall every summer; the other, that she had killed a young man who had called her "Jinny" a third time, and had buried the remains in Richmond Park at midnight.

Bird was known to take pride in both these legends and had illustrated them in a series of spirited drawings accompanied by a ballad. This work filled one of the Pelham House note-books, the red-covered kind issued from the Stationery Room for Greek and Latin only, and nobody quite knew how Bird came to possess it. Miss Fairfax, who had discovered its existence when correcting Latin Proses, always declared that Bird had stolen it and was daring the staff to denounce her to Mrs. Lysaght for theft. But nobody denounced Bird, and even if anybody had, it is more than likely that Miss Winter, who had charge of the Stationery Room,

would have suffered alone. For, there was no doubt about it, the wretch was a marvel. “She drinks-in Greek like a sponge,” said Miss Fairfax, who was coaching her for Responsions much to the disgust of Mr. Reppington the Art Master who had never in all his experience had such a gift for drawing as Bird’s to develop. Bird’s name had headed every examination list in every subject as she passed up the school from the Lower Fourth Form, which she had entered at the age of twelve, positively smothered in scholarships; and it was to Jane Bird that Mrs. Lysaght looked during the next decade for the greatest glories ever earned for Pelham House.

Until mid-term Gillian had only known this star of the Upper School by sight. But one rainy morning at Middle School Recreation Bird, being Chief Monitor, descended upon an over-noisy game in the Hall, and rescued Gillian from her single-handed combat against the forces of disorder by playing dance-music on the piano until the restless children were all waltzing happily together.

“D’y recognize the tune?” said Bird over her shoulder to Gillian, who had gone up to the platform steps to thank her.

“No,” said Gillian, “but it’s a very good waltz.”

“It’s this week’s hymn,” said Bird. “*The day Thou gavest*, three-four time. *The two-three—Thou two-three, O Lor-three—is enDED.* Go and dance with Molly Carpenter—she’s perishing with love and lack of exercise. *To Thee-ee our mor-or-ning Son-ongs a-scend-ded*—You’ll enjoy it.”

And Gillian had gone meekly up to the other monitor, a sickly girl in the Upper Fifth who used to waylay her in the mornings as she walked across the Heath from the 22-omnibus, and had danced with her till the bell for Fourth Lesson rang.

Margaret Carpenter knew all about the origin of the swinging waltz.

“She made a ripping two-step out of *Hark! the Herald Angels*, but Mrs. Lysaght won’t allow anything but waltzing in the school,” she complained to Gillian when the dance was over, “and Bird’s never played any of them at Recreation before.”

Two days later the door of the class-room opened, ten minutes after Gillian had settled down to the afternoon French Conversation class by means of which she brought her salary up to a living wage, and in walked Bird.

“Mrs. Lysaght has given me permission to change from Mademoiselle’s Senior French Conversation to yours, Miss Armstrong,” she explained in a loud, clear voice. “It is felt that one Englishwoman will be more ready to appreciate and to assist another Englishwoman in her difficulties with a foreign tongue than anyone to whom these difficulties are by nature non-existent.”

She recited this speech in the manner of one having learnt the whole of it by heart, and then stalked down the class-room, only half-filled by the girls who took this extra subject, and settled herself in a desk by the window at the farther end of the room.

Gillian’s oddly excited alarm at this apparition was not diminished when it became evident that Jane Bird was taking no active part in the conversation class. To all remarks addressed to her by name she replied with the same phrase delivered in a strong Britannic accent:

“Mais-oui, mademoiselle, vous avez raison,” and then fell back into a concentrated silence so removed from inattention that it baffled Gillian as Bird clearly intended it to do.

At her second appearance she took copious notes, and once questioned the construction of a line Gillian quoted; at her third she remained silent and intent on some drawing before her. When the class was dismissed Gillian had, her heart beating with fright, asked the Chief Monitor to remain behind. Bird, calm and still speechless, stood to attention, facing the light so that its reflection in her thick glasses completely hid her eyes from her terrified interlocutor.

“I want to know,” said Gillian, her tongue thickening in her mouth as she spoke. “I want to know why you come to this class.”

“But, Miss Armstrong,” Bird’s voice was silky with polite surprise, “to learn to speak French.”

“But you never speak.”

“I listen to you. That helps me enough.”

Gillian changed her line.

“What have you been drawing all this afternoon?”

“Lit-tel Armstrongs,” said Bird, “dee-licious little Armstrongs backwards through the centuries. Some of them better than others. Look,” and she placed her sketch-book on the desk before Gillian. “Eighteen-eighty, bustle and fringe, Du Maurier—*not* very good—but Cranford and a crinoline—delightful. First Empire—a failure—Elizabeth—too stiff and concealing. Medieval henna and veil much better. I shall do you Greek next week—and Egyptian—I’m strong on Egypt—and then—Eve in the Garden—oh, only the head and shoulders——”

“How dare you?” said Gillian, breathless.

“But they’re *very* clever,” said Bird. “Of course, if you object, you can report me to Mrs. Lysaght. You can’t very well report me to myself, though if you’d like to do that—I—as Chief Monitor will naturally come to your aid—I am bound by the beautiful Pelham House Code of Honour to do so.”

“Very well then,” said Gillian, “I *do* report you to yourself. Go home now and bring yourself to me at Second Recreation to-morrow in the Third Form Room, and tell me what you’re going to do about it.”

The next day at Second Recreation Gillian had found Jane Bird waiting for her in the empty class-room.

“Well,” said Gillian.

“I’ve thought over the case you reported to me yesterday, Miss Armstrong,” said Bird coldly, “and I have not only confiscated the drawings you complain of, but destroyed them.”

“Destroyed the drawings,” Gillian gasped.

“By fire. They *were* very clever. I hope you are satisfied.” And with enormous dignity to which she contrived to add a touch of pathos as of some wounded giant, Bird had stalked away.

She continued to come to French Conversation and Gillian grew to dread her speech more than her silence. For Bird now came armed with questions so subtly framed, so intelligently asked, that it was impossible to convict the questioner of any object in asking them other than the entirely laudable determination to make the best of her opportunities; and so searching, that, more than once, Gillian was obliged to confess her inability to deal with one or another of them.

Then, to her own great relief and pleasure, Gillian found that Bird was as keenly eager for the beauty of words as she was herself, and on the last afternoon but one before the Midsummer Examination set in, she had had what she called a miracle hour—one of those moments when Beauty slips away from all the obscuring considerations which hide her from busy people and they pause from their blinding pursuits while the vision is granted. It was part of the puzzle that she could sometimes take a class with her into the revelation—but not always. That day they had come—all of them—but it was Bird, Jane Bird, who had been filled with the glory, who had pursued each lovely line with Gillian, who had from her own reading, caught gleaming syllables herself and had added them to the jewelled minutes of that shared excitement.

And it was out of this glow, this splendour, that the thunderbolt had fallen!

The second French Conversation class in the week was held on Friday afternoon, and for it Gillian, still in the haze of heavenly sounds which had enclosed her consciousness ever since the Tuesday class, had brought with her the fat, blue commonplace book, because, after the flowing of verse she had been constrained to hear the march of prose, and there were passages copied out there which she must let forth to fill the channels freshly made in the minds of the girls she taught, and most of all (she knew this with a deep satisfaction) in Jane Bird’s mind, by the poetry she had made them all hear.

All the morning long she had gone about her other duties waiting until the hour when, in the class-room overlooking the lawn, in the shade of the great cedar-tree outside, she could take her own class—and oh! most specially Jane Bird—back into the enchanted country. *Mon âme est un colombier*, how the molten phrases flowed!—*Presse le pas, ô mon rêve*—she could hear the quickened breathing, see the flush which burned her own cheeks flame in the faces before her, as the spirit quickened within each one of them.

And it had been almost as good to do as to dream of, this sharing of her private hoard. As she read the passages aloud, the voice, the level, grave and beautiful voice of her father reading them to her in the larch-woods above Sils-Maria, seemed to be leading her own. She could see his small, fine features, his soft, blue, very clear eyes, his thin hands, holding the yellow-paper book, the great length of him, six long feet and more, stretched in the grass, almost on the edge of the rock above the lake. The breeze seemed to sigh around them again with faint icy breath from the glaciers behind; and all the light and colour and love of that last summer before he died gathered and increased in her as she read, and drove through her, and reached the listening girls.

When the singing phrases were finished, Gillian looked across the wide room to Jane Bird sitting erect and motionless at the far end of the aisle of desks. And Jane Bird's eyes were welling over with great glistening tears which ran down her flat, red cheek and fell on the flat, blue bosom of her home-made frock, unheeded.

Bird, the arrogant, contemptuous, terrible Bird was crying! Gillian looked at the roses on her desk with changed eyes. When Bird, following Gertie Wentworth with her pansies, had laid the three heavy Frau Karl Droushkys across the pen-tray on the reading-desk as the rest of the class took their seats, Gillian had hardly been able to thank the girl for them. Her action had been abrupt, slightly mocking. She suggested more than so simple a gift need imply.

"They're like pale girls with red rims to their eyes," she'd said, and Gillian had felt caricatured. But the faint resentment Bird had aroused was gone now, washed away by those heavy, silent tears.

And then, suddenly, the whole class had risen to its feet. Mrs. Lysaght was in the room. How long she had been there Gillian did not know. The door had been left open because of the heat.

“Who is the author?” Mrs. Lysaght was flustered, displeased.

“Théophile Gautier,” said Gillian. “It’s a famous passage from *Mademoiselle de Maupin*.”

“Go!” Mrs. Lysaght had dismissed the class, but Gillian had remained reading the letter the head mistress had thrust into her hand. It was from the Bishop of Putney whose twin daughters were salient features of the Upper Fifth and of Gillian’s conversation class.

My dear Mrs. Lysaght,

Doris and Daphne have come home in a great state of enthusiasm from their French lesson this afternoon, and have somewhat gravely disturbed their mother by assuring her that the most beautiful line in French poetry is one taken from Racine’s *Phèdre*. It runs thus:

“La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë.”

They have been asking me to elucidate the text. While agreeing with the young lady who has evidently stimulated my daughter’s appreciation of verbal beauty, may I venture, quite tentatively, to suggest that it would be wiser in future to seek examples in the works of Corneille, or if Racine be more fertile in melodious passages (I am myself a little rusty in these matters), to select passages from *Esther* or from *Athalie* rather than from those plays which are not usually read in English schools.

Please do not allow this mild suggestion to assume an unduly critical weight in your consideration and above all, dear lady, do not for one moment accuse me of wishing to interfere with the more than admirable conduct of your own high mission at Pelham House.

Yours, always most cordially,
Vincent Punctus.

“But,” said Gillian, “Corneille doesn’t——”

“Out of the question,” said Mrs. Lysaght. She was quivering with passion and the lace which fell from the wrists of her grey silk-muslin gown shook about her hands as she gesticulated between each fragment of a phrase.

“Gross indecency—corruption—and now Gautier—nothing but his verse—selections of course—*Perles de la Poésie Française*—in the Library—I must see what else——” and she took the manuscript book from the reading-stand.

“Oh, but Mrs. Lysaght,” protested Gillian, “nobody ever—not even my mother—it’s quite a private book——”

“Anatole France—*Le Lys Rouge*—monstrous—Gabriele d’Annunzio—steeped in vice—Swinburne—Rossetti—The Ballad of Hell—my dear Miss Armstrong—how mistaken—Hugo von Hofmannsthal—unknown to me—Maeterlinck—*Serres Chaudes*—but this is nauseating—a contamination—confiscate——”

“Give me back my book,” said Gillian, “you are not fit to look at it. It is full of loveliness you’ll never see.”

“I have been completely deceived in you,” said Mrs. Lysaght, “completely. This one term of probation will end at the end of this month. I must ask you to set and correct your own examination papers in the office—not mix with the school again.” And with this lapse into lucidity, Mrs. Lysaght trembled out of the room, carrying the Bishop’s letter reverently folded in her right hand, the left being crammed as usual with note-book, pencil and a floating supplement of extra documents which varied in number and intensity with the time of term.

Mrs. Lysaght’s crash into Gillian’s paradisic hour seemed like a thunderclap in a sunlit garden. It shattered the peace, but only for a moment. As she sat on, a little stunned by the force of the anger which had been spent upon her, the waves of beauty began to creep up once more—the flood of sound to rise in her ears again, drowning the sense of disaster which had only partially reached her comprehension through the violence of its onset.

Then another presence made itself vehement. Rigid against the panelled wall at the back of the room Jane Bird sat, black and white, crimson and royal blue, hardened again behind her convex glasses as though she never had, never could have wept.

“Jane, Jane Bird—how did you get there?”

“I didn’t go.”

“But—Mrs. Lysaght——”

“I know. Neither of you saw me. It’s a trick.”

“Do you mean you’ve been there all the time?”

“All the time. Yes. It’s been a great help to me. I shan’t be going to Oxford after all.”

“Why not?”

“Well, you won’t be here to coach me in French for one thing. I shan’t tell you the other.”

“Oh, very well.” Gillian began to gather her books and flowers together standing up rather wearily to do so. Jane was beside her, below the platform, looking up at her with yellow eyes out of the deep lenses of her spectacles.

“The matter with you is that you don’t see face values,” said the Chief Monitor. “You won’t in the least know what this would mean to anyone else. For you it’ll just be new words I’ve written to an old tune. As you told me to,” and she placed on the desk a sheet of thin blue paper on which in her clear, delicate writing, she had set down some verses.

“Good afternoon, Miss Armstrong,” said Jane Bird, and walked out of the room.

Gillian picked up the paper she had left behind her.

AN OLD SONG RESUNG—she read—

If every tree and every flower

And every star of night

Could join their beauties for an hour

To make one pure delight;

The grace thus formed would cease to be

To nature's marvel true,

Would lack the mystic unity

For which I worship you.

"I suppose it's *Songs of Araby*," said Gillian, humming the lines through after a second reading, "and you repeat the last two lines. Not at all bad, but it isn't really a lyric," and she slipped the sheet of paper into her commonplace book and snapped the clasps upon it.

Downstairs in the cloak-room she was confronted by Miss Fairfax.

"Will nothing wake you from your dream?" said she. "I've watched you coming along the gallery and down the stairs, looking as though you'd been in Heaven."

"So I have," said Gillian, "but I believe I've been excommunicated all the same."

"That's what I mean. Mrs. Lysaght came rushing by as I came out of the Extra Matriculation Coaching half an hour ago and said something about the Bishop and the French tongue. What have you been telling the twins?"

"Only about vowel-sounds," said Gillian.

"What? Again? And not lucky this time."

Gillian explained.

"Well, all I can say," said Miss Fairfax, when the facts were before her, "is that I wonder, with your genius for missing the real point of a quotation, all I wonder is that you didn't administer '*Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée*' to the whole class. It's quite as good in its way."

"No, it's not," said Gillian, "it's all t's and hissing and it's like 'our noisy years seem moments in the being of the eternal silence.' She told the school that was the finest line in Wordsworth the other day, and it's two

lines, and it's horrid, and she might just as well have said, 'though inland far we be' or 'old forgotten far-off things' or 'I feel the weight of chance desires.'" And much to Miss Fairfax's distress, Gillian sat down on the boot-rack and began to cry.

"If these tears," said Miss Fairfax, "are shed for the æsthetic misdirections of our Head, they are wasted; if they bedew the close of your own career as an instructress of youth they are silly, because," Miss Fairfax sat down beside her young colleague and blew her nose with decision, "because you have not the kind of outlook which fits you for the career of instructress."

"Don't say 'instructress,' dear, darling Miss Fairfax," said Gillian, "I can't bear it."

IV

And now she was going home to tell Lilac. She had walked down West Hill and taken the tram to Clapham Junction so as to go the longest way round and have the bit across the Bridge before she went in. It would be seven o'clock before she got to the river, and the tide would be full. Over in the rose-and-lavender distance the flattened bubble of the Lambeth gas-vat, like some pearly white moon would be rising from the stuff of the Earth ready to detach itself to soar up, up, into the highways where satellites travel the sky. The window-boxes and painted tubs along Cheyne Walk would make a bright mosaic against the shadow beneath the sunset, and all the sparrows in the garden in Chancery would be chirruping over their evening crumbs. And Lilac would be laying the table for supper and wondering why Gillian was late. Gillian was not at all sure how Lilac would take the news.

Lilac took it very well. She had finished laying the table when Gillian got in and was sewing two enormous mauve satin ribbons on to a white crinoline hat.

"I've washed them," she said as Gillian opened the door which led straight off the top-floor landing into their little sitting-room. "I've washed them in cold water with salt in it, and they're as good as new. Sophie does get the best of everything."

“Was it one of Sophie’s hats?” asked Gillian.

“No. I bought the hat myself, but the strings come off that orchid-mauve frock Sophie gave me at Easter and the rose was in a hat of hers. I’ve put them all together and they’re exactly like a model I saw in Sloane Street last week.”

“Lilac,” said Gillian, “I’ve been excommunicated. Mrs. Lysaght and the Bishop have turned me out of Pelham House.”

“The beetles!” said Lilac. “The black beetles!—the cockroaches! And you’ve worked for them like a steam-engine. Go and get into your white muslin and we’ll have *all* the butter with the green peas. I’ve put an onion and some mint to boil with them as you told me.”

Friday was the night the Armstrongs cooked their own supper on a Primus. On other evenings they had what was called the House dinner sent up from the Club kitchen.

Over the late strawberries which followed the green peas (not that the Armstrongs were vegetarians, but you can’t cook meat on a Primus in the scullery), Lilac pronounced herself on Mrs. Lysaght’s side.

“It’s a mercy,” said Lilac severely, “that I kept *The Garden of Karma* locked up in my side of the wardrobe or you’d have given them ‘Pale hands I love’ for daily bread.”

“No, I shouldn’t. It’s slip-slop.”

“It’s luscious,” said Lilac; “besides, how do you know, when I haven’t let you read it?”

“I read it in Brussels last year when I was staying with Henriette,” said Gillian. “I wouldn’t give it to a railway porter.”

“Well, a railway porter wouldn’t want a book of poetry,” said Lilac with that sententious, definitive air which characterized the close of most of her arguments with her elder sister.

* * *

That night, long after Gillian had supposed her to be asleep, Lilac called out in a soft little voice across the room from the bed under the window:

“Jilly dear,” she said, “what *are* you going to do?”

“Pray,” said Gillian; “it’s the only thing I can do to-night.”

“I suppose it is,” said Lilac. “I’ll say a threefold Ah-ah-men for you.”

“Thank you, Laylock. I didn’t know you were awake——”

“Oh, I just woke up. I suppose you were praying something fierce, and that always disturbs me.”

“Sorry,” said Gillian.

“Granted, Miss Armstrong, I’m sure,” said Lilac.

And then they both fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWO.
LILAC

I

On the prospectus it was called *The Mordaunt Club*, but in practice no one ever thought of saying anything but "The Hen House" when speaking of the block of unselfcontained flats near the river in which Gillian and Lilac Armstrong had lived ever since their mother's death.

Sir John Mordaunt, its founder, had built it out of the remnants of Buckingham Palace. This material he had acquired at what a later age has called bargain prices, from one of the contractors when the Royal dwelling was finished and there were bricks and mortar and fine-faced stone to be had for the carting away. Being of the period, the Mordaunt Club building was rock-like in stolidity and forbidding of aspect. Framed to shelter poor spinsters of the governing-classes in their declining years, it consisted of two gaunt five-storied houses, one on each side of a courtyard graced by one plane-tree and a laburnum. Kindness without consideration had directed the scheme. The buildings faced due north and south. There were four flats, or sets of rooms on each floor into two of which the sun never shone; the other two from March to October being intolerable unless their occupants were able to obtain for themselves the sunblinds philanthropy had not provided. The flats consisted of two small intercommunicating rooms, the outer one opening on to a common hall out of which, on each floor, two bleak corridors with coal-bin, oil-tank, sink, cold-water tap and lavatory (also of the period) served the tenants of the four flats as joint domestic offices. Two members living together were allowed one extra and separate room, if they could get it. And the rent, which was small, included a certain amount of service.

There was a communal kitchen in the basement of one of the buildings, from which, twice a day, at one o'clock and at half-past seven, the roast beef of old England or the boiled mutton of her Antipodean island, was sent up accompanied by potatoes, boiled, with turnips, carrots or cabbage according to their season, and followed by milk-pudding, and on Sundays by apple-pie. These viands, served between two hot plates, were placed on the table in each sitting-room, whether it were laid for a meal

or spread, as the Armstrongs' often was, with Gillian's school-books or Lilac's millinery, by small hard-working maids. They came from Battersea, these servers, and were ruled over by the janitor Mr. Gordon, and by his wife Mrs. Gordon, who roasted beef and boiled mutton for the "Ladies" (this was how the basement referred to the landings) and fried and grilled and souffléed choicer viands for her husband and the maids to consume at less conventional hours.

Mr. Gordon was only parts of a man: he had a wooden leg, a glass eye and one other contrivance of the surgical-instrument maker, the precise nature and location of which was most decently unrevealed, though its existence was well known and always spoken of as "Mr. Gordon's trouble." For some time after they came to the Mordaunt Club the Armstrongs had supposed Mr. Gordon's trouble to be the one which was always very troublesome on Saturday evenings and had caused him one night to make an earnest attempt at locking the courtyard gate with a tablespoon. This delusion, fostered by the constant references to it in Mrs. Gordon's conversation, and by the frequency with which it was cited by the maids as a complete explanation for their lateness on any occasion, was dispelled, or rather was thrust further into mystery by Mrs. Gordon herself.

"I wonder if you'd mind paying by cheque, miss," said Mrs. Gordon on her weekly visit to collect the dinner-money. "If I take it all downstairs in cash, nothing'll hold Mr. Gordon. They've told him at the Orspittle that he can have a new spring fitted to his trouble, and he's that set on it—you know what men are, miss—that he can't wait to find out whether it reely will do any good work or whether it's just one of them try-ons. Larst year he had six little buttons put on, instead of the strap. And believe me, miss, there 'asn't been a week since when one or other of them buttons 'asn't popped off. And he won't have boot-buttons sewed on at home instead. Not he. You know what men are, miss. Back to the shop it must go—and a shillin' a time unless I can find the button in his close. So I've took to keepin' the buttons till four's off at a time. And wot it'll be like if he gets a spring put on as well you can guess for yourself, miss. It's cost us a pretty penny has Mr. Gordon's trouble, miss; not but wot her ladyship didn't come down very handsome at first, but Mr. Gordon never was one to let

well alone. And he *will* read the papers. You know what men are, miss. All them nasty advertisements putting ideas into his head. So, if you don't mind, miss, I'll take a cheque, and give you all the cash I've collected from Number Six and Number Nine—Eight's out—and that'll leave me just enough to do the shoppin' meself this morning, and Mr. Gordon won't be tempted even if he does get hold of my clean apron."

Mrs. Gordon's clean apron, a highly starched affair, was remarkable for two pockets, in one of which she kept change, in the other a photograph of Miss Gordon, Mr. Gordon's daughter by an earlier and evidently ill-judged union. Gillian was, from the first, at a loss to account for the frequency with which Mrs. Gordon, diving for change, would put her hand in the wrong pocket and withdraw the picture exclaiming:

"There now! if I haven't gone and got out Miss Gordon's photograph instead of arf a crown. P'r'aps, as I have got it out, you'd like to look at it, miss. It's a new one. She brought it in the other day when she come to see me and Mr. Gordon."

And it very often was a new one. Miss Gordon seemed to be able to afford a great many very new photographs, many of them taken in deep evening dress, though the first one that had emerged from the housekeeper's pocket was a tinted affair on a thick bevelled card and represented Miss Gordon in tennis clothes, "pure white to her feet" as Mrs. Gordon pointed out, with racket in hand and balls on the ground, and a tennis-net faintly sketched in on the blank background.

"It's more than her own mother ever saw," had been Mrs. Gordon's cryptic reply to Gillian's congratulations on the handsome effect produced by this effigy, "nor deserved to," she had added as one who could, if encouraged, expatiate on a rich theme.

Gillian would have liked to know more, but Lilac had discouraged this curiosity in her sister as being not only vulgar but idle.

"For goodness' sake, Gillian," she said, "don't let the woman talk more than she must. She'll stay here all day if you listen to her with both eyes like that."

“But I think she’s wonderful,” said Gillian, “and such a rest from Mrs. Lysaght. She talks about real things and makes them deep and funny.”

Lilac snorted, “Rather a good description of her apple-pies. The crust had sunk in deep enough last Sunday and there was a bit of carrot in the apple when I got to it. Besides, she isn’t here to amuse you—and she doesn’t amuse me. Go and talk to Mrs. Barraclough if you must be amused in the Club. She’ll tell you things that are some use and she might get old Lady Mordaunt to let me sell roses on Alexandra Day.”

Mrs. Barraclough was the Club treasurer. She lived in the flat at the top of the kitchen stairs, and every Monday from 4 to 6, she sat at the receipt of custom. The members—it was understood that they should not be known as “tenants,” lest the Club lose caste—called on her to gossip, or left their rent on the first Friday of the month in notes in her letter-box according to their dispositions, some ladies being far more delicate over finance than others. So delicate indeed was Miss Parsons who lived in the flat immediately opposite Lilac and Gillian, that she always paid her rent anonymously and late at night, stealing down to slip a sealed envelope into Mrs. Barraclough’s letter-box, after Mr. Gordon had gone his rounds at ten o’clock, when he put out the landing-lights and locked the Club up till morning.

Mrs. Barraclough was the widow of a Yorkshire squire—but Mr. Barraclough’s passage through her life had been so short and so sudden that if it had ever mitigated her essential qualities, the change had long been rectified. She was one of seven Irish daughters, all reckless, as only the children of a Resident Magistrate in the eighteen-eighties could be; and, after a youth of hard riding to and after hounds, had eloped from the hunting-field with Tom Barraclough, and had seen him drown before her eyes six months later, when their wild, protracted honeymoon ended in the Aran Islands.

The child, which was born the following year, was a girl, and her mother had never forgiven her for it. In consequence of the child’s failure to be a man she had seen the small estate pass to a cousin, from whom her tiny jointure had to be wrung year by year by a solicitor whose charges for

obtaining it halved, and in very bad years, quartered the total which eventually reached the widow's pocket.

Mrs. Barraclough's life had been one long scrimmage and the training served her well. For none but a woman inured to battle could hope to keep the semblance of peace and order in such a hornet's nest as the Club was framed to become in any of those emergencies to which communal life is liable. She had obtained the post by nepotism of the frankest kind. Lilias her daughter had escaped early from the chronic friction of home, by way of marriage with a naval lieutenant, a grandson of the Club's founder; and the present Sir John Mordaunt, a man of affairs and used to cutting knots, had solved the problem of his daughter-in-law's relations with her mother by pulling such strings as were necessary to get his son appointed to a ship in the China Seas. Having done this he set Lilias up in a flat in Yokohama and, by himself, appointed Mrs. Barraclough to the post of Treasurer of the Club. Mrs. Barraclough's book-keeping was entirely her own affair, but it was sufficient, and she was in Debrett. To be in Debrett had originally been the first qualification for membership of the Mordaunt. Lilac and Gillian were not there. They had figured in *Who's Who* as "*2 daughters*" until Gerald Armstrong's death and that was all. But, as Mrs. Barraclough explained when interviewing them, things had slackened terribly since the War. She was referring to the Boer War which had filled the two years immediately following her appointment to the Club.

"It is now enough to be the widow, or the orphan of any officer," said Mrs. Barraclough, "or of a missionary, and I understand that your aunt was a missionary."

Gillian was indignant.

"Aunt Elizabeth was nothing of the kind," she protested. "She was engaged for many years to a celibate clergyman in Rhodesia—who died two years after their marriage—and neither Lilac nor I is her, or his, orphan."

“That’s what I was just saying,” said Mrs. Barraclough who, being Irish, always knew what she meant, and knew it most especially clearly when her hearers were most confused by what she actually said.

“Wasn’t it because Miss Armstrong was so well known to Mrs. Middleton that you ever came to hear of the Club yourselves? And she’s a missionary born and bred, though how she came by such a daughter as Jessie is one of those things I’d like to ask someone who knows.”

“Well, anyway,” Gillian insisted, “we’re not missionaries.”

“No,” said Mrs. Barraclough, “you’re not, neither of you. Though if one of you was it wouldn’t be that fluffy little sister of yours. I saw her going out in a frill of muslin yesterday, which had no missionary in its pedigree.”

“Lilac won’t ever be a missionary, even though she wants to go to India more than anything in this world.”

“Then to India she’ll go,” said Mrs. Barraclough. “Lilac is the kind of girl that gets what she wants, and sooner than late. But I’ll tell you,” she went on with one of those sudden changes of theme which made her conversation so stimulating, “I’ll tell you who is. The new tenant at 44. Miss Victoria Vanderleyden—she’s a missionary.”

“She sounds much more like an American,” said Gillian.

“She’s that too,” said Mrs. Barraclough. “American on one side and missionary on the other—I forget which is which—and a manicurist by profession.”

“I thought you said she was a missionary.”

“By birth, yes. But now that she’s got in on the strength of having been born in Java or some such outlandish place, I find that she works in one of those sinks of iniquity in Bond Street where you get your face ironed out and your finger-nails made to look as though you’d been eating hot muffins and got melted butter all over ’em. You ring the bell before you can get in, and you pay a guinea before you can get out, and it mostly goes in curtains and cushions.”

“Not a shop?” asked Gillian.

“No,” Mrs. Barraclough snorted, “a parlour. The Spider and the Fly it should be called. I went there once to see.”

“Did you pay a guinea?” asked Gillian.

“I did not. I rang the bell and asked for a price-list. I might have dropped an ‘h’ with a crash by the horrors they had. They don’t have a price-list. It’s called a ‘brochure,’ and it says very little about prices. It isn’t exactly a shop, but it’s so nearly one that I’d never have let that young woman in if I’d known about it before she was in. I must wink at it now.”

Mrs. Barraclough spent a good deal of time in winking at things which were not strictly within the order of the Club, but which did not disturb its peace. It was this capacity to wink with discretion that, more than anything else in her methods, had established her power over the members and also over the Committee which loomed behind her administration.

“She’s a nice creature to look at and very quiet.”

“She’s young then?” Gillian was interested.

“She seems young to me, but she’s not a baby. You two are all I want in the infant line at present.”

At one time the Club took no one under forty; but that meant separating mother from daughters. At first they had excluded widows. That was in old Sir John’s time. The idea of a man who didn’t provide for his wife made the philanthropist so angry that he refused to do anything for the consequences.

“The Club’s full of widows now,” said Gillian. “There’s the Countess.”

“There is,” said Mrs. Barraclough, “and it’s about the Countess I’ve got to talk to you, Miss Armstrong. I’ve had a letter of complaint from her.”

“She’s a terrible complainer,” said Gillian. “I suppose it’s her nationality. Poles do have a greater sensibility to grievances than other people.”

“Oh, well, so do the Irish,” said Mrs. Barraclough. “But the Countess has complained of you.”

“Of me? But I never do anything but say good-morning, and take in her parcels if I’m in and she’s out. I don’t share her scullery. She’s on Miss Parsons’ side.”

“That is the trouble. She says she’s timed the maids and that it took Beatrice twice as long to empty your slops last week when your sister was away as it did Gladys to deal with hers and Miss Parsons’.”

“Well, so long as it didn’t interfere with Gladys I don’t see that it matters. Beatrice is on our side and she never complains.”

“You don’t understand. It’s the principle of the thing. You are getting twice as much service as she is whoever serves you. She says, in the postscript, that she cannot avoid the suspicion that you have a hot bath every morning.”

“But of course.”

“That’s what she supposes, she says, ‘as a matter of course.’”

“What have you said to her?”

“I’ve written to say that I am speaking to you on the subject, Miss Armstrong, and I’ve pointed out that the remedy lies in her own hands. But being a Papist I doubt if she is allowed to bathe at all during Lent.”

“Did you put that last bit in your letter?”

“I did not. I’m warning you that whatever you do, whether it’s washing yourself as a Christian should, or having tea-parties on Sunday will be used against you and reported to me—and now you may go, I’ve got to see Mrs. Middleton about the new fireplace she’s putting into No. 6.”

“I shall complain about the Countess and her piano,” said Gillian from the threshold, “and that’ll be cutting off my nose to spite her face, because she plays gorgeously. It will be a terrible pity, but perhaps it will all be for the best, because if she thinks I don’t like her playing she’ll play much more than she does now. I think I shall complain chiefly about the Debussy and the Folk-Songs and then she’ll be put off Rachmaninoff and Liszt.”

“Go away, you chatterbox,” said Mrs. Barraclough, throwing a stone out of her own glass house with vigour and conviction.

This conversation had taken place soon after Gillian had made her entry into the Club, having walked to Chelsea from Wimbledon beside the greengrocer’s van in which the Armstrong furniture was piled, because the greengrocer and his boy, who were officiating, had refused to start unless William’s voice were stilled and their own safety insured. William was a sulphur-crested cockatoo who could, and did, sing “God save the King” as far as the syllable “Gra——” and no further, whenever in his opinion things had gone far enough. He sang very loud and harsh, and danced as he sang, accompanying himself with crest outspread and great beating of wings. Having his cage tied on to the top of a greengrocer’s wagon full of furniture on a cold-hearted day in December, was one of the things no cockatoo could be expected to encourage, and William had burst into the National Anthem before he had been actually roped on as the finishing touch to the already overloaded cart. Several repetitions of this fragment having collected a crowd, William had grown emphatic and reaching a loud “Gray” for the sixth time, stayed there shrieking “Gray—Gray—Gray” and shaking his cage with a furious dance of protest. So Gillian, who had intended to make the journey by omnibus, was obliged to go with William who would listen to her and to nobody else. And William, once he had been persuaded that she was not going to desert him, folded wings and crest, and cocking his head on one side kept one bright, round eye fixed on his mistress as she walked on the pavement beside him and occasionally calling “Puss, Puss” to a passing horse, arrived at the Club at nightfall and was carried into the little flat before anyone quite realized his nature. William had fallen into the category of the things Mrs. Barraclough winked at, partly because she liked Gillian and also because William had remarked, “Good day—what weather!” and had offered her his claw to shake when, quite by chance, she had met him, for the first time, alone on the staircase below the landing where he lived. William lived out of his cage as much as he could, and had a passion for visiting those he liked. William was no respecter of persons. If he liked you he liked you, if he did not there was no persuading

him. He liked Mrs. Barraclough and he adored the postman, and for the time that was enough.

It was Mrs. Barraclough who came to the rescue in the matter of what Lilac called "carving Gillian's career." Lilac had £100 a year of her own, as well as the £50 a year with which she and Gillian were each left when Mrs. Armstrong's annuity perished with her. So Lilac stayed at home and devoted the considerable leisure left her when the domestic arrangements of life in the Mordaunt Club had been disposed of for the day, to the management of her toilet and wardrobe, while Gillian went forth to carve her career with what had so far proved the worst possible incompetence. Carving a career, as Lilac pointed out, demanded common sense, and of common sense Gillian had no grasp.

"You might have known that stuff about Venus was no use in a school," said Lilac. "I suppose you think that any word beginning with a 'v' is beautiful because of violet. The *violet*, the *viol* and the *vine* and all that nonsense."

"But it wasn't Venus. I didn't give them that line. It was the one about Minos et Pasiphaë," Gillian protested.

"It's the same thing, only worse. I shall ask Mrs. Barraclough if she knows of any safe job for a mild lunatic who knows three languages and a lot of poetry."

Mrs. Barraclough did not endorse Lilac's estimate of her sister.

"Gillian's all right," she said, "only a little unprejudiced. I'll go and see if old Winona wants another secretary."

Old Winona, or Winona Lady Bottomley as she was described on her large glazed and gilt-edged visiting-cards, was out of a secretary when Mrs. Barraclough called. Old Winona seldom kept a secretary for more than a few weeks at a time. They either left of their own accord or were sent away in a great hurry laden with compensatory gold. Some of them took prolonged sick-leave, and to these Old Winona was very kind.

"She's the second wife and first widow of Bottomley's Bicycles," said Mrs. Barraclough, "and she doesn't know how rich she is. The lawyers don't

tell her—they think her reason might give way. But she keeps three secretaries, one in Belfast and one in London and one to travel up and down with her, and they're never the same secretary except the one in Belfast, who's a man. The others are girls. Poor things. You're to go to see her at twenty minutes past eleven to-morrow morning, and to take a signed photograph of your father with you."

"But I haven't got one," said Gillian, "my father never signed a photograph in his life."

"Then take any photograph you've got and say it's your father's," said Mrs. Barraclough, who had no use for purely academic scruples in business.

"The only signed photograph she's got," said Lilac, "is one of William Gillette as Sherlock Holmes, and that's a picture post-card. And it's so worn out with being hidden by me when I had good reason for worrying Gillian that it's no use for carving and careering. But I'll lend Gillian a black hat and my good umbrella and see her to the top of Sloane Street by 11:15 myself. I'll watch her across the road and we must leave the rest to God."

"Do I call her 'Winona Lady,' as they do Adeline Duchess?" asked Gillian.

"No; you don't know her well enough to make game of her title," said Mrs. Barraclough, "and you must be very careful about it. There *is* a Lady Bottomley, Toby's wife, but she's never mentioned, she's one of the Oh No's."

"What are they?" asked Lilac, who knew the importance of social distinctions and the wisdom of not being too proud to ask questions.

"It's poetry," said Mrs. Barraclough, as one who had very little use for the article. "'Oh no, we never mention him, his name is never heard,' a famous poem, 'my lips are now forbid to speak that once familiar word.'"

"I know," said Gillian.

"'From sport to sport they hurry me

To banish my regret

And when they only worry me——'"

“I don’t think it ends like that,” said Mrs. Barraclough.

“That was Andrew Lang,” said Gillian, “he didn’t like Haynes Bayley—he was quite right. He wrote ‘O think not Heleena of leaving us yet,’ when it might just as well have been ‘O, Helena, think not——’”

“For William’s sake, my poor idiot, if not for your own and mine, try to forget about how things sound for the next twenty-four hours. It’s far more important to find out how things are. I’ve met Toby Bottomley,” Lilac went on, turning to Mrs. Barraclough, “but I didn’t know he’d a wife.”

“She’s not noticeable, I grant you that. Not where Toby is. She’s on the stage, in America. There was a rumour that Toby was divorcing her, but Old Winona don’t believe in divorce. Her own two husbands died. And Toby only gets an allowance while she lives, so I dare say it’s all hanging fire.”

Lilac was silent and Gillian noticed that her pretty face sharpened, the blue eyes narrowing and the soft mouth tightening to a hard, red line for a moment, as they did when Lilac was planning a move in the very successful game she was already playing with life.

Gillian never understood the moves or the game, but she knew that Lilac played and won, and she was often a little uncomfortable about it. For Lilac had a way of letting her sister in at some advanced stage in an affair of the kind and expecting her to co-operate in the dark. A pang of suspicion thrust itself through her mind. It was Lilac who had gone to Mrs. Barraclough. Had Lilac a reason for wishing Gillian to work for Lady Bottomley? But, on the contrary, Lilac was rather annoyed about the prospect.

“If I’d known,” said Lilac as soon as the door had closed behind Mrs. Barraclough. “If I’d had the slightest suspicion that Mrs. Barraclough knew the Bottomleys, I’d—I’d—well, Gillian, will you *promise* me not to tell the old lady that I know Toby?”

“Well,” said Gillian, “I won’t start off by saying, ‘Oh, dear Lady Bottomley, my sister knows your son,’ but if she asks me if I’m the Miss Armstrong her son knows….”

“She won’t. She doesn’t know.”

“Lilac,” said Gillian, “what is it?”

“Oh, it’s quite all right. I met him at Glynde, at Sophie’s birthday revels, and he’s generally at Eaton Square on Sundays. Sophie knows all about it. It was Toby who gave that dinner at the Savoy last week.”

“I thought it was Stephen and Sophie’s party. That was why I wondered why they didn’t ask me.”

“Well, it wasn’t. It was Toby’s. Stephen and Sophie were asked—and me—and we went to *Kismet* after dinner. In a box. There wouldn’t have been room for you.”

“Oh, well, I’m glad it was Toby’s party. There isn’t nearly so much iron in my soul now that I know,” said Gillian, “and if Lady Bottomley doesn’t know about you she can’t suspect me of being your sister. Besides, it may not come to anything.”

“No, p’r’aps it mayn’t,” said Lilac, “and, I forgot to tell you, I had a letter from Sophie this morning. They’re going to Glynde after Ascot, and they’ve asked me to go, and you. They’ll have a Goodwood Party, but you needn’t go to the races.”

“If I become that old lady’s third secretary,” said Gillian, “I shan’t be able to go to Glynde at all, except perhaps for a week-end. I’ll write to Sophie myself.”

“Oh, all right,” said Lilac; but she was not pleased.

Sophie Glynde had originally been Gillian’s friend. She was German on her father’s side and had been at a school in Lausanne where Gillian had spent six months of her sixteenth year. Her English mother was a Glynde, and Sophie, who was startlingly pretty, had married her second cousin Stephen almost at sight the summer she came to England. She would, if Stephen’s elder brother went on being a bachelor until he died of riotous living, be the Mistress of Glynde Regis one day.

Sophie had been very kind to the Armstrongs. But gradually her butterfly affections had settled on the younger sister who, not being under the

pressing necessity of carving a career, was able to put herself more unreservedly at Mrs. Glynde's disposition on those frequent occasions when that lovely being, who had a horror of solitude, was deprived of the solace of her husband's company. Sophie was now Lilac's friend. And Lilac, who took the same size in shoes, gloves and garments as Sophie did, inherited all the clothes of which Sophie grew tired before they were reduced to the condition in which they automatically passed into her maid's possession. Lilac, who had a genius for dress, spent laborious days in achieving the raiment for triumphant nights from this spoil, and no one but Gillian, who pinned her into the never quite securely finished results, knew how precariously the lace from one gown, the satin from another, were held together to form a third more wonderful than either in its outward and dazzling effect.

Lilac, naturally, met a great many people at the Glyndes' of whom Gillian had no knowledge, or whose names she knew without importance; but Lilac's reserve about this one person, this Toby Bottomley, was unusual and significant. Lilac, clearly, would prefer that Gillian should not become Toby's mother's secretary.

But Lilac was to be disappointed.

She fulfilled her promise, lent Gillian the black hat, completed the loan with a pair of grey suède gloves and took her to the top of Sloane Street the following morning. Her last words as she pushed her sister off the island were:

"For Heaven's sake, remember you've never heard of me."

II

Number 99 Knightsbridge was a conspicuous house. It rose a full story higher than its neighbours and spread a whole window wider than any other private dwelling from the Hyde Park Hotel to the Guards' Barracks. You could see it half-way down Sloane Street, thrusting its crammed and costly window-boxes into the dimness of the London colour scheme. Each of the fifteen front window-frames had had the Georgian sashed panes removed and was now filled with a sheet of plate glass, bevelled into an ebony frame and veiled inside with curtains of the richest lace;

each of the rust-brown bricks of which it was built was now surrounded with the best mortar, so white that Gillian felt it must be enamelled. The wrought-iron balconies which hung across the first and second floors were painted black and enhanced by a gilded boss wherever the pattern made it possible to apply one, and the tall black railings which fenced the ground floor from the street had their tips gilded to match the balconies. In the midst of them the decoration of an ornate gardendoor twisted and whirled around what was evidently a bicycle-wheel with a golden tyre, the hub of which was formed of the letters W. M. in monogram. Gillian had often rejoiced in the opulent charm of this exterior without supposing that the dwelling behind it would ever admit so plain a worm as herself to tremble at its more intimate magnificences. Now, as she pressed the amethystine button of the bell-push at the gate she felt like a goose-girl in a fairy-tale at the moment when she comes to the magician's cave. It was rather a shock to find the door opened by a perfectly plain butler; a tall, grave, clean-shaven man who received her with a melancholy kindness which belonged to more anciently established, less insistently plutocratic surroundings. The pathway from the street to the house-door was flagged with porphyry and malachite under a glass roof supported on pillars up which crimson-ramblers, their roots in huge porcelain vases, were twined. Baskets of scented geraniums hung at intervals from the arches of this processional way, and tubs of blue and pink hydrangeas stood in the garden spaces on either side of the path. The hall into which she followed the butler up a flight of three marble steps, occupied the whole floor and was lit by two tall windows on the street side, and by glass doors opening on to the long garden which led down to the Park. It was full of very brightly burnished suits of armour each embowered in a separate grove of palm and fern. In the midst of these, enormous pink begonias trained round sticks in a barrel-shaped design, occupied the four corners of a sunken fountain which was playing above the rather agitated home-life of several corpulent goldfish. At each corner of the staircase there were life-size figures representing Nubian slaves (boy and girl alternating) in coloured raiment bearing trays in either hand. On one tray stood a vase of flowers, on the other a lamp. The cumulative effect of passing three of these chromatic statues after a glimpse of the suits of armour below, had stunned Gillian a little and, by the time the drawing-room door closed

upon the butler, leaving her alone with its amazing splendours, she had ceased to be keenly receptive.

But the drawing-room was worthy of the keenest appreciation. Like the hall it covered the whole floor. It had three windows looking on to Knightsbridge, and three on to the Park. Its walls were panelled in hand-cut velvet brocade, electric-blue on a mauve background: each of the two fireplaces was enriched by an overmantel, all-white balustrades and mirrors, supporting or reflecting innumerable shelves and brackets, no shelf without its flower-vase, no bracket without its statuette. Between the windows were more mirrors, framed in Dresden china frames from which candle-holders curved out like pink and gilded horns and bore not candles but china imitations carrying electric lights and silken shades which mirrored themselves again in the glass. The room was full of electric-light bulbs. From the heavily moulded ceiling mauve and blue ribbons hung in slings and from each sling a gilded Cupid stretched down a torch-filled hand, and in each torch a bulb. This amorous army of illumination circled round a very beautiful Venetian glass chandelier which, with the Aubusson carpet that spread its blue medallion and faint roses over the parquet-floor, seemed to indicate another mind feebly at work under the overmastering influence which had clearly directed the main ornamentation of the house.

There was one book in the room: *The Golden Treasury*, bound in blue leather, with a wreath of purple violets encircling the name “Winona” tooled on the cover. On the top of the grand piano, a Broadwood in a painted case, there stood an army of photographs each in a silver frame. Most of these photographs were of the same person. These were all signed “Winona” in a flowing hand and showed the signer in various forms of evening dress from full panoply of Court train, veil and feathers, to a relatively simple gown of what was probably black velvet enhanced by ropes of pearls. Here and there the series was broken by portraits signed “Reginald”; but Gillian could not discern a “Toby” among them.

As she waited and wondered if the personality of their owner were veiled or revealed by all these effigies, the door opened and the butler reappeared carrying a silver tray covered with an embroidered tray-cloth.

“Her ladyship wishes you to take a glass of milk, miss,” he said, depositing his burden on an inlaid table, “and will be with you presently.”

There certainly was a glass of milk, an engraved glass in a silver holder, on the tray before her, but it took Gillian some time to locate it among the dishes of fruit, sandwiches and cake with which it was surrounded. Winona, Lady Bottomley, was evidently kind to others as well as lavish to herself, though Gillian, who had not been brought up to eat between meals and was also a little nervous that morning, could not obey the command to drink. She was counting the layers of marzipan that separated the rich substance of an iced cake out of which one wedge had been hewn in evident consideration of her need when the door opened once more and Lady Bottomley stood revealed.

“Good morning, Miss Macfarlane, pray be seated,” she said in a measured and stately voice as she seated herself in the exact centre of a slippery and magnificent settee.

Gillian, a little surprised at the form of address, managed to control herself from correcting it by the thought that it would be time enough to do so if and when it turned out that she was to take up any duties for the lady.

There was a pause. Gillian tried not to stare too hard at the marvellous auburn wig, the Roman nose, the small dim eyes, the imposing figure, the ringed hands folded over the plush of a lace-flounced gown which presented themselves to her consideration for some time before the spirit which informed them spoke again. When the silence was broken it was with another surprise.

“My daughter-in-law, the future Marchioness of Fulham, has spoken to me of you,” said Lady Bottomley. “She assures me that, happily, most happily, you do not possess any shorthand.”

Gillian, to whom the very existence of any such person as the future Marchioness of Fulham had, until that moment, been unknown, and who was, moreover, bewildered by the receding phantom of that “Toby” on whose account she was to conceal her own relationship to Lilac, murmured that unfortunately she did not practice shorthand.

“Fortunately, Miss Macfarlane,” said Lady Bottomley, growing more imposing with each syllable, “I consider that a knowledge of shorthand renders its possessor unfit for the post of secretary to a lady of title. I shall require you to take all my letters down in your own handwriting, and to copy them out in an imitation of mine.”

“Won’t that be like forgery?” asked Gillian, forgetting her nervousness in the novelty of the demand.

“No,” said Lady Bottomley with slow decision, “it will not. It must be a poor imitation of my handwriting, and I shall sign the letter myself. The quotations from *The Times* and *The Guardian* with which I enliven my letters to those Abroad, you will add in your own handwriting; but I like my own remarks to appear in a style which will not clash with my signature.”

Gillian remembered Mrs. Barraclough’s admission that old Winona seldom had the same secretary for many weeks at a time, and wondered whether a tendency in handwriting to clash with the august signature were responsible for the failure of the relationship, or if other and even more probable reasons were to be revealed.

“You will also,” went on the lady, “you will also prepare lists of suitable concerts which on those afternoons when I am not accompanied by my daughter-in-law or my son Sir Reginald, the third baronet, you will attend with me. Concerts of classical music.”

“And matinées?” said Gillian hopefully. This part of her duties sounded easier than imitation scripture.

“No matinées,” said Lady Bottomley, “only bazaars. I disapprove of the stage.”

“Not even charity matinées?” said Gillian.

“Only those acted by amateurs in Halls. I do not ever go inside a theatre. When the cause is good I buy tickets and give them to others.”

“Oh,” said Gillian, and wondered if she and Lilac would ever be counted as others.

“How old are you?” Lady Bottomley was forsaking instruction for inquiry.

“Twenty-three—that is I shall be twenty-four next birthday.”

“And when is that?”

“In April,” said Gillian, conscious that this was only July.

“That’s very young. Still it may mean that you will prove more docile than those of riper years.”

Gillian hoped she was docile.

“We shall see. But if you come to me I must stipulate that you do not marry.”

“Never?”

“Not for three years. My last two secretaries—no, my last three,” Lady Bottomley checked them off on her fingers, “all married within a few months of joining my circle. I am now engaging only such as will take a vow not to marry for three years.”

“But suppose I left you—or you sent me away for some other reason?” Gillian ventured.

“In that case you would be free to marry. Not otherwise. Have you any intention of marrying?”

“Well,” said Gillian with complete candour, “I’ve no intention of *not* marrying, but I don’t suppose I shall marry for a long time. I don’t feel old enough yet.”

“You are quite old enough to marry,” said old Winona visibly annoyed, “twenty-four is amply old enough. I was married at twenty for the first time. Have you anybody in particular in view?”

“To marry? Oh, no. They all want to marry Lilac, not me?”

“And who is Lilac?”

Gillian felt the hot blood creep up her neck, over her chin, into her face and fill her eyes with tears. This was exactly what Lilac had forbidden her to do.

“Oh, just a sister of mine,” said she, trying to make as light of the matter as possible.

To Gillian’s relief Miss Macfarlane’s sister was a person to whose identity Lady Bottomley attached no significance whatever, and, after a few more questions, they passed on to a mutual exhibition of handwriting, and an attempt on Gillian’s part at that not too faithful reproduction of the Bottomley script on which so much depended. Greatly to her own surprise she was able, by the simple device of using a broad J nib, to write a hand with which the signature “Winona Caroline Bottomley” did not clash, and before long she was walking down Sloane Street, a little unsteady in the knees, but with an odd new steadiness in her mind. Lady Bottomley had engaged her at what seemed to Gillian a fabulous salary, and unusual though the conditions of her new employment appeared to be, she had a premonitory feeling of security in them quite unlike the apprehensions which had filled her after her first interview with Mrs. Lysaght. Eccentricity was to Gerald Armstrong’s daughter far less terrifying than regulated convention.

Not until she was opposite Cadogan Gardens did it occur to her that she had been engaged as Miss Macfarlane, a friend of the future Marchioness of Fulham: whereas, now that the gate of No. 99 Knightsbridge was closed behind her, she realized how completely she was nothing of more consequence than Gillian Armstrong, a tenant of the Mordaunt Club, on whom its secretary, plain Mrs. Barraclough, had taken pity.

It was possible that even now Miss Macfarlane, bearing a coroneted introduction, was pressing the amethyst button of the electric bell, and that she, Gillian, would in a few moments be convicted of fraud and disgraced in a way which would annoy Lilac quite dreadfully. Should she go back and confess to old Winona, or forward and confess to Mrs. Barraclough. Both confessions would have to be made with as little delay as possible. But, seeing that by this time she was nearer home and Mrs. Barraclough than she was to Knightsbridge, Gillian, who usually took the more difficult alternative from a sense of self-discipline, hurried on and walked straight across the courtyard and knocked at Mrs. Barraclough’s door before going up to face Lilac in their own flat.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you?” said Mrs. Barraclough. She was eating her luncheon with the *Morning Post* propped up against a large Sheffield-plate cruet-stand which gave to the whole of her small and rather austerely furnished room that sense of having a storied past behind it which was so lacking in the Armstrongs’ flat.

“It was Winnie Roehampton who told me that her late mother-in-law was out of secretaries again. She married Roehampton after she’d killed Jim Bottomley. He was her first husband and she made him hunt before he could ride. She’d always wanted Roehampton, but she couldn’t afford him, so she took Jim Bottomley first and married the other, six weeks after the accident, on her jointure.”

“Well,” said Gillian, “if she’s that kind of person I shouldn’t think Lady Bottomley would engage a secretary who came through her.”

“No, you wouldn’t, but Winnie’s a sensible girl. Her heart’s always in the rich place,” said Mrs. Barraclough. “She’s always kept friends with old Winona who’d never really cared for Jim. He was only her stepson, and she was delighted that her Toby could have it all. And when Winnie married into the peerage, well—wait and see. You’ll understand soon enough.”

“Well, but what about Miss Macfarlane?”

“That’s you, Miss Armstrong. All her secretaries are Macfarlanes. She’s very obstinate about names. Winnie Roehampton says she always calls Hyde Park Corner the Marble Arch.”

“Goodness,” said Gillian. “Doesn’t it make it very difficult to know what she means?”

“I dare say it does,” said Mrs. Barraclough. “But you may get used to it.”

“And is ‘Toby’ the third baronet Sir Reginald?”

“He is,” said Mrs. Barraclough. “Old Bottomley was the first, poor Jim was the second and Toby is the third—all in ten years. Old Bottomley was one of the Coronation honours. He did something very handsome for Belfast Harbour. You’ll hear all about that, too.”

“Then you really think I am quite honestly engaged?”

“Quite honestly,” said Mrs. Barraclough, “and I shouldn’t be at all surprised if you kept the job. Anyhow you have my blessing and I’ll tell Winnie Roehampton to tell her late mother-in-law you’re a treasure.”

Gillian left Mrs. Barraclough comforted and relieved. Odd though it all sounded, it was not a terrifying oddness. Winona, Lady Bottomley, was more like the first chapter in a new book than a problem of existence. You felt there were answers to all her sums. You were astonished at, not dismayed by her; and Gillian enjoyed astonishment.

“Lilac,” she called, bursting into the outer of the two rooms they used as living-rooms.

But the little room was empty. The black Cromwellian table that stood under the window was not laid for luncheon, and William had unfastened the latch of his cage and, perched on the back of one of the three chairs they had bought at Heal’s to match the table, was thoughtfully manicuring his claw with his beak.

“Hillo!” said William. “Kiss cocky! Kiss cocky!”

“Lilac! Lilac!” called Gillian and went through the door into the inner room which was lined with bookcases and furnished with an enormous red-leather chesterfield, Sophie’s gift to the young flat-holders, and so huge that there was hardly space for another seat in the room.

But Lilac was not in the book-room, nor in the larger single room on the north side of the building looking into Gwynne Street which they used as a bedroom. Lilac had evidently gone on to some occasion of her own when she left Gillian at the top of Sloane Street, which was like Lilac, who had many private affairs to attend to though she usually kept Saturday morning free for flat-keeping and was in to lunch. And this was Saturday morning or Gillian would not have been free to go looking for work as she had done. Gillian, in solitary disgrace, was still correcting the July examination papers in the mistresses’ room at Pelham House all the other days of the week.

So Gillian took off her hat and washed her hands and went and ate bread and cheese and lettuce with William and read *The Song of Honour* in a little yellow-paper book with a rather smudgy woodcut on its cover which she had bought at the Poetry Bookshop the Saturday before. William, who adored crusts with butter, sat on one claw on the back of her chair and held the crusts she gave him in the other, occasionally dropping one while he stood on both feet in order to stretch a long neck to turn over a page for Gillian. He didn't tear the page, but he often turned it before Gillian was quite ready, and she had to turn back while William was climbing down to pick up his crust from the floor. She did it as quietly as possible in order not to hurt his feelings. William was really tiresome when his feelings were hurt. He would chatter and scream and flap his wings and require whole-hearted, undivided attention for quite five minutes if he felt neglected or snubbed, and Gillian had to be very careful because the Countess had already complained of the noise he made.

It was three o'clock when Lilac came in. She was flushed, but it was with excitement quite as much as with heat.

"Have you got the job?" she asked from the doorway. Gillian felt she dared not have answered "No."

"Yes. I think so, though she wants someone at once," she replied, wondering why Lilac's eyes were so blue and her hair so curly at the sleepiest hour of the whole week.

"That's all right. You can go to her on Monday," said Lilac, taking off her hat and pushing the damp curls from her forehead with the third finger of her left hand. "I've fixed it all up with Mrs. Lysaght."

"Lilac!"

"Yes. I have. I took the Putney bus and I called on her."

"Goodness!" said Gillian.

"And gracious!" said Lilac, "I do wish, dear Gillian, you would not swear so blasphemously."

"All right then. Damn!" said Gillian, "but hurry up."

“Yes, I did. I called at *Mon Repos*. What a woman! Does she always screw that little gold pencil in and out?”

“Always!” said Gillian, “particularly when she’s angry. Was she angry with you?”

“Oh, very.” Lilac sat on the table and swung her buckled shoes up and down in the sunlight that came through under the green rush sunblinds. “At first. But it’s all right. You’re to correct those abominable children’s papers at home till the end of the term, and she’ll pay you your full salary. A person, you really couldn’t call her a girl, called Jane Bird, who lives on the other side of the Albert Bridge, will collect and deliver them day by day.”

“Bird,” said Gillian. “How on earth——”

“She came here, while you were at school on Tuesday,” said Lilac, her eyes hard and her mouth narrow. “After what she said I arranged what I’d say.”

“What did she say?”

“She said—she stood in the doorway—she’s a great creature, Gillian—she said, ‘Your sister is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. She’s no good to Madame Bowdler.’ I asked her who Madame Bowdler was and she said that was Mrs. Lysaght’s spiritual title, and then she told me that the whole school was boiling over about your being in disgrace. You never told me that they sent up your lunch and tea.”

“And it’s been Irish stew with the chill off all this week,” said Gillian. “I didn’t tell you because it is all so horrid I’d rather not talk about it.”

“*I* talked about it,” said Lilac. “I felt I must play a father’s part.”

“But, Lilac, suppose Lady Bottomley hadn’t wanted me?”

“You’d have had to find someone who did,” said Lilac. “You’d have had to do that in any case. I was determined you shouldn’t go back there any more. I told her you weren’t safe to associate with ordinary people because of the unfortunate purity of your mind. I admitted,” Lilac paused ruefully, “I admitted that it was a disadvantage, especially in school-work.

I very nearly said that I supposed no head mistress could hope to see God."

"Oh, Lilac, you didn't!"

"No—only nearly. It was a thing I thought of saying. Jane Bird said it to me."

"How did she find you?"

"She asked Miss Fairfax if you had any family, and Miss Fairfax told her there was a sister. She said she hadn't supposed that anyone so wide-eyed as you could possibly be anything but the youngest of a family. I told her that to all intents and purposes you were."

"Well," said Gillian, "nobody who saw you would suppose I was younger than you."

"Not until they knew us," said Lilac darkly.

* * *

So Gillian wrote to Lady Bottomley to say that she could begin work for her on Monday, and the sisters went out to post the letter in time to be delivered at 99 Knightsbridge that evening, and then walked along the Embankment to Chelsea Bridge and back by Battersea Park, and Gillian confessed to Lilac that she had told about her after all.

"Did she take any notice?" asked Lilac.

"Not the slightest."

"It's all right then, for the present," said Lilac. "It's really Toby I mind. And he mayn't find out just yet. Did you see him?"

"No," said Gillian, "only his photograph and that was called Reginald."

"Yes," said Lilac. "I know. Isn't it a pity?"

III

"Will you," said Lady Bottomley with majesty, "take down the following letter:

“Winona, Lady Bottomley presents her compliments to Mrs. Archibald Anstruther, and regrets that she cannot become a subscriber to the Society for the Prevention of Photographing Private Persons in the Park as she is already so fully occupied in signing cheques for the Societies to which she belongs … no, take out ‘already’ and put in ‘lately’ … to which she already belongs, that she cannot take the exercise prescribed for her by her physician. They all tell me I ought to walk for at least one hour a day before luncheon and for half an hour after tea.”

“Does that last bit go in the letter?” asked Gillian.

“Surely, Miss Macfarlane,” said Lady Bottomley with a bitter smile, “you must have noticed that the letter ended with the closure of the third person.”

“Shall I write that one in my own writing or in yours?” asked Gillian.

“Third-person letters go in your own hand. It marks the distinction more clearly,” pronounced the lady.

They were seated in the boudoir, an upholstered chamber overlooking the Park. In spite of the heat of a mid-July forenoon the French windows were closed and curtained as precaution against draughts, which, as Lady Bottomley explained, “not only give me a cold in the head, but blow down my precious photographs.”

The precious photographs stood in ranks on slippery tables in front of the window and, in every variety of frame, clambered over the walls and up every tier of the ornate overmantel. Some of them were of people and were signed. Others were of places and were dated: none was without an inscription. One or two had little memorial wreaths affixed to their frames, and on a table placed before a life-size portrait in oils of the first baronet dressed for his first levee, stood an array of silver vases in which it was one of Gillian’s duties to arrange fresh flowers every morning. On her second day she had suggested filling a pair of very fine branched candlesticks which were doing nothing in the library where she sat when imitating her employer’s handwriting after lunch, and lighting candles to burn among the flowers.

“It would be lovely to have them of different colours. I know where you can get green and red candles,” she urged.

“A very Popish notion,” said old Winona. “I beg, Miss Macfarlane, that you will not speak of it again.”

But she was not angry with Gillian, and she was pleased that the girl had noticed how fine the candlesticks were.

“Museum-pieces,” Gillian had called them, and Lady Bottomley adopted the phrase and applied it indiscriminately to many of her treasures which Gillian herself would have catalogued as pure Waring and Gillow, or early *train-de-luxe*.

Gillian had grown accustomed to the daily shock of leaving the colour-washed little flat in the Club with its open windows, plain curtains and rush-seated wooden chairs for the fringed and patterned seclusion of Knightsbridge, and had lost the inclination to giggle at each fresh revelation of what unbridled wealth could do in the way of making a house uninhabitable, before there was any sign that the third baronet lived there himself.

One morning, however, she had nearly lost her self-control on discovering that Lady Bottomley’s dressing-room was enriched by a bath which was silver-plated and covered in by a padded lid of bright rose-coloured velvet, buttoned with porcelain upholstery buttons, each bearing the Bottomley crest in the proper heraldic colours with the baronet’s hand very bloody and the Saracen’s eye looking, with its spoked lashes quite like a bicycle-wheel, very blue, painted in the centre.

“By hand, miss,” as Dashwood, Lady Bottomley’s obsequious and alarmingly golden-haired maid had insisted when asking Gillian to wait in the presence of this luxury while she ascertained whether her ladyship, who was keeping out of draughts in bed that morning, were quite ready to deal with her letters.

One of these letters was a post-card dated “Newmarket, Tuesday,” and signed “Toby.” “Can you put up me and Stephen for Sandown?” it asked.

“Now,” said Gillian, as she read this missive and realized that Stephen Glynde might come upon her any day, “I can’t possibly pretend to Stephen that he doesn’t know his own bridesmaid. I do hope Lilac will be equal to the crisis.”

Lady Bottomley, who thought she might have caught cold while driving round Regent’s Park at Gillian’s instigation at six o’clock the previous evening, took an extra dose of ammoniated quinine and decided that at any risk she must entertain her son’s friend.

“We must send telegrams,” she pronounced as soon as she had realized the import of her son’s request, “one to Sir Reginald Bottomley, Bart., Newmarket. That is sufficient address; the other to the Honourable Stephen Glynde, who is, I presume, at Newmarket with my son.”

Gillian, who remembered that Sophie was at Glynde and had been there since Ascot because the Eaton Square house was closed, bit the information off the tip of her tongue and took down in her own writing two long, delighted telegrams, one signed “Mother” and the other signed “Winona Bottomley” and copied them out in her imitation of their author’s writing without question, feeling that this attention was due to the family and its friends.

Lilac was down at Glynde, so there was no need to disturb her with news which Sophie, who was extraordinarily uninformed of her husband’s movements for a quite reasonably happy wife, might very well not be able to pass on to her.

Gillian was bidden to stay on and dine at Knightsbridge in order to help Lady Bottomley through the unwonted labour of choosing which of the two elaborate spare rooms should be filled with flowers and writing-paper and sticks of scented sealing-wax, and have bath-salts and shaving-soap disposed in its polished bathroom by the train of rubber-tyred housemaids who, shepherded by kind and melancholy Atkinson, trooped into the boudoir to receive her detailed instructions.

It was extraordinary, thought Gillian, as she walked down Sloane Street and past the Guards’ Barracks to the Embankment in the moonlight, extraordinary and rather pathetic that this very kind and cumbered lady

should not have troops of friends on whom to lavish the overflow of her incredible riches. She was, as her name suggested, Canadian by birth, and her family had long since faded out of communication with their relative who had married the first baronet in the days of his experimental and impecunious youth. Some of the wonderful letters Gillian was employed to transcribe, often from pencilled notes made in her absence, were to cousins in Montreal. These were only sent when some reference to the house of Bottomley appeared in the Press. Gillian had to go through the post for Press-cuttings very carefully every morning. On the days when any came in, Atkinson took a cab and went forth to buy twenty copies of every paper in which they occurred. After the orgies of the Bottomley Orphanage Bazaar at which Lady Bottomley had been photographed in the very act of receiving the Royal Princess who had opened it, the cab bearing the papers in which the picture appeared was so crammed that Atkinson had been obliged to come back sitting with the driver all the way from Fleet Street to Knightsbridge.

Gillian had enjoyed that day. Two cuttings of each notice, two cuttings of every photograph (several versions had escaped into print) had to be made and pasted into the two great leather-bound Press-cutting albums in which the records of twenty years were garnered. The first baronet had kept one for his own reading and another for his wife's, and the practice was continued in piety by his widow.

"I shall of course," she had told Gillian with an even more than usually majestic intonation, "I shall of course make over the late Sir John's volume to his grandchildren when they come of age."

"I didn't know he had any," Gillian had spoken in the haste of surprise.

"Not yet, Miss Armstrong." Lady Bottomley had begun to make use of the right name from time to time, though still reverting to Macfarlane, especially in the early morning.

And, then, when the cuttings had been pasted down, the crested address-book was opened, and its scantily filled pages were gone through until everybody named in it had been honoured with a copy of all the papers duly marked in red with "See Page 7." Gillian addressed the

wrappers in her own or her imitation writing according to old Winona's direction, and Atkinson bore them away and applied and gummed them down to their contents in his pantry. It was all very ritualistic and unreal, but Gillian enjoyed it.

"I suppose," she went on, as she leaned over the parapet and watched the river flowing at low tide towards Lambeth with a silver, moonlit edge on the curve of each black ripple, "I suppose that's why she's so lonely. Real people couldn't bear to be near her and she couldn't bear it either. I can, because it keeps you far enough away from anyone to be paid by them. It doesn't matter if I do laugh at her a little so long as I earn my wages. But you'd burst if you tried to be her friend."

She let her mind float away along the river till it took her to another summer night, six years ago, when she had watched another tide swim by under the same moon. Then she had been with her father at Altona on that sudden, miraculous journey he had taken, retracing some adventure of his youth, just before he set out for Burma and his death.

The broad waters of the Elbe, brackish with the sea that moved within them, and spangled with the lights of travelling ships, had carried his memory back to a time in which she, who had been his friend ever since she could remember, had no slightest share. He had spoken to her as to a new-made friend, of a climax in his life to which no memory of hers could even dimly reach.

"It was all over, the man to whom it happened was dead in me long before you were born, before even I so much as knew of your mother's existence. The house behind the chestnut-tree in that lithograph we bought this morning might be the house I left twenty years back, Gillian. Sun on the yellow walls; closed white shutters, a flight of stone steps going up to a glass door, and inside—Illusion. And I sat under the shadow of that tree and looked up through the thick leaves and saw the tall spikes of chestnut-blossom flaming like white wax candles in the heat, and it was all no good. All that stillness and beauty were empty. I had come to the end of my own deception. All the time I had known. All the time I had heard the voice within saying, 'This is not real. You are playing false with yourself. Take it if you must, but do not try to pay for it because you have

not the coin in which such things are trafficked.' And I had tried to coin their coinage, because I had to pay; and I couldn't go on. I can't tell you what it was. You need never know. I mean, child, it is not necessary to salvation for a girl to know all things. 'Its shadow upon life enough for thee'—you remember Andromeda. But you'll be safe so long as you remember to wait until the inner voice agrees *after* you've tried. It's no use hesitating before the Unknown. You must try for yourself, but you must not go along a road you know is not your road just because you've tried it. You must be able to turn back. You must be able to say, 'This road is closed.' Don't pay tolls at the wrong bar twice. One day you'll need all you've got. You're the kind that pays for everything, overpays always, but I've taught you to look for the lasting values, and you'll not pay for fakes without knowing what you're about. It's the people who bank on fakes who leave their souls in Hell. Lilac will pay for fakes in her time. But she'll pay because she wants them, and she won't pay a penny more than they're worth. It's you, Gillian, who may make bad bargains. Remember that, and wait till you've said,

"Das unbeschreibliche.

Hier ist's gethan,"

before you go bankrupt."

And then they had gone to supper with Hans Adler the painter, and had laughed and eaten and sung the Mörike-lieder till they cried, and had eaten again, and drunk extremely sweet and extremely luscious things, some iced and some buttered, and had had an utterly ridiculous, truly Germanic time.

IV

Lilac had come back from Glynde.

She stood in the open doorway of the bedroom as Gillian came up the stairs. Mr. Gordon had put out the landing-lights and Gillian had only just managed to get in before he locked the courtyard gates for the night.

"How late you are," said Lilac.

She was in her nightgown, and her pretty hair was sticking out all round her head in a honey-coloured halo, as it did before she had brushed it and tied it into lilac ribbons at night.

“Goodness,” said Gillian. “Have you had dinner?”

“Bother dinner,” said Lilac. “I’ve had two eggs and all the milk. Where have you been till this hour?”

“At 99,” said Gillian, “getting ready for Stephen. He’s going to be there for the night.”

“I know,” said Lilac, “with Toby.”

Gillian put her arm round Lilac and drew her inside the room. “Lilac,” she said, “are you in love with Toby?”

“Yes,” said Lilac, “isn’t it damnable?”

* * *

They lay awake talking until dawn. Lilac didn’t know how Toby really felt. She had known there was some hitch in his life but it was Mrs. Barraclough who had been the first to tell her about the wife in America.

“Sophie and Stephen don’t know, at least if Stephen knows he never told Sophie, and I’ve not told her either,” said Lilac, “and Toby so helpless. He’s rather like you, Gillian. He misses the point. The first thing he ever said to me, I mean, the first thing to show he’d noticed, was, ‘What rippin’ teeth you’ve got,’ and you know, Jill, it isn’t my teeth at all, it’s my hair that most people like because of its colour, and the curls. But if he loves me at all it’s for my teeth, and,” said Lilac with wisdom and despair, “it isn’t enough. There are mountains to remove, and you don’t remove anything much because you like another person’s teeth.”

“What made you come back, then?” said Gillian. “I thought it was always absence that made a man find out——”

“Oh, Jilly darling, I know, and if it had been anyone else I’d have stayed away till he did. But that’s the worst of being in love one’s self—you simply *can’t* be clever about it. It’s easy enough to be *l’autre qui se laisse aimer*. I can do that. Look at that horrid little Rollo, and Mr. Percival

Grantham. Donkeys"—and Lilac sat up in bed, and waved her arms in the moonlight and shooed donkeys out of her life.

"Well," said Gillian, "he'll have to know about me now. Do you think he'll stop loving you for your teeth when he sees me pasting cuttings into the grandchild's album?"

"I just can't think," said Lilac, clasping her arms so tightly round her knees that she laid a hand over each elbow. "He might suddenly love you terribly, just because he'd loved me a little. He's rather like you. He doesn't see any harm in the most dreadful things."

"Goodness," said Gillian, "what sort of things?"

"Poetry," said Lilac, "and pictures. He's got that print of Father's—the one Mother burnt, the Dürer. He took me to an exhibition of the most awful things, and bought it. It cost fifty pounds—no, guineas."

"Do you mean *Die grosse Fortuna*?"

"Yes, the fat woman on a skipping-rope. And there were the most dearest little grey and blue pastels, ships that pass in the mist, in the next room for half the money."

"He sounds rather nice," said Gillian. "I thought it was only horses."

"Oh, it's horses as well. And Sophie's been an angel. I've been riding every morning at Glynde. She's given me a perfectly new habit of my own for my birthday. It's much harder than riding-lessons in that dreadful *manège* at Lausanne, with the tame horses and the smell of tan."

"And Monsieur Avranches—'*dans la main gauche, mademoiselle Arumstrongüe, dans la main* GAUCHE'—oh, Lilac!"

"Yes—and only half an hour at a time. But at Glynde it's a groom who doesn't say a word and humps you along—I'm so stiff and sore, Jilly."

"Lover's pains," said Gillian, "and learning to ride properly. I think you have a very good time."

"Gillian"—Lilac was very solemn—"will you promise me that you'll never tell Toby that you cried when Mother burnt that dreadful engraving? I used

to think you shammed liking it to curry favour with Father, and when I saw Toby buy it I told him my father had had it too, but I didn't tell him what became of it, and he doesn't know there's you. Sophie didn't tell him. Sophie doesn't know that I meet him in town—at least, she didn't till yesterday."

"You're bang in the middle of the tangled web," said Gillian, "and you know how bad I am at tangled webs. But I'll try to say nothing but 'Yes, Sir Reginald. No, Sir Reginald,' like a parlourmaid. Perhaps if I did it with a lisp it would put him off so frightfully that there'd never be any chance of getting to pictures in our intercourse."

"Oh, Gillian, don't do anything stupid. It would be no good for him to think I'd got a lisping idiot for my only family."

"I expect," said Gillian, "that whatever I do'll be wrong while you are in this state. But you know you can trust me not to compete."

"I know I can trust you not to *try* to compete," said Lilac; "but you're so innocent you'll probably think you're doing putting-off things when really you're doing the other kind."

"What kind?"

"Oh, well, what had you done to set your Jane Bird blazing with adoration? I've never seen anyone in such a state. She couldn't eat or sleep because you'd been wronged, and I met her in King's Road every day last week; probably she hasn't come round the other way home on the off-chance of meeting you that way."

"I met her on Friday," said Gillian, "but I didn't think it had anything to do with me. Besides, even if it had, Jane Bird's quite a different matter."

"You wouldn't, and it isn't. And, you see, you don't know a thing about it."

"I certainly don't know much about Jane Bird," said Gillian; "but she's a strange person—exciting too. Almost the most exciting person I've ever known."

V

Lilac had forbidden Gillian to share her admiration of *Die grosse Fortuna* with Sir Reginald Bottomley, but she did not know, she could not have known, that his august mother had gone through the complete works of Swinburne in the eight volumes which he had brought home from Oxford and had cut out, with a pair of nail-scissors, all the passages she considered unsuitable for a gentleman's library. Nor could her worst nightmare have suggested to her that Toby would discover the mutilation of his property at the same moment as Gillian did. But this is what actually happened.

Gerald Armstrong's Swinburnes, the little red *Atalanta in Calydon* and the little fat Moxon *Poems and Ballads*, had gone to Sotheby's with his other first editions when his books were valued, and Gillian, who had nothing but the Tauchnitz *Selections*, had been bothered all morning because she could not remember how

"Some angel's steady mouth and weight of wings

Shut to the side..."

went on. So, just before tea, while Lady Bottomley was resting, she took the library-steps into the far corner where she had seen the tall, dark Chatto & Windus books standing on a high shelf, and was sitting on the top of them, one hand clasping the pole, and her mouth wide open in dismay at the ruin she had found, when a mild voice below her feet said:

"How do you do?"

Gillian put the book on her knee and looked over.

"I'm terribly shocked," she said. "Did you know that lots of *The Triumph of Time* and most of *Before a Crucifix* had been cut out of these?"

"No—have they?—how annoying. May I look?"

"But, of course. They're yours. It's a dreadful pity. And they've not been done at all neatly." She handed the books to their short, pleasant, rather nervous owner, who took them from her and helped her down from the ladder, saying he supposed she was the latest Miss Macfarlane.

"Well," said Gillian, "I answer to the name. I've got another for holidays."

They took the remaining six volumes down and had made a list of dilapidation before the chimes rang for tea.

“I wonder why some of them have been left in,” said Toby.

“Well, if they’d all come out there’d have been no book left,” said Gillian.

“Yes; but I don’t think that would have stopped whoever began to cut them up.”

“Lots of people don’t understand the least little things,” said Gillian.

Toby looked at her sharply.

“No,” he said. “Perhaps it’s as well.”

Gillian wondered if he suspected his mother, and was sure he did when he said nothing about the excisions when they joined her for tea.

As they sat in an uneasy silence while Lady Bottomley poured out the scented Ceylon tea she always drank, Gillian let herself fall into the abyss of guilt that so often yawned for her after any completely self-forgetting hour. This quiet man with his large grey eyes and small brown moustache was so unlike the Toby she had imagined, and the discovery of what had been done to his books had so inflamed her mind that for the moment Lilac’s complicated affairs had faded from existence, and here she now was, his accomplice, almost his friend, before he even knew her name. Was this what Lilac called “doing the other things”? Gillian wondered. She had done things. She was certainly now, without knowing how she came to be doing it, standing between Sir Reginald and old Winona.

And how dreadful it was to be so afraid of anyone you belonged to as the third baronet was of his mother. Was he afraid or ashamed? Weren’t they both the same thing? Why *would* she use that large gold sugar-tongs? Why would she put two lumps of sugar and all those blobs of cream in Gillian’s tea? Why did neither of them say a word except in answer to her own remarks? Gillian felt herself growing more and more dreadfully bright as she babbled on. If the monosyllables continued much longer, she knew she would say something awful. She felt herself turning to poor Toby and saying:

“Lady Bottomley tells me you were at Eton and Magdalen Colleges,” which was exactly what Lady Bottomley had told her in the expansions of yesterday. That would be a really putting-off thing. Wasn’t she the very worm of vulgarity for wanting, for not really wanting but for thinking of saying it? How dreadful to have crumpets for tea in July!

And then Stephen came in. And Stephen, who was so dull, so solemn, so correct, Stephen whom she really hardly knew at all, changed everything back into the amusing, preposterous fun it had all been until these last ten minutes.

“Hullo, Gillian!” Stephen said when he saw her, “why aren’t you down at Glynde with Sophie and Lilac? Is that confounded High School mewing you up in London through the dog-days?”

And there were explanations and introductions, and Lady Bottomley, instead of being upset, was elated that Gillian had a sister whom her son had met at Glynde, and Stephen and Toby, who weren’t doing anything particular that evening, said they’d both come and see Lilac and hear news of Sophie after dinner, and Lady Bottomley said Miss Lilac must come to lunch with *her* Miss Armstrong the next day, and they’d find some nice concert to go to in the afternoon. Gillian was so out of breath with it all that it took Lilac ten minutes to piece together a coherent story out of all the scraps and laughter she carried home with her, particularly as William caught the infection of excitement and sang “God Save our Gray” at the top of his voice until they covered his cage with Lilac’s Burberry. And that only made things worse, because, after a moment’s silence, William observed in a dulcet voice, “Toby—Toby—prritty Toby.” “Just as if,” said Lilac, pale and husky with rage, “just as if we’d said nothing else for months. I wish you’d kill that bird, Gillian.”

And she meant it. Gillian was afraid of Lilac when she went white with passion like that. She carried William’s cage over to the Middletons’ flat and asked the Mrs. Middleton who really was a missionary’s widow to take him in for the evening. Mrs. Middleton had “a way” with parrots, and, though it didn’t seem to work quite so well with cockatoos, she was always very kind about trying to soothe William’s song, when Gillian had other things to do. Lilac had once declared that she’d overheard Mrs.

Middleton reading the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer to William just as she used to do to the heathen: but all William was ever heard to add to his vocabulary from the Middleton flat was Jessie Middleton's drawl, "Oh, Mother, *must* I?" followed by a prolonged imitation of Jessie Middleton's yawn.

Love, thought Gillian, as she knocked at Mrs. Middleton's door, was doing rather horrid things to Lilac; it was making her cruel—Lilac who couldn't bear even to kill clothes-moths—and suspicious and extravagant. And dishonourable. After all, there was Toby's American wife—at least there might be, though, now she had seen him herself, Gillian was bound to admit Toby didn't look in the least married to anybody.

"Isn't it damnable!" was what Lilac had said last night. And to-night she wanted to have William killed.

VI

It was hot in the little book-lined room up under the roof of the Mordaunt Club. Gillian sat on the window-sill and leaned out over the dark well of the courtyard across which beams of light from the other open windows made slanting, transparent, misty bridges. She sat out of the circle of lamplight made by the painted shade over the oil-lamp which stood on a table in front of the largest bookcase.

Stephen was in the light. It shone on his red, fine skin, on his smooth, shiny hair, on the patent leather of his shoes, on the shining curve of his dress-shirt that bulged, ever so little, over the dull repp of his white waistcoat. Gillian was liking Stephen more every minute. He was so comfortingly at his ease in life. Here, in their little book-room; that afternoon, before the appalling splendours of old Winona's tea-table, he was just the same Stephen as he was at Glynde. He wasn't like Toby, who had been nervous even though he chattered in his own library and sulky in his mother's drawing-room, and who now sat in the corner of the red-leather chesterfield making jerks of speech and ruffling up the pink-and-blue Samarkand rug with his feet. Lilac sat in the other corner, quite in shadow, very slim in her thin white frock with its wide angel sleeves that hung down over her hands as they lay folded in her lap. Her eyes, dark

with excitement, looked black in the shade, and the fluff of her fair hair seemed grey with no light to bring out its golden shimmer.

“Been to the Russian Ballet?” jerked Toby.

“Not again,” said Lilac.

Money was sometimes a disadvantageous possession—sometimes. Stephen hadn’t half as much as Toby, but he had been born into his place in life, and it never occurred to him to doubt his perfect right to be wherever his life took him. You could see he never thought about paying for anything; he took it for granted that things were paid for! Stephen was free. Toby, who could buy real Dürers in St. James’s Street and have horses at Newmarket, was afraid. Money had robbed him of the place he was born into and he didn’t fit in the place it had bought for him. He was too nice to be apologetic, but he was always ready to be a little angry. He said “How annoying!” over everything that went at all wrong. He’d said it about his Swinburnes; and when Lady Bottomley had said that she’d promised he should open a bazaar in September; and when he’d dropped the spoon out of his coffee-cup saucer as he took it from Lilac just now.

It was odd that Lilac, whose every movement was so finished and effectual, and who knew exactly not only what she wanted but how she was going to get it—it was perhaps not really odd that Lilac should want this gentle, undecided Toby. It was clear that he wanted her. Of that Gillian had been sure from the moment he had come into the flat. You could see that Toby saw, that he *could* see nothing but Lilac. It was dreadful, Gillian felt, to have that feeling about another person, particularly if you had a wife in America and couldn’t have the person you wanted like that. It was rather dreadful of Lilac to let him want her when he couldn’t have her. Dreadfully cruel. Perhaps Lilac didn’t know. Perhaps Toby had never looked at her in this way before. Lilac couldn’t let him go on like that. She was keeping very still, almost as if she were half asleep. She must be making up her mind to put a stop to it; not to see Toby again. Nobody could bear to be wanted so badly, to be looked at with such unhappy eyes.

Then, very quietly, and without looking at Toby, or at Gillian, or at Stephen, softly and slowly, but deliberately and not at all as if she were dreaming, Lilac raised one hand and smoothed back the long loose sleeve from the arm that still lay in her lap. Stephen was lighting a cigarette and didn't notice. But Gillian saw. And she saw how Toby leaned forward a little and stopped in the middle of asking something quite dull to let his eyes drop from Lilac's face to her hand. And Lilac raised her hand and pushed it along the top of the chesterfield, playing a little, light, slow five-finger exercise on the red leather until her bare arm up to the elbow, lay out beyond the shadow, cream-pale and soft, the skin taut and smooth over the wrist-joints, with tiny sparkles of gold hair catching the yellow lamplight as the round finger-tips tapped out their noiseless tune.

"Guess what I'm playing," said Lilac softly, in the voice of a young witch casting a spell. "It's something you know," and her two long front teeth gleamed in the shadow, breaking the rose of her mouth as she spoke and smiled.

"I can't guess," said Toby hoarsely. "Tell me," said Toby, as though his life depended on being told.

"No—you must guess," said Lilac, her voice shaking a little in her throat with laughter. "You know it quite well," and she emphasized the "quite" delicately so that it rang in the air like a chiming bell.

Toby bent on his elbows; his crimson hands clutched each other between his spread knees. His head, thrust into the circle of lamplight, showed his damp hair sticking to his brow.

"Lilac, I *can't* guess. Not while you do that."

Gillian slipped down from the window-seat.

"It's *Ach du lieber Augustin*, the tune the pipkin sang when it boiled, in the story of the prince who went back into his kingdom and slammed the door," she said.

Lilac jumped up from her corner and the sleeve fell back again over her arm.

“Oh, Gillian, how mean of you!” she cried. But her voice was happy and satisfied as it had not been before that day. And presently Stephen took Toby away. They were driving down to Esher that night, as Toby had horses arriving from Ireland with a new groom whom he didn’t quite trust, and he wanted to be on the spot himself first thing the next morning.

* * *

Lilac went to lunch next day, and on to the nice concert with Lady Bottomley. She arrived, very pretty and rather pathetic in the large crinoline hat trimmed with the pink rose she’d bought in Sloane Street, and the mauve ribbon she’d salved from part of Sophie’s largesse, while Gillian was pumice-stoning the copying-ink from her fingers after her morning’s work. All old Winona’s letters were preserved in duplicate, even the third-person refusals to add to her cheque-signing toil. Gillian had already traced the original hands and the varying imitations of six of her predecessors through the flimsy pages of the copy-files which, also bound into crested volumes, filled a shelf below the newspaper-cutting tomes in the library at 99. Gillian had been taught by her father to burn all letters, even his own lively, brilliant letters written when she stayed behind at school and he sent her his diaries with their little pen and pencil drawings on every page. So she added her daily sheaf to this unvaluable collection, consoling herself with the quotation from La Rochefoucauld, which she could never quite get by heart, about considering the kind of people to whom He gave the most of it when you wanted to know what God really thought of money.

“And, of course,” said Gillian, being honest with herself as she scrubbed her inky hands, “it wasn’t God who gave old Winona money to spend on having a quite young crest put on everything she possesses, but John Bottomley who did make the best bicycles that ever spun and deserved to be ‘a perfect Crocus’; and Toby will do beautiful things with it when old Winona dies. I wonder if she’ll have a tomb all made of precious stones. I do hope she will. I do wish she would. And order it now, while I’m with her like the Bishop, at St. Praxed’s.”

But there wouldn’t be any ordering of jewelled monuments for a day or two at any rate, for by the time Gillian came into the drawing-room Lilac

had made such headway with Toby's mother that that lady was insisting that Gillian must take the week-end until Tuesday and go with her sister to Glynde.

"And, of course," said Lilac, "if Gillian is not quite rested by Tuesday, I can come back and do your letters myself for a day or two. I don't pretend to be as clever as Gillian, but I'm *very* industrious, and I'd try not to let you miss her too dreadfully, Lady Bottomley, indeed I would."

Lady Bottomley was archly playful.

"I am sure, Miss Lilac, that you would be a delightful secretary, but I always spend August in Ireland, where my male secretary attends to all my requirements, and *my* Miss Armstrong will only have to look in for an hour or two in the mornings when she gets back from Glynde. I should be sorry," and she tapped Lilac's cheek with the whole bunch of her fingers, "for such a pretty little person as yourself to leave her friends on my account. Mr. and Mrs. Glynde would never forgive me for robbing them of such bright eyes."

So Gillian went to Glynde with Lilac by the five-o'clock train out of Victoria on Friday afternoon. And when they got there, there was no Toby.

Stephen met them with the car at Lewes.

"Toby's gone to America," he told them. "He was very bored at Sandown and didn't seem to care whether the Buster won or not. I think he's gone after that wife of his."

"Oh," said Lilac. "You don't think he'll bring her back, do you?"

"Alive or dead," said Stephen. "Dead, possibly. I dare say he's gone out to murder her. There's sure to be one of the properly free states where a decent fellow like Toby can kill a wife from time to time! How long have you known about her?"

"Only since I went to Lady Bottomley," said Gillian. "I thought you and Sophie didn't."

"Sophie don't," said Stephen; "but Toby told me the whole story, and he says he told Lilac."

“Yes,” said Lilac, “he wrote to me about it, yesterday. But I’d known for some time. And I told Sophie.”

“You did, did you?” said Stephen. “That’s all to the good,” and he changed the subject.

VII

Lilac did not marry Toby till the spring. And Toby did not murder his wife, though old Winona went into deep mourning on the receipt of a cable from San Francisco one day in the following October. The cable was duly filed. It ran:

“Millicent is no more. Do not announce it in *The Times*.—Reginald.”

“I quite feel with my son,” said old Winona. “The death of so unworthy a woman as the late Lady Bottomley is not a matter we, as a family, can publicly countenance. But my own change of title must be announced. Will you look up in Kelly, my dear, for the form in which a dowager announces the resumption of her original title?”

But Gillian could find nothing helpful in Kelly or even in Whitaker, and, after an afternoon’s research, was told to telegraph for the lady whom Mrs. Barraclough called Winnie Roehampton.

“My daughter-in-law knows by experience how to deal with knotty points in the social code,” said the ex-dowager.

Lady Roehampton discouraged the attempt at a public resumption of her ex-mother-in-law’s rights. She was an elegant and vivacious creature with very flaxen hair and a complexion so brilliant that, though actually the work of nature, it laid her under the constant suspicion of resorting to art. Her manner, which at first seemed friendly, was on closer acquaintance seen to be the outward expression of an undiscriminating candour. She had no reticences, and also no rancours. To her things and people just were. She neither classified nor blamed. But she lacked the philosophic detachment which enables others who share her outlook to stand aside and watch their fellow creatures commit the follies they themselves are too balanced to stigmatize, too interested to prevent. Life was not pure spectacle to Winnie Roehampton. She knew what drama meant to the

actors and she was a shade too unintelligent to remain passively unkind in circumstances over which she could have any possible control.

“My child,” she said, drawing Gillian into the shelter of one of the palm-groves in the hall after telling Atkinson to call off that powdered menial as she would let herself out, “take her to Jay’s. Let her buy up the whole shop. They’ll tell her to an inch how much crêpe indicates the resumption of whatever a baronet’s widow resumes when her son has been divorced by his wife. Oh, yes! That’s what’s happened. Didn’t you know? Let her get new visiting-cards—she might have a little black arrow put through ‘Winona.’ I wish I’d thought of that before. Never mind. You can tell her I thought of it on the way down. But keep her out of *The Times*. You needn’t tell her Millicent isn’t dead—after all, I *may* be doing Toby an injustice—unless you can’t restrain her any other way. But you might suggest that she’d better wait till Toby gets back, as it’s quite on the cards that he’s bringing a perfectly good new wife of his own with him.”

“I think,” said Gillian, “the little black arrow is quite enough for me to suggest. I’ve seen the cable, you know.”

“So have I. That’s what convinces me. Millicent isn’t the kind of woman who dies of anything but extreme antiquity or violence. And she’s now about thirty, and you don’t suppose Toby has done anything violent.”

“No, of course not,” said Gillian faintly, seeing again Toby’s bent head and strangling hands thrust forward into the lamplight as Lilac’s arm slid along the top of the couch behind him.

Her hesitation was misunderstood.

“Oh,” said the Countess of Roehampton, without a trace of self-consciousness or embarrassment, “Dora Barraclough has told you about Jim Bottomley’s accident? She’d exaggerate, of course; I’ve always said it was my fault. But I didn’t plan it. I was quite sorry when it happened. And you can see how I’ve been forgiven. Call me in again if she gets difficult. One of Roehampton’s aunts is a lady-in-waiting, and I’ll get her trained intellect to bear on the situation.”

“Thank you so much, Lady Roehampton,” said Gillian from the doorstep, ignoring the more sensational aspects of the lady’s Parthian speech. “I’ll get Dashwood to take her to Jay’s this very afternoon.”

VIII

The only person who made any difficulty about Lilac’s marriage was Aunt Elizabeth Armstrong, whose real name was Mrs. Mortimer. She was what Toby called a reinforced relation. Toby could be quite amusing if you gave him time. Mrs. Mortimer had been a Miss Armstrong, Gerald Armstrong’s only aunt, and had taken him after his mother’s death when he was quite a child with her at such times as he was not at school. When he grew up and went to Oxford, and not till then, Aunt Elizabeth had bestowed her hand on the West African clergyman to whom she had plighted her troth in early life. Mr. Mortimer did not long survive his marriage, and little Ellen Mortimer, a young half-sister who was semi-dependent on him, came to live in England with his widow, and, much to her indignation, married Gerald Armstrong quite quietly one afternoon when he was home on leave, going out to do so at a registrar’s office in an old hat, and coming back with him to tea as though nothing had happened.

There was something of the born supplanter in little Ellen Mortimer, so it seemed to Aunt Elizabeth, who did not greatly care for women. And it was like little Ellen to have two daughters and no son. Aunt Elizabeth, who filled the office of grandmother on both sides to Gerald’s and Ellen’s children, made the best of Gillian, whose second name was Elizabeth. But Lilac was a thorn in her flesh. Little Ellen had been sly, but demure and quiet in her dress, as became a Christian lady. But Lilac only resorted to slyness when overt methods failed and her taste in dress was what Aunt Elizabeth called “shouting,” which wasn’t in the least what other people mean by “loud,” but indicated a general effect calculated to make the casual observer look twice and look approvingly.

Aunt Elizabeth lived at Highgate in a little bow-windowed house at the top of the hill which you entered from the road, thinking it quite an ordinary house, only to discover that the parlour-window at the back hung over a precipice dizzying down through tree-tops, and smoke-wreaths and chimney-stacks to the great lake of the city out of which the dome of St.

Paul's rose, a small round island in the east, and the four chimneys of the Chelsea power-house stood against the far horizon in the west like the masts of a sailing-ship with all its canvas furled.

Aunt Elizabeth set no store by the view from her parlour-window. She did not obscure it, as she obscured that of the road in the front of the house, by strong, white Nottingham lace curtains; but her motives were not æsthetic motives.

"No need to curtain these windows," she said. "Only the birds of the air can see into them from the outside, and the fewer the curtains the better the dusting." Aunt Elizabeth's house was very well dusted. It was also quite reasonably comfortable. Its furniture belonged to the mahogany age, but there was no horse-hair left, though you could feel that Aunt Elizabeth had lived with horse-hair in her time. Also, it was quite surprisingly free from any traces of Mr. Mortimer's vocation. None of the African mats, beads and other devices which filled Mrs. Middleton's flat in the Club, had its counterpart in Aunt Elizabeth's parlour. "Heathen rubbish," she called them all, "and some of it worse. How Agneta Middleton can bring herself to set up that shameless idol she has on the mantelpiece in a Christian land I cannot conceive, and if," said Aunt Elizabeth, "that Mrs. Barrymore of yours wasn't a poor thing, she'd have had it taken away and burnt."

"But Mrs. Barraclough thinks it is an ornament. She doesn't feel about it as you do. It doesn't seem to her to be a god as it does to you," Gillian had protested.

"God, indeed," said Aunt Elizabeth; "devil, my girl, that's what they are, however your Mrs. Barrington makes excuses for them."

Aunt Elizabeth always got the names of the people she called "poor things" just a little wrong. It made them seem even poorer than she said they were, and was a deliberate classification, not in the least akin to old Winona's large confusions. She had never once stumbled, as a person liable to true confusion might well have done, over the name or names of her prospective great-nephew-in-law. "Poor Reginald" she called him from the first, and she withheld her blessing on the match for some days

under the impression that, being Irish, he must necessarily be a Roman, and so worse than the heathen of whose conversion it was always possible to entertain an active hope.

Lilac made it quite clear to Gillian, without any direct reference to the subject, that Aunt Elizabeth was to be allowed to understand that Toby was the bachelor he appeared to be.

“If she can be brought to approve of my marriage,” was what Lilac had said, “she’ll forgive me for not going to live at Highgate.”

Mrs. Mortimer had been quite willing for Gillian to go to the Mordaunt Club, and be under Mrs. Middleton’s eye when Ellen died. The Club was within an hour’s journey of Pelham House. But she had quite supposed that Lilac would sojourn with her at Highgate. That neither she nor Lilac really liked one another was no reason, in Mrs. Mortimer’s self-disciplining view of life for them, as widow and orphan of the same blood, to live apart.

But Lilac had been firm. Gillian was not fit to live alone. All she’d got to furnish the flat with was a ton of books, a cast of the Winged Victory, and an old brass toasting-fork which, said Lilac, just showed. Besides, Lilac couldn’t live out so far as Highgate herself. And Aunt Elizabeth saw to it, as Lilac very well knew she would when it came to the point, that all the lacunæ made by the sale of her nephew’s really valuable things and the habit of living in semi-furnished houses which little Ellen had contracted in the course of their nomadic married life, were properly filled with good cutlery and fine linen sheets to go with the outlandish curtains and wild cups and saucers Gillian herself had bought at strange shops of post-Maple ideas.

“And how is Gillian any fitter to live alone now?” asked Aunt Elizabeth, when she had been made aware of Lilac’s engagement. “Is she going to share your home?”

“No! How could she, dearest Aunt Eliza? Toby and I aren’t going to have a home for ever such a long time. We’re going round the world for our honeymoon, and that’ll take almost a year.”

“And where will you be if the Lord should send you a child? Gadding about on the face of the waters, I dare say.”

“Oh,” said Lilac, blushing, but defiant, “He won’t send one till we get back. Toby and I have decided that.”

“Wicked, impious creatures!” said Aunt Elizabeth, shaking her head, on which, in spite of Lilac’s efforts, she wore just the same kind of cap, three rows of Brussels lace frilled on to a high-crowned ‘shape,’ as her mother had worn before her. “I shall pray without ceasing that the Lord may see fit to defeat your ungodly purpose.”

“Well, don’t say anything to Toby about it, or to Lady Bottomley,” begged Lilac.

“I shall do the Lord’s bidding,” was Aunt Elizabeth’s reply. “If He bids me to speak, it will not be for you to prevent me, my girl.”

So Lilac took good care that Toby was not left alone at any time when the Lord might be likely to move Aunt Elizabeth to declare His views; and by the exercise of that secret diplomacy which always baffled Gillian to detect in the working, managed to keep her quasi-grandmaternal relation and her prospective mother-in-law apart.

“I dare say you would enjoy seeing them meet,” she retorted when Gillian pointed out how fine a conflict might arise between two such autocrats, “but it’s my wedding and I’m not going to have it spoilt.”

“I’m sure they’d not spoil it,” said Gillian. “Aunt Elizabeth is so relieved that you’re going to be married in a Protestant church that she doesn’t mind its being a fashionable one, and she won’t know how like a pantomime it’s going to be till she’s there. And you know she won’t brawl in church.”

“No. Not *in* church. But she might persuade Toby and his mother to have the horrid bits left in. She thinks her Prayer-Book was just as much given by inspiration of God as the Bible.”

“Are there any horrid bits?” said Gillian.

“Gillian, you idiot. You’ve read the Service, haven’t you?”

“Lots of times,” said Gillian. “I think those vows are rather terrifying. It’s such a long promise—forsaking all other, too—you can’t know who’s coming—but I like it because of the ‘so’—‘as.’ I can’t think why people will say ‘as long as.’ It’s no easier.”

“Oh, *that*,” said Lilac. “That’s all right, and I’m not going to be common and suffragetty about ‘obey.’ It’s the other bits. Even you, my poor Jill, wouldn’t want to be mixed up in a remedy against sin.”

“I don’t know,” said Gillian slowly; “if it were a remedy, it would be rather beautiful to be part of it—*against* sin.”

“There are times,” said Lilac with bitter incisiveness, “when I think you can’t be quite right in your head.”

They were on their way to Dover Street to try on the bridesmaids’ dresses. There were to be six bridesmaids—two little Glyndes, the two small Roehampton children, a stout but very rich friend of whom Lilac had not lost sight since the Lausanne days, and Gillian herself. And they were to be all dressed as Dresden china shepherdesses in dresses copied from a complete half-dozen originals that figured among the many presents from the bridegroom’s mother. For old Winona, who was coming out of her black garments and going into maroon with feathers on the resumption of her dowagership, had insisted on giving and choosing the bridesmaids’ dresses herself. It wasn’t regular, but still, as Lilac said, this was a subscription wedding in which Glyndes and Armstrongs and Mortimers all had stakes, so why shouldn’t everybody have a share? And, having once allowed the prospective dowager to take a hand in the preparations, it was useless to attempt to stay that hand from munificence. Besides, she was already very fond of Lilac. Their ideas were seldom in conflict. In the matter of abridging the wedding-service, for example, she was entirely of Lilac’s mind. There was nothing Calvinistic or Biblical about old Winona.

“She really is very nice and refined about some things,” said Lilac. “Much better than Toby is. Did you know that she’d snipped the worst bits out of his Swinburnes when they moved from Blackheath to Knightsbridge after he’d left Oxford?”

“I knew someone had chopped up the books dreadfully,” said Gillian. “I shall give Toby a new unbarbered set for his wedding-present.”

Toby gave Gillian *Die grosse Fortuna* and the large *Saint Eustace* two days before the wedding. Lilac had come upon the print when they were looking through Toby’s things together one day, and had told him that Gillian liked it. She was taking her own pictures, a large coloured reproduction of Greiffenhagen’s *Idyll* and a photogravure of Balestieri’s *Beethoven* away with her in the small case of her own personal possessions which was being stored at Knightsbridge, and Toby, very modestly, proffered his two Dürers to fill their places on either side of the tall bookcase in the little room.

Gillian accepted them in speechless content.

“And I suppose,” said Lilac, “that you’ll hang them there, both of them, and tell me they’re both beautiful.”

“So they are,” said Gillian.

“The one with the dogs is amusing, and I like the little hill with the castle on it behind,” Lilac conceded. “But as for the other—well, all I can say is that you’d better not let Mrs. Gordon see it if you want to stay on at the Club without me. She’d think it was a caricature of herself. Which it might very well be.”

* * *

The wedding took place on the 25th of April at Holy Trinity, Sloane Square. Aunt Elizabeth did not attend. The date coincided with some mysterious anniversary in her own life which she always kept in prayer and fasting. Neither Lilac nor Gillian could ever be quite sure when this penitential festival would fall, for it came round, not as a day in the month, but as the third or fourth Monday in April, which might be any day between the 15th and the 27th. She had presented Lilac with travelling trunks and cases and a dressing-bag of the finest quality and a length of black satin brocade which would stand by itself. To Toby she sent two copies of what she called “The Scriptures,” one in the Authorized the other in the Revised Version, replete with Notes, Maps, References, Concordances and

Subject-Indexes printed in large type on India paper and bound in the limpest, most velvety purple leather. She had also given Lilac a purse containing a five-pound note, four sovereigns, two half-sovereigns, six half-crowns and ten shillings in shillings and sixpences, all new coins of that year.

“No need for you to go to your husband for pocket-money till you’ve got used to him, my girl,” said Aunt Elizabeth as she gave her youngest great-niece a dry and single good-bye kiss.

* * *

Gillian was glad that the old lady did not appear on the day of the wedding. Nothing about it would have pleased her mind. The great, green, Burne-Jones window lighting the white-and-silver bride with her sheaf of Madonna lilies, followed by the six powdered and panniered bridesmaids with their gilded crooks and jaunty flowered-baskets, would have seemed to her equally sacrilegious with the operatic music sung by an exotic soprano and a dusky tenor in place of a sound Britannic anthem while the register was being signed. And the huge wedding-bell, composed of white roses and plaster Cupids, under which Lilac and Toby stood to receive congratulations in the drawing-room of the Grosvenor Hotel afterwards, a surprise planned and executed by old Winona, would have pleased Mrs. Mortimer as ill as the champagne and the confetti (silver hearts and horse-shoes these), which flowed and floated through the afternoon.

Gillian took Lilac up to the hard, unfamiliar hotel bedroom strewn with dressmakers’ boxes and tissue-paper where the bride had dressed that morning and now was to change into her travelling-clothes. The room was crowded with people. There was Lilac’s new maid, a rather awful being, who had packed everything so thoroughly that there had been nothing left for Gillian to help with the night before, and there was Sophie, of course, and the awkward other bridesmaid who had to come up too, and Mrs. Barraclough whom they couldn’t very well keep out, and odds and ends of people who tapped at the door and said, “May I come in just for one second?” and Winnie Roehampton who dashed in very slim and cool in a leaf-green sheath frock of the most miraculous cut, and said, “Well, my dear, I was Lady Bottomley once and I hope you’ll make a better job of it

than I did," and skimmed out again before Lilac had time to thank her for the benediction.

But Sophie cleared the room for the sisters for a final moment, and Lilac cried a little in Gillian's arms before she went down to Toby and the confetti.

"Jilly," said Lilac, "promise me one thing. When I come back, when you see me again for the first time, you won't open your eyes and stare at me, will you?"

"No," said Gillian; "but why should I stare?—and why should you mind if I did?"

"Oh, Jilly, Jilly," said Lilac, "I don't believe you know."

IX

Gillian had a dazed, deafening headache. She couldn't stay on and chatter to the wedding-guests. She couldn't go on and dine at Claridge's before the theatre-party with which the day was to end.

Old Winona had another Macfarlane to look after her now. Gillian was absolved from her duties and was going to take a proper secretarial course in order to fit her for real life, a business for which life at 99 was no sort of preparation. So Gillian was free to go home to the Club by herself; Mrs. Barraclough was making a complete orgy of it with the Roehamptons and the Glyndes.

She took off her preposterous hat, shook the powder out of her hair, put on a hooded cloak and slipped out of the busy, indifferent hotel into the April twilight and walked down to the river.

It was a soft, dim evening, heavy with spring. The plane-trees on the Embankment were shaking the fine splinters of their stamens out of the little tasselled bracts that opened with soft popping noises in the still leafless boughs. The air was as clouded and green-grey as the water; the figures hurrying to get out of the Park before the gate closed for the night moved on the other side of the river as if behind glass in an aquarium.

Gillian leaned across the parapet and let the breeze that blew downstream cool her aching flushed face. The tide was low. A few desultory gulls, the stragglers of the main fleet which had put to sea with the onset of mild weather some weeks earlier, scavenged quietly in the mud at the water's edge. A police-boat prowled up from Vauxhall; two barges keeping to mid-channel travelled with the ebb, their sails set to catch what airs might stir to aid them. The evening was not so much peaceful as indifferent. Gillian lingered on, and an increasing desolation preyed within her. What was it that Lilac had done?

"Lilac will always know that she is paying for a fake." That was what her father had said. Was Toby a fake? Lilac had wanted him. She had wanted him so much that she had at last stretched out her soft arm and taken him by guile with her rosy, tapping fingers. Gillian never remembered that hand, creeping into the lamplight and shaking all poor Toby's unhappy resistance, without a shock of wonder. What exactly was it that Lilac had done to him? How did she know she could do it? It was predatory, her gesture, yet it gave away something that could never be taken back again. Lilac had been paying, paying deliberately, for Toby. But was it Toby, the essential Toby, that dim, kind, gentle Toby who loved horses and fine engravings and had such clumsy hands and such vague, beseeching eyes that Lilac had bought with the lilt of a song from a fairy-tale? Or was it what Toby stood for? Was it only the power to buy everything, to go everywhere, to make, if she chose, such a crammed and monotonous wilderness of any house as Old Winona had made of 99, that Lilac really wanted in Toby? wanted it so much that she had confused Toby, who was not in the least magnificent with the magnificence she could reach through him? Gillian thought with a slow gust of remorse of that far-off, unconsidered Millicent who too, in her day, had wanted Toby, and who was now—neither she nor Lilac had ever stopped to ask if she were dead—at least she had never spoken of Toby's first wife to Lilac. What Toby had said to Lilac about her was their own affair; but Gillian might have spared her a thought.

Lower and lower in her own esteem she plunged, down into the dark undergrowth where motives lie tangled in egoism and vanity. Jealousy of her sister; envy of Lilac's freedom; feeble self-pity for her own

loneliness—as if she didn't want to be alone—assailed her as she groped in the shadows of her heart. What an aftermath of a wedding! Why couldn't she be happy because Lilac was free, because she had both hands full of what she most wanted? Gillian wanted freedom too. But it wasn't, after all, freedom that someone else's money could give her. Lilac had freed herself with one hand by fettering the other. In a way she was more bound than Gillian, who could never hope to be freer than she was now.

Gillian's headache was gone; it had faded out with the daylight. The sky was quite black above the Embankment lights now, and the tide was rising and taking fresh reflections, long swords of light from the lamps on the bridges, as the waters broadened beneath them. Gillian turned her face to go home, her self-reviling over. But there was still an ache of disappointment in her thoughts. What was it she had asked of this day, that thing for herself, that secret and peculiar enjoyment which had not been given to her? Long ago, when she was a child, she had known this unsatisfied ache. "I'm not hungry, but I know there's something very delicious I've not eaten," she had explained to her father. Now the ache was there, but she knew what she had missed. It was the climax of the wedding-service which had never come; the moment when, in her prayer for Lilac, she had hoped, had meant to reach out and touch her father's spirit if it could be possible that that spirit remained aware of her. She had promised herself to wait with closed eyes for the words:

"... whose daughters ye are so long as ye do well and are not afraid with any amazement."

and they had never been spoken.

Lilac and Old Winona together had had the service thoroughly pruned. The Bishop had tweetled an inaudible little sermon over the married pair, the murmurs of which were drowned to the congregation in the creaking of the bridesmaids' gilded flower-baskets as they stood separated from the bride and fidgeting in the aisle for the end of the performance. There had been little need for consecrated phrases at the Pantomime Wedding.

CHAPTER THREE.
THE TORTOISESHELL CAT

I

There was a knock at the door.

Gillian, who was dusting books in the inner room, ran out to answer it without taking off the brown holland overall she was wearing, or untying the old, blue, silk handkerchief with which she had covered her head.

Jane Bird stood on the landing.

"Good morning, Tanagra," she said, her face impassive behind her round spectacles. "*The Times* has announced that Moloch has devoured your sister, so I've come to see if you've been singed at all during the sacrifice."

"I don't know what you mean," said Gillian, torn between shyness, excitement and an unresentful knowledge that Jane was being very impertinent, and that she was not going to be able to snub her for it.

"Don't you know about the Bottomley Sunbaths for Ricketty Children?" said Jane, "and may I come inside?" She followed Gillian into the inner room and sat down, very tall and flat, like a creature hewn and jointed together out of planks, on the red chesterfield.

"Your brother-in-law has celebrated his marriage by giving a sun-cure installation, in Dorset, to the London Hospital," she said. "It's in the papers with photographs of the wedding. There's one of you in fancy dress, with the fancy hat a little on one side. You oughtn't to try the piquant style. Undine or Ophelia, with your hair quite down, and no stays, is all you should ever allow yourself."

"You can't have Ophelia bridesmaids," said Gillian, "it would be tactless. Hamlet was such an unmarrying-man. And how nice of Toby! He kept it very quiet. I didn't know."

"Very wise of him till he'd got clear of the country, or he'd have all the hospitals in the kingdom after him. I know. I was brought up on the lap of a hospital committee. My father was the director of Addenbrokes till he died. That's how I know so much more about Life and its Mysteries than

most young women. I read all his books, and it wasn't only medicine. I'm an orphan now, like you. I've got a mother—if mother indeed she can be called. She's third curate, unpaid, at St. Luke's, and I've taken a studio in Buckingham Palace Road for six months."

"Aren't you going to Oxford?"

"Nor to Cambridge. They're coming to me. Do you know Larry Browne?"

"No," said Gillian.

"You will soon," Jane assured her. "He knows about you; his father was your father's tutor at B.N.C., and he's got a photograph of your father in his studio that might be you with your hair cut short and your nose a size larger. I recognized it because it's the same one as I saw here the day I called on your sister last summer."

"It's the only photograph he ever had taken that wasn't a snapshot one," said Gillian. "And why has your Mr. Browne got it? where did he get it?"

"His father had it from your father in the days when you were both unborn. It's like a nursery rhyme," said Jane, "and he's trying to put it into a large allegorical picture he's going to enter for some prize or other. Up in the top corner—complicated with wings and a halo."

"I think," said Gillian, "I think I should like to see it."

"Come along then," said Jane Bird; "it's only on the other side of the bridge."

They walked together over the bridge and along by the palings of Battersea Park, and as they went Jane told Gillian that she had discarded scholarship for sculpture, and had already sold two figures to a shop in Bond Street.

"They're not good," said Jane Bird, "my figures are not good, but they're very pretty, and I sell them for five pounds apiece."

Presently they crossed the road, went through the fragment of a gate that hung between two blistered gate-posts in a fence which ran along the footpath between two blocks of flats, and found themselves in a long,

asphalted garden, common to a row of studios, where the fires of Spring were vainly striving to cover up the traces of the bonfires of November.

The studios were of commercial build. Red brick, faced with white stone, cut into unnecessary and depressing arabesques above the gutters, held the doors, windows and skylights together. The woodwork of the whole row had originally been painted in that peculiar liver-coloured red which distinguishes the entrances of the Piccadilly and Brompton Tube stations, and is so often used by the London builder to enhance the yellower red of London bricks. But, here and there in the row, an occupant had sickened at the shade and had splashed in white or green over the landlord's paint. The door of the last studio in the row was new and shining in a rich cobalt.

"That is the azure goal of our pilgrimage," said Jane Bird, and Gillian found that she dared not ask her to express herself with direct simplicity. Jane was making it perfectly clear that Gillian was no longer in authority and that she, Jane, intended to be as ornate and ridiculous as she pleased, when she pleased; would indeed go out of her way to be ridiculous and ornate, just for the triumph of seeing Gillian check her impulse to protest.

Larry Browne, who opened the door to them, was tall and broad-shouldered, with thick, strong, golden-brown hair that curved without curling from either side of a deep, straight parting dividing his head from crown to brow. He had light eyes; grey-green with yellow gleams in them, and there was a curious triangular fleck in the iris of his left eye that gave him a false expression of being a man with an outward cast. He had a small, neat nose with beautiful wide nostrils that drank the air freely, and a beautiful fresh mouth from one corner of which, at that moment, hung a long cherry-wood pipe with a tassel half-way down its stem, and a china bowl, with a lid to it, painted with robins and forget-me-nots that hopped and twined in and out of the device *Traum und Rauch* which ran in large black Gothic capitals below its brim. He wore a shantung shirt which had once been blue, but had passed through many washings and was now clouded, like an August sky, where the colour had run, leaving irregular white spaces. An enormous pair of green corduroy trousers was folded into the tops of his brown boots at the ankles, and pleated into a leather belt round his waist. In spite, or even because of, this voluminous

garment, the young man appeared remarkable for slenderness and grace as he stood in the doorway, the sunlight beating full on his clear, bright skin, filling the little freckles that crossed from cheek to cheek with colour, and striking a high-light off the curve of the jaw that ran, a clean line, from behind his small flat ear to the end of his slightly pointed chin.

“Behold,” said Jane Bird, still daring Gillian to protest, “the youth is ruddy and withal of a fair countenance and beautiful to look to.”

“Hullo, Aholah!” said the young man in an even voice, removing the pipe from his mouth as he spoke, and shutting down the pewter lid of its bowl with one finger. “Come in. We call your friend Aholah,” he said, turning to Gillian, “partly on account of her iniquities, but also because it was my good fortune to stumble on the derivation of that ancient name. It means ‘she that has her own tent,’ which is Miss Bird’s case, while I,” said Larry Browne, “am forced to share mine with a faun, as you may see for yourself.”

He pulled aside the curtain which shut the little lobby off from the studio itself, letting it fall again as the two girls passed into the gaunt, white room.

Larry Browne’s studio was the usual wilderness of easels, canvases, mahl-sticks and more or less damaged properties, furred with the usual dust, smelling of the customary oil and turpentine. The blinds were not drawn across the skylight and the studio was flooded with sunshine. All the low windows on the farther side were open on to a hedge of box and ivy and Virginia creeper which was noisy with sparrows. Some of the sparrows had hopped in over the window-seat, and three of them were fluttering and pecking on the boards below the model’s throne. A fourth was perched on the knee of the figure which occupied the throne; seated on it with one leg hanging down, the other crossed and bent so that one naked foot lay on the right knee, just behind the unruffled bird.

It was the figure of a man so slight and supple that at a first glance he seemed little more than a child.

He wore a light-blue suit like an engineer’s overall, held up by a tape which passed over his neck from the middle of the garment and left his

arms and shoulders as bare as his thin, brown feet. Some one—it was most probably Larry—had stuck an ivy-leaf into the close black curls on each side of the creature's head, and the stiff corners stood up like horns, widening the low, wide brow and giving to the dark, heavily lashed eyes which looked out from under the thick eyebrows, a woodland air. The face narrowed on either side of a long hooked nose to a chin deeply cleft below a mouth which was at the moment pursed up into a soundless whistle. The faun was holding converse with the sparrow, having for this purpose broken off his attempt to clear up the studio with a long-handled broom which leant up against the throne and served as a perch for yet another brown bird.

"Heinrich," said Larry Browne, "you must shoo those fowls away. We have other guests."

The faun, with one liquid movement, broke the angles of his pose and, gathering the complacent sparrows together, bore them, perched on the fingers of either hand to the window and placed them, chirruping, in the hedge outside.

"I go to put on coats, vaistcoats too," he said with a brilliant, melancholy smile, and vanished.

"Heinrich," Larry explained, "is a faun by day. At six o'clock he puts on more coats and waistcoats and goes out to play in the second violins at Queen's Hall. Some of him is German as his name expresses, some of him is Italian, some of him is Jew. His father undoubtedly was Pan. He must have had a good many mothers."

"And when you've done painting him into your fresco," said Jane Bird, "he's going to sit to me with a sparrow, real or stuffed."

"I wonder if William would sit with him," said Gillian. "It wouldn't be the same thing as a sparrow, of course."

"It would be quite another subject," said Jane. "'Tame cockatoo devouring wild violinist' I should think would be what the group would sell as."

"I'm sorry," said Gillian, and didn't look for fear of seeing Jane Bird's small annotating smile at her capitulation.

“I suppose you’re doing Heinrich as Pan,” said Jane.

“I’m not,” said Larry Browne, “Heinrich with sparrows is clearly a Cytherean theme. Without his overall, as you’ll see presently, he loses touch with nature. But, morning by morning as he sweeps the dust about the floor and encourages those vulgar birds to be perfectly at ease indoors, I’ve wondered what it was he reminded me of. He’s my idea of Cupid.”

“Goodness!” said Gillian.

“Even so,” said Larry. “With a bunch of arrows stuck through the front of that pointed pinafore of his, serious with a sidelong eye—a conscious, predestinate demiurge—enslaved by his own destiny of enslavement.”

“That’s an Orphic Eros, not a Cupid,” said Jane.

“By Orcus out of Aphrodite,” chanted Larry.

“Oh, well,” said Jane, “if you like to mix your parents to fit the faun…. Aren’t you going to be charming to Miss Armstrong? She’s come because your father knew her father.”

Larry Browne was easily charming. He remembered Gerald Armstrong’s visit to his old tutor, soon after his marriage to little Ellen, when Larry himself was a child of six. “He told me about you,” he said to Gillian, “he said you’d only one tooth and no hair. I wanted dreadfully to see you. I didn’t realize you were just a normal baby such as I could see any day in perambulators on Boar’s Hill. He called you ‘my daughter’ and I thought you must be grown up, particularly as he said you had the most beautiful manners, in which alas! you differed from me, as my mother pointed out, rather tactlessly, I thought.”

And Gillian asked more about that visit, and discovered that Larry had been in Munich only a month after they’d left it five years ago, and had had re-introductions to her father which he’d never used, either then or in Paris, where they might have met if he’d only known. It was clear that the whole of Europe was thick with welcome for Larry Browne, and that he never used half his introductions in any place he visited. He had, indeed, it appeared, come to Battersea because London was the only place

where you can really hide, “and even here,” said Larry Browne, “I’m subject to the inquisitions of Aholah Bird.”

He showed Gillian the head he had painted from her father’s photograph in the long procession he was designing for a frieze which was the subject set for a certain much-coveted prize that year.

“He’s the Knight. I’m doing imaginary characters, Fairy-Tale ones. I wish you’d sit to me for an hour if you’ve time one morning?”

“What as?” said Jane Bird sharply.

“As a changeling, of course,” said Larry Browne. “I wonder you troubled to ask so answered a question.”

“Of course,” said Jane, “it’s what I’ve always wondered, and now you’ve told me. Well, I wish you luck.”

Heinrich came back, rather more human, in a very shiny blue serge suit, a wisp of frayed tie holding the soft collar of his grey flannel shirt together, and they all four went out into Battersea Park and gave the raven in the aviary in the maze everything that was left over from the studio breakfast that morning.

II

The laburnum-tree in the courtyard was dropping its amber-and-lemon florets in the sunlight, and the sparse blossom of the lilac-bush against the wall by Mrs. Barraclough’s window sent up a breath of such fragrance as its soot-clogged pores could still render to the morning air, as Gillian washed her breakfast-dishes. She had been late the night before, having gone with Jane and Larry to hear Heinrich play the violin by himself at another studio, after the Queen’s Hall orchestra had dispersed for the night.

Heinrich, looking more unlike a Cupid than anything Gillian had ever seen, had played melodies in a piercing sequence, choosing them from orchestrated or fully harmonized scores and giving them in the naked strangeness of a single string. The air from Borodine’s musician’s quartette; the subject of the last movement of Smetana’s *Aus meinem*

Leben; a phrase from a Bach three-part invention; “Cherry Ripe”; the pizzicato passage from one scherzo movement of Mozart, and other tunes, half-recognized or quite unknown, sang again in Gillian’s memory as she stood at the sink by the open window and let the water from the tap rush over the old Spode plate, the leadless glaze milk-jug, the Nanking teapot with its sodden, shabby bamboo handle, and the wide-pink-bordered Rouen cup and saucer she always used for breakfast.

How lovely running water was, even out of an indifferently polished brass tap! How unearthly some of Heinrich’s playing had been! Faint and thin and high like a gnat’s music. How late it was! Nearly eleven o’clock. The milk-cart had clattered out, before she was awake; the butcher-boy’s bicycle had crunched swiftly over the gravel in the courtyard while she dressed; the ten-o’clock postman had knocked at all the doors where he had letters to deliver while she was sitting over her breakfast. Gillian felt she was getting demoralized. No Lilac to consider at night when she came in. No work to get her out of bed before she had finished her sleep in the morning. It would be a good thing when the vacancy at the secretarial school fell in next week and she had more motive in her days again. How did that Borodine tune end?—up or down? She turned off the tap and whistled the melody through softly to herself. No, that wasn’t right. Odd that she could hear it in her head and not be able to reproduce it properly. Humming was worse than whistling. Her voice made the oddest noises. She hadn’t a pretty voice. Still it hadn’t made, it couldn’t have made that queer little sound. Gillian stopped her low, uncertain singing and leaned out into the sunlight to listen. Yes. The sound was coming up from below, a shrill, hoarse, tiny cry. Not unlike Heinrich saying “No” when they had tried to make him play again last night.

She leaned out farther, her two hands clutching the window-sill. How lovely it was to feel the sun on her neck, down between her shoulder-blades as her holland overall stuck out and made a tunnel there. A lock of her hair broke loose and hung vertically, soft and long, below the level of the window so that the sun shone through it and made it golden and iridescent. She shook her head a little to make the light dance in her hair, and saw with such a glow of vanity as only the straight-haired can feel that the movement made it curl a little at the tip.

And still the little cry came up, tired and pleading. It sounded like the mewing of a cat. But it was against the rules of the Club for any member to have a cat, and Mr. Gordon's Crack, a stout and arrogant fox-terrier, made it his vocation to preserve the yard against strays. But it certainly sounded like a cat. Gillian leaned out a little farther, so far that one shoe slipped on its sole from the stone floor and swung out behind her leaving her poised on one foot and two hands. Yes. She could see it—wedged in under the foot-scraper by the door five storeys below her—a kitten. Crack had probably chased it under the iron bar and had tired of the game, and nobody had seen it to set it free. What a good thing Gillian had heard it! What a good thing, after all, that she had time on her hands, this lovely, dancing, shining day!

Down the ten flights of stone steps, eight to a flight, two to a landing, she ran twisting up her flying hair as she went. The courtyard was still empty and the kitten had wriggled itself free of the door-scraper when she reached it; but it was mewing none the less.

Gillian had seldom seen a less attractive cat. It was not so very young, not so disarmingly small, now that she was on the same level with it. It was almost not a kitten any longer, and it was tortoiseshell, a brand she didn't admire, and Manx, a thing she had never been able to bear. It had the four white feet and the white chest and face peculiar to its kind, and it was very dirty. Its nose was pink and dirty and its pink-rimmed eyes were sore. Gillian sat on her heels to examine it more closely. It smelled of indescribable things as well as of stale fish. And it mewed—oh, how it mewed!

"I wonder if you're hungry?" said Gillian. "Perhaps this awful smell of a dead sardine was eaten by some stronger cat who fought you for it."

The cat stopped mewing and took a step nearer to Gillian; then it pushed its cold nose and weak whisker against her hand and slithered the whole of its brindled flank against her knee with the travelling pressure cats exert in order to produce for themselves the sensation of being stroked.

"I'd rather you didn't do that," said Gillian, "you're not clean enough, even if this overall is going to the wash." But the cat had whisked round and

was sleeking its other side along her knee, offering the pink, unprotected obscenity beneath its upright stump of a tail to Gillian's inspection.

"Oh! I don't like you at all," said Gillian. And she stood up.

But the cat, having attracted attention, was minded to secure a friend. It began to wind round and round Gillian's ankles, once more uttering its short, exhausted mew.

"After all," said Gillian, "you may be really hungry, and if you were a pretty and attractive cat you'd not be here or some one else would have taken charge of you long ago."

And, closing her eyes, she stooped and took the unhappy thing by the scruff of its neck and wrapped it in the front of her overall. It made no resistance, and as she carried it upstairs she could feel the faint thrill of a purr creeping through the holland folds in which it lay.

The cat was hungry. It lapped up two saucers full of milk almost as quickly as Gillian could pour them out, and it ate, with quivers and sharp, sudden jerks of the head, a cold sausage she had meant to have had with a lettuce for her own lunch.

When it had finished eating, not because it seemed satisfied but because there was no more to give it, Gillian bathed its eyes with some warm boracic lotion and saw, with loathing, that it was lapping the water from the bowl when she returned from putting the muslin rag she had used into the dustbin.

"*Schamlos!*" said Gillian. "I apologize to Heinrich for having let your voice remind me of him. Now you must go home. I daren't let William know you've called."

So she put on her hat, carried the kitten down to the street with her, set it down at a street-corner, and then walked up to South Kensington to look at some T'ang horses in the Museum about which Larry Browne had been talking the evening before.

Later in the day she went to tea with Old Winona, who was having all the post-cards sent her by the honeymoon couple as they progressed round

the world along the most frequented tracks, framed and incorporated in a screen of fretwork. She herself was inclined to have the whole screen gilded, but Gillian thought it would look better, or at any rate that the pictures themselves would show better if the fretting were all black. So they were having one fold of the screen blacked and another gilded in order to see which pleased the greater number more. Winnie Roehampton had been in that morning and had suggested that they should get a third fold done pea-green.

“I think Lady Roehampton must have said that in fun,” said Gillian.

“Well, my dear,” Old Winona conceded, “her manner *was* a little playful. Shall we say no more about it?”

“We can always say we liked the black one best,” said Gillian.

“Or the gilded one,” said Old Winona, who did not intend to like the black one at all herself.

It was dusk before Gillian reached the Club again. She had stayed to see whether there would be any cards from Colombo by the seven-o’clock post, escaping before dinner as she was expecting Jane in later in the evening. As she reached the door in the courtyard there came a soft rubbing around her ankles and once more the short, hungry mew of the stray tortoiseshell rose to her ears.

“Goodness,” said Gillian, “have you come for the night?”

It seemed that such was the animal’s intention. It followed her upstairs, or rather, to be accurate, it came upstairs with her feet, purring as it slithered around and almost under them at every step.

“It would,” said Gillian, “be far less trouble to carry you. Less dangerous also. But that would be encouragement—and I don’t want to encourage you.”

But the human attitude, so long as it is not brutally repulsive, makes no difference to a cat. This one, meek outcast though it seemed, had that soft persistence by means of which the meek obtain fulfilment of the promise that they shall inherit the earth. Up to the fifth floor it squirmed,

escaping injury as only a cat can, every time Gillian stumbled over its soft and moving form.

“I shall let William see you this time,” said Gillian.

But William proved an unexpected failure so far as discouraging the pensioner went. After a preliminary greeting of “Bow-wow-Bow-wow-wow” (William always got his animals wrong and had insulted Crack and seriously alienated Mr. Gordon by shouting “Baa-lamb” after the fox-terrier at their first meeting) he took very kindly to the tortoiseshell. And when Gillian, feeling that there was no need to deprive William of his wonted freedom because this dingy stray had invited itself to supper, let William out of his cage before she sat down to the table, William not only refrained from shooing the cat away from the plate of scraps Gillian cut for it from the boiled beef and suet dumpling which had come up for her dinner from the kitchens, but waddled across the floor with crusts of bread for the visitor’s plate himself.

“Pretty cocky,” said William surprisingly, as he deposited each fresh crust, “pretty cocky,” and finally, deserting his perch on the back of Gillian’s chair, he established himself on the top rung of the fender-rail and turned his boot-button eye downwards on the eating, furry thing, and fixed it with cold, unwinking goodwill.

And then the tortoiseshell cat broke down the last barrier of Gillian’s resistance to its adoption of herself and home by sitting up on its horrid stump of a tail when she began to clear the table and, with the aid of its pale, dry, little tongue and a grimy forepaw, beginning, very feebly, to wash itself.

“Goodness,” said Gillian for the second time that evening. “If I’m a reforming influence in your poor little life I suppose you’ll have to stay.”

“Weak,” said Jane Bird when she came in and heard the story, “weak but characteristic. There is no reason in logic or morals why any creature should reform itself under your roof against your will. Besides, it’s a vagabond. It has a bleary eye. It doesn’t want to stay. It only wants to get you into trouble. I shall take it down to its native gutter when I go.” And she did.

But the next morning, while Gillian was having her breakfast, the now familiar mew, slightly stronger and more insistent came up from the foot-scraper by the courtyard door.

She had received a letter by the early post telling her that she might, if she liked, begin her training at once at the very exclusive establishment Lilac had selected as the proper place in which her sister was to be polished into fitness for a Cabinet Minister's confidence, and she was in a hurry to avail herself of the sudden vacancy in Miss de Stormont's exclusive ranks. So she dressed to go out and, taking a jug of milk and a saucer in one hand, she locked up the flat and went downstairs intending to nourish the kitten by stealth behind the little box hedge that had succeeded in growing half across the north side of the yard.

But, by the time she reached the door-scraper, the kitten had stopped mewing, and had almost disappeared into the box hedge. The stub of its tail alone was visible, and that quivered as though the rest of its person were in the act of consuming food. Gillian put her jug and saucer down on the ground-floor scullery window-sill and stalked the beggar to its grove. There, on the stony soil from which the box hedge sprung, stood a shallow bowl, a china bowl with a spiked, green dragon coiled around it, a beautiful bowl that was still half full of Devonshire cream.

Gillian had no time to waste. The cat had evidently found a richer benefactor than herself and, musing a little who it might be in this Club who had cream for a cat and could set it before the creature in a piece which looked like part of the loot from Pekin, she hurried off to her first class in Buckingham Gate.

The new surroundings, the unfamiliar routine drove this small but pictorial mystery from her mind for the rest of the day. But at four o'clock (Miss de Stormont gave short hours, half-past ten till one, and an hour and a half after luncheon to prepare for the next day) it came back to her with a thrill of romantic excitement as she turned in under the archway from the street and saw that the cat was lapping from the same bowl once more, but that this time the green dragon coiled over the faintly dimpled glaze, in the open, from the flagstone by the door-scraper.

III

All her life long Gillian had been a spectator. The joys of her life had been the joys of the eye and the mind. Her sorrows had been few. The loss of her father, although she was unaware of it, had been mitigated for her, as it could not have been in a more physically passionate creature, by the consolations of that kingdom of the spirit wherein his companionship had taught her to travel. Her mind, in a very literal sense, was its own place. Since her father's death she had possessed it alone. Trained by him to make æsthetic discriminations and to take her own pleasure in any manifestation of life or art, not only as the only valid test of its worth, but as the highest form of happiness attainable in human experience, she had, without any conscious intention, failed to develop the faculty for establishing personal relationships, for taking root in any place or affection, which her essentially friendly and enthusiastic nature should have encouraged. Lilac, who was both more captious and less affectionate than her sister, had many friends, useful, ornamental or merely pleasant, with whom she quarrelled or amused herself, and had whirled her way through several love-affairs before she met Toby Bottomley and decided that in him she had found the husband she required. But Gillian depended for her friendships either on circumstance, or on the determination of those who were willing to pursue. Love-affairs she had none. There had been two strange episodes, both of them of almost the same kind, in which infatuated strangers had applied to her parents for permission to address her, and, on the second occasion, Gillian, who was by then nearly twenty-two, had had some trouble in assuring her widowed and excusably flustered mother that she didn't even know the young man by sight.

"Do you mean to tell me, Gillian," her mother had said when discussing the matter, "do you seriously mean to tell me that this is another case of that student at Lausanne all over again?"

And Gillian had assured her mother that, so far as her conscious knowledge of the affair was concerned, this was indeed a repetition of that old vexation. And it had seemed to her that she was once again an

onlooker at a play, the central character of which was a man who had fallen in love with a girl to whom he had never spoken a word.

But that afternoon, through the clear May sunshine that was beginning to turn golden with the westering beams, there came to Gillian, as to a long-prepared appointment, a creature who filled the eye to overflowing with that completed harmony between experience and imagination which, when it comes to any empty heart, is the most unmistakable of all vanquishing powers.

She was sitting on her heels, having taken off her hat as soon as she was inside the gateway (Gillian never wore a hat a minute longer than she needed, and not always so long as she should), and was watching the cat and admiring the bowl, when the door of the opposite building opened and a tall, dark woman came out and stood at the top of the steps.

Even before she came down to the courtyard and claimed it, Gillian knew that this was the owner of the china bowl, the Providence that dispensed clotted cream to dirty little strays. But as she came with a swift, steady stride, the free rapid movement of a woman who had been much with horses, who had ridden from childhood, Gillian also knew, with a thrill of recognition so strange, so new to her experience that the shock of it took away all sense of any other consideration, that she beheld in the flesh the very image of a perfection wrought by her own imaginings in the secret places of her dreaming mind. This was not a beautiful creature for all the world to see and gape at, it was the figure—unique of its kind—for which the shrine of her spirit had stood empty and waiting till now.

Dark hair, “curled like breakers of the sea” away from a low brow under which clear, tawny eyes shone beneath fine, exquisitely arched eyebrows; a wide mouth parted like a ripe pomegranate in a smile that showed white, even teeth, each separated from its fellow; an impression of clear red and white in the complexion, and, above all, that swift, scythe-like movement from hip to knee as the figure approached her where she crouched on the doorstep beside the lapping, oblivious cat, these were the first things Gillian was aware of as she gazed stupidly upwards into the vivid face.

“Is this your little cat?”

The voice was a disappointment: flat, metallic, not coming from any depth, curiously old and lifeless for so vital-seeming a possessor.

“Oh, no!” said Gillian, “we aren’t allowed to keep cats in the Club; didn’t you know?”

“Yes, I knew,” said the stranger, “but I thought you might be keeping one.”

“You must have thought I was behaving very badly to it,” Gillian retorted, “if you’ve been feeding it too.”

“Oh, well, I saw it was hungry. It’s been about for some days. I can see it from my window.” She made no attempt to excuse herself for the implied charge of neglect. Gillian thought she couldn’t have noticed it.

“I *heard* it,” said Gillian. “I couldn’t see it at first. It seems to prefer this side of the yard.”

“Yes,” said the stranger. “So you live in the Club?”

“I do,” said Gillian, “my name is Gillian Armstrong.”

“Do you spell it with a J?”

“No,” said Gillian, “it’s a soft G, like gilly-flower. I can see you live in the Club,” she went on, “because you’ve come out without a hat, but I’ve never seen you before. Are you a new member?”

“Yes, rather new. I came in last year. I know you quite well by sight. I see you from my window.”

“That’s because I don’t have curtains across mine,” said Gillian. “Up on the top floor it doesn’t really seem necessary. And Mrs. Gordon told me, when I asked if people could see in from below, that she’d never seen nothing wrong in my rooms.”

The other laughed, a short dry “honk” that added no more mirth to her steadily smiling eyes.

“Mrs. Gordon is a scream,” she said, “so is Mr. Gordon. Do you like his dog?”

“No,” said Gillian. “I can’t bear Crack, and I don’t think you’d better leave this lovely bowl down here. Crack will break it, you know.”

The cat had licked the last smear of cream from the sides of the bowl, and was now rubbing itself round the stranger’s ankles. Gillian with the bowl in her hands, stood up.

“Shall I wash it for you?” she said; “I’ll do it with my tea-things and send it over by the maid who brings my dinner.”

“Oh, don’t let Mabel bring it,” said the stranger, betraying what seemed to Gillian an extraordinary familiarity with the arrangements of the Club under which the four little housemaids revolved from floor to floor with each returning moon, so that you had the same maid for a month at a time and then passed into the hands of one of the other three. Gillian herself was quite incapable of finding out or of remembering which maid was waiting on any other floor but her own, though she had gathered from the verbosities of Mrs. Gordon that some floors were more popular with the servants than others, either because of the kindness of their occupiers or because of the more sensational furniture and adventures which occasionally distinguished one member from another in the gossip of the Club.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said. “Mabel is the rough one, she might drop it. How did you know it was Mabel’s turn on our landing?”

“Mabel did my floor last month,” said the stranger, “and she told me she was going to yours in time for the wedding.”

Gillian knew that a wave of resentment flowed through some dim backwater of her mind at this intrusion, but it was drowned in the flood of expectation with which she accepted a suggestion that, if she really insisted on washing out the Chinese bowl, its owner would be delighted to see her with it in her own flat.

“My name is Victoria Vanderleyden,” she said, “and I live at Number 36. Do come up to coffee.”

Gillian had never been bidden to go anywhere “to coffee” before, but she took the formula to indicate that she would be expected immediately

after dinner, and she accepted the invitation saying she would come as soon as she had turned the cat out for the night. For the cat was already inside the door, looking back over its shoulder, a little impatiently at Gillian, and plainly intending to dine with her that night also.

IV

The door of Number 36 stood open and lamplight poured out from the room over the dark landing where Gordon had not yet lit the gas-jet, when Gillian, carrying the china bowl and a bunch of purple centaureas from a basket of flowers which Sophie had left at the flat on her way from Glynde that afternoon, reached the third floor of the house across the courtyard, soon after eight o'clock.

It was, Gillian saw, one of the large, two-windowed rooms. The windows looked westward, across the tops of the trees in the gardens of Cheyne Row, and through them, lower than the lamplight, there still came the glow of a late, red sunset. Accustomed as she was to the roofs and chimneys of the street, or to the windows of the house across the courtyard as the familiar views from the Club windows, Gillian felt, as she entered this lit and quiet room, as though she were going into some far country.

Her own rooms and those of the Countess and of the Middletons, the only flats beside her own and Mrs. Barraclough's into which she had so far entered, were all colour-washed a uniform cream, with white paint on the doors and window-frames and skirting-boards; and this colour scheme was, so Mrs. Barraclough had told the Armstrongs when they took their flat, the rule of the Club.

But Miss Vanderleyden had evidently been allowed to break that rule, for her walls were tinted lavender, and all the woodwork that surrounded them was black. Long curtains, a shade darker than the walls, and touched by the sunset into a rosy mauve, hung at the windows, and two red, wooden candlesticks on the black chimney-shelf matched two painted Norwegian chairs which stood on either side of a low black table. A wide divan against the wall at one end of the room was covered with black satin and heaped with red and green cushions, and the bare boards

of the floor were black and shining. There were no pictures on the walls, but a mirror in a red frame hung from ceiling to floor between the windows, and over the fireplace there spread a fan-shaped case in which hundreds of South Sea Island shells were ranged together in a geometrical pattern. Gillian looked for books, but there were none to be seen. “Perhaps she keeps them behind those strange curtains,” she thought, noting that three of the far corners of the long room were curtained off with what was obviously stuff from Burnets in Garrick Street, a shop into which Lilac, who preferred her cretonnes flowered, had definitely forbidden Gillian to go when they were furnishing Number Seven.

A strong smell of freshly made coffee filled the whole landing; but of Miss Vanderleyden herself there was no trace. Gillian crossed the room and went over to the open window. Between two blocks of houses she saw the river move, still burnished in the fading light, and voices rose faintly from the small gardens under the trees below, where the dwellers in Cheyne Row were sitting out in the cool of the day. In one of the gardens a row of Chinese lanterns had been festooned between the branches, and some one was lighting them as if in preparation for a festivity. One green, one orange and one variegated globe were already swinging in the dusk and Gillian was waiting with absorbed, delightful speculation as to the probable colour of the fourth lantern, when a sound close beside her made her turn. Miss Vanderleyden was standing by the table on which she had placed a Benares tray with coffee-cups. She was gazing with lighted eyes, not at Gillian, but at her own reflection in the long, scarlet-rimmed mirror between the windows.

“Come and look,” she said, without taking her eyes away from the glass before her.

Gillian obeyed. Miss Vanderleyden had taken the red candlesticks from over the fireplace and had lighted the tall, white candles they held and had placed them on the table so that their wavering flames lit up her face as she leaned between them. The door, still open behind her, showed the dark abyss of the unlit landing beyond, which repeated itself in profound obscurity in the depths of the looking-glass. Out of the heart of the

darkness the vivid face floated midway on the surface of the mirror—wide, white brow, wide, luminous eyes, wide, smiling mouth. Miss Vanderleyden had not changed the soft, dark, brown dress she had been wearing when they first met, and Gillian saw that the large, old-fashioned topaz brooch still fastening the lace at her throat was matched by a pair of heavy gold bracelets which she wore on either arm. The stones in these antique, fetter-like jewels threw out reflections into the mirror and seemed to illuminate the hands which, raised on their finger-tips from the dark surface of the table, as though each had a separate existence in the shadowy picture, completed without belonging to, the whole reflection.

"Look at yourself," laughed the mouth in the mirror, and the mirrored eyes met Gillian's as she gazed.

And Gillian saw herself, a moth-pale phantom behind the radiant head. Her white frock glimmered grey in the background, the candle-light glinted in her hair so faintly that its blondness looked silver above the molten glow of Miss Vanderleyden's topaz and gold. Only her rose-flushed cheeks, and the starry glitter of the eyes she hardly knew for hers, prevailed with the ardent image that challenged her, and proved her able to meet the challenge.

It was the first time in her experience of life that any direct personal appeal had aroused in her this profoundly personal, this intense and definitely physical reply. Miss Vanderleyden's look had, Gillian could see it in her own reflection, changed the colour of her face, the expression of her own eyes and lips. For a moment they stood side by side looking at themselves and at one another in the dark pool of the mirror, and then Miss Vanderleyden spoke.

"Aren't we a nice contrast?" she said in the same flat, shallow voice as had startled Gillian that afternoon with its audible contradiction of all that her eyes could see.

* * *

They drank their coffee, which was very good, sitting together on the black divan which was neither so soft nor so comfortable as it looked, being as Miss Vanderleyden explained with some pride, constructed out of her

trunks and a spare mattress, and far too hard to be used as a bed except by actresses of whom, it appeared, Miss Vanderleyden knew all kinds.

“And most of them will sleep on anything, poor dears, when they are resting,” she stated, without explaining why an actress should be able to rest in such discomfort.

Statements of this nature, based on some occult information which, whether she could not or would not, she certainly did not impart, formed a staple of Miss Vanderleyden’s conversation and helped to send Gillian home across the courtyard to her own flat at midnight in a state of mingled exaltation and bewilderment. But some account of herself the wonderful creature had given, though few of the details were consecutive.

Her name, as she had already said, was Victoria Vanderleyden, but she was usually called “Victor” by her friends, and she invited Gillian to use this sobriquet from the beginning because she could see that they were going to be real pals. Gillian had been able without rejecting the advance or accepting the actual title of “real pal” to select from a choice of other names, to all of which the lady had answered in her day, the alternatives “V.V.” and “Viva,” and had made it clear that the “G” in her own name was a soft one. “V.V.,” it seemed, had the blood of an authentic missionary in her veins, and so her title to benefit by the Club was clearer than the Armstrongs’ had been. Her father’s brother—“a real Dutchman” (Gillian could not make out to what extent the brothers differed in their respective Dutchness) had been a missionary in Borneo, and it was from him that she had inherited the trophy of shells. But some of her life had certainly been spent in Ostend, and she appeared to have a root or two as far north as Blackpool. A person called “Daisy” flickered in and out of the dialogue and, just before they parted, Gillian gathered that this was no lady but Miss Vanderleyden’s brother, who appeared to be a gentleman of independent means.

These details were, in review, unsatisfactory and, added to the fact, which Gillian remembered Mrs. Barraclough deploring that Miss Vanderleyden was employed in a beauty-parlour, gave her a sense of having taken a step into an unknown and even a perilous region. But Gillian was not in the least afraid of the unknown and, as she looked for a third time that

evening at her own reflection, this last time in her own toilet-mirror in her own bedroom, she knew that she must go on with the adventure.

For her mirror showed her what V.V.'s mirror had shown her, the second time she had seen herself there—a new, and an undeniably changed and prettier Gillian. And she wanted to see this girl again.

"You don't know how to do your hair," V.V. had said after half an hour's talk with her new pal. "I can make it look twice as much. Do you mind?"

And Gillian, who had been told till she was tired that she did her hair infamously, had submitted without the least reluctance while V.V.'s long, swift, cunning hands drew out the pins from the "bun" at the back of her head and untwisted the tight coils into which Gillian drove a dozen hairpins like carpenters' nails twice or three times a day, in the despairing hope that they would hold her troublesome locks in place.

V.V. had produced a set of long-bristled brushes, bleached with constant washing and innocent of any trace of the varnish with which their wooden backs had been originally finished, and several large professional-looking combs. And then, with a long, steady stroke and a light lifting of each separate strand, she had worked her way from brow to nape of the head beneath the showering hair that fell as straight as rain over the elbows of the girl who sat with folded hands in the straight-backed red Norwegian chair beneath the hanging-lamp in that quiet room. V.V. brushed and brushed, crooning with pleasure as the fine hair rose and crackled through the bristles before they let each shining lock slide back into its place again.

"Lovely, lovely, hair," she babbled, and Gillian hardly heard the foolish voice as the cool hands moved through her hair soothing and lulling, and flattering her senses till she almost slept.

"Now," said V.V. "Sit up, I'm going to plait it over your ears."

"Why, I look like a German schoolgirl," said Gillian when the plaiting was over and the two long ropes had been coiled one each side of the parting which divided her head into two smooth shining segments, "and the pins hurt my ears dreadfully."

“You look like a fairy-tale princess,” said V.V. “I wish Dicky could see you. She’d simply love to draw you.”

It certainly was an improvement, but, now that she was back in her own room again, Gillian felt quite sure that Lilac would never allow her to wear her hair like that: and she unpinned the plaits knowing that she would twist her hair as usual and drive the long black hairpins into it in the morning, and cram her hat down on the solid lump in the same old way as ever, before setting out to her humdrum day in the correct establishment of Miss de Stormont in the Buckingham Palace Road.

During the next three or four days the intimacy between Gillian and V.V. grew like a gourd until, by Saturday morning, they were free of one another’s rooms and crockery; community of tea-things being one of the consequences of intimacy at the Mordaunt Club.

On Saturday morning a bomb fell.

“Dear Miss Armstrong,” wrote Mrs. Barraclough on the die-stamped correspondence-card she always used when reprehending members by letter:

“I am writing to Miss Vanderleyden as well as to yourself in order to request most emphatically that you will not continue to encourage stray cats about in the courtyard. I understand that you and she are in the habit of feeding a most objectionable and probably diseased animal there night and morning, and must forbid you to continue the practice.

Yours faithfully,
Theodora Barraclough,
Secretary.”

“And,” said Mrs. Gordon, who delivered the letter with her weekly bill and made no secret of having lifted the damp and yielding flap of the envelope in order to read the note on her way up, “Mr. Gordon’s going to set Crack on the little beast if it begins its mewing again to-night, I can tell you.”

Gillian, as Mrs. Gordon very well knew, had got the little beast shut up in the inner room where William was helping it to the coarser seeds of Parrot

Food in the intervals of eating the hemp out of the mixture himself. She made no reply to this sally but paid her bill and said that she would herself carry down the answer to Mrs. Barraclough's letter and post it in Mrs. Barraclough's letter-box when she went out later in the morning.

"Miss Vanderleyden ain't got hers yet," said Mrs. Gordon vindictively, moving on. "A telegram come for her from Eppin' ware she keeps that great dog of 'ers, this morning, and she's gone off in a great state. Borrerd Mr. Gordon's A.B.C., the one you threw away in Febewry, miss, to look out a train she did, and I hope she catches it."

"If she looked it up in a February time-table I'm afraid she's missed it then," said Gillian. "It's June now, you know, Mrs. Gordon."

But Mrs. Gordon was panting heavily across the landing and made as if she had not heard Miss Armstrong's fear.

All day long Gillian pattered crossly about the flat, feeding the most objectionable and probably diseased little creature which followed her in and out of the two living-rooms and twice got out on the landing and mewed there "as if," said Gillian to it, as she drove it in again, "as if it were not enough to have tempted me into a misdemeanour, and you must now advertise that I'm engaged in crime on your account."

Something must be done with the animal, and she certainly was not going to let Crack do it. Once the desperate thought of taking it up to Highgate and throwing it on Aunt Elizabeth's mercies came to her. But Aunt Elizabeth's mercies were not tender towards cats, and, though Atkinson might have sheltered it richly in the basement at 99, he was just then having a holiday and Gillian had no faith in the humanity of the first footman who was taking his place and who was not on friendly terms with the cook.

William, too, seemed to be siding with Authority. "Good-bye," he had observed rather severely to the cat several times since lunch, and when Gillian began to get tea and put down a sardine beside the saucer of milk for her guest, William raised his yellow crest and sang, "God save our Gray——" with unmistakable emphasis.

“All right, William,” said Gillian, losing her temper, “you needn’t shout like that. I’m going to take it to the chemist next door to the *Blue Cockatoo* and get it prussic-acided. So there.”

She caught the little cat and put it into an old Gladstone bag of her father’s and set off with misery and dislike in her heart to spend a shilling on murder.

Half-way to the chemist’s she met Heinrich.

He was coming away from the studio and was tightly buttoned into the short jacket of his blue suit so that he looked smaller than ever. He wore no hat, and one diaphanous black curl stood up, like a smoke-wreath in still air, from the very middle of his forehead making his long nose seem longer than before. His eyes were unusually blue and fierce.

“I go to buy a cage,” he announced with dramatic abruptness, stopping Gillian who had not intended to speak to anyone till her deed were accomplished, “a cage in which to shelter the beautiful canary Larrie gives to me. Zoze sparrows, zey pluck at ’im. Zey are proletariat birds. Zere is somesing alive in your bag,” he ended, suddenly diverted from his own mission by unmistakable signs of struggle in the interior of Gillian’s burden.

Gillian explained her dilemma and the cat in the bag grew violent.

“Oh,” said Heinrich, “ze poor animal will perish of himself in that confinement and zere will be no need to call on ze chemist. You shall just srow him in ze river.”

“Goodness,” said Gillian, “how horrid. I must let him out.”

“Come on ze Embankment to a seat,” said Heinrich. “I go wiz you. I will look at zis cat. My canary is all right for now. I have shut out all zoze sparrows till I shall give him a cage.”

“What’s happened to the cage he came in?” asked Gillian as they hurried to a seat. “Larry can’t have brought a canary home in a piece of paper.”

“Oh, it is somevere,” said Heinrich vaguely. “I sink we have lost it. It was a small, old cage. Perhaps Larrie sit on it.”

They reached the seat just in time. The little cat had given up the struggle to escape and was gasping for dear life at the bottom of the bag when they opened it.

Heinrich lifted the mottled, furry body out and laid it across his knees. The creature had improved a great deal during its friendship with Gillian, but it was still an unprepossessing cat. Heinrich stroked it with his dark, thin hands and lifted one corner of its drooping mouth.

“It lives. It jumps,” he announced. And presently, with a twitch or two, the tortoiseshell cat was itself again.

“It is a bad little cat,” said Heinrich, looking at it with mild criticism as it sat morosely on his knee, and lifted one paw after another with a tearing noise out of the serge of the trouser-leg, into which it had struck its claws to ensure its grip of the position. “Quite a bad little cat. It shall come to live in ze studio wiz Larrie and wiz me.”

“But, Heinrich, won’t it eat your canary, and frighten your sparrows?”

“No,” said Heinrich, “I say it is a bad little cat. If it would eat canaries and sparrows it would be a good little cat. I will take it in my hand.”

And he went back, across the river, towards the studio carrying the bad little cat in his arms.

CHAPTER FOUR.
LARRY BROWNE

I

Heinrich, barefooted as was his custom, and wearing the light-blue slops in which he always performed his self-appointed task, was trundling a mop across the studio floor the next morning when Gillian went down to see how the little cat had prospered among the birds. It was half-past ten and Sunday. The church-bells on the Battersea side and those fainter peals which came from over the water had stimulated the canary, which hung in an extremely fine cage in front of the long window by the hedge, to such tremendous matins of its own that Heinrich did not hear her knock at the open door. Gillian, on the threshold, waited while Heinrich swept on. He brought an entire seriousness and a complete lack of method to his work, and was, when Gillian arrived, absorbed in chasing a dandelion-seed which had blown in from the waste places of the Park, across the width of the studio floor, stalking the mist-like intruder with elaborate patience. He approached it with creeping stealth, hardly breathing as he lifted the oiled mop-head at the end of its long pole before the blow that would bring his prey to rest, only to see the spiky phantom dance away in the wind he had raised. The sparrows were everywhere. He drove them off from the immediate field, isolating the drifting seed. The sparrows appeared to have abandoned their vendetta against the canary now that it was caged, and to be pursuing their lawful occasions again with the usual noise and fluster. Some of them were perched round the rim of Larry's zinc sponge-bath which had been pulled out from the bedroom at the back of the studio and filled with clean water for them to bathe in, and one, as Gillian came to the door, had flown up from the water and was shaking the drops out of its wings, perched on the crown of Heinrich's black, devoted head.

Heinrich's estimate of the little cat's character was being abundantly justified; for the creature was seated on the model's throne, mildly washing its face with its paw, while, three feet away, a couple of sparrows were picking at the bird-seed which the canary scattered from the seed-box in the cage above them.

“Puss, puss,” called Gillian from the doorway. The little cat took no notice. Either it did not hear her or it had already forgotten her in the new security of its home. But Heinrich heard and came towards her, dragging the mop behind him, his face a little anxious with the eagerness of his welcome.

“I beg that you will enter,” said Heinrich. “Have you been long at ze door? I hear nozzing for ze cantata of my canary. It shall cease.” He laid the long-handled mop down on the floor in the place where he stood, stumbled slightly over it, regaining his half-lost balance with the lightest ease, and bustled, if so lithe and gentle a movement could be called bustling, after the sparrows, clearing them from the room in handfuls and putting them out at the casement which he closed upon them.

“It’s like putting toys away in a cupboard,” said Gillian, who never tired of watching the clearing process Heinrich always accomplished before attending to a visitor.

“Zeze sparrows are my toys,” said Heinrich. “My canary is my friend.”

“And what is the cat going to be?”

Heinrich met this conversational inanity with a seriousness it had not been framed to elicit.

“Tell me,” he questioned, his blue eyes very lustrous and dewy under their long lashes, “have you complete responsibility for ze life of zis little cat?”

“Goodness!” Gillian was alarmed. “I don’t even know if it belongs to anybody. It adopted me, and I’ve been feeding it with a friend. Here are its sardines. It has only had three out of the box.”

Heinrich took the oily tin, over which Gillian had tried unsuccessfully to re-roll the lid that curled back from its contents on its key opener, and counted the sardines with his thin forefinger.

“Ten fishes,” he announced. “Are zeze not your own food for to-day?”

“Mine! No! I hate sardines, especially in oil. So does William. They belong to the cat, really.”

Heinrich picked a sardine out of the tin with his fingers and carried it by the tail across to the throne where the cat still continued its perfunctory cleansing.

“See, Minchoulina!” he chanted, “a fish!”

But the cat had evidently gorged its fill on some earlier meal and, collapsing into one of those acrobatic postures with which the meanest cat can put the proudest human to scorn, went on licking its way over its person with an increase of zeal.

“When you know me better,” said Heinrich gently, “you shall dance and sing when I come.” And he carried the sardine back to its tin which he had laid on the floor beside the mop.

“And zis friend,” persisted Heinrich, putting the sardine carefully into its oil again, “is it her cat?”

“No. I don’t think so. No, I’m sure it isn’t. She has a dog. She’s gone away to see it. You can have the cat for your very own if you like, and if Larry doesn’t mind. Where is Larry?”

“Charing Cross.”

“Gone to meet a friend?”

“No, gone to go a walk.”

“What a funny place to walk to!”

“Oh, he will not walk zere. Afterwards he will walk all day. But at Charing Cross he get a train.”

“Don’t you ever go with Larry for his walks?”

“Me? Sometimes. Yes. But I do not like so many hills and so much rain. And to-day I must play in my orchestra in the afternoon.”

“Heinrich,” said Gillian, sitting down on the window-seat and taking off her hat, “I’m going to stay and help you put the studio really tidy. Tell me how did you and Larry ever come to share it?”

Heinrich brought the mop and the sardine-tin over to the window-seat and sat down with them, cross-legged on the floor in front of Gillian.

“Zis studio is mine,” said Heinrich; “it is left me by my uncle, and I let it to Larrie, and he take me wiz it. Quite simple. There is room for two people. In two years I am rich by my uncle’s money which is still now in his will, until I shall be older, zen I *give* zis studio to Larrie.”

“And where will you live then?”

“Everywhere,” said Heinrich gravely but with decision.

Gillian thought the programme admirable and they discussed it in much of its possible detail as they worked together at putting the studio really tidy. Gillian was glad of so good an excuse for not going back to the Club. She had been piqued at V. V.’s sudden departure yesterday and had an unreasoning desire that V. V. should in her turn wonder what had become of her.

At twelve o’clock, while Heinrich retired to his room behind the gallery to assume his “coats,” and Gillian was washing her hands in the little lavatory which opened out of Larry’s room on the ground floor, preparatory to making a salad for luncheon, Larry himself walked in. He was wearing light, rough tweeds, carried a metal-pointed cherry-wood stick and was rather cross.

“I’ve missed the only train in the day,” he said, “and I’m not in the mood to go anywhere but to Coldharbour. The rhododendrons will be out in the wood on the Ockley side and there’ll be bluebells left beyond Tanhurst and I sent Mrs. Print a post-card to say I would have lard-buns for tea.”

“Can nothing be done about it?” said Gillian.

“Yes. We can take a ’bus—a motor-omnibus from the Latchmere at one o’clock, and you are coming with me. It won’t take us to Coldharbour, but it will take us to the larch-wood and the buns, and I’ve got sandwiches enough for two here already and we’ll commandeer Heinrich’s lettuce. That’ll larn him to be a rabbit.”

“Heinrich can have the cat’s sardines,” said Gillian, feeling, as she dried the lettuce and put on her hat, that larch-woods near Coldharbour were more than an offset to a dog at Epping.

II

The larch-wood grew on one side of the hollow bridle-path that led across the hill from Broadmoor to Pitland Street. The rest of the way was through pine and birch with some oak scrub and a holly-bush or so at the intersection of the main bridle-path with the smaller tracks which ran straight down the slope.

They came out through a beech-tunnel that switch-backed narrowly between palings and, at a turn in the path, saw the aisles of green larch-boles shot with violet rising out of the bracken, greener at that time of year than the feathery green of the curved, fine arabesques of the branches above it.

It was nearly four o’clock when Gillian and Larry reached the larch-wood, and the sun, held up by the long shadow of Holmbury Hill, behind which in another two hours’ time it would be setting, was sending slanting rays between the trunks of the trees.

The bluebells Larry had promised were there, though not in great masses: but their coming disturbed a jay which fled away from them through the purple tree-trunks, flying low so that the light flashed on his blue head and picked out the black-and-white feathers in his wide, strong wings. The brambles were all in bloom under the green fronds of bracken and their pinky-white flowers repeated the tender rose of the horizon seen beyond the green veil of the larch-spindles.

“It’s softer than the mountain larch-woods with snow behind them,” said Gillian.

“Colouring’s sentimental,” said Larry, “but the drawing’s good. I’m going to use it for the background of my fresco design. It’ll repeat well, and I can change to sky instead of the hill behind it for the figures. Panoramic pathetic fallacy. Dawn for the Changeling. You’re very like a Dawn anyhow, Gillian; and twilight for the piping Eros. Can’t put a violin into

symbolism—and the lewte's an instrument I never could a-bear. It's a filthy job altogether—I wish I'd never started on it. I could draw Heinrich for ever, but this making a photograph-gallery of one's friends…."

"Then why do it?"

"Oh! I dunno. Hand to the plough and all that. Besides, it *is* a good idea. Why can't you be the Eternal Feminine you look, Gillian, and cheer the artist in his despondent hours?"

"I thought you meant it. Besides, I can quite see that there are times when you would get tired of an idea like that. Are you putting all your friends in?"

"No. Nor half mine enemies either. What could you do with Bird in a fresco, for instance?"

"If you were Augustus John——" said Gillian.

"I shouldn't be going in for a London County Council prize competition, my poor dear Dawn. Try to rise to daylight, or is it your tea you need?"

"No, not yet. Let's stay here. I like this mauve and green and rosy wood. Why didn't we bring Heinrich?"

"You think that because Heinrich can pick up sparrows in his hands as though they were tennis-balls, that he'd be at home in a wood among squirrels and nuts. But you are quite wrong. Heinrich is brother to the sparrow who is a city bird. He's good with Cockneys. But he's an indoor pet—that's why the canary is not wasted on him, or that dreadful little cat you've planted on us. But put him in the open and he's lost. Think of Heinrich in tweeds! It can't be done. Heinrich suggests the spirit of the wild to people who've only read about it in the Classics. He's Art. He's the eternal Will to be Other. But there's nothing of the English public-school boy, the country gentleman about him. And that's the man who really enjoys your muddy lanes and your streaking red sunsets and says 'pretty dear' to the rabbits he's going to shoot."

"I'm sorry," said Gillian, "but you introduced me to Heinrich as a faun."

"And did you ever see a faun in Surrey? Or in Devonshire? Or in Wales? I've heard of fairies in Wales. Little grey men with long beards who don't

mean to let you see them—and there's a lot of dialect ballad metre about pixies on Dartymoor; but the faun—the faun, my child, is the invention of the sophisticated artist."

"Heinrich's not sophisticated."

"Heinrich in his way is a genius. But the home of his soul is Leicester Square. I found him, covered with sparrows, on a bench in front of that soaring tribute to Shakespeare which so fittingly presides over the Empire, the Alhambra and Daly's."

"He'd be all right at Taormina," said Gillian.

"And when his uncle's money comes out of his will"—Larry grew emphatic and a little angry—"he shall go there, if I can keep the vultures away from him till then."

"I suppose people might swoop down on him if he had money to give away."

"Yes, they would. But that isn't what I was thinking of."

"What did you mean by vultures, then?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Heinrich's very endearing," said Gillian, passing on from vultures, "he's the kind of thing you'd like to put in your pocket and take home to keep with your dolls."

Larry looked at her quickly. It was the same sharp, surprised look she'd seen jump into Toby's eyes the day she found the chopped volume of *Poems and Ballads*.

"That's how the vultures feel," he said shortly.

"But mine isn't a devouring wish."

"No. I don't suppose it would be. You'd better leave it at that."

So they watched a nuthatch pulling its way up the bole of a tree in front of them; and wondered why it was there instead of the squirrels which seemed more probable in such a place; and smoked Petit Caporal

cigarettes, which Larry got from a little shop near Victoria and pretended to like, though Gillian, who wasn't much of a smoker herself, didn't see how he could. And then they went down to Pitland Street and came to Honeysuckle Cottage, so called because of the honeysuckle bush which stood at the garden gate and was visited by gardeners for miles around, being something of a curiosity. It was beginning to flower and was full of bees that day, and Mrs. Print, who counted it one among many occasions of her pride, stood by it, like a benevolent witch, a bent, smiling figure in a black dress and a white apron, with smooth hair, still black, parted tightly on either side of a nutcracker face that looked as if it were carved out of old ivory.

"Hurry up, Mr. Browne," she called to him as they crossed the green in front of the house, "them lard-buns you ordered is baking themselves dry, and it's going to rain. You'll be getting the young lady damp."

The sky had clouded over, and as they drank strong Indian tea, heavy with cream, and ate what Gillian thought was bilberry, but Mrs. Print called "Hurt jam," in her parlour, the rain began to fall outside. Mrs. Print's parlour was a room as full of flowering geraniums and other hot-house plants as if it had been a conservatory instead of being the chamber in which Mrs. Print stored the strange and occasionally valuable things she'd spent a lifetime buying at the sales at great houses in the countryside both here in Surrey and in Lincolnshire where she'd gone in marriage with her first husband, a Mr. Booty of those parts. She had returned at Mr. Booty's death to her mother's house which she had inherited and to which she had welcomed Mr. Print, a meek little man whom she had married, chiefly, said Larry, who recounted Mrs. Print's history to Gillian over their tea, because he was a gardener by trade and could give professional services to the honeysuckle bush.

"It's my belief, Mrs. Print," said Larry, repeating what was clearly an old and trusted joke, "that you and Mr. Print do something to that bush to prevent its being a creeper. It isn't a freak of nature at all, but just a common work of art."

Mrs. Print picked up a crumb from the Brussels carpet and smoothed a plush chair-back that hung over the interlacing pattern of a beautiful Heppelwhite settee.

“You’ve said that before, sir,” she answered with friendly scorn; “if you was a gardener yourself you’d know better. How’s Miss Jerusalem?”

This appeared to be a frontal attack of considerable weight, for Larry’s golden freckles disappeared into his blush as he answered, rather hurriedly, “Oh, quite well, I fancy. What about getting to the station in all this rain?”

“I’ll step round and see if Mandible’s got a trap going.” Mrs. Print was immediately side-tracked by the appeal to her instinct for preserving the young from damp.

And accordingly, ten minutes later, Gillian entranced, watched Mrs. Print in an enormous black straw wide-awake trimmed with a plain band of what was now very rusty black ribbon, her shoulders protected from the elements by a small three-cornered red woolen shawl and carrying a large, green cotton umbrella, “step” down the garden path and out across the green on her way to see about a trap.

“Couldn’t we have gone ourselves?” she asked, feeling very young and ruthless for exposing so bent a frame to the weather on her behalf.

“We might have tried to go, but we shouldn’t have gone. It’s my belief that Mrs. Print takes a commission on orders for Mandible’s trap and likes to book them herself.”

Presently Mrs. Print came back up the garden path and stood outside the open glass door of the sitting-room while she unpinned her skirts and shook the rain out of her umbrella.

“Mandible’s took the trap over to Malquoits with a party hisself,” she announced over her shoulder, “but Madge’ll put the old pony into the closed conveyance for ye, and you’ll have to be startin’ soon as she’s a slow driver and the roads is slippery with all this wet.”

The June rain was falling heavily by this time. It washed the sandy path before Honeysuckle Cottage into a golden ridge between two brawling torrents which ran down to a pool at the south side of the green to meet the motor-road where the rods of water broke into circles of spray with a beating patter as they hit its shining, tarry blackness.

The “closed conveyance” driven by a small, morose girl from the brim of whose straw hat the rain was falling in a stream over her large, melancholy nose, swished through the rivulets beneath its wheels and drew up outside the gate, where it stood, wreathed in the steam from the old pony’s devoted and unclipped flanks, and waited while they said good-bye to Mrs. Print. It was a very small, very old brougham; a metropolitan, luxurious padded trifle with silver-and-ivory handles to its doors, and ivory knots and buttons for the brocaded window-straps and arm-rests, the heavy crimson cords and the flower-vase clip, the pencil-tray and the hanging letter case, with which it still was fitted. There was a shelf, under the window behind the coachman’s box, high enough to take the paper-bordered bouquet of the lady it had once carried to Court or to the Opera in the days when the Empress Eugénie visited her royal cousin at Buckingham Palace. Two cords buttoned across the roof had once held the silk hat of her escort when she drove out in the daytime and could make room for one beside her silken skirts. It might have been the original coupé designed by and built for the fashionable beauty who first called her carriage after the original garden-chaise of the fierce Lord Brougham; so neat was its finish, so brave the excellence of its frame, so heroic the resistance to age and decay which the cracked but still valiant leather of the coachwork, and the remaining varnish on its slender wheels still offered to the eye. Even the unkempt and dejected pony who stood, too low for his position, between the curving shafts, could not destroy the serious elegance, the accomplished and considered frivolity of its air.

“Hallo, Mrs. Print,” said Larry, surveying the “trap” between the spreading leaves of a huge arum lily which stood in the parlour-window, “why have I never seen this remnant of forgotten splendour before?”

“You generally walks to the station, sir,” said Mrs. Print dryly.

She had returned from escorting Gillian to the vehicle under her green umbrella, and was now waiting for Larry to pursue through his various pockets the exact equivalent in coin of the tea they had consumed.

“Mrs. Print is certainly a fairy. Is she your godmother, Larry?” said Gillian as they drove away, the rain drumming on the roof and misting over the windows of the little carriage where they sat, hunched and crowded on account of Larry’s height and rucksack and the thickness of his tweeds. Larry fidgeted and wiped the mist on the inside of the window next him with a too easy unconcern.

“Oh, the Honeysuckle Bush is a great place for reading-parties. I’ve known her ever since my first year at Trinity.”

Larry was silent for the rest of the drive. The noise of the rain, the clop-clopping of the pony’s hoofs on the wet asphalt, the swish of overhanging branches across the roof of the little brougham which held them both so tightly, made it easy not to talk and Gillian, tired with the long day in the open—they had walked eight miles to get to the larch-woods—lay back against the worn but not ragged brocade of the padded lining and wondered with a little sting of envy who Miss Jerusalem was.

It must, thought Gillian, be rather wonderful to be a friend of Larry Browne; very friendly to have been with him at Cambridge—there were girls as well as men who belonged to that near past of his! Some of them had come to the studio, easy, laughing creatures who talked of swimming and tennis, of walking tours and winter sports and only very casually of “jobs” which they took, not because they had to work to live, but because it was better fun to be doing something. Miss Jerusalem, she supposed, was one of these.

It was none of her business, and she had not fallen in love with this tall, careless, beautiful Larry Browne; but, if ever she could come back to live the life on earth again, as some people imagined possible, and if she might, remembering this life, make her choice of the next time, it would—of this she had long been sure—it would be that she might be one of this free and happy company who were cradled in learning, and to whom

money was a means already granted and never an end to be pursued, hardly even a necessity to be toiled for.

The sudden chilling of the summer air that had come with the rain, fell also on Gillian's mood as they travelled slowly between half-seen hedges, down the long, gradual hill to the station in the valley. Larry Browne, the friendly, argumentative companion and guide of the sunlit hours of the day had now grown strange, detached, almost inimical. Gillian had a sudden and desolating wonder. Was she boring him? The thought had never occurred to her before, but if it should be—how was he, how was she, to endure the rest of the cool, dim journey back to London?

In the train Larry, who had cheered up as soon as they were released from the antique confinement of Mandible's closed conveyance, unpacked his rucksack and offered her her choice of *The Three Mulla-Mulgars* and *Georgian Poetry* to read till they got to Charing Cross. Gillian, who had bought the anthology when it came out, chose the novel, which turned out not to be a novel at all, but something so much better that she came up as from the depths of a well to realize that the train had stopped at Waterloo Junction which was why it had suddenly grown too dark to read. The wistful merriment of the monkey-pilgrimage she had been following with a sense of a new world to explore had chased away her own cloud of self-pity, and she saw with a free heart the lemon and lavender of a clearing sky reflected in the lamp-spangled waters of the Thames as the train moved slowly into Charing Cross, and the lit clock of the tower of Westminster pointed to half-past eight.

It was cold at Charing Cross. It was cold on the top of the No. 11 omnibus which trundled slowly down the rain-washed slope of Whitehall and took its almost solitary way along Victoria Street, splashing through the pools of petrol and water that had settled in the uneven shallows of the traffic-furrowed road. Gillian's spirits drooped again. She was lonely. She was ending the day farther away from Larry than she had been before it began. Lilac was at the other side of the world by now, in Japan. There would be no one in the little flat under the roof of the Mordaunt Club. The grate in the inner room would be empty, bare and clean, the chimney swept for the summer. She did not even know if there were a bundle of firewood in

the cupboard by the scullery sink, and there was a hole in her right stocking, right round the base of her great toe, and her feet were cold, and by the time she had walked from King's Road to the Club, her feet in the thin shoes in which she had walked so far that day, would be wet through. Gillian wished she were there in the cold twilight, with the door locked, having a thorough good cry. The omnibus stopped with a grinding jerk. Larry helped her off the step with a kind hand under her elbow, which he held a moment in his warm, firm palm as they walked along the slippery pavement together.

"Dumpy? Come and have supper with Heinrich and his mice—oh yes, he has mice out when the sparrows have gone to roost. There's sure to be cheese and eggs, and we might make coffee and omelette with the Primus."

"Oh, Larry! May I?"

"Yes, of course," said Larry.

"I've got some macaroons and a Buszard cake," said Gillian as they passed the Club; "shall we get them too?—and Lady Bottomley often sends down strawberries on Sunday."

"Up we go to see," said Larry, with enthusiasm.

* * *

A golden flicker of light under the door of Number Seven crept across the landing to their feet as they reached the top of the stairs.

"Whoever—whatever!" Gillian was alarmed. "Is it on fire?"

"What a first-rate idea," said Larry, "let's hope it is a good one—omne ignotum pro magnifico, or Hope for the best, as they say in the schoolroom. Hadn't we better go in and see?"

For Gillian was hesitating on the doorway. Her key was not in her pocket.

"I'm frightened, Larry."

"The longer you wait the more frightened you'll be. Is the door locked?"

"I forget, I'll try."

The doors at the Mordaunt Club were so constructed that, even if you forgot to lock them as you went out, nobody who didn't know the secret of the handles could open them from the outside.

Gillian pushed the knob and the door fell back.

The light came leaping and glowing from the inner room. Someone had kindled a fire in the empty grate.

III

V.V. was sitting in front of a fire burning clear, and licked with flame as only a newly lit fire can burn. She had left the window-sash thrown up from below, and the stirring night-airs blew the curtains about so that they made shadows in the lamplight from the windows on the opposite side of the courtyard. The eager fire and the waving curtains filled the room with a dance of flame and shade. The great Fortuna on her rope above the world; Saint Hubert praying to the crucifix that rises between the horns of the stag he has hunted till sundown, were revealed and hidden as the flames leapt and the curtain waved across the white wall where they hung, the tall white bookcase between them.

She sat in the red-leather couch, her astonishing eyes watching the doorway, her dark mouth fixed in a steady smile. The firelight moved in the great waves of her hair, burnishing their heavy curves, and flashed on the whiteness of her even teeth. She wore a dress of some thin silk many times washed to a faint brick-red, and her long hands, their wrists held in the tawny bracelets she always wore, lay palm to palm in her lap, the finger-tips catching the light above the sharp angle made by her knees which jutted sharply through the stuff of her clinging skirt as though it were a skeleton and not a woman sitting under the rusty silk that fell to the rug at her feet hiding them in its folds.

Gillian stood in the doorway smiling back at the firelit face. It shone out against the background of book-filled shelves behind it, gathering up the glint of the lettered bindings, their reds and yellows and browns in one living concentration of colour and light.

"God! What a colour scheme!" said Larry from behind her shoulder.

“A fire’s nice on a wet evening, isn’t it?” said V.V., stretching her hands to the blaze but making no other movement. “I’ve had supper ready for an hour.”

“You’ll have to stay to supper with us, Larry,” said Gillian. “This is Miss Vanderleyden who lives at Number Thirty-Six in the other house. V.V., this is Mr. Browne. He’s adopted our cat.”

“Well,” said Larry, “that’s one way of putting it. I’ve been told that a cat, I hesitate to believe it was ever Miss Vanderleyden’s, and you say it wasn’t yours, Gillian—I’ve been told that a female cat has been added to the menagerie at my studio without my consent.”

“I didn’t know it was a she,” said Gillian.

“All tortoiseshells are,” said Larry. “That is one of the beautiful truths which are universal.”

“Oh,” said V.V., “Mrs. Gordon said there’s been a fuss about it and I found a silly letter from Mrs. Barraclough when I got in. Was it your cat after all?”

“I’ve just told you, V.V.,”—Gillian had already noticed that V.V. often did not quite follow everything that was said—“I’ve explained I’ve given the cat to Larry. It was a stray.”

“Oh, was it?”

“Yes. Where have you put supper, and is there enough for three?”

“In the other room. Didn’t you see as you came through?”

“No; we thought the book-room was on fire.”

V.V. laughed quite heartily at this and then, suddenly becoming practical and administrative, she announced that there was hot water for Gillian to wash and enough for Larry, too, if he didn’t mind washing at the sink, and that they could get tidy while she dished up.

“Does this vision dwell with you?” asked Larry while V.V. disappeared to ration the boiling water.

“Not exactly, but she knows where I keep everything. Isn’t she lovely?”

“She looked gaudy in the firelight when we came in, but the drawing of her face is bad. Nose wrong. No chin.”

“I thought you looked as if you wanted to draw her.”

“I am going to paint her. Her colour’s exciting.”

V.V. had made a fine supper. A strange, sliced sausage which she said came from Looms, which might, for all Gillian knew, be a suburb of Epping; a crisp salad, not cut with a knife but lightly torn, and sprinkled with a dew of lemon-juice and a frosting of brown sugar; a junket with cream in which the huge Bottomley strawberries were drowned; the macaroons; the Buszard cake; a bottle of white wine; a loaf of brown bread; a dish of radishes, and her own as well as Gillian’s butter, made enough for three. V.V. had laid these things out in dishes, some of them her own, some of them Gillian’s and had brought over two amber glass candlesticks with dangling lustres which she had inherited from an aunt and which were the joy of Gillian’s life at that moment. Two tall candles stuck in these heirlooms lit the feast and threw down white copies of their flames that lay like waving petals on the dark, waxed surface of the table.

“Poor Heinrich! we might have fetched him,” said Gillian half-way through her second macaroon.

“No, we mightn’t.” Larry was heaping his plate with the cream-extinguished strawberries. “He’s quite happy. He’s got all the cheese for his mice.”

“What about that little cat?” asked V.V. “Is Heinrich the name you’ve given him?”

“Heinrich,” Larry informed her, “is a mouse-tamer. It’s a more difficult thing to be than a lion-tamer. He also tames sparrows. That is difficult too. It is also quite messy. Worse than William who is but one and, I suppose, trained for the house.”

“You suppose wrong,” said Gillian, “but no matter. Go on telling V.V. about Heinrich.”

“Heinrich, for the moment, follows mouse- and sparrow-taming as a hobby. He lives by his fiddle and with me. With, but not *on*. I pay him no rent and the studio is his. He pays me no board and the studio is mine. One day Heinrich will be rich.”

“How rich?” asked V.V., gleaming.

“Oh, quite. His uncle had foolish, dilatory ideas about Heinrich’s majority, and there are things in Chancery for him. A grasping place. But that’s neither here nor there. Heinrich has his own joys and his needs are few. If only he could wear my clothes his needs would be none.”

Larry looked down, a little self-consciously, at his long tweed-covered legs, and Gillian thought of the yellow and pink, blue, silk skirts and Brobdingnagian trousers he usually wore when at work, and of Heinrich’s shiny serge suit and the pathetic blue slops slung round his thin bird’s neck as he mopped the studio floor after his birds.

“At this moment,” said Larry, warming to his work, “Heinrich is most probably marching on tip-toe, a sort of solemn dance—an antic hay—all round the studio. He’ll have lighted a little, bronze, Roman lamp with olive-oil and a wick made out of the marrow of a seven-months child and it will be burning blue and violet in the middle of the floor, and, after him, there will skip mice of all ages, on *their* toes, their pink, little, sharp-nailed toes, and sparrows, walking in their sleep, will come in twos and threes and dance with them, and, at the tail of the procession, your tortoiseshell cat, Miss Vanderleyden, will be walking on his hind legs, and the canary will have broken cage and be perched on the bow as he fiddles—oh yes, he’ll be fiddling away, and spiders will come swinging down on threads from the roof and all the cockroaches from the studio next door will look in——”

Larry paused for breath.

“What a queer little man he must be,” said V.V. “I should like to meet him.”

Gillian was almost afraid that V.V. believed it all, but she did not like to tell her that Larry was just talking, in case she had really understood. It was difficult with two people you didn’t know very well. After all, she’d not

known Larry much more than a month and V.V. less than a week. Besides, what Larry had said was true, in a way. Heinrich might at any time make friends with a spider, even though Gillian hoped he wouldn't with a cockroach, and it was more than probable that he was at that very moment fiddling a tune for the little cat to dance to.

"Shall we go and call on that funny man?" said V.V.

But when they got to the studio all was quiet. Nobody was fiddling, nobody was dancing and the canary, its head long since under its wing, was asleep, a ball of pale down on the perch of its cage high up in the shadows of the soaring roof.

The table was laid with an untouched supper for two; bread, cheese, a mug of beer and a plate of green apples, and, curled in a corner of a divan, among sketches and scarves and half-empty boxes of crayons, Heinrich slept, with the tortoiseshell cat purring quietly, asleep, beside him.

"What a shame," said V.V. "He's waited for you and never touched a thing himself. Let's wake him and give him his supper now."

So they woke Heinrich who admitted that he was very hungry—it was now almost eleven o'clock—and V.V. set to and made a cheese omelette of a high superiority, and the cat had all the milk and Heinrich had all the beer which made him astonishingly gay and polyglot.

"Heinrich talks all the languages there are," Larry explained to V.V., "talks them all with a foreign accent and I don't believe he gets any of them quite right, but he gets most of them far better than we get any of them except our own, and as he's not got one quite of his own——"

"Oh, I expect he's got one of his own all right," said V.V., "but he keeps it dark."

"Mein bester," said Larry, "she's insulting you. Can you hear her?"

Heinrich was sitting on the floor, his hands clasped round his knees, rocking slightly to and fro. His eyes were fixed on V.V.'s face as she sat above him in a gilded Italian chair with a large green apple in her hand.

Gillian thought he was paler than usual, but he was always so pale that this might only be her fancy.

Suddenly Heinrich spoke in a high, quick voice, rocking to and fro in time to the words.

“Ich liebe dich,” said Heinrich with conviction.

“Mich reiz’ deine schöne Gestalt.

“Und bist du nicht willig,” he chanted, the wind rising in the music behind his voice:—

“Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch’ ich Gewalt.”

“There!” cried V.V., in some alarm, “I told you so! He’s talking some outlandish language of his own. Does anyone understand him?”

But Larry was rolling in his chair in a paroxysm of joy.

“Oh, Heinrich, you unmatchable treasure! Your virtue is beyond rubies,” he shouted. “*So brauch’ ich Gewalt. Gewalt!* Did you hear it, Gillian?”

“Yes,” said Gillian, a little dazed, “and I think, in a way, he would—he could, I mean.”

“I told you he’d got a funny language of his own,” Miss Vanderleyden reiterated, her eyes shifting quickly from Gillian’s smile to Larry’s laughter-wrinkled face.

“You know, the Erlkönig wasn’t brawny after all. Play it to us, Heinrich, you haven’t played to us this evening. Get your fiddle and spin.”

Larry, for all his mocking tongue, was very proud of this odd, gifted, incalculable friend.

So Heinrich got his fiddle and spun the mist and the wind and the night-ride through the storm, and rocked them with the galloping horse, and cried to them with the terrified child, and stirred them with the sound of the goblin’s insatiable desire.

* * *

Gillian and V.V. went home in the small hours. They walked across the bridge in the light of an old moon lying on its back low in the sky, having refused to be accompanied by either Larry or Heinrich. It was V.V. who had insisted.

“We shall be seen coming in by one of the old cats,” she said, “and they’ll think you’ve come in too.”

“Goodness!” said Gillian, “what a horrid thought. But they couldn’t.”

“Oh, yes, they could,” and V.V. proceeded to tell how the Countess had written to Mrs. Barraclough, once when one of V.V.’s actresses was being put up on the hard divan, to complain that Miss Vanderleyden’s visitor had come home after midnight with a man, *who was never seen to leave*!

“What did Mrs. Barraclough do? Did she come up and look in your cupboard for him?”

“No,” said V.V. “She wrote to the Countess and said she was so sorry to hear that she’d felt obliged to sit up all night in that way, but that she felt quite sure I was able to chaperone my guests myself.”

“Did he?” said Larry.

“Did who, what?”

“Leave.”

“He never came in, of course. The Countess lost sight of him in the archway, I suppose. Serve her right if she did sit up till morning.”

“Oh, well,” said Larry, “if it means keeping Countesses out of their beds till dawn, and you’re quite sure——”

“That Heinrich gives me the creeps,” chattered V.V. as they walked home; “his fiddle and those eyes. And you did look such a thin, tired little thing, I wanted to take you home and brush your hair and put you nice and comfy in your little bed-a-bies long ago. I came home for a surprise for you this morning and you weren’t there. I said to Dicky that you’d be wondering where ever I’d got to yesterday, but she had Jerry and Frank coming and poor old Biddles had had to have a pill. So I lit the fire and got supper

ready and all, and we could have had such a nice cosy little evening all to ourselves, and then you came in with your Larry and spoilt everything."

"But V.V., you were quite pleased to see Larry, and, please, he's not particularly mine."

Gillian was irritated a little by V.V.'s chatter. It was very late; she herself was really tired and it seemed beyond understanding that anyone could have listened to Heinrich's fiddle and not still be silent in the mood it had woven round them all. Larry was still in it, she was sure, and Heinrich himself had never come out of it at all, but had sat, a shadow among shadows, in the darkness round the model-throne, plucking fragments of melancholy airs out of his violin while they said good-night.

V.V. was a puzzle. In the moonlight, with her rich colour greyed into monochrome, Gillian could see what Larry meant about her nose being clumsy and her chin weak. They seemed to reinforce the vapid, babbling voice, making it sillier than it sounded by day or in the lamplight. Only the swift, smooth walk, the balanced rhythm of knee and shoulder moving in continuous, co-ordinated harmony kept their beauty. They were a lilt of the enchantment under which Gillian had fallen, beating time to the pulses of her heart, carrying her back to the room overlooking the gardens, to the compelling magic of the face which had shone out of the dark mirror on the night when Gillian had washed up the cat's cream-bowl, only a week ago.

"Is Biddles your dog?" She asked the question to escape from the creeping disillusionment that sickened beneath her fatigue.

"Yes, he is, the darling. Dicky's keeping him till I can afford to have a cottage. He's a borzoi. They're very delicate, you know, and Biddles bites—that's why he's at Epping."

Gillian was too tired to ask whether biting dogs were cured or endured at Epping.

They let themselves into the courtyard stealthily and then, because it might wake Mrs. Barraclough, who lived on the ground floor, if V.V. were to open the hall door and go up to her flat in the farther house, she came up

to Gillian's and slept, in borrowed night-gear, on the red couch by the embers of the fire she had kindled.

Gillian slept well that night. V.V. had carried out her programme and had brushed Gillian's hair and braided it into two long plaits which she tied with ribbons and pulled out over the sheet on each side of Gillian's face as she tucked her up in bed.

"It's my flat," Gillian had protested, "I ought to be putting you to bed really."

"But you're not," said V.V. She stood by the bedside, a lighted candle in her hand, and looked down at the tired girl with a brooding eagerness. Then stooping swiftly, she kissed Gillian, kissed her with a little gurgling murmur, as if a mother were kissing her baby, kissed her twice on her open, astonished mouth.

"How odd of V.V.," said Gillian sleepily to herself when the door had closed behind her, and the room was dark and still. And she pulled her handkerchief from under her pillow and wiped her lips as if she had taken a drink from the tumbler of water which stood on a table beside her bed.

IV

Later in the week, Gillian went to tea with Jane Bird in her workshop in Buckingham Palace Road. It was conveniently situated for the purpose, being on the way home from the Secretarial School.

Jane had called the place her studio when she first took it, but since she had begun to sell her figures she had changed the name.

"It's not Art, it's Commerce that I woo behind these portals," she explained. "Besides! Look at it!"

The place was certainly business-like. It had originally been a coach-house and stables, and the loose-box and stalls still remained as store-rooms, divided from the larger portion in which Jane, standing at a long table on trestles, worked on her plasticine figures.

“I keep three going at a time, one being modelled, one being painted, one being varnished. Mr. Quist has invented a varnish which is transparent without being shiny.”

Mr. Quist, a little olive-skinned man with a shock of white hair, who worked in his shirt-sleeves and wore a red tie and a gold watch-chain, looked up and bowed his acknowledgment of this introduction, but did not speak. He was varnishing a figure with a camel’s-hair brush which he dipped with marked precision into a clear, colourless liquid that seethed in a glass retort under a spirit-lamp.

Gillian went across the workshop to look at the figure. It stood about eighteen inches from the square base on which it was moulded and which was painted in the semblance of a sandy path between two flower borders. The figure was that of an old, bent woman in a black full-skirted gown with a bodice buttoned tight across the hollow, stooping chest. It stood, leaning forward, supporting itself with two claw-thin, parchment-white hands on the crook of a large, bushy, green umbrella. The face, keen and delicate, like an old ivory, was framed in smooth bands of dark brown hair gathered into a bag-like net at the back of the fine, old head.

“Goodness!” said Gillian. “It’s Mrs. Print.”

“Goodness!” mocked Jane Bird, “how did you know?”

“Larry took me to tea there last Sunday.”

“The Pirate! Mrs. Print’s mine. Larry had no right to share her. I’d have taken you there myself.”

“Oh, dear!” Gillian was remorseful. “Why didn’t I say ‘by the pricking of my thumbs’? Anyone can see she’s a witch—a good witch.”

“She’s nothing of the kind. She’s a village landlady who knows her business, but you make every-think into a fairy-tale.”

“Well, look at her! Look what you’ve done with her! How did you get that black-velvet net effect on her hair?”

“How did she get a chenille net? I don’t suppose there’s another within a hundred miles of London. Did she tell you about her teeth?”

“I don’t think she’d got any.”

“She hasn’t. And she hasn’t had for years. She bites with her gums. They’ve grown hard and sharp, and she reads without spectacles, and she takes her mother out in a bath-chair every Saturday afternoon.”

“Jane! what magnificent people you know! Larry and Heinrich and Mrs. Print.”

“Magnificent isn’t the right word for either Heinrich or Mrs. Print. Larry, perhaps.”

Mr. Quist looked up from his varnishing. He pushed his gold-rimmed spectacles up on to his forehead, put his paint-brush down on a glass tray, dropped a glass extinguisher over the blue flame of the spirit-lamp and, without a word, trotted off across the workshop and disappeared into the loose-box.

“Jane, who is Mr. Quist? He doesn’t look like a workman.”

“He’s a genius. And I know no more about him than you can see for yourself. He called here one morning to buy a figure he’d seen in that shop I told you about. They’d sold that one and he wanted another, and I wouldn’t make one for him. So he told me about his varnish.”

“It sounds like the Great Panjandrum! Did he speak?”

“Not much. The bare minimum. We carry on mostly in pregnant silences. I’m good at mute eloquence.”

“I know you are. But I shouldn’t have thought two could have been eloquent enough that way.”

“Well, we are. He’s gone to fetch the Larrys for you.”

Mr. Quist emerged from the loose-box carrying in either hand a veiled object, much like a priest bearing two chalices to a sick parishioner. Mr. Quist jerked his head sideways and Jane, advancing to meet him, took one of the muslin-shaded figures from him and placed it on the work-table. Mr. Quist carried the figure he still retained to a shelf with a small, carved canopy, evidently prepared for the exhibition of completed figures, and then returned to unveil the one Jane had taken from him.

It was Larry Browne in his wide green corduroys, his blue, cloudy shirt open, his straight hair a little heightened in colour so as to balance the gay mosaic of paint on the palette he was holding, his head thrown back and a little on one side as if he were watching a smoke-ring he had blown. The right arm hung straight from the shoulder and slightly backwards, and a cigarette burned between the fingers of the hanging hand.

“Jane, it’s lovely,” said Gillian, “so long, so graceful, so alive. But—but—he isn’t painting—his face is all wrong, not concentrated.”

“No,” said Jane. “He doesn’t. Didn’t you know?”

“But he does, I’ve seen him. I’m sitting to him. And he has proper models. And there’s Heinrich.”

“He draws,” said Jane, “quite well. And he plans all sorts of pictures. And he squeezes miles of Windsor and Newton out on that wonderful palette of his. It belonged to Arnold Boecklin. Did you know?”

“Yes,” said Gillian. “I’ve often wondered why he got it.”

“It was a bad debt. A very bad debt. He shouldn’t have taken it. It’s part of his curse. He is so interested in being interesting, in the details, in literaryishness—and he’s got such an audience, and enough money to live on. He’ll never paint. Not unless——” Jane smudged a thumb-load of plasticine vindictively on to the figure she had left when Gillian came in, and began scraping it off again, and left her sentence unfinished.

“Well,” said Gillian, “I don’t think it will be much of a pity if he never finishes that procession of a fresco for the competition. But he’s going to paint V.V. Vanderleyden in the fire.”

“Golly, what a name!” said Jane rudely. “Who is it? Another?”

“She’s one of the Club members. He saw her in my flat on Sunday.”

“Has he taken her to Mrs. Print’s?”

“Not yet. He doesn’t seem to take many people there, really, Jane. Only me and Miss Jerusalem.”

Jane's high colour ebbed away and her face looked streaked and queer between the black bosses of her hair.

"That's me," she snapped. "Jane Ursula Mayne—they called me 'Jerusalem' when I was little. They used to send me to Mrs. Print's for weeks together after measles and things."

"What a lovely name for a little girl!"

Gillian watched the blood flow back into Jane's flat cheeks and remembered how Larry's blush had swamped his freckles at the same name. Why hadn't Larry told her that at the Honeysuckle Bush Jane was "Jerusalem"? It was such an addition to Jane.

"May I see the other figure—the one on the stand?"

Mr. Quist removed the second veil with a flick which might or might not be an expression of feeling.

It was Larry again: slim and dapper and sleek in the hard white and black of evening dress, white waistcoat, white tie, white gloves. The figure was shown buttoning one glove critically, lovingly, the whole attitude expressive of intense absorption in the matter so charmingly in hand. It was finished with a minute perfection, a ridiculous attention to detail, Pre-Raphaelite in its insistence on every button, every seam. Gillian, who had never seen Larry wearing any garments of the kind, was forced to admit that this Larry was even more accurately portrayed than the other.

"Jane," she cried, "what a horrid thing! Just like one of those painted plaster figures they put in shop-windows."

Jane was angry. "How can you be such a philistine! Look at the modelling! Look at the pose! It's a masterpiece."

"I don't like it," Gillian persisted.

"Like it. You like your pictures pretty, I suppose. You aren't meant to like it. It's a warning. Larry'll revert to type, he'll be just like that before he's done."

"Has he seen it?"

“Not yet. He shall before it goes home, though.”

“Jane! you’ve not sold it?”

Jane nodded, and by a rustle that came from the direction where Mr. Quist was varnishing Mrs. Print, Gillian understood that he was the purchaser.

Gillian was puzzled. She had thought Jane and Larry were friends.

“Have you done Heinrich yet?” she asked, more to change the difficult subject than because she thought this possible.

“No,” said Jane, “I can’t do him out of my head, and he hasn’t been able to sit to me. He’s very busy about something or other.”

“Heinrich’s always busy. I’ve never seen such an occupied creature. Besides, he’s rehearsing a new Russian Symphony, and there are afternoon concerts.”

At that moment there was a knock at the workshop door, and before anyone could reply to it, Larry himself walked in. Gillian saw Jane’s immediately suppressed movement towards Mr. Quist’s purchase, and saw how that movement had directed Larry’s eyes to the effigy, which stood in its niche on the same wall as the door, so that it was invisible to anyone entering the studio.

“Hullo!” Larry swung round to look at the figure. “I say, Jane, that’s pretty cruel,” he said. “What made you do it?”

“My prophetic soul, of the wide world dreaming on things to come, I suppose. These things are in the air.” But it was odd how unhappy her voice was.

“Le Beau Brummell de nos jours. Well, I seem to be making a success there, at any rate. Are you going to give it to me?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s sold.”

“Jane, don’t be a fool! You can’t sell my portrait.”

“It isn’t a portrait. You didn’t sit for it. It’s a fantasy.”

“It’s a simpering horror. You’re to destroy it.”

“It isn’t mine to destroy.”

“Then I will.”

Larry took a step towards the figure, but Mr. Quist reached it first. With a practised hand he swathed the property in its butter-muslin shroud and, lifting it from the stand, carried it back to the loose-box where the statues were packed.

Larry watched him go and gave a short laugh.

“Sorry, Jane. I’ve lost my temper, and you’ve got to help me to find it again at once. You must promise not to let whoever has bought it have that idiotic thing.”

“He’s paid for it,” said Jane, “and I’m going out to see the Guard change at the Palace. I’ve got an order for a Grenadier complete with busby”—and going to a peg on the wall, she took down her hat and gloves and marched out of the still open workshop door. Larry looked for a moment as though he were about to involve Gillian in the discussion, and then, tossing his hair back with the very gesture Jane had caught for the figure which still stood uncovered on the work-table, he followed her into the street.

Gillian waited a moment to let them get a start so that she might not appear to be following, and while she waited, Mr. Quist came out from the loose-box again and began to wrap up the laughing Larry.

“I’m afraid, Mr. Quist,” said Gillian, feeling foolish for speaking and yet nervously unable to keep silence, “I’m afraid Miss Bird and Mr. Browne have misunderstood each other about your figure.”

Mr. Quist looked at Gillian over the top of his glasses.

“Sublimation. Sublimation,” he said.

Gillian, who had never heard of the theories of Vienna or the practices of Zurich, had not the faintest idea of what Mr. Quist meant.

It was the first time she had heard his voice. It was a thick, smooth voice, and she thought there was a note of triumph in it. She did not feel she was going to like Mr. Quist, and she was not at all sorry that he made no attempt at further conversation before she said good-bye and went out.

V

Whenever Gillian felt she had come to something she didn't want to think about, she either cleaned out William's cage or went to see Aunt Elizabeth. William's cage was, of course, cleaned out every day. That is, he had fresh seed, fresh water and fresh sand as punctually as Gillian had her own breakfast. Indeed, there had been mornings in the Pelham House days when Gillian's breakfast had been omitted in favour of William's cage. It was in recognition of what she called her sister's slavery that Lilac had once tried to teach William the hymn which says:

"All my wants by thee supplied,

All my sins by thee forgiven,"

as a surprise while Gillian was away. But William, who was a pronounced eclectic, had welcomed Gillian's return from a holiday with the remark, "Hello—sins forgiven? Bow-wow," and had then gone off into peals of very strident laughter in imitation of Mabel, who had, at her own request, undertaken the care of William's food and cage during his rightful servant's absence. But, in moments of doubt or pain, there was no more successful anodyne than half an hour's extra attendance on the cage. William, who enjoyed extra attendance, always assisted with might and main at all efforts towards the promotion of his own well-being, and while William was helping and encouraging you there was no time for metaphysical brooding or morbid self-analysis. Sometimes, when she wanted practical advice or felt the moment was come for facing rather than escaping her problem, Gillian would go to Highgate. But it was a long way to Highgate, and, besides, Mrs. Mortimer was away just then, and, even if she had been available, Gillian was not at all sure that she could have had any patience with so insubstantial a grief as the one she now carried. For Gillian was fighting a shadow which was never vanquished and had now become so constant in assailing that she could no longer

doubt the existence of the shape which cast it. One day, and that day might be to-morrow, she felt, the shadow would pass her by and leave her face to face with the reality in which it originated, and of that day she was afraid.

There was a force, a malign thrusting-on, at work, in the lives around her; she saw it more and more, to which her own experience gave her no clue. It seemed to go by the name of Love, but in its manifestation it was the most unloving impulse in the world. It lay, Gillian had known that, behind Lilac's whole attitude to Toby; it was, she had seen it, implicit in Toby's submission to Lilac. And now it was binding and hurting Jane Bird, making her cruel and vulgar and yet giving her a power over Larry which he resented but did not deny. Larry had been angry with Jane. That was clear enough and easy to understand—but he had followed her when she defied him, and it was to his own defeat he had gone.

Gillian knew very little about sex. She had escaped the definite physiological instruction which most people of her age and station had had administered to them in their teens. A little vague botany, put before her with the best intentions while she was at school, had bored without enlightening her. Flowers were flowers. Diagrams of their works with straight black tines leading out of them like so many stamens, with A, B, C, and D at their tips, had seemed to her of far less use or interest than the pages of the little green Huxley's Physiology, another class-book which had been brought to her notice at the same time. But that concise and well-illustrated manual confines its guidance to the alimentary canal and the organs of sight and hearing, and it had never occurred to Gillian to make any connexion between the two branches of knowledge. They had been laid before her, separately, in a hopeful spirit, by parents and guardians who shrank from directer methods of illumination, and who credited adolescent curiosity with greater powers of accurate deduction than there was any sound reason for supposing it to possess. Gillian had failed entirely to deduce. She had assimilated one set of facts and rejected the other; for she had a clear and honest mind and chose by instinct, competent instruction in preference to tentative and disingenuous information set up as an analogy which she had not the means to follow.

Later on, when disturbances in her own development might have turned her mind inwards, she had been in the full tide of that friendship with her father which had filled them both with so deep and so shared a passion for impersonal beauty that human love, except as it found its expression in Art and Letters, had seemed a matter which might very well wait its time. Gerald Armstrong, like so many men of his type when they begin to meet on its own ground the first blossoming of the mind they have trained, had fallen in love with his daughter, idealizing the crystalline beauty of her girl's mind, loving the eager courage of its unflawed innocence and jealously guarding that virginal quality from any taint of a dark knowledge she might never need to bear. When she had asked him what

"The expense of spirit in a waste of shame"

meant, he had given her *Madame Bovary* to read, and had adored her for the comment with which she returned the book to him: "I suppose the French of those days were even more different from us than they are now."

When he died and she was left with his books, she had taken to those they had not read together, the same spirit of detached and impersonal enjoyment of literary quality as had distinguished his own appreciations, and had retained unimpaired the habit he had never checked since the day when he had first discovered it, of classing any allusions or franknesses she did not understand as "Elizabethanisms," a term he himself had once used to dismiss a very early inquiry as to the precise meaning of a passage she and Lilac had failed to elucidate in the psalms for the day when Lilac was seven and she was nine years old.

And before Gillian could venture very far by herself, her father's more valuable and rarer books had been sold, and she had been allowed to keep for her own use only such ordinary editions of the classics as would not fetch more than remainder prices in an auctioneer's rooms. Out of these she got all she required, either as food for her own mind or as material for those lessons in literature which she had so disastrously added to the curriculum of Pelham House. But in actual knowledge of life

she moved, at twenty-three, in the same occasionally troubled but still enchanted dream as she had known at seventeen, when her father died.

Love, according to the best authorities known to Gillian, was the guide to many a wandering bark; many waters could not quench it; it suffered, endured, and hoped all things; it made the world go round, in which last connexion it was assisted by the blessing of the Church in the Solemnization of Matrimony. When it made people ridiculous or tiresome it was called Calf Love; when it was transferred from its legitimate objects it was called Sin; and when, as sometimes happened, particularly on the Continent, it took place between people who had conscientious objections to marriage, it was called Free. So far, this conspectus of an important but not personally urgent business had met any case which had come under her observation; but, lately, Gillian had begun to suspect its adequacy. Toby and Lilac had made what is called a love-match. Had not Mrs. Middleton given them for a present an illuminated copy, in a frame, of a work supposed to be a translation into more adequate terms of the well-known passage from Corinthians? It had made Gillian's blood boil at the time, particularly the improvement, which ran:

"Love has no taste for anything which is impure but a responsive delight in all that is genuine."

But it certainly was about love, and Gillian had always understood that, as a definition, however translated, the original had never been bettered. Possibly there were things about love which Saint Paul did not know. Times had changed, and love with them. There was Modern Love. There were the sixteen-line pseudo-sonnets—"We are betrayed by what is false within"—"A kiss is but a kiss now, and no wave of a great flood…." Gillian had always thought that an interesting but rather exaggerated way of referring to a kiss. "Love that had robbed us of immortal things," that was better, a beautiful line, all o's—better, Gillian thought, than the one about the swan and the twilight wave, which didn't somehow come in quite naturally. "I suppose he'd seen a swan at twilight, and used it up for his last line in the same way as Tennyson used his nature notes." Gillian didn't care about these detachable beauties. You didn't find them in Shakespeare's sonnets. All the great lines fitted there: "The mortal moon

hath her eclipse endured," or, "Come in the rearward of a conquered woe." ...

VI

By the time Gillian got back to the Club she had walked herself out of love to literature, and there, on a happy well-known path, she was herself again. No need to give William second sand, after all. But she'd do it, for a treat, for William's treat, and he should walk up and down outside the window of her bedroom on the street side while she did it, and address the children on their way home from school at half-past four, a performance he, and they, enjoyed vastly.

But when she turned into the courtyard she was met by an excited crowd headed by Mrs. Gordon and superintended from the window of her ground-floor flat by Mrs. Barraclough herself. Club members, some of whom Gillian had never seen before, were visible at windows or present on the gravel under the laburnum-tree, and a first glance informed Gillian that V.V. was not among them. But the Countess, in hat, veil, gloves, parasol, and a fan, was conspicuous; as was Mrs. Middleton, whose hair was coming down and who had buttoned the blouse she had donned in haste in most of the wrong holes.

And over the noise of the mob, drowning it in a torrent of excruciating protest, flooding the sky with clamour, the voice of William shrieked from the open window of the book-room under the roof.

"Oh, Miss!" cried Mrs. Gordon, trundling towards Gillian as she emerged from the archway. "'Ere you are at last. 'E's been goin' on like this for a *h*our or more, and none of us can't get anywhere near 'im to pacify of 'im."

"Oh, dear," said Gillian, "but haven't you my duplicate key?"

"No, Miss, that I 'aven't." Mrs. Gordon was righteousness under outrage. "That Miss Vanderleyden come and borrowed it off me to take 'im a piece of groundsel, and she've gone off with it and 'ere we are."

"And groundsel isn't a bit good for him," said Mrs. Middleton, "we all know that. Do you think dear William is dying in agony?"

“No,” said Gillian, “he’s evidently perfectly well. Only cross. I’m so very sorry. I’ll go straight up and scold him.”

Up she went, accompanied by Mrs. Middleton, who loved William with passion, and followed at a speaking distance by the Countess, who made no mystery of her feelings towards “this savage bird.”

And, even as she ran, listening to the sympathetic bleat of Mrs. Middleton at her side and pursued by the blistering invective of the Countess behind her, Gillian was conscious that Mrs. Gordon’s pardonable rancour against Miss Vanderleyden was shared by her fellow members. And it was not because she had locked a screaming William in and disturbed them all over their tea that they were angry with V.V. She felt that in a way they were glad to have this excuse for saying, “So *very* peculiar. A little officious. Members should *never* borrow the duplicate key.”

William, it turned out, had a real grievance. Touched by one of those synchronizing impulses which it was her queer gift to receive and act upon, V.V. had herself come over and had given William fresh seed, fresh sand, and fresh water, as well as the bunch of groundsel which now lay, severely mauled but uneaten, on the bottom of his cage. But not content with these ministrations, she had, with a zeal commensurate to the protest it had evoked, polished the whole of the cage, bar by bar, wire by wire, with Bluebell. It stood there glittering in the afternoon sun, the brass ring by which it was carried from room to room a perfect blaze of reflected light. The room reeked of the polish, and it was against this smell quite as much as in disapproval of the unwonted scintillation of his home, that William’s voice was still most devastatingly raised.

It was not until she had quieted the bird that Gillian caught sight of a three-cornered note, stuck in the back of the old settee and addressed to her in V.V.’s black, curly handwriting, out of which the tops of the t’s and d’s stuck like pins in an untidy pincushion:

“Belovedest” (V.V. had an expansive epistolary style), “I’ve polished up Cocky’s cage for a s’prize and I’m going to the concert with Hinerik, so don’t look me up till I get in. A thousand kisses—V.V.”

Gillian sat with William rubbing his beak against her ear and clucking, “Pretty Cocky! Pretty Cocky! S’rimps for tea,” and tore the note into tiny fragments, wondering why V.V.’s letters moved her to nothing but dismay, when V.V.’s presence had in it the power to fill her with transporting joy. The soft, thick, gilt-edged paper on which the note was written tore without sound into pieces, each of which showed at the furred indefinite edges little glistering filaments of the pulp from which it had been dried. Almost like blotting-paper, she thought, remembering how sore her middle finger had been for days when she had sliced it against the sharp, hard corner of the note-paper on which she used to imitate the Bottomley signature from Knightsbridge.

Presently, to her surprise, Larry knocked at the door.

“I’ve come to tell you,” he said, pushing his hair back from his eyes as he subsided into the chesterfield, “I’ve come to tell you that I’m sorry I let fly at Jane as I did. It was a rotten thing to do, anyway, and with you there”—he flicked a fragment of the torn letter away from the back of the couch with his hand as if disposing of himself and his behaviour for a while.

“I didn’t like that figure myself,” Gillian conceded, “but Jane seemed to think you deserved it.”

“So I do.” said Larry moodily. “I’m a rotter.”

“That’s silly,” said Gillian. “It was rather rotten of Jane, you know, as well—to sell it, I mean.”

“Oh, Jane’s got to get her own back. Besides, she didn’t make it to sell it. She made it because she thinks I ought to do one thing at once. She’s afraid of my atavistic impulses. In a way she’s right. But life’s a great thing in so many ways. And Jane’ll only hear of me having it in one.”

“Well, one thing at a time is the only way if you’re going to do anything great.”

“Who wants to do anything great? It’s like being a non-drinker, a non-smoker, and a Nonconformist like an old gardener of ours, because he wanted to be sure of living a long time in this world and missing hell-fire in

the next. The great object of life is living—not saving life up to do things with. I'd rather die of life at thirty than hang on 'doing.'"

"Jane believes in doing things."

"I ought to know what Jane believes by this time."

"Larry, are you in love with Jane?"

"No. Not now. That's the trouble."

"I don't think," said Gillian slowly, "I don't really suppose that I quite understand about being in love."

"Your state is the more gracious."

"Well. It's supposed to bring happiness."

"It's the devil. It has the primal, eldest curse upon it."

"Oh, Larry—that was murder, not love."

"It wasn't. You're a shallow, superficial child, and you're talking like a parrot—like that William of yours."

"But the King in *Hamlet* had killed his brother, that's what his offence was rank about."

"What had he done it for? Shakespeare was a subtler johnny than that. Read your Bible. What is the eldest curse? Not Cain's. Golly, no! His was easy, 'a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth'—lots of us are that, and like it. No, the primal, eldest curse is Adam's: 'I will put enmity between thee and the woman.' *Enmity*—'It shall bruise thy head.' That's love," said Larry. And he thrust both hands deep into the pockets of his flannel trousers—he was wearing a perfectly normal, grey flannel suit that afternoon—and began to whistle, through his teeth, a tune which Gillian recognized after a bar or two to be "Nearer, my God, to Thee."

But she was quite sure that Larry had no notion of what he was whistling, and she didn't tell him.

CHAPTER FIVE.
ILLUSION

I

Larry went to Germany. He said he knew a place in the Bavarian Tyrol where in the third week in June the hay was all flowers and no grass and each separate flower had its butterfly coloured to match itself, and that there was an inn, *Zur Goldenen Rose*, at a place called Dinkelsbühl, on the way back, which hadn't had a chair added to it since the eighteenth century. And, why, when there were these things to be inherited on the Earth, he or anyone should stay in a jerry-built studio in Battersea Park Road——? Larry was in a difficult temper. Heinrich, who couldn't go with him, partly because his orchestra was active until after the third week in June and partly because he hadn't any clothes to travel in, was very pensive about it both before and after Larry's departure from Waterloo in a crashing thunderstorm late one Sunday evening.

Larry was going by Havre. It seemed a long way round and was not so cheap as the other ways. But Larry was in the kind of temper which makes people—and more especially men—go the longest, dearest way on purpose, and gives them some interior satisfaction of the kind which arises from being able to blame others for these self-inflicted aggravations of an initial injury. Larry's state of mind was in no sense Heinrich's fault, but Heinrich pined and wilted terribly after his departure.

"I shall have that Hinerik to tea to cheer him up a bit," said V.V., and Gillian, who admired nothing in V.V.'s rather featureless character so ardently as her real kindliness, went off to Seaford, comforted by the idea of the comfort these two apparently friendless beings would give one another.

Gillian's errand was not of her seeking. On the day of Larry's departure she had received a letter in an imitation less exact than her own of Old Winona's hand. It was dated, "Marine Hotel, Seaford," and ran:

"My dear Gillian,

Miss Macfarlane is very kindly acting as my amanuensis to-day, and I am asking her to tell you that I have come down here on a matter of important private business on which I should very much appreciate the benefit of your advice.

The matter concerns a little gift which I mean to make to our dear Lilac on her return from her wedding-journey in three months' time, and as time presses I shall be glad if you will come down here for a week or two as soon as your classes at the Polytechnicum are over.

I enclose a small cheque to cover the necessary expenses, and remain,

Yours, affectionately,
Winona Bottomley.

P.S.—The car will meet you at Lewes."

"Goodness!" said Gillian when she had read this epistle through twice, "what ever *can* she be doing? She can't have gone down to Seaford to knit a shawl for Lilac, and I've never known her make anything else. I wonder if she's mad. The Macfarlane in office has evidently not been able to persuade her that I'm going to her own revered de Stormonts', which goes on for ever like that dreadful brook, and has no terms. I think I'd better go at once."

So she telegraphed to the Marine Hotel, called on Jane and excused herself from an engagement to sit to her for that portrait of the Changeling which Larry had never painted and which Jane was now going to attempt, and with the zealous aid of V.V., who washed and ironed odds and ends of ribbon and lace and packed them for her with the utmost delicacy and precision, got herself started for Seaford within twenty-four hours of receiving the summons.

The car met her at Lewes. This simple phrase but poorly conveys the experience of being met by Old Winona's car. It began on the platform, where two startlingly liveried menials flanked a bowing stationmaster, drawn up, unfortunately, in front of the Pullman in which Gillian had not thought it necessary to travel, although the cheque for expenses had allowed margins in every possible direction. It continued, in processional

splendour, with Tompkins bearing her ticket and umbrella before, and Wilkins carrying her reasonably new suit-case and her quite unreasonably battered hat-box behind, and it ended, much to the delight of an admiring crowd, when the car, a Rolls-Royce of the largest size, mistook the road and, with three men to direct and prevent its ways, had to back down one steep and cobbled hill and up another before it could find a space sufficient to turn round in. The ways out of Lewes from the railway station are almost as difficult as if they had been expressly planned for the bewilderment of haughty and companioned chauffeurs.

Miss Macfarlane, a new one, met her in the hall. She was a thin and serious girl who had not done very well at Newnham and was finding private-secretaryship more remunerative but less straightforward than the scholastic career for which Nature had planned and Education had almost fitted her. On the way up to Lady Bottomley's private suite Gillian gathered that things were in a bad way. "And I am afraid," said the Miss Macfarlane with depression, "that the fault is partly mine. I had hoped to inspire Lady Bottomley with a wish to visit the châteaux of the Loire herself. Instead of which we are having frightful trouble down here."

Some of the trouble, it appeared, had been due to the presence at the Marine Hotel of another Belfast baronet's widow, a lady on a visit of supervision to an only son in a preparatory school who had broken a quantity of bones in a riding accident. This lady, in virtue of her sorrows, had claimed the suite, the best suite on the first floor, for which Lady Bottomley had negotiated.

The air was still surcharged with the fury of the storm which had raged over the claims. Finally, Old Winona had won, on a point of precedence. "Ours is the earlier creation," she had announced. Sir John had been raised to the title in 1906. And Lady Eaton, whose husband had had to wait until 1908 before his merits had been formally acknowledged by a dilatory government, had admitted her just defeat. The other matter, however, was more serious.

The glories of Chenonceaux and Blois, the architectural resplendency of Amboise, the marvels of Tours for which the mild young secretary had a deep enthusiasm, had been displayed before her employer in so many

photographs, diagrams, and literary panegyrics that they had gone to the poor lady's head.

"She wants," said Miss Macfarlane, "to have bits of them copied into a kind of composite villa here, and Sir Edwin Lutyens has just refused to do it for her. She will tell you the rest herself."

Gillian did not hear the rest at once, for she had been assigned a suite of her own, bedroom, bathroom and sitting-room, on the second floor, and, having a horror of lifts in descent, had wandered for some time along unfamiliar corridors all carpeted in the same monstrous pattern before she found the rooms Lady Bottomley now triumphantly occupied.

"My dear," said Old Winona, who, by way of emphasizing the difference between an hotel and her own home, was wearing an imposing bonnet although she had not been out that day, "I am glad you have been able to get away so soon. Do you know anything of architecture?"

"Very little," said Gillian.

"Socially, I mean," said Old Winona.

This was difficult, but Gillian was able to gather that what was required of her was information about architects of a more docile temperament than those of riper years or wider fame were proving themselves to possess. Young men, willing to carry out the plans which a lavish and devoted mother was making for her children's dwelling; impecunious young men, in short, were what the lady sought.

"I have," said Old Winona, "already purchased the house, an admirable one: south aspect, modern sanitation, large grounds, within easy, but not too easy, reach of the sea. Children," said Old Winona with a long, prospective look through the closed windows and across the waters of the Channel, "children have been known to escape from their nurses, however numerous."

"But Lilac——" Gillian began, intending to point out that Lilac, though not yet of age, could swim quite well.

“Not yet—not quite yet, I dare say.” Lilac’s mother-in-law was evidently hopeful, possibly even better informed of the future than Gillian. “But though she has many years before her, there is no time to be lost.”

Dinner was coming up processionally, borne in courses by a staff visibly awed by what had happened during the installation of the occupant of the first-floor suite, before Gillian had heard the whole story. The house intended as a surprise for Lilac and Toby was not to be destroyed. It was a large, three-storied affair, gabled and balconied with terraces to its garden, and Old Winona’s idea was to have replicas of as many of the distinguishing features of the châteaux in question as could possibly be crowded together affixed to the building, so that in none of its aspects it should fail to remind the beholder of at least one, and often of several of them. And, having been told by one famous architect that he thanked her but that, praise God, he was not a reincarnation of Viollet-le-Duc, and by another that nothing would induce him to consider her project, she had applied, very feebly seconded by Miss Macfarlane, to the local builders and found that they simply could not begin to understand her idea. So, knowing that Gillian lived in Chelsea and was therefore surrounded by people who drew and planned for the upper classes, Old Winona had decided to leave the problem in her hands.

Gillian sat up for an hour with the Miss Macfarlane, after the old lady had gone to bed, trying to think of a way to save Lilac from the consequences of the secretary’s plot for foreign travel. Nothing, of that Gillian was quite sure, nothing would induce Lilac to live at Seaford for any part of her time, just as not even the occasion to select her own models would have moved Old Winona abroad without anything less than six months’ preparation.

“You might just as well have told her about Ludwig of Bavaria and gone on touring round all those crazy castles next summer,” she said to Miss Macfarlane, who was horrified, not caring for the idea of visiting any places that were not known to be famous for good art and authenticated history.

But, two days later, having seen the house, which had been originally built as a school, and having interviewed the puzzled builder, Gillian had an inspiration.

Jane would be quite equal to constructing a model of such a fantasia as Old Winona desired; and superintending Jane might distract the old lady for a time and would help to preserve the builder's sanity which her direction, supplemented by portfolios of photographs and engravings, had severely shaken. And, so long as the house itself remained untouched until Toby and Lilac returned to take up their own responsibilities, it could be put into the market again; whereas, once improved according to plan, it must remain for ever planted on the Bottomley family, only too probably to be known, as other less comprehensive outrages had been known in other places, as Bottomley's Folly.

The idea pleased Old Winona, and it enchanted Jane, who came down for two days and went back to London with a suit-case full of plans and photographs.

Gillian stayed on at Seaford for another week, bathing and walking over the cliffs towards Cuckmere Haven and up and down the Seven Sisters all morning, and relieving Miss Macfarlane after tea, and going on to Glynde when Lady Bottomley abandoned the Marine Hotel in order to open a bazaar in Belfast in the first week in July.

When she got back to London she found Jane and Mr. Quist fully occupied in modelling, painting, and varnishing such a doll's-house as had never been made in any studio. Gillian looked in at the workshop on her way home for Victoria.

"Delirious, ain't it?" said Jane, "and not a staircase, not a gargoyle without documentary evidence of its origin in other brains than ours. The colour I'll admit is often my own. I've never faltered more or less in my great task of happiness since I started this. What a peach, what a queen, your divine Winona! How sumptuous in outlook! A ton of plasticine in the yard and everything handsome about me. I'm having a painting-blouse embroidered with bicycles to keep my mind from being puffed up, and

you've got to come and sit to me like a ghost at twilight, to prevent my spirit from being snuffed out."

"I shall have to sit with V.V. at twilight for a bit now," said Gillian. "I've been away for three weeks and she'll expect me to make it up to her at first."

"You'll find V.V. otherwise engaged," said Jane darkly.

"Goodness!" said Gillian. "Engaged?"

"To the unfortunate being she will call Hinerik," said Jane.

"But she must be years older."

"She is. Ten at least. She would be."

"What ever made them do it?" wondered Gillian.

"Hadn't you better ask them?" said Jane. "It might be love, you know."

II

Heinrich was extremely pleased about his engagement. He wore a "Mizpah" ring, which V.V. had given him, and a rather small Trilby hat which he had disinterred from some forgotten cupboard himself. Arrayed in these additions to his toilet, he called formally on Gillian that evening. V.V. was not at home. She was working late in Bond Street all that week, renewing the youth of the fashionable clientele before its final exodus from town.

"I have taken ze responsibility for zis life," he explained, as though V.V. were another cat or sparrow. "V.V. has never enough money till ze end of ze munz. For ze last two, tree, four, five days she does eat nozzing."

"Heinrich! What ever do you mean?" Gillian was startled. It had never occurred to her to inquire into V.V.'s finances, but all sorts of instances crowded into her mind at Heinrich's words.

"I mean what I say. V.V. has not enough money for food for four weeks, only for tree. In ze force week she starve. On ze first day of ze monz she have fresh money. Zen she eat. So I marry her." Heinrich was delighted with the adequacy of this solution.

“Have you got married while I was away?”

“Not yet. It is to come. Now we food on love.”

This was beyond Gillian. “Will she live with you and Larry in the studio when you do marry?” she asked, turning to practical matters for relief.

“No. I give ze studio to Larry for himself. V.V. and I we go in many countries. Countries where it is warm. Italy and Africa and Hindustan,” said Heinrich.

“You’ll have to wait then,” said Gillian with reference to the golden liberty which was known to lie behind the clauses of Heinrich’s uncle’s will.

“A little, yes. But not so much time as before. I go to my ozzer onkel, and tell to him zat now I marry. And he say I may have some money out of ze will, from him. He is not quite a good man—but there is in him a little goodness sometimes. I sign him a paper so that he have twice as much out of ze will by and then. And I get sree hundred pounds for each year till ze will is over.”

Unversed though she was in the ethics of finance, Gillian had a distant feeling that Heinrich’s uncle was being the not quite good man Heinrich had admitted him to be in the question of that other uncle’s will on which his future depended. But Heinrich had done his best for V.V.

And he looked taller and braver, more nearly a man, and rather distressingly a little less like a fairy than he had seemed to her till now.

“Does V.V. want to marry you?” she asked.

“Oh, very much.”

In the dark of her mind Gillian felt a jealous pang. V.V. then had forgotten her.

“I go now to take her to dinner, in a restaurant: proper dinner,” said Heinrich impressively, “wiz prrawns.”

* * *

Late that night there was a furtive knock at Gillian's bedroom door. Gillian called "Come in," wondering who could be there. It was V.V. She stood in the doorway smiling, excited.

"Oh, you darling," she said in a hungry whisper, "oh, you darling."

"V.V.! how did you get in? Gordon locked up hours ago."

"I had your house-key copied while you were away," said V.V., and did not wait to hear how Gillian took this announcement, but strode across the room and knelt by the bedside, thrusting her long, strong, bony arms in under the bed-clothes and dragging Gillian to the edge of the bed in an almost angry hug.

Gillian struggled out of the straining clasp and sat up, pulling the ends of her long plaits from under the sheet and shaking out the crumpled bows of blue ribbon with which they were tied.

"V.V., how thrilling!"

"Isn't it! isn't it!" said V.V., burying her face in Gillian's shoulder. Her hair smelt of brilliantine—a sweet, heavy smell like scented-geranium leaves when you pinch them—and of fresh Virginia-cigarette smoke, and she had been drinking liqueur. She was shaking all over and Gillian could feel the quick, pushing beat of her heart vibrate in the wire of the stretched spring-mattress of the little iron bedstead.

"Goodness!" said Gillian, putting one arm round V.V.'s trembling shoulder. "Are you as happy as all that?"

"Of course I am, you darling, aren't you?"

"Well, no! You can't expect me to be quite as excited as you are—or as Heinrich is."

"Hinerik? What's he got to do with it?" V.V. sat back on her heels and frowned. "I'm excited because I've got you back again. You know that, you monkey."

Gillian felt uncomfortable. She had not expected this pudicity in V.V.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, “I thought you knew I knew. Heinrich told me. So did Jane.”

“Oh, that,” said V.V., “that’s Hinerik’s funeral.”

“I thought it was to be your wedding.”

“P’r’aps. Some day. But we won’t bother about silly old weddings now I’ve got you back again.”

“Get the basket-chair and a cushion and come and talk to me a minute,” said Gillian, clasping her hands round her knees outside the bed-clothes and preparing to conduct an inquisition. “You tell me such a lot about your life, all in bits, and I can’t ever put them quite together in any real plan.”

“Oh, mine’s not been a planny life,” said V.V., dragging the chair and cushion close to the bedside.

“Well, never mind about the whole of it now,” said Gillian, “but try, if you can, to tell me what Heinrich meant about you not having proper meals some weeks.”

“Oh yes.” V.V. was frank as always, with a baffling and allusive frankness that more often than not darkened the situation she attempted to illuminate. “My brother, you know. He’s not quite all there—not mad you know, but sometimes he drinks a little, and sometimes he goes out and paints the town red, and then he can’t send me the whole of my allowance.”

“I didn’t know you had an allowance. I thought you worked in Bond Street.”

“Oh, that’s a debt. The rent for the flat at Ostend. I’ll be paid by October and then I shan’t go to silly old Jacynthe’s any more.”

“But V.V., if your brother is like that he oughtn’t to have the money to control. You ought to have it and send him his allowance.”

“Yes, I know. But he’s the eldest, and a man. He’s the trustee too, but I don’t like him. If I marry Hinerik and he can get hold of his money we’ll put my brother into a home and he can have it all.”

“How did Heinrich find out?”

“Oh, he just came to dinner and there wasn’t any. Old Mrs. Gordon wouldn’t send any up because I’d not paid my book. She’s generally quite good about waiting, but when she came up on Saturday with the books, I was unpacking some bath-salts and she seemed to think I could have done without them.”

“Oh, V.V., that’s why you’re so thin.”

“Oh, I was always bony, even”—V.V. did not intend to be enigmatic—“even at Ostend.”

And then she yawned and Gillian said she was sleepy too, and V.V. kissed her and went over to her own flat.

III

“V.V.,” said Gillian, “I can’t make out why your bedroom is so different from this room.”

They were sitting in the large room at Number Thirty-Six, and Gillian was contrasting its considered effects, seen by daylight to be hastily contrived, with the muslin and pink ribbons of V.V.’s bedroom, the outer of the two communicating rooms that completed the set, into the inner of which Gillian had never penetrated.

“Oh,” said V.V., “this is all Jacky’s furniture. She’s on tour, Cape Town and Australia. She won’t be back till Christmas. She was very good to me when I was down on my luck.”

“But you mayn’t sublet flats in the Club, or be away for more than three months at a time.”

“We haven’t sublet. We live together. But it’s mostly her furniture. Hers and Peter’s.”

“Who’s Peter?” Gillian was conscious of a growing irritation as each new woman with a man’s name emerged from the horde of V.V.’s acquaintances.

“Oh, Peter’s Smithy. I was with her before I met Jacky. She’s married now. She won’t ask for her furniture because we quarrelled and she doesn’t want Evelyn to know that she lived with me. She never told him that. He was in the same company on tour and he never came to our flat.”

Gillian did not pursue Smithy and Evelyn into the seclusion of their matrimonial relationships. She was not particularly interested in their vague and distant passage through V.V.’s life and she was beginning to dread the copious and unilluminating anecdote with which V.V. replied to any polite manifestation of concern for the fortunes of these drifting adventurers.

V.V. was polishing her manicure-tools. She sat on a low seat by the table, a duster on her knees and her case of instruments, emptied of its contents, lying by them on an outspread sheet of the *Daily Mail*. The sun, shining on her bent head, brought out chestnut lights in the waves of her dark hair and showed her pale skin, yellowed and sallow below her ears where her neck had not been covered with the fine, perfumed powder she always used.

Gillian sat in the window darning her socks. Her attention was absorbed in the in-and-out in-and-out of her short darning-needle, as it drove its way backwards and forwards through the warp and woof of the thread which stretched across the painted glass of the china darning-egg in the heel of her brown stocking. There was something very satisfying to Gillian about a good large darn. It gave the stocking, which had looked so desperate and uncomfortable with a ragged hole in it, a cared-for and rather interesting appearance of having survived adventure and being prepared for more, and it was, of all necessary mending, the most interesting to do, surpassing the sewing on of buttons, always a tiresome business, especially when, as usually happened, the buttons didn’t quite match and the strong cotton was missing.

She was in V.V.’s flat for the day because her own was given over to the workmen who were installing a telephone in Number Seven. This was a gift of Lady Bottomley’s, who, on several occasions, had wished to telephone to Gillian without success for the sufficient reason that there was no telephone at the Club.

The innovation was being showered upon her in recognition of the donor's sense of the services Gillian had rendered in introducing Jane Bird. It was also a valedictory beneficence. Having learnt by one of those rich coincidences which do occur even in the most heavily sheltered lives, that the Royal Princess who was to open the next bazaar on her horizon had just returned from visiting the châteaux of the Loire, Old Winona had decided that what Royalty had done she could do also, and Miss Macfarlane, her days heavy with time-tables, hotel tariffs and interviews with Cook's clerks and couriers, was realizing the profound sadness of having a long-treasured dream come true (as it so often comes true in this trying world) more than a little wrong.

Jane had gone with them, but not Gillian. This was entirely Gillian's own fault, for an invitation so pressing that it had almost the force of a command, had been issued to her as soon as the decision to go at all had been reached. And she had refused, alleging that the three weeks already spent at Seaford must be made up before the Secretarial School closed for a fortnight in August. Old Winona, who respected a business reason, had acquiesced insisting, however, that the occasion must be marked in some way, and choosing the telephone as its monument.

To Miss Macfarlane (her real name Gillian discovered was Bronx-Prittlewell, and this did seem an excuse for going on calling her Macfarlane)—to the harassed secretary Gillian confessed that the prospect of three weeks' pilgrimage from one best hotel to another in a party consisting of Old Winona, her maid, a courier, three chauffeurs, two cars, as well as Jane and herself, was so asphyxiating that she felt as if they would all be smothered if she, Gillian, added herself and her luggage to the caravan. But, in her heart of hearts, she knew that she would have endured the restraints and adored the enjoyments of such a pilgrimage with the utmost indifference to one and abandonment to the other if it had not meant separating herself again from V.V.

V.V. herself had been quite unscrupulous about it, and had declared that she would not look after William if Gillian went to France. She had not looked after William while Gillian was at Seaford. He had gone down to the basement for the period of Gillian's absence, on a visit to the Gordons

who looked upon him with mingled admiration and terror as being "almost a Christian." And, Christian or no, William had come back with Mabel's sniff and Mr. Gordon's cough and Mrs. Gordon's raucous cry of "'Arry!" (this being the title by which Mr. Gordon was known on the hearth) added to his repertoire, and was in consequence rather more than Gillian could bear at times. For William was always immensely proud of any new phrases he had acquired, and had sniffed and coughed and summoned 'Arry with penetrating distinctness and with reiterations which would not be quenched for at least half an hour every time Gillian had come into the flat since her return. She had vowed that she would never go away again unless either V.V. or Heinrich were left behind in charge of him. But Heinrich had gone to Bristol for a Musical Festival in which the orchestra to which he belonged was competing, and V.V. thrust her own deserted state as well as her refusal to harbour William into the scale when Gillian had hesitated over the invitation from Knightsbridge.

So Gillian saw the expedition start without her and remained at home to solace V.V. and to strive to soften William's memories of kitchen life.

On this particular Saturday morning he was entertaining the telephone men with the whole of his repertoire and Gillian, having warned them that everything they said would be repeated by the bird, hoping in that way to keep William pure from the grosser profanities of proletarian expletive, darned her stockings and listened to V.V., and prayed that William would not and could not learn to make a noise like telephone men hammering telephone nails into the well-built and very resisting walls of the Mordaunt Club.

V.V. prattled on, cleaning the blades of the tiny knives and slender scissors in her outfit, taking minute stains out of the ivory file-handles and the pushing and picking instruments, fitting fresh chamois leather on the large wooden buffers for nail-polishing, testing the screw tops and the glass stoppers of some bottles and putting fresh corks into others. She worked without much method but with fastidious care. Everything about V.V. was fastidiously cared for, immaculate, crisp or shining according to its kind, from the glass of the window-panes in her flat, which sparkled every day of the year as the windows of Gillian's rooms only sparkled for

two or three days after the quarterly cleaning, to the Japanese paper napkins which replaced table-linen in her domain and which she used extravagantly and burned after every meal. V.V. might go without food in the weeks when her allowance ran short, but she would not go without soap and hot water.

“I wonder,” said Gillian, “if it’s eating so little or washing so much that makes you so thin.”

“I ’xpec’ it’s a bit of both,” said V.V., whose speech was far more slovenly than her person; and she rambled on into a fresh tangle of autobiography in which Smithy and the landlady of some theatrical lodgings in Wrexham and a box of Keating’s powder all played equally ambiguous parts.

“What I can’t understand,” said Gillian as the story finally lost itself in a species of delta with V.V. sitting on Smithy’s dress-basket all one Sunday morning in the cloak-room of a Welsh railway station whose name V.V. kept, quite unsuccessfully, trying to retrieve from a long list of railway stations she had waited in, “what I keep on trying to get you to explain, V.V., is why if you’ve never been an actress you travelled about so much with touring companies. Were you really never on the stage?”

“Never quite,” replied V.V., “I walked on once in a play Jackie was in, *The Notorious Mrs. Something* I think it was, or else *When Knights Were Bold*, I’m not sure, but I was too tall for the clothes and they got a girl the next night. I was sharing Peter’s rooms then. She was ill and couldn’t afford things, and my being there helped. It’s cheaper travelling two.”

“You’re a kind creature,” said Gillian.

V.V. changed the subject.

“Come along, Gillian, put your horrid old stockings away and I’ll do your hands for you.”

“Wait one minute. I must just put one more thread through this darn to make it tight. It’s such a beauti*full* darn, V.V., worth having a blistered toe for. I walked that toe through in Richmond Park on Friday evening, seeing the full moon with deer, and I’ve darned it all into the hole again, moon, and mist over the lake, and an owl that hooted and flew—no, it didn’t fly,

what is the proper word for the way owls make no noise when they go through the space in front of your nose at night?"

"How you do talk!" said V.V., filling the dragon bowl with warm soapsuds and a little sponge, "make haste or we shan't get both hands done before lunchtime."

So Gillian put away her darning and pushed up the sleeves of her cotton frock. She lay back among the gay cushions of Jackie's Russian-ballet room which V.V. piled one by one into the big arm-chair by the window, with consummate knowledge of where you did and where you didn't need a cushion to be. And, one hand laid on the clean towel on V.V.'s knee while she dabbled in the warm, scented soapsuds in the green-dragon bowl with the other, Gillian forgot the flatness of V.V.'s voice, the baldness of her narrative style, forgot that she could never talk to V.V. about the shape of a word, or the meaning of a colour, or the way people took in life, but could only ask her questions to which V.V. never could give coherent answers. She could let herself be petted and caressed and flattered and told how each of her fingers as it passed under file and cutter and emery board to the ultimate polishing, exceeded any finger that V.V. had ever polished before in the beauty of its shape, the fineness of its skin, the rising of the half-moons at the base of its nail and the colour of the tip. It was all nonsense, of course, nonsense of the worst kind, but it was extraordinarily soothing on a hot midsummer day at the end of a long week of shorthand and typing, card-indexing and tables of precedence, and the most preposterous lectures on how to address envelopes to persons of title, it was balmy and cooling to lie back in heavenly comfort and let your mind be vitiated by it for an hour. Gillian would have been very lonely after Lilac's wedding if she had not found V.V.

IV

They sat on through the hot afternoon drowsing in easy chairs by the open windows, the green-and-orange sunblinds drawn so low that, of all the world outside, only the glitter of the sun on the river could be seen under the rims of the sunblinds. Three tawny roses in a slim rainbow-glass vase dropped their petals hour by hour on the black table under the mirror and filled the still air of the room with their breath; the fragrance coming and

going in obedience to that mystery of a flower's life which gives its odour a rhythm and makes it rise and fall by a law we do not know.

It was too hot to darn any more socks, and her hands, sleek and languid, with the scent of V.V.'s unguents still hanging around them, lay idle in Gillian's lap, the milky opal in her mother's engagement-ring which she always wore, gleaming in the tranquil light with almost as rich a lustre as the over-polished nail of the finger on which it shone. One of V.V.'s sharp little knives had slipped and cut into the flesh at the side of Gillian's right-hand little finger, and the smarting of this infinitesimal wound was pain enough to prevent her falling completely asleep. But V.V., tired and happy, was sleeping, her mouth a little open and her head fallen sideways against a purple cushion; and, as she slept, she gave occasional soft, puffing snores, like the engine of a doll's train going uphill.

With eyes closed and sagging mouth, V.V.'s face lost the light and glow which in her waking hours made it so difficult to realize that she was not as intelligent as she was vivacious. Gillian, watching her, saw what Larry's trained eye had taken in at a glance—the abnormal fading away of the jaw-bone, which, after lifting the chin away from the long, thin column of the neck, disappeared into the cheek, giving to the lower part of the side face a flat, unmodelled look. The nose too, long and blunt, with wide, unwinged nostrils, was unfinished, almost embryonic in its failure to achieve any dignity of form. And yet the rest of her; the wide flat shoulders; the thin flanks, and long, harmoniously proportioned and swift-moving hands and arms; the slim, straight legs with that moving line from thigh to knee which was to Gillian the first element of grace in any human beauty, belonged to an inbred fineness, an inherited civilization which should have had its corresponding signal in her mind. Gillian had searched the more eagerly for this confirmation of excellence in V.V., as she grew increasingly aware of her own enslavement to the infatuating spell which the thought, far more than the actual presence of the elder woman had established upon her life. It was galling to her dignity, and contrary to an ascetic strain in her nature to admit that V.V.'s predominance was due to the eager adoration, the curiously maternal devotion she professed and practised. Gillian, it is true, darned V.V.'s stockings and had, since she learned of V.V.'s ways with her allowance,

made it her business to see that V.V. had three good meals a day, but then she liked the act of darning, and nobody could be reasonably comfortable themselves with a fellow being starving within earshot. The rest of their relationship consisted of services offered; daily, almost hourly oblations by V.V. It was V.V. who supplemented the duties of Mabel and her rotating colleagues in all sorts of details for which Gillian had no time. The Bluebelling of William's cage was symbolic of her whole attitude to Gillian's surroundings. Gillian seldom had cut-flowers in vases because she could not bear to see flowers die, and so spent more time than she could spare changing their water and clipping their stalks when she did have any in her rooms. V.V. kept flowers fresh in water as clear as plate glass in all three of Gillian's rooms, and so stimulated a tiny dwarf rose-bush which Gillian had nurtured for several years, by giving it packets of some patent forcing compound that it bloomed and withered in a fortnight.

Once or twice when Gillian had dined or gone to a play with Stephen and Sophie, V.V. had sat up till after midnight with hot water for her to wash in, and clean brushes to brush her long hair out before she went to bed. On hot evenings V.V. produced ice for the Club lemonade; on rainy afternoons she had tea waiting when Gillian came back from her classes tired and cross. V.V.'s hours in Jacynthe's beauty-parlour appeared elastic; they had interfered with some of Heinrich's arrangements, but Gillian remembered with a startled thought as she brooded sleepily in the deep chair, they never prevented V.V. from being at hand when she could do anything for Gillian. Where, Gillian wondered with a pang of remorse, did V.V. get the ice they had had so often since her return from Seaford? How had she found money to fill both flats with flowers ever since April? V.V. must have gone without many more meals than Heinrich had counted, if her brother had drunk or spent her allowance very often in the past three months. Gillian could not feel honestly grateful to V.V. for these supererogatory ministrations. They were more than the services of common friendship, but they checked rather than encouraged the unique response she made to some other quality than the slavish activity in V.V. That quality was undeniably a physical one. Gillian had suffered V.V.'s exaggerated and frequent embraces with a docility which had surprised

her in herself, and lately she had found herself returning them with a queer thrill of satisfaction. It was rather wonderful to hear the thump of V.V.'s heart through the thin silk of her blouse when she kissed you; to feel her cool, strong hands on your shoulders and to smell the mixed aromatic confusion of scents from her hair and her face-powder; from the soap she washed with and the paste she used for her shining, greedy-looking teeth; from the creams and lotions with which she kept her hands in order. V.V. did not reek of these things. She was almost morbidly clean and dainty in her person, as in all her surroundings. Her clothes were worn but spotless, shabby with much cleaning, limp from many laundries—you had to come very near to her to know that blended, exciting smell. Gillian knew it well now. It was V.V.'s most intimate secret; something she could not know herself, even when she imparted it. And yet it was not a secret after all. It must have been shared between all sorts of people, the Jackies and Dickies, the Peters and Brownies and Smithys—they must all have known it in their day. And that mysterious woman, the one figure in all the picaresque vagabondage to whom V.V. never gave a name, the shadowy friend with whom she had gone, oh, but quite years ago, to live in that little flat in Ostend for which she still owed some one rent, had she too kissed V.V. and breathed her scented warmth? Gillian was wide awake now, her mind alive with pictures and speculation. V.V. must have been quite young in those days. She was only just thirty now and there were at least ten years between the Mordaunt Club and the home she had left for ever to go to Ostend. For some reason V.V. didn't seem to think needed explanation, her father had refused to let her return to him and her sister when she wanted to come back. It wasn't as if she had run away with a man Gillian reflected. Fathers, she knew, were entitled to be harsh when their daughters did that, and the partner of their flight either could not or would not, or, in any case, did not, marry them. But V.V. and her horse and the borzoi she now kept at Epping had come to England, but not to V.V.'s home, when the Ostend adventure ended, and V.V. was working at Jacynthe's to get herself free from a debt—though to whom she owed the money and for what and why and where the woman was through whom she came to be in debt at all, Gillian could even now not understand. It was all so overlaid with the procession of other women and their affairs which trailed along the more immediate past of V.V.'s life. She had clearly

loved them all in her way. But not for long. Did she, Gillian wondered, always love immoderately, with lavish bestowal of material proofs of her love and so wear herself and them out? V.V.'s face as she sank deeper into sleep was unlined, but it had shadows on its imperfect beauty. Her waking face was always pathetic rather than tragic in its shallow ardour; its expression of her unbridled desire to give; but when the vivid evidence of that outgoing impulse was shrouded and her face was at rest, the shadows could be seen, resting lightly, where time and change might have driven furrows in a more resisting field. Even the catastrophe to that friendship for which she had left her father's house and had not even seen him before he died, had left no mark on her smooth forehead. Could one love lightly and violently too? And many times? Gillian knew that V.V. loved her with a kind of obsession now—and there was Heinrich—V.V. loved him too. Of course she did. He was away just now, which was why she had so much time for Gillian. And she was missing him, missing his love-making. It must, thought Gillian, throwing a shy, hurried thought after an idea which had skimmed across her mind like a swallow in flight, it must be very touching to be made love to by Heinrich. Rather like the flattering, miraculous advances a squirrel had once made to her when she was quite a little girl and had spent a whole day being most happily lost in a wood. Heinrich had made love to V.V. like that, and V.V. had kissed him and thrust her scented fingers into his hair and laughed in her throat, and he had felt her heart beating and smelt her spicy odour and had kissed her softly and whispered to her as though she were a mouse or a sparrow or their poor, dull, little tortoiseshell cat. It must have been like that. It must have been very sweet and wonderful. And V.V. was missing it all. How should she not miss such a thing, she whose whole happiness lay in demonstration of that kind? That was why her hands were so often round Gillian's neck in these days, and why her clear eyes, hazel-brown, black-ringed, lovely eyes, looked at her with such an overwhelmingly dewy appeal. Gillian felt the tight little core of resistance to V.V. which had been hard in her heart, melt into pity and love. Dear V.V., kind, lavish, squandering V.V.! Why should Gillian stiffen herself against so warm, so human, so fragrant an adoration as this transferred and wistful passion? "And how much nicer for Heinrich, and safer, to have me occupying till he comes," said Gillian, coming to the surface of her reverie in a bubble of

laughter. “V.V. must love somebody aloud all the time. Suppose she’d fixed on Larry or some other man? Heinrich would have minded that.”

And then, suddenly, she remembered why Larry had gone away. It was much easier not to have love-affairs, unless you were rich like Toby and could marry them at once. Would waiting till Heinrich’s money came out of his uncle’s will and make him really rich, put enmity between him and V.V.? She hoped not. Heinrich would take enmity so seriously. And V.V. wasn’t serious about anything but kissing; and kissing, after all, isn’t a serious matter.

There was a sudden knock at the door. V.V. woke with a start and sat up in her long chair, putting up her hands to arrange her perfectly tidy hair with the instinctive gesture of one whose personal appearance is her constant thought.

“Who ever can that be?” said V.V.

The knock was repeated and seemed to emerge from a background of more complicated though muffled noises.

“Oh! *Come* in!” shouted V.V. through a yawn.

The door was pushed open and Mabel’s voice, carried on the clamour that rushed in, as a soloist sings with the accompanying orchestra, was heard delivering a message.

“Please, Miss Armstrong, Mrs. Barraclough says it’s William again, and will you go over to your own flat and see to him.”

William’s voice certainly could be heard in the din; but it was not its chief ingredient. It rose and fell, tossed about like a cork on the surface of the flood of sound that stormed in through the open door from the landing and from the courtyard beyond the landing window. The noise was the noise of many pianos in conflict over one piece of music. From the floor below Number Thirty-Six but from the flat on the courtyard side there rose the Ballade in A Flat, played loudly, heavily, horribly, with steady thumpings and the dreadful vibrations of an instrument on the loud pedal of which an unrelenting foot is pressed without lifting.

“Goodness!” said Gillian, “that’s the new tenant at Twenty-Nine. Mrs. Barraclough told me she’d had a piano left her by a friend. Do you think it’s driven her mad?”

“It’s driving the Countess madder,” V.V. grinned as she leaned through her scullery window and looked out over the courtyard with Gillian at her side.

The Countess, her window wide to the afternoon, was, in her turn and with enormous *brio*, rendering Chopin with all the assurance of a compatriot and all the calculated resonance of a powerful mistress of the instrument. Neither in *tempo*, nor in the exact place each performer had reached in her interpretation was there any pretence by either player at synchronizing the two performances. They were intended to clash and they clashed. That William should have joined in the din was both natural and comic; but a touch of pathos was added to the conflict by Mrs. Middleton, who, with sturdy perseverance in well-doing, was pedalling away at the harmonium she usually only employed on Sunday evenings and, all stops drawn, was attempting to sound the note, not so much of Christian forbearance as of holy awe, by sending out the tune of “Eternal Father, Strong to Save,” in a series of simple but heartfelt chords.

“I don’t think,” said Gillian, sobbing with laughter as she raced across the courtyard and up the ten flights of steps to her own flat, “I really do *not* think that William is to be blamed for this.”

But William, who had felt lonely since the telephone men had gone home at noon, was making up for several hours of silence. Refreshed by sleep, and strengthened by a pickled onion which one of the workmen had shared with him at the lunch interval, he was in full song and in no mind to stop for anybody. Even when the instrumental contest had subsided until none but the missionary strains of good Mrs. Middleton’s harmonium continued to break the evening peace, William sang on. And, unfortunately the competition had stimulated his memory, from the dark and backward abysm of which he had dredged up fragments, taught him by the lewd sailors who had carried him from the tropic isle which saw his hatching. These he now scattered to the Mordaunt Club with piercing distinctness just as they came back to his undiscriminating mind. And presently, Mrs. Middleton, her pacific task accomplished, closed down

the folding lid of her harmonium and took her feet from the red-carpeted pedals. And still William flung loud, obscene snatches from his marine repertory out of the double mufflings of green baize and Mexican blanket which Gillian had flung over his cage, hardly caring if she stifled William's self so long as his songs were stifled too.

* * *

V.V. came up to dinner, with a muslin-covered basin of ice in one hand and *Pharaoh's Book of Dreams* in the other.

"All the old cats on my landing have written to complain about the new member," she said.

"I'm sure the Countess will complain of William," said Gillian, "and Mrs. Barraclough has warned me that if anyone does he'll have to go."

"Shall you let him? Poor old cocky."

"No, of course not. I shall *take* him away."

"Oh, Gillian—where?"

"To wherever I go, of course."

"You wouldn't leave the Club!"

"I should have to."

"And poor V.V. too?"

"Well, in any case you'll leave when you marry, and besides, we don't know yet that I'll have to go."

However, as they were drinking their coffee in the book-room Mabel came up, very full of importance, and delivered a letter from Mrs. Barraclough in which Gillian was given a final warning.

"I will overlook the matter this last time," wrote Mrs. Barraclough, "as William, in spite of several representations made to me by some of the members, cannot be held entirely responsible for this afternoon's disturbance, but I must be very plain with you that this *is* the last time."

“I’ll tell you what, darling,” said V.V., her eyes very bright in the cloud of cigarette smoke she blew about her head as she sat curled up in a corner of the chesterfield. “We’ll take a ducky little flat together on the Embankment past Beaufort Street and keep William in the window and buy those white china elephants you want so badly from the shop in King’s Road to go with him, and we can have a real bath with a geyser to it, and no more cans of hot water up from the kitchen or boiled on the Primus for our bedroom tub. Won’t that be lovely?”

“It would be very nice to have a flat with a proper bath and electric light in it,” said Gillian, “but, if you can find one, you’ll have to take Heinrich there, not me.”

“Oh, him,” said V.V. “He’s sent me a picture post-card, such a funny one. Look!”

Gillian, who had seen some of the coloured comic post-cards with which V.V. cheered her betrothed on his travels, looked rather anxiously at the response which V.V. drew from the pages of *Pharaoh’s Dream Book*. Heinrich, however, had not replied in kind. He had been over to Wells and had sent V.V. an enchanting picture of a head from one of the cornices.

“He’s not written anything on it but the address and put a little H down in one corner. It’s a dull sort of thing to get, I think,” said V.V. without rancour.

“I think it’s perfectly lovely,” said Gillian, “and it’s a little like you—the way the hair parts, and the eyebrows. That’s why he chose it.”

“Me! Like that ugly stone thing! I hope not,” said V.V., and she tore the card across and threw the pieces into Gillian’s waste-paper basket.

That night, when she had brushed out her hair and shown her how much more becoming two narrow ribbons of different colours threaded in the lace of her nightgown were than one wide one, V.V. pulled down her own hair, slipped out of her old silk dress, and, her thin arms looking very brown and dusky in contrast to her white underclothes, proceeded to sit cross-legged on the floor with a candle on either side of her, to interpret her own and Gillian’s dreams from the pages of the ragged book she had brought upstairs with her.

“You must take off all metal and one garment before you begin,” she explained. “We used to do it at Ostend.”

“V.V.! If you don’t mind, I’d rather you didn’t do it here. I don’t want to know about my dreams, anyway. They are my own, and I know what they mean to me.”

“Oh, all right, ducky. I thought it would amuse you, pertickly as you said you’d dreamed of flowers, and that’s a lucky dream always.”

And gathering herself and her oracle together, she rose from the floor and, coming over to the dressing-table where Gillian was still braiding her hair, she kissed the back of her neck and the shoulders round which the blue and mauve ribbon she had threaded held the lace of Gillian’s nightgown together.

“You baby,” said V.V. “I should like to eat you.”

“V.V., if you don’t take care I shall knock your lovely front teeth out with my hair-brush,” said Gillian. “Go home now before Gordon locks up, and eat a bun instead.”

“I haven’t any buns, and you are being dreadfully cross to your V.V.,” she said. But she went home in quite a good temper, having once more reverted to the glories of the possible flat with gas and a geyser in it, which she was sure they could find without much trouble. V.V. seemed to know all there was to know about dear little flats.

“All the same,” said Gillian to herself when V.V. had gone, “I hope she won’t find one till Heinrich gets his money settled. I don’t think I could bear to live all day and all night in the same flat as dear V.V. I must have some lucid intervals. And there’s nothing lucid about her.”

CHAPTER SIX.
AUNT ELIZABETH

I

"It's high time I came home again," said Lilac. "*Look* at your hat."

Gillian took off her hat and looked at it. It was an old one she had retrimmed herself.

"What a funny expression 'high time' is," she said. "It's like 'now then.' You know what it means, but it doesn't mean anything at all when you think about it."

Lilac made the noise that is written down as "pish" or "tush" to convey her opinion of that remark and returned to her point. Lilac had a most feminine gift for returning to the point.

"Your clothes are past praying for, and you say 'Goodness' twice a day instead of once a week. You *have* been left to yourself."

Lilac had as evidently been left to herself, for she had come back from her honeymoon travels more emphatic and more critical, more woman of the world and more beautifully dressed than she had been able to be when the combined influence of Gillian and poverty had kept her relatively easy-going and only tentatively fashionable.

"Your hat's a marvel," said Gillian, "so neat and yet so gaudy. It looks expensive all over even though it's so plain. Paris, I suppose?"

"Vienna, my dear." Lilac was infinitely up to date: almost in front of date, Gillian thought, once more reflecting on the oddness, the strong commerciality of the phrase "up to date," but this time keeping her comments to herself while Lilac chattered on of how *no*body went to Paris now for really new ideas in clothes. All the cleverest things came from Vienna, which was more Russian than the Russian ballet, so far as colour and decoration went.

She had brought Gillian an enormous grey fox muff and stole from Vienna and a string of clear glass beads that hung down to her knee and then

ended in a cerise-and-magenta tassel to bring out the green colour of the glass.

“Just like that poem in *Georgian Poetry*,” said Gillian, “and they’ll go most wonderfully with V.V.’s flat.”

“Well, I hope you’ll wear them there,” said Lilac, “and not come to my house in them or in any other string of beads, like a savage. I’d never have got them myself. It was Toby’s idea. He said they looked like you.”

“How lovely of Toby!”

“Well,” said Lilac, “he seemed to think I should want to wear them because they reminded him of you. Men *are* the queerest creatures.”

“Oh! Poor Toby! He wanted to be able to see them every day, and now you’ve given them to me.”

“You can wear them when Toby takes you out to dinner, and I hope he’ll be calm about it when you catch your knee in them and they break and roll about on the floor at the Berkeley or get caught in the spring-seat at a theatre. Beads,” said Lilac, “should be seen but not weared.”

“Does Toby let you make nursery jokes?”

“Toby would let me do anything so long as I didn’t prevent him getting back to England in time for fox-huntin’. We’re going to Ireland next week about horses and then back to wherever it is he’s got that horrid, cold, little house you can’t get to from anywhere.”

Lilac was on the whole discontented; a little with Toby, Gillian thought, and a little with life. She had no definite, spoken grievance except one against Gillian for not preventing the house at Seaford altogether.

“Of course, neither Toby nor I will ever go near it. Never, never, never. She’s got that ridiculous clay model all over the billiard-room table at Knightsbridge, and the Bird, looking like an owl, to explain it to us. Why ever did you let her?”

“But how could I help it?”

“Well, she says you advised her. And Seaford of all inhuman wildernesses. We could have done with a house at Ascot, and there are schools there.”

“I’m sorry. But she’d bought the house before I knew and she thought you’d like one near Glynde.”

“Pish!” said Lilac again. “And, anyway, it was you who got Bird into it. Painting all over those cauliflowers and gargoyles. It’s like a lunatic’s house. It’s worse than the Phené toy in Oakley Street.”

“Well,” said Gillian, “Jane’s going to have it in her show in Grafton Street. In the middle of the room with the portrait figures all round. It’s very amusing, and awfully clever too. She’s not made a mess of it.”

“Oh, the model’s all right as a joke, and some of Bird’s figures are very good. She’s going to be a rage. She’s the best friend you’ve got. I think you ought to drop the others.”

“Really! Lilac——”

“Yes! Don’t look at me as though I had a smut on my nose. My face is perfectly clean, and I mean what I say. You have no taste in people. Larry Browne’s all right. He belongs to quite a good family. All that living in a studio and wearing a big hat is just pose. He ought to have gone into the Home Office and done a little painting in his spare time, then you could have married him.”

“But, Lilac——”

“Oh, yes, I know you never think of how you are to get out of all this nonsense about earning your living. But I think of it for you. No one but rather an odd sort of man would marry you. Unless, of course, I can *make* you dress properly and look at things in an ordinary common-sense way.”

“Lilac darling, I’m perfectly happy as I am. And quite ordinary enough to keep myself out of an asylum.”

“For the present. But look at the lunatics you go about with.”

“Lilac!”

“Yes. I saw you yesterday in Sloane Street with something rather like an Italian organ-grinder without the organ and the monkey. Without a hat too.”

“Oh, that was Heinrich. He plays in the Queen’s Hall orchestra.”

“Look here, Gillian. You can’t be seen about with a man who plays in a band; and Bird told me yesterday that you’d got another crony, a woman hairdresser with a wild name.”

“That’s too bad of Jane. She’s always been horrid about poor V.V. I think she’s jealous because Larry has drawn and painted her so much since he came back. She’s engaged to be married to Heinrich. They are both perfect dears.”

“Well, Jane Bird does not approve of the woman, and I’ve seen the band-player myself. Let them marry one another, by all means, as soon as possible, and then you’ll be rid of both of them.”

“No, I shan’t. They can’t marry for some time. And I’m very probably going to share a small flat with V.V., so as to be able to make a home for William. Mrs. Barraclough has given me notice for him again, and, this time, he must go.”

“Nonsense, Gillian. If you must leave the Club, go and live with Aunt Elizabeth. She’s very frail and lonely. I was up there yesterday. She asked about you. Have you been to see her lately?”

“N-no. Not since she came back from Matlock.”

“It hasn’t done her much good. And you’d far better cherish her a little and leave these fearful wildfowl you’ve collected alone. Toby and I’ll take William on if you want a home for him, There’s a conservatory in the house we saw yesterday in Norfolk Street that would suit him very well.”

“I’ll think about William, and I’ll go to see Aunt Elizabeth on Tuesday. It’s her birthday.”

“So it is. I’d almost forgotten. We shall be in Ireland. I must have some flowers sent up.”

And Lilac gathered her sable coat about her and cast a rather wistful look round the flat.

“Good-bye, Jilly dear. In some ways I envy you for being here still, in spite of the oil-lamps and the bedroom bath. You’re free, and the rooms are very peaceful, once you get up all these stairs.”

II

The air was yellow and the pavements were slimy with what might at any moment thicken into a December fog as Gillian made her way from the workshop to the Highgate omnibus, where she had spent the morning sitting to Jane. Nothing short of missing the last omnibus on a wet night ever drove her into any Tube.

She had spent a depressing morning. Jane, who never worked on the model with a sitter, had taken a few sketches and had then insisted on having lunch, in order, as she frankly confessed, to talk to Gillian. Jane was much happier since she had returned from her commissioned journey in Old Winona’s retinue. The progress from château to château had been marvellous in every aspect, whether as business and its involved and legitimate pleasures, or as the illicit delight any prolonged acquaintance with the mind and methods of that great and wonderful woman could not fail to arouse in anyone so keenly alive to the varieties of human experience as Jane Bird. But it was not only the refreshment of that change which had calmed and illuminated Jane’s spirit. There was now, as Gillian could not fail to notice, a new and a curiously peaceful understanding between her and Larry. They no longer hailed each other with torrents of esoteric abuse: indeed, they seemed to have quite wonderfully little to say to each other in public. But every now and again in general conversation it would appear that Jane or Larry possessed the answer to some question asked of one or the other, and, several times when she had been out alone or with V.V., at night, watching the moon on the river or coming home from a play on the top of an omnibus, she had seen Larry and Jane arm-in-arm strolling together deep in talk and laughter. Gillian never saw Jane at the studio when she went to fetch V.V. home from a sitting or to join her and Heinrich at supper, and Larry never came into the workshop when she was sitting herself to Jane, but it was

clear that they spent a great deal of time together and that each knew every detail of the other's work. More than once Gillian had been on the brink of asking whether Mr. Quist had taken the glove-buttoning figure home, but the question had never been spoken, and no reference to it appeared in the little descriptive catalogues of Jane's works which they had all drawn up together in preparation for the coming exhibition of them.

But it was not of herself, nor of Larry, that Jane delivered opinions that morning.

"It's about Heinrich, Gillian. Do you think that painted mannequin of yours is behaving properly to him?"

"V.V.? Why, yes. Why shouldn't she?"

"Well, I don't. Have you noticed the look in his face? His eyes get nearer together every time I see him. The bridge of his nose hardly separates them. It's an ugly look. And he never takes his eyes off her while she's with him."

"I know he doesn't. It gets on her nerves a little."

"She shouldn't have nerves. No woman who undertakes Heinrich has any business with nerves. He's got more than enough for a whole family. And she won't let him have his sparrows in, or play with mice."

"I know. She says the cat is enough now that it has killed the canary which she *did* like. She's very tender-hearted."

"Very *what*?"

"Tender-hearted, Jane. You don't know V.V. as I do, and you are not fair to her or about her."

"Gillian, you're dotty about that woman. And it isn't right. You're too old. I know what I'm talking about. I was dotty about you two years ago. Crazy. I didn't think of anything but how to make you look at me again. But I came through. And you were worth it. You meant something, and you never set yourself to lead me on. Do you remember the King's daughter? You showed me the bit in that purple, locked book of yours. How did it go? 'Let

us love her or none—to choose the false in mere impatience with the true, that it is which degrades us....' And that Vanderleyden woman won't see you through, Gillian. There's nothing to her, once you've got her colour and her bones—she's a model, but only a model. It's not worth it—it's not good enough. Not for you. Larry doesn't like it either."

Gillian was angry.

"I wish you'd not discuss my private affairs with all sorts of people. Lilac was saying on Saturday that you'd slandered V.V. to her. She's the only person who bothers one little bit about me, and she never says one unkind word about you."

"Oh, all right. Lose your temper. It's a symptom. Only when the crash comes, remember I'm like the man in the Psalms: I've delivered my soul."

"Well, I always did think that was the top note of self-seeking," said Gillian, getting up from the table and putting on her hat with emphasis, rather on one side; "and besides, it isn't Psalms, it's Ezekiel."

"Pedant!" said Jane. "You are right, 'if he turn not from his wicked way,' which is what you've refused to do. And if you won't finish your lunch you won't. There'll be two lemon cheese-cakes for me. Also a cream-cheese. You didn't know that. But it's too late now. You can't relent and forgive me just for cream-cheese."

"I could," said Gillian, "but I've got to go and buy some chrysanthemums and get up to Highgate before it's black dark."

* * *

Outside in the raw, damp air Gillian's temper cooled. She sat on the top of the omnibus, on the left-hand corner seat, in front, her arms full of the crisp, copper-coloured flowers, their festive winter scent filling her brain with half-remembered excitements: children's parties; her first grown-up dance; the bouquets which came at New Year when they lived at Lausanne—mimosa and carnations or chrysanthemums always. The scented memories crowded out her resentment at Jane's strictures as the omnibus lumbered on and the heavy air cleared and lightened with every

mile. But there remained with her the half-guilty, half-puzzled sense that had beset her before.

It was half-past three before she reached the top of Highgate Hill, and there was a faint glow of sunset with a little shred of new moon dim through the watery twilight above the trees in Mrs. Mortimer's garden, when Gillian rang the bell at the gate.

It was answered by Maggie, a devoted and entirely disrespectful retainer who had "stood up to" Aunt Elizabeth for many years and was known to be keeping a matrimonially inclined policeman at bay, until she could find another person (Maggie did not care for the word "woman," refused to say "servant," and considered "lady" to be an unsuitable description of the ideal she sought) fit to take charge of "the mistress."

"I'm glad you've come, Miss Gillian," said Maggie in the tone of one who could have said "and surprised," "and I see you've remembered it's the mistress's birthday. Seventy-three she is, and looks it. She's been far from well the last ten days and more."

Gillian carried her flowers through the square hall where the grandfather clock, which had belonged to her own great-grandfather, ticked to the rocking of a full-rigged ship that tossed to and fro across its aged face on a painted ocean very full of waves, and opened the door of the room with the view.

Mrs. Mortimer sat in a chair by the fire, a pile of white muslin in her lap. She was hemming window-curtains for Gillian's flat.

"Lilac told me you'd none now she's left you," said she, as Gillian kissed her and asked her why she tired herself with sewing in the fading light.

"How lovely of you," said Gillian, not daring or even wishing to tell that she preferred her windows unblinded. "I believe you do it a little out of vanity because you can see without glasses."

But when she had arranged her chrysanthemums, to which Mrs. Mortimer paid very little attention, flowers inside a house being, in her opinion, out of place and in the way, Gillian, sitting on a low stool in front of the fire, looked up at her great-aunt's face and saw that she was very tired. And

Aunt Elizabeth, looking down at the young face lifted to hers, saw a shadow there.

“Have you anything to tell me, my girl?” she said.

It was the consecrated phrase in which, ever since Gillian and Lilac could remember, she had made open confession easy for them.

“Aunt Elizabeth,” said Gillian, “did love make you unhappy?”

“The Lord,” said Mrs. Mortimer, “dealt very graciously with me and gave me the man of my choice.”

“But not for a great many years, Aunt Elizabeth.”

“He was given to me in the first moment I met him.”

“How did you know?”

The old woman was silent. Her dim eyes fixed on the glowing embers of the fire.

“By a bodily pang,” she said at last.

Gillian was startled.

“Tell me about it,” she said, taking one of the thin old hands, its blue veins dark under the transparent, silk-smooth skin, and laying her cheek in its palm. “Tell me, Aunt Elizabeth. I want so much to know.”

“I was an unbeliever in those days,” said Mrs. Mortimer, “a wicked, haughty girl, a Sabbath-breaker. I and my brothers, James and Penrhyn, would ride together twenty miles on horseback and think nothing to dance all night afterwards, and ride home again in the morning without sleep. They called us the handsome Armstrongs. James was dark like an eagle, and Penrhyn had red hair and a blue eye, piercing and terrible. Two girls pined and died when Penrhyn had looked at them only. And I was betwixt and between, cinder-colour they called my hair, and my eyes were not so grey as James’s nor so blue as Penrhyn’s; but my hair was thick and long so that I could sit in it and you could not see my hands if I put them in my lap or behind my back, and it was curly. And my eyes were well enough, even if my face was pale. Tall like a Maypole I was. ‘Long

Bess Armstrong,' they called me, and I was mad for horses and pleasure. Twice I broke my arm and once my collar-bone riding, and when I was eighteen, I dressed in Penrhyn's breeches and stole my father's riding-coat and won the steeplechase at Stone Crosses. My father was for sending me away to London after that, but James and Penrhyn rebelled. Neither of them would move without me to any ball or gala in the countryside; and neither of them would marry, because there was not a girl for miles around I could not put to shame in the pride of my dancing and for riding the wickedest horse anywhere in the marches. And many's the man that would have tried for me in the face of Penrhyn's vow that the man I married must outride him and then throw him at wrestling. But there was not one of them I would put to the test.

"But one night, as we rode home just before harvest, we came to a narrow lane that ran along a field of corn, sloping up the hillside. And the dawn was breaking and the wind ran up the cornfield in waves and shadows like hounds in full cry, and I was riding ahead because of the narrowness of the lane. And there, at the end of the lane where the hedges ended and the fields lay open, I saw a light before me, and a voice coming out of the light called me by name, 'Elizabeth Armstrong,' three times. And my horse heard the voice and saw the light and would not go forward. But I said nothing to the boys when they came up with me, and we rode home together laughing at the way Penrhyn spoke of what my mother had told us the day before. She had told us that she was giving the two rooms at the end of the house to a young student from Trevecca. The rooms were part of an old cottage that had been built into the main part by my grandfather when he married his third wife and had more children. My grandfather had twenty-four children, and they all lived to grow up. And this young student was coming to finish his study for a degree in theology. He was going to the Valley Farm. But smallpox had broken out there. And the pest-house was full and they had to keep three cases in the house. So my mother said she would be ashamed for a young and godly man to go there, to his death maybe, and she with more rooms in the house than we could ever fill, and the student should come to us and the payment should go just the same to Mrs. Pryce at the Farm and be towards the nursing of the sick.

“In my heart I knew that my mother was right; but I joined with James and Penrhyn in mocking at her for taking sides with a Methody man. And, as we rode on, the sun rose higher, and Penrhyn laughed and said we should come into the village a little late for church. It was a Sunday morning, and presently we could hear the bells ringing for Morning Prayer at ten o’clock. And Penrhyn said, ‘Let us ride into church and support the parson. Maybe he is too drunk again this morning to read the prayers without aid.’ But James and I would not ride our horses into the churchyard. So we got down at the gate and gave our horses to a boy to lead home and walked into church as we were, in our riding-things. I had on a green habit, with laced frills at the neck, and a black hat with a feather in it, and I stood for a moment in the porch to smell the roses that grew over it and to wait for the General Confession to be ended and the Absolution, so that we could walk into church with less scandal—it was bad enough to be going straight from our dancing and in our riding-clothes—when the congregation stood up to say the Venite. There was no singing in church in those days, my girl, till it came to the hymn, and not then if Tom and Harry Pryce had been harvesting all week and were too tired to play the flute and the cornet at ten o’clock in the morning.

“And as I stood there I saw Evan Mortimer. And he stood up in his place when he saw me. And my heart broke within me and my tongue was stiff in my mouth, and I walked straight into the church and stood beside him. And when we knelt down I prayed to God for the first time since I was a child and my mother made me pray at her knee, and my prayer was, ‘O God, give me this man.’”

“And was he the Methody student?” said Gillian.

“He was, my girl,” said Mrs. Mortimer, “and he would none of me, knowing of my ungodly life. But he had not known who I was when he saw me, and by the grace of God, the desire of my flesh inflamed my soul and I believed and was saved.”

“But did you love God because of Uncle Evan?”

“God showed me first His creature who had beauty that I might desire him and so come to know Him whom no man hath at any time seen. The

love of man will lead to the love of God, or to the slavery of the Devil. I served God, through Evan, and was saved. But my brother Penrhyn, who mocked at my love and would never speak to me again after he knew that Evan and I had promised marriage to each other, he went a-whoring after women and was lost."

"I thought he went to America," said Gillian.

"He went to America, with the Squire's young wife; shamefully, in open sin, and died there before I married Evan. Evan had gone to Africa away from me, and I was alone, for the grace of God to work in me, when your father was born, and James's wife—a poor and sickly creature who thought more of the new book of poems by Robert Browning than of James or of her unborn child—died. And I took the child, for the Lord had denied children to my body. Sometimes," said Mrs. Mortimer, "when love is as great as it was between Evan and me, there is no child according to the flesh, born of it."

"Why didn't you go to Africa with Uncle Evan?"

"There was a time when your uncle turned from me, fearing that he was losing God in his love for me," said Mrs. Mortimer, "and until he had purged himself of that fear we remained apart. But the Lord blessed his ministry and brought us together in it at the end."

"Goodness," said Gillian, "it gets more and more difficult. I thought love always made people want to live together for ever."

"Love," said Mrs. Mortimer, "divides like a sword if it is only of the flesh. But when its roots in the flesh come to their flowering in the heart and in the soul, it is from everlasting to everlasting; death and the grave have no power upon it; it cannot consume away."

Night had blackened the uncurtained windows, and the fire had died into a dull gleam as they talked; but the room was filled with the living flame of the old woman's passion and they needed no grosser light. Gillian sat, with her head against her aunt's knee, and listened to the faint ticking of the austere little polished granite clock that, flanked by two bronze vases, presided, from the centre of the marble mantelpiece over the gaunt,

Victorian room. The locked glass doors of the bookcase shutting in volumes of sermons and the lives of John and Charles Wesley, together with the works of other latter-day saints, reflected the firelight and cast a dim flicker on the polished wood of the walnut davenport at which Mrs. Mortimer inconveniently conducted her direct and concise correspondence. A fine steel-engraving after Rubens, *The Descent from the Cross*, hung between the two windows, and a coloured print of Turner's *Golden Bough* occupied the opposite wall, hanging over a Victorian sofa on which the hardiest frame could find no repose without the aid of the cushions which Mrs. Mortimer kept upstairs in a cupboard, except at such times as illness warranted their temporary release.

Gillian knew now why no vestiges of her African life appeared in Mrs. Mortimer's parlour. The carved and woven trophies of heathen art, the pink-lipped tropic shells, the plaited mats that proclaimed the past in Mrs. Middleton's flat, were absent from her friend's retreat. The heathen in his blindness had been to Elizabeth Mortimer the necessary means through which God had worked to bring peace to Evan Mortimer's soul. She had helped to clothe the negro nakedness; she had taught the African girl to read the New Testament and to substitute the name of Jesus in her automatic prayers for those of the more awful though not less blood-stained deities of her native religion, but she had not let her eyes be beguiled by the ingenuous art of her proselytes. Her pupils had taught her nothing. She went out to preach the Gospel in a strange place, and, that duty accomplished, she returned to wait the day of reunion with her husband in surroundings as removed from the wild folly of her youth as they were untouched by the missionary adventure of her middle life.

Gillian had known for many years that under the rigid performance of such duties to society at large and to the members of her own family in particular as Aunt Elizabeth felt called upon to discharge there burned a deeper, more individual flame. She was accustomed to the sight of Evan Mortimer's portrait, a miniature, faded but still clear with the fine, grave beauty the artist had seen in the ascetic face and had transferred to the yellowing ivory. It lay, in its worn leather case, beside the Bible and the clean, lavender-scented, always folded handkerchief Mrs. Mortimer kept with a carafe of cold water on a table by her bedside. She knew that her

aunt entertained a living belief that her husband, clothed in the immortalized flesh of his mortality, answering to his earthly name, speaking with his human voice, would be waiting for her when, in a glorified but still tangible shape, she, too, should ford the river of death ("cross Jordan" was Aunt Elizabeth's phrase) and be welcomed on the farther side, knew, too that it was in the strength of this conviction that she was possessing her soul through the years of waiting. But in Gillian's mind, relegated to the class, formed in childhood, of impertinent questions which it was not her business to ask, the actual nature of the feeling on which this expectation was founded had escaped definition. That Aunt Elizabeth should ever have been shaken by, that she should still openly admit the dominion of physical passion, was to Gillian an amazing discovery. And the most amazing part of it was that the revelation left Aunt Elizabeth herself untouched, the same emphatic Puritan as she had always been; but love, this thing of the body from which she had until now turned her timid thought, became exalted and magnified "of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting one altogether." What was it she was saying? "And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting: and they that have done evil into everlasting fire."

"Aunt Elizabeth. Do you know, you've made me think of the Athanasian Creed?"

"I daresay, my girl," said Aunt Elizabeth. But she was sunk in a dream, and Gillian was not sure that she had heard her.

And presently Maggie came in and lit the incandescent gas-burners, one on each side of the fireplace, and drew, the long, red, repp curtains across the windows and stirred the fire and said tea was ready in the dining-room, and she hoped Miss Gillian wouldn't go making her auntie talk too much or she'd have another of her bad nights again.

III

When she got back to the Club, Gillian crept up to her flat very softly so as not to be heard of William, whose cage stood in the outer of the double-rooms on the courtyard side, and let herself into the single-room on the street side of the building which she still kept as a bedroom, though,

strictly speaking, she should have given it up when Lilac left. She did not want William's possible song of welcome or the light in one of the courtyard windows to announce her return. She wanted, for this one evening, to be alone, free from V.V.'s kindness and cherishing, free from her interminable chatter, and from the necessity of responding to the ardour of her impulsive embraces. She might, of course, find one of V.V.'s notes—"Darling, put a light in the window when you come in and I'll come across"—but this she would—she must, for once, ignore. If only she did not meet V.V., or find her waiting on the landing.

But there was no eager shadow waiting on the darkened staircase when she let herself in after closing-time, no three-cornered note fell out from the letters in her letter-box when she unlocked it, almost furtively, outside her bedroom door. And, perverse as she felt it to be, Gillian was surprised, disappointed, hurt at this failure of the very importunity she had tried to avoid.

She had not seen V.V. before going out in the morning: it was quite possible that she had gone to Queen's Hall and that Heinrich had taken her back to supper at the studio after the Symphony Concert that evening. She hoped so. She hoped so much that Jane was wrong about V.V. making Heinrich unhappy. It was strange to think that V.V. and Aunt Elizabeth were both women, and that both of them used the same word and meant such different things when they spoke of loving. "But, then," said Gillian as she drew the blankets up above her ears, "I suppose Uncle Evan must have been extremely unlike Heinrich."

Yesterday's threat of fog had established itself in suffocating fulfilment when Gillian woke next morning.

By three o'clock it had so blinded the eyes and irritated the throat of everybody in the school in Buckingham Palace Road that Miss de Stormont declared the last lecture suspended and sent her students home an hour and a half before the usual time. Gillian groped her way back to Chelsea on foot, all the omnibuses having given up attempting to run at noon. She had not had time to see V.V. that morning, but as she came out of the fog to the railings by the gateway to the Club she knew that she wanted nothing so much as to find V.V. with a huge fire and tea

waiting for her when she got upstairs. “And if she’s not in my flat, I shall go over to Thirty-Six,” said Gillian to herself.

But she was so sure that V.V. would be waiting for her in her own rooms that she tried the door on the top landing without unlocking it. It was locked. V.V. had not come over. Gillian propped her dispatch-case against the wall on her lifted knees as she groped in it for her latch-key. A small movement behind the curtain which shut off the scullery corridor from the landing made her pause before she could find the key in the darkness on which the single gas-jet in its wire cage only threw more obscuring shadows.

“Who’s there?” she called, and was a little frightened at the note of fear in her own voice.

A shadow detached itself from the gloom.

“It is I,” said a reedy voice.

“Heinrich. What are you doing without an overcoat in this weather?”

“I come for V.V.,” said the thin voice sternly. “You will please give her up to me now.”

“Oh, I thought she must be with you,” said Gillian.

“You know she is here,” said Heinrich.

But when the door was unlocked Gillian’s two rooms were dark and untenanted. No fire had been lit in either, though fires were laid in both.

Gillian lit two candles and put a match to the fire in the outer sitting-room.

“Will you stay and have tea here,” she asked, “or will you go over to V.V.’s flat? You see she is not in mine.”

“V.V. is somewhere wiz you. She is not in her flat. She has not been zere since before yesterday. She is wiz you.”

“Don’t be silly, Heinrich. I haven’t seen V.V. since Sunday. Why—what *have* you got?”

“A pistol—wiz bullets in him.”

“Goodness! Is it yours? Can you work it?”

“No. I do not know how to work it. But I can pull somesing till it works himself. It belongs to Larry. I bring it here to frighten you. I am,” said Heinrich, “frightened of it myself.”

“Well,” said Gillian, “I’m not exactly frightened. But you’d better put it down on the table and have some tea. If it’s Larry’s it won’t be loaded. Larry knows better than to let you have loaded pistols to play with.”

“Larry does not know I play wiz it. He has gone wiz Jane up the hill out of ze fog. And I come here for V.V.”

“I’ve told you V.V. isn’t here. I’ve not seen her since Sunday. What makes you think she’s here?”

“She tell me so herself. She said to me ‘whenever you cannot find me I shall be wiz Gillian.’”

“Oh, she just meant I might know where she was or she might be here. Are you sure she is not in her own flat?”

“I know she is not. She tell me she is wiz you.”

Gillian was cross. It was cold and foggy and she wanted her tea and Heinrich was being very obstinate and trying.

“Look here, Heinrich,” she began, and then, in the light of the candles which were burning higher now, she saw his face. Jane had been right. He had a curious look. His eyes *were* odd, almost squinting, with deep, dark hollows on each side of the nose so that they seemed to have grown nearer together.

“Let’s go over to the other house and look for her,” she said.

“I will look first for her in the books-room please,” said Heinrich.

So Gillian let him look, and carried a candle into the inner room to show him that V.V. was not there. But all it showed them was the empty, red chesterfield and the Great Fortuna who danced on her tight-rope in the flickering light.

“Come,” said Gillian, “we shall find her in her own room.”

The doors of the large and of the smaller rooms in the house across the courtyard were locked and there were several letters visible through the glass of V.V.’s uncleared letter-box.

“We’ll ask Mrs. Gordon if she knows where V.V. is,” Gillian decided as they came downstairs together. Heinrich shivered a little. He was wearing neither overcoat nor hat. “You must put that weapon in your pocket though,” Gillian admonished him. “Mrs. Gordon would be scared past speech if she were to see such a thing.”

But Mrs. Gordon had seen nothing of V.V. for some days.

“I see her on Saturday wen she paid her book,” said Mrs. Gordon, “and yet again at middle-day Monday wen she went out with that ’at with the red feather in it, if you take me, miss, the oxydized one like the ’at Miss Gordon wears of an afternoon. But since then I’ve seen nothing of her and she’s not been having any meals from the kitching.”

“Did she leave her keys with you?”

“’Arry!” screamed Mrs. Gordon suddenly down the kitchen stairs to the top of which she had mounted in reply to Gillian’s ring. “Wot abart Number Thirty-Six?”

Mr. and Mrs. Gordon always spoke of the tenants as warders are said to speak of the convicts in their charge.

“Bin away since Chewsdy,” boomed a voice from below, “left no key downstairs neither.”

“There now.” Mrs. Gordon was satisfied that her statements had corroboration. “Wot did I say. She’s off after that dog of hers again, I suppose. Makes as much trouble as if ’e was a Christian.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Gordon. I dare say that’s what has happened,” and Gillian closed the door although Mrs. Gordon betrayed symptoms of her being able to continue the conversation further. Gillian did not wish Heinrich to be drawn into it, hoped he had escaped Mrs. Gordon’s notice altogether, above all did not wish his pistol to be remarked. She didn’t for

one moment think the pistol was loaded or feel that Heinrich himself was dangerous; but he was so agitated and unhappy that she knew he couldn't bear such a fuss and clamour as the discovery that he bore firearms would arouse in the Gordons' domain. "Suppose they set Crack on him," thought Gillian, "as they would have done on that poor little cat. He'd break." Heinrich did indeed look strained and taut; Gillian had never before realized what the expression "reaching the breaking-point" really meant.

Out in the courtyard, in the angles of lamplight that came down from above the doors of the two houses, he was almost invisible, a faint shade in the fog which was moving and lifting as the tide set down-stream in the river.

"Heinrich dear," said Gillian, "she's not here. She's probably been held up in the fog in Essex. Hadn't you better go back to the studio? Perhaps she's waiting for you there."

"She told me she will always be wiz you," persisted Heinrich in the thin, high voice.

"I'll come and tell you or I'll send her if she's not too tired, the minute she comes, if she does come to me, to-night. But I don't think she will. There'll be a letter from her in the morning. Perhaps even to-night. Perhaps there's one waiting for you at the studio this very minute."

"I shall find a letter if I go back?" asked the voice anxiously.

"Yes, I think so. Anyway, go and see. And get an overcoat and a muffler if you come out again. And a hat, Heinrich."

Gillian went with him to the gateway of the Club and watched him drift away and vanish into the dim mists by the river. Then she went up to her own flat again.

The fire she had kindled hastily was out, quenched by the heavy air, and the candles burnt sullenly in the yellow stillness. It was getting late; a clattering of dishes on the lower landings announced the serving of dinner. Gillian decided to leave the fire alone and to eat her dinner as quickly as possible without taking off her outdoor clothes. It was a lonely,

dismal thing to do, but she intended to make up for it by having the largest fire her bedroom grate would hold, and a double quantity of hot water for her bath and to devote an hour to washing the fog out of herself before she went to bed. She would read *Emma* till the last post came. *Emma* was just the right book for a foggy night. She would enjoy getting too hot eating Mr. Knightley's strawberries, she would avoid the long cold drive with the proposing Mr. Elton, and she would look up all Mr. Woodhouse's gruels. She would put on her old, padded, silk dressing-gown, shabby but faded into such a satisfying, dim, rose-colour, and sit in the big basket-chair which would go on giving out companionable creaks all night afterwards, and there would be no Lilac to grumble at the noise it made, saying that each creak woke her out of a dream it sounded so like a pistol-shot at night. Poor Heinrich and his borrowed pistol. She hoped he was all right and that V.V. had either gone to the studio or written to him. Anyhow it was warm at the studio with that white porcelain stove that Larry had brought home with him, each tile painted with a different bird on a flowering branch; and the little cat would be there to keep him company. Gillian was glad to think he had the little cat.

Mabel, clearing away the dinner-dishes, agreed to bring up two large cans of bath-water and volunteered the news that the fog had blowed off to Battersea. She also offered to light the bedroom fire seeing that she must have laid the sitting-room one badly that morning for it to have gone out as it had done. This was kind of Mabel, for it was not her duty to light, only to lay the fires in the various rooms she waited on. But, ever since the day when Gillian had gone unexpectedly into her scullery and had found the postman kissing Mabel behind the curtains and had told neither Mrs. Barraclough nor Mrs. Gordon, Mabel had done a great many little services of that kind for Number Seven.

So Gillian settled down in the big basket-chair with *Emma* and *Songs before Sunrise* in the new Pineapple Edition; shrugged her shoulders luxuriously up and down in the soft silk of her dressing-gown; toasted her feet at the big fire and waited for the last post and for the two cans of boiling water that would come up just before the house was closed for the night.

But there was no letter from V.V. by the last post and when Mabel staggered into the room, wreathed in clouds of steam from the two huge cans she had carried upstairs at ten o'clock, she said that Miss Vanderleyden's flat was still empty.

"Maybe," said Mabel hopefully, "she's met with a haxident. Lots of people is run over in these ere fogs you know, miss."

And William, from under the baize cover which kept him warm and silent in his corner for the night, roused by Mabel's familiar voice, stirred on his perch and gave his only too realistic imitation of Mabel's loud, persistent sniff.

IV

It was eleven o'clock. Gillian had had her bath and the round shallow tin which V.V. had only just re-enamelled pink inside and bright blue out, was still full of fragrant soapsuds iridescent in the firelight and whispering to themselves with a little, soft, hissing noise of tiny bubbles as they coalesced and broke. She had put the lamp on a table by the window so that her shadow should not fall on the blind, and she stood in front of the fire, her feet rosy on the blue bath-mat, her arms raised to take the pins out of her hair.

A few small flames, blue and transparent, moved softly, flowing together like liquid mercury across the blackened surface of the still unburnt coal that arched the ruddy caverns of the fire from which an even glow enveloped her as she stood, supple and tingling from the water. Her bath-towel hung drying over a chair on one side of the fireplace, her nightgown threaded with two coloured ribbons, mauve and blue this time, lay warming on another. She hunched one shoulder and rubbed her chin against its rounded smoothness and she saw her shadow cast by the firelight on the white wall behind her. She shook her head to free the coils of her hair. They slid down her back, two thick ropes warm and faintly scented with camomile-flower tea blended with an imprisoned memory of the day's fog. Taking an end in each hand she turned her back to the fire and, holding out her arms to their full length, she shook out her hair so that it fell slowly and made a great fan-shaped shadow on the wall. She

ran to the dressing-table to take a comb, stilting along on the top of each great-toe like a ballet-dancer, and then, returning to the zone of warmth and firelight, she combed and disentangled and pulled away the knots until her hair hung straight and smooth hiding her breast and shoulders in a moving veil. Her face peered at her, laughing at its own reflection in a little mirror framed in black, carved ivy-leaves which hung above the fireplace between a white, china rabbit and an old, green, glass door-stop, all three cherished relics of her childhood. The tick of the falling ash in the grate; the creaking of the wicker-chair on the cushions of which *Emma* still lay, open in the middle of the Box Hill party; the swish of a passing taxi in the street below muffled by the closed window and drawn curtains, seemed like little desultory tunes played to the accompaniment of a silence that was, like a ray of light that twists together all the colour of a rainbow, only the gathering together of distant, undistinguishable clamour of many sounds. Gillian, alone in her closed room, its white walls gilded and rosy with lamp- and firelight, its warm air laden with the clean scent of soap and water and violet-powder and loosened hair which in five minutes would be chased away by the cold night-air when she opened her window and got into bed, felt herself caught into a bliss of solitude, safe, anonymous, ignored. She was alone, alone. No claims, no duty, no criticism could touch her. The disfiguring humiliation of the clothes she could never quite wear as other people wore the same, or slightly better chosen raiment, was no longer about her. She was free, and fine and lovely. She cupped her chin in her hands and saw in the mirror how the point of each shoulder broke through the cloud of hair hanging over it, like a young moon in an outcast sky. She shook back her hair and, with a hand on each hip, bent her body backwards till she felt her hair touch her ankles. She stretched up her arms till the shadow of her hands on the ceiling almost met the shadow of the chair on which her bath-towel hung. She made a rabbit of her hands, as children do, and it scampered round the walls; she played tricks with her shadows, the tall one on the wall opposite the fire, and the wavering one by the door, cast by the lamp which was flickering and dying down because its oil was nearly spent. She tried to make them meet and become one shadow. She stood on one leg with the palm of her foot over her straightened knee and let the light shine through the arch; she tried to look through the arch and

almost slipped and fell. As she straightened herself again she remembered that it was Lilac who did that, and that, even when she was twelve, she had never succeeded in doing it three times running, herself. "I'm getting too old to do it at all," she said and put out her hand to take her nightgown.

* * *

There was a sudden rush of cold air into the room as the door opened and closed quickly again shutting V.V. in.

Gillian clutched at her nightgown and tried to slip it on.

"Don't, don't," laughed V.V., "I love you as you are, you witch," and she slipped across the room and pulled the thin cambric till it tore across.

"V.V.! how dare you!" said Gillian, and she wrapped herself from chin to toe in the warm bath-towel, folding her hair in with it in her haste and indignation.

V.V. sat down in the basket-chair, throwing *Emma* on the floor beside her with no concern for the crumpling pages.

"Have you missed me?" she said.

"Of course I have," said Gillian, surprised to feel herself trembling as she stood holding the bath-towel round her like a shawl. "Have you been with Heinrich?"

"No. Not since Monday. I had a quarrel with him on Monday. I've kept away from both of you on purpose since."

V.V. was pale and tired. She had evidently been out in the fog all day for her hair hung damp and heavy under the brim of her hat and there were black smudges on her imperfectly powdered face.

"Poor Heinrich has been here in a dreadful state of anxiety this evening," said Gillian.

"Has he? The little fool."

"Oh, V.V.! He was really distressed about you. He thought you were with me."

“So I am.”

“Yes, now, but this was between five and six.”

“Well, he knows I’m with you now.”

“Oh, then you have seen him.”

“No, not yet. But I’m going to.”

V.V. got up out of the creaking chair and in two swift strides had crossed the narrow room and was at the window. She pulled aside the curtains and threw up the sash. “Come here,” she said to Gillian as she leaned out over the sill.

Gillian stumbled in her heavy swathing to V.V.’s side.

“Look there. Did you ever see such an idiot,” said V.V.

Gillian leaned out beside her and looked. The fog had cleared off and a fine, chill rain was falling. Down on the pavement on the opposite side of the street, standing under a lamp-post Heinrich waited looking up at the lighted window. He was still without hat or overcoat and even from the fifth story Gillian could see how sharp and white his face was.

“Go home, Hinerik,” called V.V. “I told you I’d be here,” and dragging Gillian back with her she slammed the window down again and drew the curtains.

“V.V., what are you doing?” said Gillian, her teeth chattering with the sudden cold.

“Teaching him his place,” said V.V. sullenly. “I told him on Monday that you and I were going to live together in a flat of our own——”

“But, V.V.——”

“Yes, we are. You know we are. Well, he didn’t like it.”

“But of course he didn’t——”

“You be quiet. I told him, like it or not, that’s what I was going to do. So then he said I thought more of you than I did of him and I said, yes, and had done from the beginning——”

“Oh, V.V., how could you?”

“Well, it’s true—and it’s time Master Hinerik made up his mind to it. And I said you knew it.”

“That was a lie, V.V.”

“Oh, was it? Of course you knew it. Haven’t I been with you day after day and night after night when he was alone or hanging about in the courtyard till old Gordon turned him out——”

“V.V.! V.V.!”

“Well, I said if he couldn’t see what was as plain as the nose on his silly face I’d tell him. And I did tell him. I told him I’d always gone with girls and that you were worth ten of any boy, let alone a little Dago like him. What are you crying about, Gillian? It’s the plain truth.”

“It don’t know what you *mean*, V.V. You can’t feel the same about me as you did about Heinrich when you were going to marry him.”

“Oh, well, not the same, but I’d sooner live with any girl than with him. And I said we were going to Ostend together for Christmas.”

“You know we’re not. It’s the first I’ve ever heard of it.”

“Well, it won’t be the last. I’ve been down to Epping and paid off the rent of that flat so’s I can go back there all right—not to the flat, we’ll go to an hotel. And I stayed on to make you worry, darling. Did you worry about your V.V.?”

It was amazing, it was sickening, but V.V. was clearly unable to realize how what she had told was affecting Gillian.

“V.V., what brought Heinrich up here again to-night? How did you know he’d be there?”

“He’s there most nights,” said V.V., “and I wrote to him from Epping this morning to make sure. I told him I’d be coming home to give you your bath. He’d get it by the last post.”

Gillian felt herself turning giddy. She put out one hand to steady herself on the back of a chair, and the bath-towel slipped from her shoulder loosening a strand of hair with it.

“Oh, you darling,” said V.V., “take off the horrid ugly towel and let V.V. brush out your hair and make you all nice and comfy.”

“If you dare to come near me,” said Gillian, and she choked between each word. “If you dare to touch me I’ll ring the night-bell and have the Gordons and Mrs. Barraclough up to take you out of my room. I’m going to dress and go to Heinrich now, myself. He’s ill, he’s nearly mad.”

“Oh, spitfire!” said V.V., still cheerful but a little uneasy, “and you can’t go to a man’s studio in the middle of the night, you naughty one. Shocking!”

“You shall come too,” said Gillian. “Sit down in the basket-chair and wait for me.”

Trembling and sick she dressed hastily, twisting her hair up anyhow and pulling a knitted cap over it to keep it together.

“Now,” she said, when she had found the keys of the outside door and gate, “are you ready?”

“I’m cold and hungry and tired,” whimpered V.V., “and Hinerik will only be cross.”

But Gillian had no pity for V.V.’s weariness.

* * *

It was some minutes before they could get the high barred gate under the archway open. The lock was often hard to deal with when two or three people had locked and unlocked it on one evening and V.V., at any rate, had come in since it had been closed at ten by Gordon. But Gillian was not to be hindered by a lock. Finally the key turned and the gate swung open.

“I’ll leave it unlocked in case we can’t get in again,” she said, pulling it to gently.

They set off over the bridge, but Gillian could not make V.V. hurry. She protested that she was dog-tired and once or twice she stopped and leaned against the parapet and really did seem to be exhausted. The night-rain on her already rain-soaked clothing was cold and heavy. But still Gillian had no pity. There was no room in her aching mind for any trouble but Heinrich's. She had turned him out dazed with misery, had let him go wavering off into the fog to find V.V.'s letter. And he had stood there under the street-lamp while she was sleeking her skin and playing silly games with her shadow, staring up at her window, so numb with despair that he had not even seen V.V. herself as she crept into the Club an hour ago.

The ragged wooden gate of the studio gardens was unlatched and flapping feebly on its hinges in the wind. But there was no light in any of the studio windows. Some of them were uninhabited except in the daytime, and the occupants of the others were either in bed or abroad on their private occasions. The blue door Larry had painted was locked and no gleam from within came through any crack over the fanlight.

"He's gone to bed," said V.V. "I told you so."

"He's not asleep if he is in bed," said Gillian, and she knocked at the door. She knocked first with her knuckles, then hammered with a stone she found in the gravel of the path. She called him by name. "Heinrich, Heinrich. It's Gillian. V.V.'s come to you." She rattled at the door-handle; she tried to climb on the ledge of the small high window, but it was too narrow to hold her foot. A window was opened by some disturbed sleeper in one of the houses that backed on to the studio gardens, but the only sound that came from behind the locked and bolted door was the faint, melancholy mewing of the little tortoiseshell cat.

"He's not there," said V.V. "I knew it was no good coming. He's prob'ly gone off to some other studio where there's a party. Oh, do come home. You'll catch your death of cold and so shall I."

"I shall come down again first thing in the morning," said Gillian. "I believe he's in there all the time."

"With that screaming cat," said V.V., "just like him."

* * *

But the next morning there was a telegram from Maggie.

“Please come at once. The Mistress has been taken seriously ill.”

* * *

When Gillian got to Highgate, Aunt Elizabeth was lying dead in her chair, her hands stiffening round the leather case in which the miniature of Evan Mortimer was closed. And the luminous, still smile that the living never wear raised the corners of her mouth and lifted her shadowed eyelids into an angel’s beauty.

CHAPTER SEVEN.
THE FOURTH MOVEMENT

I

Queen's Hall was three-parts full of the regular Saturday Concert audience listening to a regular Saturday Concert.

It was almost as foggy inside the hall as it was out in the streets, and the light streamed down from the red, silk valances round the great chandeliers over the orchestra in straight slanting lines, and cut yellow, flat-headed cones of illumination out of the misty dusk.

Gillian sat in the darkness at the back of the two-shilling gallery. How she got there was more than she could remember. They had nailed Aunt Elizabeth down in her coffin that morning and there was no more to do in the house where Maggie held lugubrious tea-parties for the reception of all licensed comers in preparation for the funeral on Monday. Lilac had missed Gillian's telegrams at Curragh and would only reach Euston at six o'clock that evening, and Gillian, who could neither stay at Highgate nor go back to the Club, was waiting till it was time to go to the station to meet her.

She could not stay in the house at Highgate now that Aunt Elizabeth's face was hidden in darkness, and she could not go back to the Club and sit in the room where Larry had stood and told her that Heinrich was dead.

Larry had been waiting for her the night she had gone back after seeing the doctor and the lawyer and the men who wanted to know about Aunt Elizabeth's grave. V.V. was with him at first, but they had sent her away. Jane had come and taken her away, leaving Gillian and Larry alone. Larry had told her what had happened and presently Jane had come back and had said to Larry:

"Dearest, you will have to give evidence at the inquest to-morrow. But I think we shall be able to keep her out of it."

But they weren't keeping V.V. out of it because they loved her or were sorry for her, only because it was the decent thing to do. And Gillian was to be

kept out of it as well. Nobody, not even Mrs. Gordon, had seen Heinrich in the fog on Wednesday afternoon looking for V.V.

“All the mud will be splashed on Larry,” said Jane, her face one set and constant glare. “V.V. will be his broken-hearted *fiancée* who was away at the time, and you—you won’t come into it at all.”

It was Mr. Quist who had found Heinrich on Thursday evening. He had gone down to the studio to get a book Jane had left there and wanted to have sent to Felday, and the people in the studio next door had said that the mewing of the cat had disturbed them all day long. So Mr. Quist had got a ladder and had broken the skylight and had looked in. He had seen Heinrich sitting queerly in a chair in the middle of the studio. And Heinrich had torn up all Larry’s studies of V.V.; the drawings and sketches for the fire-picture he was going to paint; and he had broken the little figure of Gillian, the Rapunzel statue Jane had made and given to Larry to take care of just before they went away, the figure Gillian had never seen which was to be a surprise for her at Christmas. He had piled the ruined fragments in a heap in front of the dais. He had put on his blue overall and had swept all the dust and rubbish from the floor and had covered the fragments with it. He had pulled out the big Italian chair and had sat in front of the pile of rubbish and had put the barrel of the pistol he was so frightened of into his mouth and pulled the trigger. And the pistol had been loaded after all. And the little cat was sliding round his feet mewing, mewing....

“He must have done it just before we got there,” said Gillian.

“Or just after you had gone away; it doesn’t much matter now,” said Larry.

“Larry, did you know that he minded about me?”

“Of course I knew. I minded myself.”

“But I didn’t. I didn’t dream—why didn’t you warn me?”

“Jane did. I spoke to Jane about it. She wouldn’t believe me at first. She said she’d ask you.”

“She did, but only the day before—two days before—and besides, I didn’t understand.”

“You should have understood,” said Larry. “Everybody else did. Are you going to live with her?”

“With V.V.? No. I never was. She talked about it a lot. But I thought it was only talk.”

“It was a good deal more than talk to him.”

“How did you know? Did he say anything?”

“I loved him, that’s how I knew. But that, again, is something I don’t suppose you would understand.”

The sick trouble in his face had deepened as he looked away from Gillian out into the courtyard and at the staircase window of the other house which Jane was passing on her way down from V.V.’s flat.

And then Jane had come and taken Larry away.

Gillian did not see V.V. again. The Jacky who shared the flat with her had returned from South Africa and was looking after her. She appeared to be a very sensible and decent creature, and quite equal to V.V., who, said Jane coldly, was really very much distressed, and as Gillian was in trouble herself she had better leave V.V. to her own friends.

That was last night. And this morning she had found a list of the Saturday concerts. Heinrich had given it to her because she said she wanted to know what she’d be likely to hear before she went to any of them. And she had been to none. And now Heinrich’s place in the second violins was already filled by some other player, someone to whom his failure was probably a godsend, and she was there because in some aching, remorseful fashion she knew that if there were any knowledge or remembrance in the dim places where his eager soul had exiled itself, he would be eased of some part of his torment because she had gone there for his sake.

She had slept heavily all night, numb with the fatigue of the past three days, but she had wakened unrefreshed and it had not been worth the trouble to get herself any breakfast. It was Mabel’s week in the other house and the maid on duty on Gillian’s floor had upset her milkcan,

being new to the flats and consequently unable to retain her hold upon any object that happened to be in her grasp when William addressed her as “Pretty Dear” out of the darkness of seven o’clock in the morning. Kind Mrs. Middleton, hearing the clatter, had come in with a cup of early tea and had stayed to condole and confer with Gillian and to be scandalized that Gillian had made no effort to get black raiment for the funeral.

“But I shan’t go to the funeral,” said Gillian. “Aunt Elizabeth wouldn’t think it right. Only the men of the family—that’ll be Toby and Old Cousin Mortimer from Ludlow—will go. Lilac and I will stay at Highgate, with you and her other friends.”

But Mrs. Middleton would argue, and Gillian had slipped out to escape the questions she knew must come as soon as the news of Heinrich’s death travelled up from the kitchens, where it must already be known, and came to Mrs. Middleton’s ears.

She had wandered on the Embankment with no bread to give to the gulls who wheeled out of the mist, their red legs hanging straight like coral-branches from their down-white bodies as they screamed past her face. Their broken, mewing cries seemed like a devil’s echo of that other mewing, the thought of which drove all the blood of her body in a cold flood back to her sickened heart.

There, by the river, where she had so often found comfort, where she had escaped so often from her small, half-imagined griefs, the real and awful sorrow, the harrowing remorse for her own share in the disaster she was facing, broke in upon her with wave after wave of mounting desolation. All the beauty she had ever found by the river was gone; washed away by this horror. The ash-grey water, sluggish under the hidden sky, lapped against the pier by the bridges with a cold reiterated syllable—“dead—dead—dead.” Gillian drifted on to the flat sound till she came to Vauxhall. For half an hour she wandered in the Tate Gallery. All the pictures there seemed to repeat the sound of the river in paint. Ophelia floating on the flower-encumbered stream; Icarus livid among the soaring feathers of his wings; the child in Luke Fildes’ life-size bestseller; Chatterton, dead at his attic window; the sickening giants struggling or gloating over corpses in the symbolism of Watts; the anatomical perfection of Leighton’s Sea

giving up its dead; the bird crushed in the grip of the Minotaur—could they paint nothing but this? Did the men who put paint on canvas with such hideous competence know anything about the crazed disillusionment that had killed Heinrich? Had they ever imagined the ineffable, almost contemptuous peace which Death had set upon Elizabeth Mortimer's smiling mask?

And then the memory of the faint, ironic curve into which the dead mouth had fallen before they shut it away from sight, came back to Gillian, terrifying, abasing her with the thought that Aunt Elizabeth knew of her folly and condemned her from the grave to which she herself had gone in righteousness and joy.

Out past Westminster and up Whitehall she wandered. She did not pause in Trafalgar Square to look with derision at dead painters' crucifixions and *pietàs*. Her mind was heavy with refusal of the consolations their very existence implied. Her eye had offended and she had not plucked it out. She was fit to be eternally cast into the outer darkness where she was now wandering. She could not enter any Christian church and pray for the pagan Heinrich; and no prayer of hers need reach the heaven for which Aunt Elizabeth had saved her own soul.

After a time she had found herself waiting in the gallery-queue on the staircase outside Queen's Hall; and finally, jostled and elbowed by enthusiasts who would not, if struggling could avail their eyes, miss any turn of the conductor's wrist, any wafture of his expressive hair or necktie, she had found a seat high up in a corner against the wall.

She did not trouble about a programme. The orchestra played one of the well-known overtures. A violinist executed some Dvorák; there was a Martial work—Elgar, Gillian thought, and another violin solo, and the first part of the programme was over.

Gillian was only musical at second hand. For the most part she was content to feel without understanding what she heard. Unless she had a score to read she could not follow any orchestrated music at all. But both by taste and training she was happier listening to a symphony she knew well, or hearing chamber-music with which she had some acquaintance

than she was where any but the greatest artists sang. Words were spoilt by music to Gillian, though she often turned the music she knew into words. It was one of the secret personal idiosyncrasies she discovered to Heinrich, that when she had learnt to know any great music by ear she remembered it in a notation of words, just as in her childhood she had done as Jane Bird did and had made profane verses to hymn-tunes. Heinrich had not been musical in this same secondary, literary sense, though he knew and loved the tunes in what he played. But once, following her lead, he too had set a melody to words. Nothing in the first part of the programme had gone to any words for Gillian; but, after the first item on the second half was over, there was a longish pause, and then the orchestra gave forth the first subject of Tchaikowsky's B Minor Symphony. And Heinrich, his great eyes laughing with pleasure, his fiddle tucked under his ear, stood before her singing in his voice that was almost the voice of the strings from which he drew the tune, singing at Gillian's bidding, but singing for V.V., who hardly listened to him, his one absurd, exotic phrase:

"*Wir sollen nicht mehr auseinander gehen*"—the phrase repeated itself, *nicht auseinander, nicht auseinander* soared the violins, and the whole orchestra repeated it like an oath, *Wir sollen nicht mehr auseinander gehen*. Was it only of V.V. Heinrich had been thinking when the melody, the perfect love-phrase of the music, had drawn this sentimentalism up from the recesses of his polyglot vocabulary? It might have been. And yet Heinrich was better than that. He was not, like V.V., incapable of any idea that had not a direct personal implication—*Nicht mehr auseinander gehen*—that was the ideal of all lovers. Would any German girl, Gillian wondered, hearing it exotic and appealing from Heinrich's impish lips have loved him as V.V. could not imagine doing? Or would she have laughed at his queer passion as V.V. had done. It was a terrible thing to face—that claim—love me or I die. After all it was almost what V.V. had said to her, and she had turned away from it with all the force within her. You couldn't let another human being set up a right in you like that. Larry hadn't. He had said it was the primal curse.

The orchestra marched on until the time and the key had changed and the first bars of the five-four allegro were racing along the wood-wind and up

and down the strings. Heinrich had made no words for that, only a funny little laughing song that had run against the tune. There was more music in Heinrich than in Gillian—she could not have pointed any melody like that. She could not even quite remember how Heinrich had done it. It flickered in her mind as the movement danced on: presently it would flicker out altogether—and be just a little, forgotten trick, like his way of getting the sparrows together in his hand and throwing them out into the ivy on the wall beyond the studio window.

Heinrich had refused to make words for the rest of the symphony, and as it rioted on melodiously Gillian's attention flagged and she half-dozed in her airless corner, her eyes dazzled by the angles of light which cut one another just within her line of vision. And then the descending chords of the fourth movement, the Adagio Lamentoso, broke heavy with anger and despair. And they made words so plain that Gillian felt the whole hall was ringing with them. "O poor Larry Browne," they called, "O poor Larry Browne." Like a foolish, tragic, nursery rhyme. And it was Jane's voice, and Lilac's, and even V.V.'s heaping anger upon her because of what had been done to Larry and to Heinrich. What was it Jane had said? "Spattering mud on Larry." She had done that. It was clear that in some horrible way, which was a part of the things she did not even now quite understand, Larry was being laid under an imputation of which she, Gillian, had been the source.

He was, she knew, almost Heinrich's guardian. He had meant to take his faun to the warmth and light in which his frail and delicate nature could flourish and grow in joy. But Larry would never be able to take Heinrich to Taormina now. Larry had not saved him from the vultures after all. He could never bear to live in the studio again. Perhaps, even now, at the inquest Larry was being blamed—censured was the word—the coroner censured the witness—for leaving his pistol loaded—for leaving Heinrich alone with a loaded pistol. For leaving Heinrich alone with his anger and his fear.

Suddenly the lights grew together, they began to revolve like rockets, and the music swelled and increased to an intolerable shouting, and everyone in the galleries leaned forward and pointed at her, and they all shouted in

time to the chords—they all shouted Larry's name. Gillian stood up in her place—"Larry, Larry"—she shouted with them; and then the reeling lights and the shouting voices became one black confusion into which she was falling, falling——

* * *

Someone—she did not know who it was—was holding her by the arm on the pavement outside. A taxi with the door open stood by the kerb.

"Where shall I take you?" said a strange, kind voice.

"To Euston, to meet the Irish Mail," said Gillian.

And then she fainted.

II

The curtains were of the richest satin and they were so voluminous that even when they were drawn right across the windows they fell in close corrugation to the velvet pile of the carpet which covered the floor. But carpet and curtains were plain and of a very soft, dull, rose-colour, and there was not an inch of fringe or an attempt at a true-lover's knot to be seen on them. And the room, though large, was not very high, and there were no mirrors on the plain cream walls nor in the doors of the plain walnut cupboard that ran along the wall opposite the fireplace. And the only picture in the room was a large uncompromising water-colour of a race-horse in a flat, wooden frame which hung over the fireplace. A huge photograph of Old Winona, framed in silver, stood on a writing-table between the windows, but the frame was quite plain, and the bed in which Gillian lay, though it was deliciously comfortable with sheets of heavy, cool linen, smooth as silk and blankets as light as the down quilt above them, was narrow, with plain head- and foot-boards, to match the wardrobe.

She was in Toby's room on the top-floor at Knightsbridge, which was for the moment, so Lilac had explained to her, the only spare room in the house, Toby having moved down to the room with a dressing-room on the floor below next door to Lilac's temporary quarters.

“When we get into Norfolk Street you shall have a whole floor to yourself,” said Lilac.

But Gillian had refused the installation saying she would rather go back to the Club if Mrs. Barraclough would tolerate William there after all.

“It would be awkward for you to have a wage-earning sister in the house,” said Gillian, “and wages I intend to earn after Christmas.”

And Lilac had not argued with Gillian, though she had tried to make Jane Bird do so when Jane had come to tea that afternoon. Jane, however, sided with Gillian.

“She’s quite right. She’d ruin herself, living up to your standard in hats and gloves alone, in Norfolk Street,” said Jane, “even if she did live rent- and food-free. Whereas at the Club with me and Larry as social outlets she’ll be affluent, and you can provide her with the right kind of trimmings when you feel she won’t quite do as she is for special occasions.”

Gillian, from her pillows, expressed her gratitude to Jane, and when Lilac left them alone together Jane said more.

“You wouldn’t be happy with them anyhow,” she said; “they don’t want the same things as you do. Toby may have wanted some of them once, but he’s forgetting. You’d better let Lilac go. She’ll be a Leader of London Society in three years and Toby’ll be in the House of Lords before she’s done with him. You’d come quite as bad a cropper there as you did with your Vanderleyden. It’s no use being intimate out of your own class.”

“But I haven’t got a class,” protested Gillian.

“Oh yes, you have. But it isn’t a very large one. I’m in it. That’s why I’ll never be rich, though my figures are getting quite degradingly fashionable. And Larry’s really in it. I think I shall keep him there. We’re married, you know.”

“Goodness!” said Gillian, “has this been going on for long?”

“Since he came back from Dinkelsbühl. It was the white porcelain stove that made me see I could not allow him, with it, to pass out of my life. And we were afraid Heinrich was gone beyond recall to the Vanderleyden.”

“Oh, Jane!”

“Yes. I know. She’s gone off to Ostend with someone called Mick or Nick. A female. Mrs. Barraclough has let her rooms to a real missionary this time: false teeth and no mean moustache. She tilled the Chinese vineyard in her day, I’m told.”

“I don’t believe you till vineyards,” said Gillian. “Where are you and Larry going to live?”

“In a converted mews, behind Brompton Oratory. It looks out on the greenest of green gardens and we’re painting it Reckitt’s blue and orange in our spare time.”

“What do you do with the rest of your time?”

“Gillian,” said Jane firmly, “we kiss each other.”

* * *

Jane had gone. She had left a single Christmas rose behind her. It stood on a table by the fire, in a toothbrush-glass full of water which Jane had fetched for it from the dressing-room before she left, and it was unfolding its pinky-yellow petals so quickly in the heat that Gillian could already see the pollen-soft stamens at its heart. Presently the petals would fall on the polished wood, just as the petals of the gloire de Dijon roses had fallen on the table in V.V.’s room last July on the day when the idea of their living together in the same flat had first been suggested.

Gillian did not remember that she had assented to it even then, but that did not lessen her sense of guilt. What was it Aunt Elizabeth had said? Love must blossom in the spirit. There had been no spiritual blossoming in all her infatuation for V.V. She had known that all the time. She had gone on taking all the pleasure, breathing the heady incense, yielding to the senseless spell of that haunting, physical charm that never once fulfilled the promise it always half suggested. What it was that had so lured her mind and stirred her senses Gillian had never known. She had followed blindly, but her blindness had been wilful. Always she might have opened her eyes.

And now the waking dream was over. Heinrich was dead. Larry might have gone after him if it had not been for Jane who had seen and known all the time.

* * *

It was Jane who had made many dark things clear to Gillian a few days earlier. Lilac had sent for Jane, not understanding the confused and shaken trouble of Gillian's state.

"She says you are angry with her," said Lilac.

"So I was," said Jane, "but, I admit, she can't have known what she was really in for. But now this dreadful thing has happened she ought to be told."

And Jane had told Gillian. And in telling her Jane had lost the bitterness of her anger against Gillian and found her love there still. And Gillian had seen the morning of her ignorance melt into a hard, bleak, unenchanted day.

The only person who had escaped unhurt was V.V. But she was unhurt because, and this Gillian knew now, because long ago V.V. had been so maimed, her soul had been so warped and stunted by some influence she could still recall though she was too vitiated to resent it, that nothing that happened to her now would make very much difference. You cannot shipwreck a derelict.

V.V. had gone her own way, and Gillian could not follow her. She had taken the first steps on the road down which V.V. was disappearing, and had come back again to the place where it started.

And now that road was closed.

THE END

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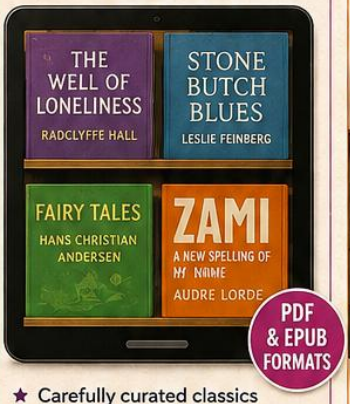

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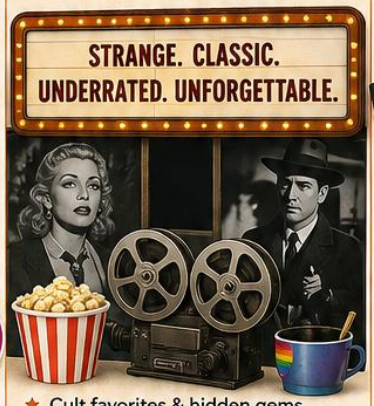

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