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COVENDEN"

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I

Peace and her blessings were flowing already. All the same there was a terrible crush at Belgravia. The congestion of passengers and their luggage at the terminus of the B. S. W. was enough to daunt the stoutest heart, but a girl in a sealskin coat with a skunk collar standing at the bookstall on Platform Three was as calm and collected as if the war was still going on. Outwardly at least she made no concession to the fact that the Armistice had been signed three days.

She chose some newspapers and magazines and paid for them with an air that almost treated money with the disdain it reserved for literature. Then she moved towards a figure of sombre dignity standing between the barrier and herself.

"Come on, Pikey," she said.

A tall, griffin-like woman, craggy of feature but almost oppressively respectable, followed her mistress dourly. The duenna carried a large, queer-shaped, rather disreputable-looking dressing case whose faded purple cover was adorned with a coronet. As their tickets were franked at the barrier, these ladies were informed that "All stations beyond Exeter" were up on the right.

In spite of such clear and explicit instructions, it was not easy to get to all the stations beyond Exeter. Platform Three was a maelstrom of almost every known community. There were Italians and Serbians, Welshmen and such men, Japanese sailors and turbaned Hindoos; the personal suite of President Masaryk; Tommies and poilus; American tars and doughboys; British and Colonial officers, their kit and appurtenances; and over and above all these were the members of the traveling public which in other days had kept the railways running and had paid the shareholders their dividends.

A cool head and a firm will were needed to get as far as the stations beyond Exeter. And these undoubtedly belonged to the girl in the fur coat. Her course was slow but it was calm and sure. With rare fixity of will she pursued it despite the peace that had come so suddenly upon the world. It was a very long train, but she was in no hurry nor did she betray the least anxiety, although somewhere about the middle—Salisbury and Devizes only—she cast a half-glance back to say to her companion, "I don't see our porter, Pikey."

To utter the word "porter" just then was either bravado or it was inhuman optimism. But the act of faith was justified by the event, for hardly had the lady of the fur coat made the remark when a figure in corduroys almost miraculously emerged from the welter. Both travelers had a doubt at first as to whether this rare bird was Trotsky himself or merely a Sinn Fein delegate to the Peace Conference, so aloof yet so grim was his manner. But at that moment there seemed to be no other porter on Platform Three—it followed, therefore, that their porter it must be.

It was rather providential perhaps that the porter had been able to find them, but he was by way of being a connoisseur in the human female. He had not been employed at Belgravia for thirty-five years without learning to sort out the various ranks and grades of a heterogeneous society. As a matter of fact, there were only two grades of society for Mr. Trotsky. One grade was worth while, the other was not.

The progress of the party up Platform Three to all the stations beyond Exeter was slow but, like fate, it was inevitable. They walked through, over and beyond armed representatives of five continents, nursemaids with babies and perambulators, not to mention remarkable women with remarkable dogs, trolleys and milk cans and piles of luggage, until at last they reached a compartment not far from the engine. It was notable for the fact that it was two-thirds empty. Rugs, umbrellas and minor portmanteaux claimed the unoccupied seats; those remaining were adorned by two distinguished-looking gentlemen who, however, were reading *The Times* newspaper with an assiduity that definitely and finally dissociated them from Mr. Trotsky and party.



The lady of the fur coat was in the act of opening her purse at the carriage door when a wild, weak voice said, excitedly, "Oh, porter, can you find me a place—please?"

On instinct Mr. Trotsky disregarded the appeal. There was frenzy in it; and that fact alone made any examination of the overburdened, rather hunted little creature at his elbow unnecessary. Dark fate itself could not have turned a deafer ear than he.

"People are standing in all the thirds." The piping, rather piteous little note grew more insistent. "I can't stand all the way to Clavering, St. Mary's."

"Not be so full after Reading," said the laconic Mr. Trotsky, coldly accepting a substantial tip for services rendered.

"But—but there's no place for my luggage."

As Miss Fur Coat closed her bag she observed that a rather pretty gray-eyed mouse of a thing bearing a large wickerwork arrangement in one hand and an umbrella and a pilgrim basket in the other was standing at bay. She was literally standing at bay.

"There is room here, I believe." The air of Miss Fur Coat was cautious and detached, but not unfriendly.

"But this is a first," said Miss Gray Eyes, "and I have only a third-class ticket."

"But if there's no room?" Miss Fur Coat turned a gesture of immensely practical calm upon Mr. Trotsky.

"Better get in, I should think." The servant of the railway company made the concession to the two honest half-crowns in his palm. "Inspector'll be along in a minute. Talk to him."

Mr. Trotsky, having done his duty to the public, turned augustly on his heel to make a private and independent examination of the engine. His advice, however, in the sight of the third-class passenger, seemed sound enough to put into practice. Or, perhaps, it would be more just to say that the other lady put it in practice for her. Miss Fur Coat was curiously quiet and unhurried in all her movements. She was absolutely cool, physically and mentally cool, in spite of the temperature of Platform Three and the mass of fur round her neck, whereas poor little Miss Gray Eyes could hardly breathe in her thin green ulster. And the slow-moving will of Miss Fur Coat had an almost dangerous momentum. Before the third class passenger realized what had happened, she had been taken charge of.

"Go first, Pikey. Clear a seat for this lady."

Slightly Olympian if you like, but tremendously effective. Pikey, who looked fully capable of swallowing Miss Gray Eyes whole with a single motion of her large and powerful jaws, entered the carriage, and calmly and competently transferred a plaid traveling rug and a leather-handled umbrella from one seat to the next.

"Thank you so much—thank you ever so much," twittered the lady of the green ulster, at the same time inadvertently barging the end of the pilgrim basket into the middle of the middle prices on page eight of the Times newspaper.

A patient jobber from the oil market, en route to Croome Lodge for an hour's golf, looked gently at the green ulster, looked at it less in anger than in divine resignation, over the top of his tortoise-shell pince-nez. One had to rub shoulders with all sorts of queer people these times! Still the Armistice was signed and Burmahs were up another half crown.

"This train is already twelve minutes late." Miss Fur Coat announced the fact after a glance at almost the last thing in wrist watches on almost the last thing in wrists, and then assumed the best seat in the compartment, the one next the door with the back to the engine.

The tortoise-shell pince-nez peered over the top of Court and Society on page six. It looked slowly up and down Miss Fur Coat and then transferred an expert gaze to Pikey and the other lady. Before the head office could register any conclusion on a matter which really did not call for comment, a message was received from another department to ask what price Shells had closed at. And there for the time being the incident ended as far as the Oil Market was concerned—ended almost before it began. For nothing whatever had happened, so it really did not amount to an incident. All the same, something was about to happen.

II

The Inspector came along to look at the tickets.

"You must either pay excess or change into a third," he said firmly at the sight of the third class ticket.

"But there's no room," its owner faltered. It is a phrase no longer in vogue in the best novels, but the little lady of the green ulster was of the faltering type.

"Plenty of room presently." So firm was the Inspector he might have been Marshal Foch himself. "Meantime you must find a place somewhere else."

At this cruel mandate the little lady shivered under her bright thin garment.

"How much—how much is there to pay?" It was mere desperation. There were only a few—a very few shillings in her purse. All her available capital had been put into the green ulster and the new serge suit she was wearing and a black felt hat with a neat green ribbon. But to be torn out of that haven of refuge, to be flung again, bag and baggage, into the maelstrom of Platform Three—the thought was paralyzing.

The Inspector condescended to look again at the third-class ticket. "Clavering St. Mary's. There'll be twenty-one and six-pence excess."

Miss Gray Eyes wilted visibly.

"I can't stand here all day," announced the Inspector. "This train was due out a quarter of an hour ago."

"But—" faltered the unlucky passenger.

"You'll have to come out and find room lower down."

At this point a slow, cool, rather cautious voice said "Inspector."

"Madam?" It was a decidedly imperative "madam."

"If there is no room in the third-class compartments this lady is allowed a seat here, isn't she?"

"There is room—if she'll take the trouble to look for it."

"She says there isn't." If anything the voice of Miss Fur Coat had grown slower and cooler.

"I say there is." The Inspector knew he was addressing a bona fide first-class passenger, all the same he was terribly inspectorial.

"Well perhaps you'll find it for her." The considered coolness was almost uncanny. "And then, perhaps, you'll come back and show her where it is."

The Inspector was obviously a little stunned by Miss Fur Coat's suggestion, but he managed to blurt out, "And what about the train in the meantime?" Then he went for Miss Green Ulster with a truculence that verged on savagery. "Come on, madam. Come on out."



"I don't think I'd move if I were you." The manner of the other lady was quite impersonal.

"Very well, then,"—the Inspector produced a portentous looking notebook—"I must have your name and address."

It is quite certain that Miss Gray Eyes would have yielded to this awful threat of legal proceedings to follow had it not been for the further intervention of the good fairy or the evil genius opposite.

"You had better take mine, Inspector." The voice was really inimitable. "My father, I believe, is a director of your company."

Miss Fur Coat knew that her father was a director of a railway company. She didn't know the name of it, nor did she know the name of the company by which she was traveling, nor was she a student of Hegel, or for that matter of any other philosopher, but there really seemed no reason at that moment why they should not be one and the same.

The Inspector turned to confront the occupant of the corner seat. It would be an abuse of language to say that he turned deferentially, but somehow his notebook and pencil certainly looked a shade less truculent.

"I had better give you a card." It was almost the voice of a dreamer, yet the dry precision was really inimitable. "Pikey,"—she addressed the lady opposite—"you have some cards?"

The duenna opened the queer-shaped dressing bag with an air of stern disapproval. At the top was a small leather case which she handed to her mistress.

"Inspector, this is my mother's card. My father is Lord Carabbas. That is my name"—a neatly gloved finger indicated the middle—"Lady Elfreda Catkin." She pronounced the name very slowly and distinctly and with a care that seemed to give it really remarkable importance.

The Inspector glanced at the card. Then he glanced at Lady Elfreda. He made no comment. All the same a subtle change came over him. It was hard to define, but it seemed to soften, almost to humanize him. Finally it culminated in an abrupt withdrawal from the compartment with a slight raising of the hat.

Before the train started, which in the course of the next three minutes it reluctantly did, the guard came and locked the carriage door.

England ranks as a democratic country, but the fact that a daughter of the Marquis of Carabbas was sitting in the left-hand corner, with her back to the engine, lent somehow a quality to the atmosphere of the compartment which would hardly have been there had its locale been the rolling stock of the Tahiti Great Western or the Timbuctoo Grand Trunk. At any rate two diligent students of The Times newspaper peered solemnly at each other over the top of their favorite journal. Both lived in Eaton Place, they had belonged for years to the same clubs, they were known to each other perfectly well by sight but they jobbed in different markets; therefore they had yet to speak their first word to each other—for no better reason than that he who spoke first would have to make some little sacrifice of personal dignity in order to do so.

Now, of course, was not the moment to break the habit of years, but if their solemn eyes meant anything their minds held but a single thought. Carabbas himself did not cut much ice in the City, but if he was joining the board of the B. S. W. it meant that the astute Angora connection was coming into Home Rails, in which case purely as a matter of academic interest, there would be no harm in turning to page fifteen in order to look at the price of B. S. W. First Preferred Stock.

That was all the incident meant to these Olympians, just that and nothing more. But for the little lady of the green ulster it was of wholly different portent. When shortly after nine o'clock that morning she had left the home of her fathers in the modest suburb of Laxton she had not dreamt that before midday she would find herself under the personal protection of the daughter of a marquis. It was her good fortune to be living in the golden age of democracy, but...!

She stole a covert glance at the fur coat opposite. Such a garment in itself was no longer a mark of caste, but this was rather a special affair, a sealskin with a skunk collar, so simple, so unpretending that it needed almost the glance of an expert to tell that it had cost a great deal of money. Then she glanced at the hat above it, a plain black velour with a twist of skunk round it, then down at the neat—the adorably neat!—shoes, and then very shyly up again to their wearer. But their wearer was holding the Society Pictorial in front of her, and in the opinion of the third class passenger it was, perhaps, just as well that she was. Otherwise she could hardly have failed to read what was passing in the mind of the Lady of Laxton. She must have seen something of the envy and the awe, of the eager, the too-eager interest which all the care in the world could not veil.

Miss Gray Eyes knew and felt she was a little snob, a mean and rather vulgar little snob in the presence of Miss Puss-in-the-Corner, the tip of whose decisive chin was just visible between her paper and her rich fur collar.

What must it feel like to be the daughter of a marquis? A crude and silly inner self put the question. A daughter of a marquis is just like anybody else's daughter—the answer came pat, but somehow at that moment the third class passenger was unable to accept it. A gulf yawned between herself and the girl opposite. They were of an age; their heights and their proportions were nearly identical; at a first glance they might almost have passed for sisters except that Miss Gray Eyes was quite sure in her heart that she was the prettier; all the same there was a world of difference in the way they looked at life and a whole cosmos in the way life looked at them.

The little lady sighed at her thoughts—they were hard thoughts—and opened her pilgrim basket. She took from it a notebook and pencil and a dog-eared copy of *The Patrician*, the famous novel of Mr. John Galsworthy, which bore the imprint of the Laxton Cube Library. For two years past she had prescribed for herself a course of the best modern English fiction. She was reading it diligently, less for relaxation and human enjoyment than for purposes of self improvement. Her social opportunities had been few and narrow, although her parents had rather ambitiously given her an education excellent of its kind at the Laxton High School for Young Ladies, which she had been able to supplement by passing the Oxford Preliminary Examination.

For the second time in her life of twenty years Miss Cass—she was known to her friends as Girlie Cass—had taken a situation as a nursery governess. She had had one brief experience which had been terminated by her mother's illness and death. Since then she had been three months a government clerk, but she was not quick at figures and she couldn't write shorthand. Life as a nursery governess was not going to be a bed of roses for one as shy and sensitive as herself, but she was genuinely fond of young children and somehow such a career with all its thorns seemed more suited to one of her disposition than a stand-up fight in the peace that was coming with terribly efficient competitors, who, if they happened to want your particular piece of cake, would have no scruples about knocking you down and trampling upon your prostrate body in order to get it.

If Miss Cass had any taint of vanity it was centered in the fact that she was by way of being a high-brow. She was not a high-brow of the breed that looks and dresses and acts and thinks the part. In her case it was more a secret sin than anything and it took the form of competing week by week in the literary competition of the Saturday Sentinel, under the "nom de plume" of Vera.

The subject this week was the "Influence of Mr. John Galsworthy upon the English Novel." It was, perhaps, a little advanced for the Laxton Cube Library, but Vera was ambitious. She had not yet won a prize, truth to tell she had not even been in sight of one, but three weeks ago her essay on Jane Eyre had been commended as showing insight. She had not yet got over her excitement at receiving a compliment which in her heart she felt she fully merited. If she plumed herself upon anything it was upon her insight. One day when she had learned a little more about life—her trouble was that she had so little invention—she might even try to write a novel herself. But in her case it would have to be based on first-hand experience. She would not be able, like the Brontë Sisters, to weave a romance out of her inner consciousness.

"The Influence of Mr. John Galsworthy upon the English Novel." Miss Cass had the bad habit of sucking her pencil, but it was not easy to marshal or to set down one's thoughts with the train converging upon Reading at forty miles an hour. However, she was able to write the heading quite legibly. But then her difficulties began. What exactly was the influence of Mr. John Galsworthy upon the English novel?

"Pikey." It was almost the nicest voice Miss Gray Eyes had ever heard, yet curiously low and penetrating in quality. "Do you recognize that?" Miss Fur Coat folded back a page of her paper to display a photograph of a famous beauty. "Rather flattering, don't you think?"

Pikey lowered The Queen, which she had been studying with a kind of latent ferocity, and exchanged periodicals without comment. She was evidently a creature of very few words, and to judge by a certain morose dignity it seemed to argue considerable hardihood on the part of anyone to address her at all familiarly.

Miss Cass could not help wondering what the status was of this duenna who seemed a cross between a lady's maid and a werewolf. But the chain of her reflections was interrupted by the stopping of the train at a station of which she could not see the name. Here the two gentlemen got out, after one of them had lowered the window and had called to an official to unlock the door. And in the order of their going the student of The Patrician noticed that while neither of them showed any particular concern for the green ulster, both were very careful not to tread upon the fur coat.

III

The three ladies now had the carriage to themselves. As soon as the train had moved out of the station, Lady Elfreda discarded The Queen and said, "What have you brought for luncheon, Pikey?"



The Society Pictorial was laid aside while Pikey came resolutely to grips with an interesting looking case which had been placed on a vacant seat. In the meantime the blessed word "luncheon" had brought a pang to the heart of Miss Cass. On leaving her home that morning it had been her intention to procure some food en route. Alas, the difficulties of metropolitan travel, the irregularity of 'bus and train culminating in a bear fight at Belgravia, had driven all minor matters out of a head that was not very strong in practical affairs. Therefore it was now the part of Miss Gray Eyes to regard wistfully, from behind her book, the disclosure of the contents of the luncheon basket. Certainly it was quite in the tradition of a marquis' daughter. There was a place for everything and everything was in its place: delicious looking sandwiches in neat tins, a cake which for war time could only be described as royal, and crowning glory and wonder, a large bottle of wine most artfully packed with glasses and corkscrew complete.

Lady Elfreda shed one neat glove with a very businesslike air and offered the contents of the tins. "Those are egg, Pikey—and these are ham, I think."

The choice of Pikey was ham. The younger lady inserted a very level row of teeth into the other kind. "Considerin'," she remarked with obvious satisfaction, "that these left Ireland at midnight they have stood the journey pretty well."

But the Werewolf was too busy to attempt any form of conversation.

Behind The Patrician, now rigidly fixed as a barrier, the mouth of Miss Cass was watering. Within her was the emotion of sinking which marks the sense of zero. It was a terribly long journey to Clavering St. Mary's. The train was not due in until after four. If only she had provided herself with a piece of chocolate! At the next stopping place, perhaps, she might be able to get something, but it was by no means a certainty, having regard to the length of the train and the present time of famine.

Suddenly Miss Cass was driven clean out of her dismal reflections. A voice of irresistible charm was addressing her. "Won't you have one of these?" Both tins were offered. "Ham—and those are egg."

Miss Cass blushed and hesitated. There was not the slightest need to do either, but it was her nature to blush and to hesitate, and there is no appeal from nature. A pair of eyes, very blue, very clear and only very slightly ironical looked straight into hers. "Do." The voice was extraordinarily kind. "Please!—won't you?"

It would have called for a heart of stone to resist such an appeal. Besides, there was no need to resist it.

"Oh, thank you ever so much." A small piece of paper was laid reverently upon The Patrician and a delicious looking egg sandwich was laid with similar reverence upon it. Then a white woolen glove was carefully removed.

The flavor of the sandwich was quite equal to its appearance. But it was a mere prelude to the repast. There was a profusion of excellent things, not a vulgar or ostentatious profusion, but the case had come from a land flowing with milk and honey. Miss Cass was firmly required to do her part with both kinds of sandwiches—dreams of sandwiches they were!—alluring biscuits and rich, almond-studded cake. Above all—and to be perfectly frank there would be no story without it—she was compelled to drink honest measure of a generous and full-bodied wine.

The sombre eyes of Pikey glistened when she took this royal vintage out of its improvised cradle and held it up to the light. "Herself said it would be good on the journey," she announced.

"I know you are clever with corkscrews, Pikey," said Lady Elfreda, handing the implement persuasively.

Pikey was very clever indeed with corkscrews if her present performance was anything to go by.

"Be very ca-re-ful how you pour it out." Such words were superfluous, which Lady Elfreda well knew; in point of fact, they were a mere concession to the famous cellar of Castle Carabbas, for Pikey showed herself a past mistress in the art of decanting a great wine under trying conditions.

"Clever Pikey!"

Clever enough. The Werewolf had not dwelt from babyhood at Castle Carabbas and brought up half a dozen members of the Family without acquiring knowledge which in some quarters was rated highly.

When she had delicately filled the tumbler to two-thirds of its capacity she handed it to her mistress with something of the air of sovereign pontiff. But to Pikey's cold disgust that Irresponsible offered it to the lady of the green ulster. Nay, she did more than offer it. She pressed it upon the almost too obvious third-class passenger with a cunning that made resistance almost impossible.

"Do—please! You have such a long journey." The blue eyes were smiling. "It will do you so much good." The tone was charming entreaty.

"But—but!" faltered Miss Cass.

"There is a great deal more than we shall require. It is quite a large bottle." That statement was very true. It was a decidedly large bottle.

The Dragon scowled over the fur clad shoulder of her mistress, whom she would willingly have slain. Nevertheless Miss Cass had to yield to force majeure.

"Those plain round biscuits are strongly recommended. They make an excellent combination"—clever old Pikey to have thought of those!—"You see, there is any amount—far more than we shall want."

Resistance was vain. Miss Gray Eyes accepted a plain round biscuit and then she drank of the full-bodied wine from the famous cellar of Castle Carabbas.

"This is for you and me, Pikey." The Dragon, a figure of grim disapproval, had charged the one remaining tumbler. "You must have the first drink. That is your side of the Atlantic," Lady Elfreda humorously drew an imaginary line across the mouth of the tumbler. "This is my side."

Pikey drank. But her nose was so long that it seemed to stretch from Queenstown to Old Point Comfort.

Yes, a great wine, as none knew better than Pikey. She could not bear to see it wasted on Miss No-Class. If Pikey's will had prevailed it would have choked the lady of the green ulster. What right had she to be drinking it, much less to be having a tumbler to herself?

Who knows what imprisoned genius lurked in that magic bottle from the cellar of Castle Carabbas? Miss Cass had never had such a meal. A modest repast, if you like, yet full of a peculiar virtue. Her thoughts began to fly round, her blood to course quicker; imprisoned forces were unsealed in her brain; phrases, ideas began to shape themselves. The moment with its pains and its fears began to press less heavily. Suddenly she became free of a great kingdom that her dreams had hinted at.

Suppose—entrancing supposition!—she were not an obscure, timid little governess at all, but the daughter of a marquis. She could have looked the part anyway; that was to say, had she been privileged to wear the clothes of the lady opposite she could have made an equally good showing. Privately she felt that with an equal chance she would have made a better. At any rate, if a glass could be depended on, her eyes, which were her chief asset, a rather curious gray, would have gone extremely well with that beautiful skunk collar.

Miss Cass grasped her pencil with a confidence she had never felt before. “The great charm of Mr. Galsworthy’s novels, which they share with the novels of Mr. H. G. Bennett and Mr. Arnold Wells—”

... “This is quite a large bottle, Pikey.”

The eyes of the Dragon glistened ... as if she didn’t know the size of the bottle!

... “You must do your share.” The tumbler was replenished.

That which slept in the royal vintage was known only to the Genie whose happy task it was to stage manage this tiny fragment of the human comedy. For the little Catkin lady, after a second modest recourse to the glass, also began to sit up and take notice. She, too, began to look at the world with other eyes.

Suppose one was little Miss Rabbit opposite? How must the world appear when you wear cheap clothes and you carry your own luggage and you have all suburbia upon your eyebrows? Rather nice eyes, though, by the way. What was the book she was studying? Part of some very difficult examination evidently, to judge by the way the poor hunted little mouse was biting her pencil....

Governess, obviously ... of sorts. What must it be like to get one's living as a governess? How must it seem to be bored and bullied and snubbed by total strangers for the sake of a few pounds a year? Still in some ways even that mode of life might offer advantages. At any rate one might be able to call one's soul—one's real soul—one's own. If you were an obscure little governess whom nobody cared twopence about, you could do as you liked in the big things, even if the small things did as they liked with you.

There must have been a powerful Genius lurking in that famous bottle, for the ears of Lady Elfreda had begun to tingle with resentment. She remembered that she was an unmarried daughter of a cynical father and a selfish mother. Four of her sisters had been sacrificed on the altar of money. And if the present journey into an unknown country meant anything it was her turn now.

With a pang that was almost agony she searched for and read again her mother's letter.

Castle Carabbas,

Friday.

Dearest E:

I hope you will have a pleasant time at Clavering St. Mary's. The D. says you may find the host and hostess rather crude, but otherwise very respectable, nice people. He is on several Boards with your father. You are not likely to have met any of your fellow guests, but no doubt you will find them quite agreeable. And in any case you must bear in mind that you are giving your services for a noble cause. I hear from Mabel that last week you had quite a success in "The Duke of Killiecrankie." The D. says that if everything else fails you will be able to come out as a star!!!



By the way, one of the new Peers will be included in the house party. He is what the D. calls "a Lloyd-George Particular," all the same, he says, he is quite a good fellow. He has made his money rather suddenly, but from what one hears he is extremely wealthy. And that is something to bear in mind with things so black over here and the outlook for land so uncertain.

The only people you are likely to know are our old friends the Lancelots who live in the neighborhood. Perhaps you may get out one day to see them.

As you will be among strangers I am sending Pikey to look after you. And "under the rose" she is bringing a bottle of the D.'s choicest Chateau Briault as you may be a little run down after your recent Labors in the cause of charity. If you are bored with your present task you must remember that you are giving your services for St. Aidan's. Much love,

Your affectionate mother,

Charlotte Carabbas.

P. S.: The D. says the new Peer has at least £60,000 a year.

A second reading of this letter filled Elfreda with fury. Somehow it was so typical of her mother; of the mother who was a curious mixture of kindness, naïveté and cupidity; of the mother who cared for them all so much in small things and so little in great ones. Behind these careless phrases of Lady Carabbas her youngest daughter read her intentions only too clearly.

As Elfreda sat back in her corner and turned things over in her mind a kind of cold rage began to dominate her. Had she been left any choice in the matter she would not be going to Clavering St. Mary's at all. No one she knew would be there. But she had not been consulted. Her autocratic father had promised one of his friends "in the city" that she should go down there and take part in some private theatricals in aid of a war charity. For nearly a year now she had been living in London with a married sister and working for the V. A. D. at one of the hospitals, but from time to time she had taken part in various entertainments with considerable success.

The play in which at decidedly short notice she had been called upon to enact no less a rôle than that of the heroine was called "The Lady of Laxton." It was the work of an enthusiastic amateur whose chief claim to distinction, literary or otherwise, was of the kind that attends the possession of a baronetcy. She was to be a governess masquerading as a girl of position. Not only was the part very long and difficult to learn, but in the opinion of Elfreda it was pointless, silly and vulgar.

To make matters worse she had yet to meet the author of the piece, but he was known to several of her sisters with whom he was by no means persona gratissima. However, with a fulsome letter, he had proudly sent her a copy of the piece to which he evidently attached considerable value; and at that moment it was in the traveling bag by her side. Resentfully she took it out and began to study it again. In her present frame of mind, made much worse by her mother's letter, the task seemed even less congenial than it had done at first. "I simply can't act such rubbish" was the thought that dominated her.

It was surely too bad to force her into such a position. She dug her teeth into an uncompromising upper lip. Charity excused everything nowadays, but the more she examined the situation she was in, the less she liked it. Beneath the armor of stern self-discipline with which she faced the world were strong feelings, and these flamed suddenly forth into violent antipathy. Surely it was too bad to be let in for a thing of this kind! And she would be among strangers, with as far as she knew, not one solitary friend to help her out.

Her eyes with little darts of anger in them strayed to the girl opposite. Miss Cass was sucking her pencil again in the process of thought, her gaze was fixed on vacancy and she was frowning fiercely. Evidently a very difficult subject she was studying. But, judging by the color in her cheeks, she was the better for her meal.

Elfreda was rather inclined to envy this girl. She could call her soul her own at any rate, even if her bread and butter depended on the overtaxing of her brain.

Accidentally their eyes met. The faint, slightly aloof smile of the one was answered by the other's honest blush of gratitude.

"Are you studying trigonometry?" Elfreda had never studied trigonometry herself, nor did she know exactly what trigonometry was, but if there was anything in a name it must be a subject of superhuman difficulty; and taking as a guide the air of concentration and the rumpled brows of Miss Green Ulster her present difficulty could hardly be less than superhuman.

Miss Cass haltingly explained that she was trying to win a prize in the Saturday Sentinel.

"How amusing! But one has to be very clever to do that, hasn't one?"

Miss Cass was afraid that it was so. She had been trying week by week for nearly a year, but she had only achieved an honorable mention so far. The topic served to break the ice, however, and they began to talk freely. This may have been due to the fact that both were glowing with a generous wine, for it was the habit of neither to indulge in promiscuous conversation with total strangers. But just now, in quite an odd way, their minds began to march together, in fact one almost seemed to be the other's counterpart.

Miss Green Ulster confided that her name was Cass, that she came from Laxton, that her father, three years dead, had been a solicitor, that her mother had been dead six months, that she was left unprovided for, and that by the recommendation of Canon Carnaby, the vicar of the parish, who had been very good to her mother and herself, she was going as governess to the two young children of Lieutenant Colonel Everard Trenchard-Simpson, D. S. O., The Laurels, Clavering St. Mary's.

Elfreda was secretly amused by a simplicity which told so much and concealed so little. All the same she was oddly attracted by the way this little suburban laid all her cards on the table. Her hopes, her fears, her pathetic desire for self improvement, the general bleakness of her outlook, her cruel sense of loneliness now that her mother as well as her father was dead, her poverty, her lack of a really first-class education, the exposure of all these things verged upon the indecent, but somehow they called insistently for pity.

Poor Miss Cass! And yet ... Elfreda shivered at her thoughts ... lucky Miss Cass!

"How thrilling to act ... in public ... on a real stage ... to a real audience!" The gray eyes looked quite charming in their awe and their sincerity.

"Do you really think so?" The slight drawl with its tag of fatigue was equally sincere.

"Oh, I should just love it—that is, I should just love it if I were you." The candor was almost indecent, but a nearly whole tumbler of a great wine was working spells. What Miss Cass really meant was that she would love to be the daughter of a marquis.

Elfreda deplored her taste and sighed for her innocence. "Think how bored you'd be to learn a long and stupid part—so that you were simply word perfect in it."

"I should just love it." Miss Cass grew enthusiastic at the thought. "If I could also be the daughter of a marquis" was the major part of that thought, which, however, she did not put into words. But those fatal eyes of hers, in which her soul dwelt, put it into words for her.

Elfreda smiled pityingly. How little she knew!

"By the way, you come from Laxton?"

"Yes, but this morning I gave up my rooms there. So I've got no home now."

"It happens that this stupid play is called 'The Lady of Laxton.'"

"There are very few real ladies in Laxton," said the student of The Patrician in a burst of candor.

"So one would think if this play is at all true to life," rose to the lips of Elfreda, but she did not allow it to escape.

What she did say was, "The plot of this play is that a governess and a peer's daughter arriving at a place in the country by the same train get mixed up. The governess goes off with the other girl's luggage as a guest to one house and the peer's daughter finds herself taken for a governess at the other."

"But what a splendid idea!"

"Do you really think so?" The daughter of the marquis opened incredulous eyes. "In the first place, it could never have happened."

"Oh, I think it might have happened—but of course it would have been found out at once."

"As a matter of fact, the author gets over that part rather well. It seems they arranged the matter beforehand because the peer's daughter wanted to teach some snobs a lesson."

"But it's splendid!" Miss Cass clapped her hands with enthusiasm—the Devil was in the wine.

"And, of course, the son at the smart house proposes to the governess thinking she's the peer's daughter and vice versa."

"How were you able to guess that?"

Miss Cass had been able to guess that because the Saturday Sentinel said she had insight. But modesty, of course, forbade her to say that to Lady Elfreda, who was looking at her now with an intentness greater and more curious than she had ever noticed in any human countenance.

Of what was she thinking, the daughter of the marquis? The mind of Miss Cass could not stop to inquire. For that deep, delicious voice, that seemed to treat each individual syllable of the English language as a work of art, was saying: "As a matter of fact, that is what happens in the play, but it is all so extraordinarily stupid that one simply loathes——"

The stern critic had suddenly caught the look of pain in the eyes of the lady opposite. Then it was she realized that to some minds the situation itself and even the vulgarly obvious working out of it might not be intolerable.



## IV

The conversation, which was becoming full of perilous possibilities, was interrupted by the stopping of the train at Newbury. From her place by the window Elfreda observed a consequential little man strutting along the platform in the direction of their compartment. He was looking for a vacant seat. She recognized at once by a portrait in the Society Pictorial now open on her knee, that he was no less a person than Sir Toby Philpot, the author of the play; and to judge by the quantity of luggage in charge of his servant it was not unreasonable to suppose that he was on his way to the scene of action at Clavering St. Mary's.

He looked a harmless little donkey enough, but among Elfreda's own friends he had the reputation of a bounder. It was this fact in the first instance which may have led her to judge "The Lady of Laxton" so harshly; at all events the piece could scarcely have been as bad as she thought it was or it would never have held together. But at least it went far to account for the depth of her resentment against her father and mother who, without giving her any option in the matter, had so high-handedly let her in for something she was going to dislike intensely.

A sense of disgust pervaded Elfreda. Really there was hardly anything about the little man to call for such an emotion, but it was his misfortune to be the central figure just now of the world she was hating.

"Pikey!" Her imperiousness was almost savage in the ear of the Werewolf opposite. "Put your head out." Elfreda lowered the window fiercely. "Look your largest." She might have been addressing a very favorite grizzly whom she had been clever enough to tame. "Let him see you.... Let him really see you."

As soon as Pikey grew alive to the situation she rose and thrust forth her head in all its man-hating ruthlessness. She was only just in time. Sir Toby, having caught a glimpse already of a decidedly attractive occupant, was making a bee-line for the carriage door. But the sight of Pikey, grim as a gargoyle and breathing latent ferocity, gave pause even to a recently elected member of the Old Buck House Club. Swollen with self-importance Sir Toby undoubtedly was, but in point of inches he was a very small man indeed, and he was confronted with the jaws of a man-eating tiger and the nose of a crocodile.

Sir Toby suddenly decided to seek refuge elsewhere.

With a sigh of relief Elfreda lowered the ample pages of the Society Pictorial, behind which she had entrenched herself. "No family should be without you, Pikey," she said gratefully.

The train moved on. But somehow the incident caused Elfreda's resentment to flame even higher. She had yet to meet the author of "The Lady of Laxton," but she was amazingly quick in taking the measure of the world at large. In regard to her fellow creatures her opinions were few, but they were very definite. A first view of Sir Toby Philpot had convinced her that his reputation was deserved and that she was bound to dislike him intensely. It was all very unfair, no doubt, but she belonged to the sex which, with all its virtues, will never be able to run a League of Nations.

Again her eyes strayed across to the student of The Patrician. Poor Miss Cass ... and yet ... lucky Miss Cass! Then it was in just that fragment of time while she gazed at the slow-moving pencil of the "Lady of Laxton" that a diabolical thought began to take shape in her mind...

If only....

It would score them off properly....

Above all it would teach a certain Person a lesson....

Elfreda began to hug her wicked thoughts. Fate itself appeared to be taking some trouble to play into her hands. Surely a great opportunity was being given her if only she could rise to the height of it. But even if that was the case there was still one very vital question to ask and to answer. Could the girl opposite be screwed up to the requisite pitch of nerve and enterprise?

No sooner had Elfreda put this question to herself than she did a thing that naught can condone. Deliberately, of malice prepense, she forced Pikey and Miss Cass to finish the bottle. As far as the maid was concerned there was really no obstacle; she was more than willing to play her part. But Miss Cass needed tact and firmness; she had to be handled with masterful delicacy.

"Please—you will help us—won't you?" The voice of the siren. "Yes—really—you must!" The daughter of the marquis dealt out honest measure with her own uncompromising hand. "That's your glass, I think—the one at the top—isn't it, Pikey?"

Pikey's grunt was in the affirmative, but if eyes could have slain, her mistress would have died on the spot. How dare she offer one of her father's choicest vintages to such a middle-class person!

The Lady of Laxton had already fallen at once to the blandishments of her imperiously charming benefactress. Her instinct was to resist, but the Bottle Imp had seriously weakened her resolve. She knew it was wrong, insane, indecent, but an eye of concentrated power seemed to bore right through her soul. And, after all, such wine as that did give one a perfectly heavenly feeling.

Once more, and almost in spite of herself, Miss Cass brought her lips warily to the edge of the tumbler. It was folly, nay, it was piggishness, but at that moment she was hardly more than a helpless midge caught in the toils of an inexorable will. The wonderful blue eyes of the girl opposite had the quality of steel. "Please!... don't let us waste it ... it is supposed to be rather good of its kind!"

History, alas, is hardly likely to be very gentle with the Lady Elfreda!

The bottle was finished at last. And Pikey, who, after all, had had the lion's share of it, sat back on her cushions in a state of most agreeable somnolence. As for Miss Cass, her pencil began to fly across the paper.

"Mr. John Galsworthy in common with Mr. Arnold Bells and Mr. H. G. Wennett has a singular power of visualizing——"

Has the power of visualizing!

"What Mr. James Henry so beautifully calls the Human Scene." The fair phrase came clear and pat, but before the page could receive it Miss Cass was again in the toils of the incarnate demon opposite.

"Suppose you take my part in the 'Lady of Laxton'?" There was a suggestion for one simply athirst for life, for knowledge, for first-hand experience! Such amazing words could hardly be meant seriously; nevertheless there was a concentration in the manner of the marquis' daughter that almost took away the breath of Miss Cass.

Emboldened by an unmistakable snore from the gently but firmly sleeping Pikey, said the wicked Elfreda, "I don't think you would find it at all difficult and it might amuse you."

Miss Cass could hardly believe her ears. For the tone, beyond the shadow of a doubt, was quite serious. "I don't know any one at Clavering Park and I don't suppose any one knows you."

"But——" pleaded Miss Cass.

Elfreda was not in a mood for “buts.” The wicked Genie now had her firmly in its grip. So simple, yet so radiant was the idea that already it was glowing with the colors of destiny. There were obstacles, of course, but a dynamic will could remove them.

“In size we are much of a muchness, aren’t we? So you can take my things and I’ll take yours.”

“Oh, but——” faltered Miss Cass.

“You might have quite an amusing fortnight”—Pikey, who had been traveling all through the long night was sleeping very comfortably now—“One hears the place will be full of new people. With a bit of luck ... if you really play up ... you might even....” ... Get one of them to marry you!—was the thought in the mind of the abandoned Elfreda. But the Bottle Imp had not quite bereft her of a sense of shame, therefore she did not complete her sentence by mere words. She had recourse to wireless telegraphy, which, however, was just as effective.

Miss Cass felt herself to be growing dizzy.

“That’s what happens in the play, you know. The son of the house falls in love with the governess——”

“Oh—but,” gasped Miss Cass. And yet if the truth must be told the wicked Genie was now beginning to stir in her, also. A voice was heard in the subliminal self of Miss Cass. There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood leads on to fortune.

“It needs a little pluck, of course.” The light in the blue eyes was almost sinister. “But it might be rather amusing, don’t you think?”

Miss Cass was bewildered. But it seemed to come upon her all at once that she was now in the toils of a female Napoleon. Moreover, she was faced by a proposition which exceeded her wildest dreams. Of course, it would not bear any sort of analysis, but when one is possessed by a perfectly heavenly feeling all things seem possible. Such a sense of “uplift” was quite new in Miss Cass’s experience and she felt unable just now to adjust her mind to a phase which although delicious was yet without a parallel.

The train sped on through a country which grew steadily richer and more pastoral. Lady Elfreda looked again at the watch on her wrist. It was after three. Already the light of the brief November day had begun to wane. Pikey was snoring now with slow, deep, reassuring regularity. Somehow all things, even the motions of the train itself, seemed to be conspiring to fix and determine the mad project which had been born in that wicked and rebellious mind.

Every mile that brought them nearer to their journey’s end was carefully registered in the acute brain of Elfreda. The train stopped at Yeovil and there was a further examination of the tickets, not by a truculent male inspector on this occasion, but by a rustic maid in spectacles, who willingly accepted the assurance that the ticket of Miss Cass was quite in order. After that the train passed over the borders of Wessex into the famed county of Devon; and then with but a few embers of daylight remaining the Evil Genius suddenly insisted that the time had come for action.

V

Lady Elfreda gave Pikey a shrewd glance to make sure that the snores were bona fide. Then she got up and with perfectly amazing sang froid took off her fur coat.

“Give me your ulster, please.” Napoleon—Bismarck—Caesar—Hannibal were in that pregnant whisper.



The pencil dropped from the trembling fingers of Miss Cass. Her heart took a great leap. Was this a serious demand? Could this amazing girl mean what her words implied?

"Your hat as well, please."

In the growing dusk, now as ever a true friend of conspiracy, she saw the girl opposite withdraw a couple of pins and remove her hat. Was it conceivable that she was in earnest!

The urgency of the whisper laid that doubt at rest. A thrill quickened the soul of Girlie Cass. Her bewildered mind began to spin with a new and strange idea. It was madness ... it was lunacy ... and yet ... if only ... one could screw up one's courage....

"You will have Mrs. Pike to look after you. She is very experienced. If you hold your tongue you can't go wrong." Incredible words, incredible girl, incredible proposition! "You will have all my clothes, of course. I will see that my trunks are put in the luggage cart. And"—the whisper was dæmonic—"Mrs. Pike has some money."

Girlie Cass could hardly breathe for excitement. The Patrician followed the pencil on to the floor. "There is a tide, etc." Her heart began to hit her ribs violently.

"Give me your ulster, please."

If only one's head would not spin so!

"You'll find this coat warmer and it's very comfortable. It'll be quite an amusing fortnight. Nobody will know—except Mrs. Pike, of course, who can be trusted implicitly. I quite think you'll like it."

The brain of Miss Cass was whirling helplessly. And yet there was a demon in hers also. What an opportunity, what a golden opportunity for first-hand experience! What a chance to see the great world from the inside. To be, for one whole fortnight, a real authentic daughter of a marquis ... if only one had courage!

Miss Cass never really knew how it happened, but a mile or so farther on she awoke to the momentous fact that she was wearing a sealskin coat with a skunk collar and a velour hat with a twist of skunk round it, while immediately opposite was a girl in a green ulster with a hat also trimmed with green.

"Please give me your ticket. This is mine."

By the aid of some power not herself Miss Cass exchanged tickets with the Force that was luring her to glory and destruction.

Finally, as an afterthought, a typewritten abstract of "The Lady of Laxton" was handed to Miss Cass.

"You mustn't forget your part in the play. For any one with a good memory it will be quite easy to learn. And you'll find the acting rather fun, I think."

Miss Cass was living in a dream which could not envisage details, but she submitted to the play being pressed into her hand. Without so much as a glance at the brown paper cover she placed it mechanically in the pocket of the fur coat.

The next thing to happen in the bewildered consciousness of Miss Cass was the stopping of the train. Lady Elfreda let down the window to disclose a lighted station lamp with the name "Clavering St. Mary's" painted thereon. Somehow at the moment this legend meant nothing to Miss Cass; the land she was living in now was east of the sun, west of the moon. But a voice amazingly dominant said: "Here we are. Pikey, wake up." And then the owner of the voice put her head out of the window and summoned a porter.

A leisurely functionary came up to the carriage door and opened it. As he did so the lady of the green ulster said with an air of quiet competence which in the circumstances was almost uncanny, "There are two trunks in the luggage van. Or is it three, Pikey? Do wake up."

Pikey somnolently grunted the word "three" and then with a supreme effort stepped, or rather lurched, out onto the platform, while the porter collected the flotsam of the compartment and bore them to an adjacent trolley.

"Three trunks in the luggage van, porter."

"Very good, miss.

"They are labeled 'Clavering Park'—aren't they, Pikey?"

The reply was a drowsy affirmative.

"You have one, too, haven't you?" said Elfreda in a bold aside, with one eye upon her maid.

Girlie confessed a small tin one labeled "Cass."

"Very good, miss," said the porter again.

The Lady of the Green Ulster stepped with calm audacity onto the platform. In a kind of trance Miss Fur Coat followed her.

The porter had no difficulty in retrieving three important looking trunks from the luggage van. Nor did the small tin one present any obstacle. When all the luggage had been duly collected, Elfreda marshaled Pikey and Miss Cass through the booking office and past the ticket collector into the station yard.

Several vehicles were waiting. Foremost of these was a stylish motor omnibus. Elfreda instinctively made a bee-line for it.

"Are you from Clavering Park?" she said to the smart footman with a wound stripe on his sleeve who stood by the open door.

The man said that he was from Clavering Park, whereon Miss Green Ulster pointed to the Fur Coat and informed him that its occupant was Lady Elfreda Catkin; whereon she was informed that there was a cart for the luggage, but owing to the shortage of petrol there was only the omnibus for everybody.

Miss Fur Coat, standing helpless and mazed in her borrowed plumes beside the omnibus door was hustled, literally hustled, into the interior of the vehicle, and Pikey, still far too drowsy even to begin to grapple with the situation in its strange complexity, was hustled in after her. While the porter put in rugs and umbrellas and a couple of the smaller cases under the competent direction of the lady who stood by the door of the omnibus, Pikey at the same time was adjured by her mistress in a stern whisper to play the game, to hold her tongue, and not to give anything away.

These instructions were Greek to the unfortunate Pikey in her present extremely somnolent condition. She made one feeble, rather despairing effort to come to grips with a matter that was frankly beyond her, but before she could rouse her will to any real activity the footman had been ordered to start.

"I am to wait, ma'am, for another guest."

Elfreda bit her lip sharply. For the moment she had forgotten the existence of the little baronet. Almost immediately, however, she received a forcible reminder of it. Sir Toby, who had traveled lower down the long train, was to be seen emerging from the booking office.

For the last time Elfreda thrust her head into the omnibus interior. "Mind you play up, Pikey. I will write to you in a day or two."

Poor bewildered Pikey was only able to emit a grunt of hopeless defeat before Sir Toby Philpot, in the company of his faithful body servant, Mr. O'Toole, converged upon the omnibus door. After a brief exchange of remarks with the tall footman who stood thereby, the small baronet took his seat gracefully beside the lady of the fur coat, and Mr. O'Toole hoisted his respectful bulk alongside Pikey, who was already verging once more upon the comatose.

At the same moment Elfreda felt in the very marrow of her wicked bones that the tremendous risk she was taking must end all too soon in disaster. But she was still in the thrall of the demon. The fun would be gorgeous while it lasted; it would enable certain people to realize that the times had changed; moreover, having definitely burnt her boats, this was not a moment for human weakness. Therefore she said in the private ear of the tall footman, "Don't wait for me. I am not coming with you." And then she turned discreetly away from the door of the omnibus, saw the right trunks put into the luggage cart and accompanied the porter with the modest residue to a dogcart twenty yards away.

Brief colloquy with a bewhiskered Jehu in a faded snuff-colored livery and a battered furry topper proved this vehicle to be from The Laurels and that it was awaiting the arrival of the London train.

"Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson?"

Jehu, who combined the functions of groom, gardener and general factotum, said gruffly that he was Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson and that Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson hoped they would be able to squeeze the box of the new governess into the back of the cart without chipping the fresh paint. It took but a minute or two for the porter to dispose of the very modest luggage labeled "Cass" and to accept for his general services a fee considerably in excess of what he had reason to expect; and then the groom-gardener, one John Small by name, said curtly, "Jump in, miss. We can't keep this 'orse standin' here all night."

Without showing the slightest intention to obey the order, the new governess looked at the horse in critical fashion. "I hope," she said impersonally, "he won't take it into his head to sit down."

The reply, although sweetly given, did not make at all a favorable impression on Mr. Small, who was a great autocrat within his sphere; the porter, however, his heart warmed by half a crown, smiled broadly. The horse pawed impatiently and Mr. Small coughed in a hostile manner, but nothing would induce the new governess to ascend to the vacant seat by his side until the Clavering Park omnibus had actually quitted the station yard.

## VI

In the process of time the omnibus started for Clavering Park, and in almost the same instant a darker thrall was cast upon the soul of Pikey. Right up till that final moment the maid struggling with might and main against honorable fatigue, the Genius of the Bottle and the weight of five and sixty years, had cherished the hope that her mistress—who apparently had changed her clothes, although Pikey was hardly prepared to swear to the fact—would come aboard the omnibus. But the vehicle started without that consummation coming to pass.

Even then the duenna, no longer able to keep her eyes open, still pinned her faith to the bare chance that her wayward charge—the Little Wretch had always given more trouble than all the rest together!—was up in front beside the chauffeur. The old woman knew that such a conjecture belonged to the region of fantasy, yet it might be so. Elfreda was as full of tricks as a monkey and always had been.

The omnibus passed a lamp at the entrance to the station yard and, as Pikey's eyes flickered open for the last time, she caught a hazy glimpse of the fur coat and the velour hat opposite. The maid drew a long sigh of relief. Why, there she was, after all! Something or somebody was playing tricks, though. Pikey could have taken an oath that five minutes ago her mistress was standing outside the door in a green ulster. But the delicious sensation of warmth, comfort and extreme somnolence was too much for her now. Yes ... of course ... it must be quite all right. Elfreda was seated opposite. Besides ... what did it matter?... what did anything ... mat ... ter ...?

In a measure these feelings were shared by Miss Cass. She, it is true, was very far from somnolence just now. Her state bordered upon ecstasy. The Genius of the Bottle and the many famous novels she had read must share the responsibility for her frame of mind. Was she not fully launched now upon the most wonderful, amazing, wholly preposterous adventure! She was a living romance and it was equal to anything in the "New Arabian Nights." Was she really awake? Or did she dream? In the humid interior of the smooth-gliding bus she too was lulled into false security by a delicious sense of comfort. The wheels were going round in her head with an ease, an abandon she had not experienced before. Yet over and beyond all else was the feeling that as she was under the personal ægis of a marquis' daughter everything was bound to turn out for the best in the best of all possible worlds. The extraordinarily charming and clever little Lady Elfreda Catkin, who in every detail was so absolutely the Real Right Thing, as Mr. James Henry would have said—or was it Mr. H. G. Wennett?—whose father was the Marquis of Carabbas, could be trusted to see to that.

Yes, everything was bound to be all right. There was a very experienced maid to look after her. She would have fine clothes and plenty of money; she might even be provided with jewels. It would all be part of a delightful joke, a little daring no doubt to a humdrum bourgeoisie mind, but then in High Society they had a different standard, as all the best writers insisted, from Thackeray down. And this really was High Society and she had really entered it. Besides taking the matter at its lowest, here was a dazzling opportunity for one who desired to write as well as Mrs. Humphry Ward or Mrs. Elinor Glyn. The secret door of aristocratic life had been opened to her so miraculously that it was enough to make the Brontë Sisters turn in their green graves with envy.

Girlie Cass was not by nature brave. But as she snuggled her chin lower amid the delicious warmth of the skunk collar and she reviewed an incredible situation to the best of her rather impaired ability, for a few epic moments she never felt so brave in all her life. Somehow with that rich fur round her ears and her very own maid seated opposite she felt almost equal to anything. Two things only were required of her, according to her entirely amazing mentor and all powerful protectress. The first was never to let go of the fact that she was Lady Elfreda Catkin; the second was "to play up."

Alas, the feeling of courage passed all too soon for the comfort of Miss Cass. The presence of others slowly percolated to her. Impressive looking male figures were seated each side the door. They did not speak, but this very quality of silence seemed to render her sense of insecurity greater. And then to her horror almost the man by her side turned his head and addressed her.



"Aren't you Lady Elfreda Catkin? My name is Philpot. Our hostess wrote to me at Newbury to say you might be coming by this train." He was quite a friendly little man, a chronic sufferer from a rush of words to the head, who seldom waited for the second party to any conversation to catch up with his ideas. Nothing could have served Girlie better at this nerve-racking moment than the little man's habit of amiable loquacity. She was just able to make some kind of wholly unintelligible murmur, but it sufficed for Sir Toby to go on. "I sometimes meet your father at the Buck Club. I do hope you like your part. What do you think of my big scene in the third act? Monty Jupp says it is quite equal to anything that Oscar Wilde ever wrote. I think it better myself, though that is between ourselves. I wouldn't say that to everybody, but it really is a nailin' good comedy, and your part of the Little Guv is absolutely the best thing I've done. Of course, it wants playin' on rather broad lines, but it's sure to be a go."

The little Catkin lady was not very forthcoming. Throughout the whole of the baronet's discourse she sat in her corner as solemn as a mouse. But Sir Toby was much encouraged by the passing glimpses of her an occasional street lamp afforded him. She had absolutely no conversation, but she was a pretty little Puss.

Meanwhile a chill of paralysis was settling upon Miss Cass. She must really make an effort to say something. It wouldn't do to appear odd. At that moment, however, it seemed quite impossible for her to devise any form of words to meet the occasion. What ought she to say? What would a daughter of a marquis say in such circumstances? Above all, the student of The Patrician asked herself, how would the daughter of a marquis say whatever she had to say?

Girlie took the line of least resistance. She said nothing. It was the obvious, in fact, the only possible course, because her will was inert, her mind was a blank, her tongue was petrified. Happily Sir Toby was extraordinarily insensitive, even for a baronet. "I knew several of your sisters. I am always meetin' your father. I hear you absolutely knocked 'em in Yorkshire as Lady Henrietta in the Duke of Killiecrankie, but of course this is a very much better play than poor Bob Marshall could ever have written. Don't you think so? But you do, of course."

No, not exactly forthcoming, but she was a pretty little thing and obviously very shy.

"I haven't seen you act myself, but Monty Jupp says when he's coached you a bit more you'll be able to play the ingénues out of all the London theatres. He thinks you ought to go into the business. If your father will give his consent he will produce a big contract for you; and if all goes well down here Monty says he can find the money to put you up as the Little Guv at the Imperial."

The reserve of Lady Elfreda lasted all the way to Clavering Park. Happily Sir Toby was less concerned by it than less gifted people might have been. For he had a real love of the sound of his own voice, and somehow it had never sounded better than in this cozy tête-a-tête with the youngest of the Catkin girls. A shy little puss, but she was as pretty as pretty.

Under her fur coat, however, Miss Cass had begun to shiver with dread fear and dire remorse. But emotions of that sort were simply no use now. Things had gone much too far. Whatever happened now she must play up. Therein lay her only hope of salvation.

It seemed as if this journey would never end. The sense of impending disaster was getting on the nerves of Miss Cass. Luckily they had not far to go. It was but a couple of miles or so to Clavering Park.

## VII

All the same, Miss Cass was by no means ready to welcome the end of the journey even when it came. The first rather abrupt intimation that her destination had been reached was a brief stopping at the lodge gates of Clavering Park, followed a few minutes later by a flare of lights from a large, wide-fronted house. Then came the epic moment of the tall footman opening the omnibus door, the descent of her traveling companions and the obvious need for her own.

Immense courage was called for to quit that comfortable corner, but with an effort which in the circumstances seemed superhuman Girlie took the plunge. After being gracefully assisted from the omnibus by Sir Toby she moved without apparent impulse or volition of her own into a wide zone of light. The next thing she realized was that she had arrived in a large, bright inner hall that was terrifyingly full of people. For the most part these were seated on chairs and sofas in groups of two and three, consuming afternoon tea and talking at what seemed to be the top of very loud voices.

A large, fair-haired woman of forty or so, with the look of a rather overblown yellow chrysanthemum, suddenly detached herself from the center of the throng, literally sprang at Miss Cass and welcomed her with the greatest effusion.

"So nice of you to come! Such a pleasure to see you! So good of you to come all the way down here!"

Girlie realized that she was in the grip of the voluble and demonstrative mistress of Clavering Park.

"You have made friends with Sir Toby already, of course?"

The little man answered brightly that they had made friends already. Other brief and swift introductions followed, but Miss Cass made no effort to catch the names and she shyly avoided the eyes of these favored ones. And then said the hostess with delightful urgency, "Do let me give you some tea."

Almost as if by magic a passage was found to a table in the middle of the hall. As the important guest moved forward with the hostess the conversation abruptly stopped. Girlie felt that every eye was upon her fur coat, yet somehow the sensation was not unpleasant. There were more brief introductions en route. And then at last she was safely anchored in a very seductive low chair and the conversation had begun again with a redoubled violence.

"So sporting of you to come and help us!"

Girlie was soon aware that there was no immediate need for her to say anything; the hostess and those around her were abundantly equipped with small talk.

"This tea is quite fresh. Milk and sugar?"

Girlie's tongue declined to act, but somehow she was able to muster a hoarse whisper which the hostess interpreted as "Yes, please."

Tea gave Girlie a little courage. A spasmodic warmth began to flicker in her gray eyes.

"Do have some more." The voice was kindness itself. "And then if you would like to rest a little after your long and tiresome journey you shall go up to your room."

Nothing could have been nicer, easier or more amiable. For all her excitement, which seemed to be breaking in burning waves round her head and ears, Girlie was able to do ample justice to her tea and cake; she even continued to listen with a kind of gratitude to the prattle of the yellow chrysanthemum lady, who was obviously a very good sort.

"We feel quite honored, you know, at having you here. Sir Toby says you are to be advertised as our principal star on the play bills. So awfully clever of you to act in the way you do. I am sure you will be a great draw. And such a good cause. Do have some more tea, won't you?"

The curiously shy and timid Lady Elfreda was not averse from even a third cup of tea.

"One hears that you are simply wonderful as Lady Henrietta in the Duke of Killiecrankie. The Society Pictorial says you have genius, although"—Girlie suddenly felt the eyes of the hostess fixed intently upon her—"you don't look much like your photograph. Do have another piece of tea-cake."

Girlie had never heard prattle sound quite so agreeable. She began to take very kindly to her surroundings. At the back of her mind, it was true, the sense of the unreal was almost grisly. But the immediate present in which she was living was strangely like a dream, although touched with sinister edges that might develop into a nightmare at any moment. Still, a low cushioned chair, three cups of tea and the eager, the almost too eager kindness of the hostess were for the time being an anodyne for the fear that hovered like doom in the background.

"Dinner is not until a quarter past eight, so that if you would like a little rest you shall go to your room." The yellow chrysanthemum lady glanced half-maternally at the small peaked face. "If you like, I will show you the way."

Girlie was most comfortable as she was, but instinct told her that it would be wise to end the present phase of the dream, which was so seductive, and prepare to envisage some of the stern realities that were undoubtedly lurking near at hand.

"I think I will please—if you don't mind." Those were the first words Girlie found the courage to speak in her capacity of a marquis' daughter. For an instant the sound of her own voice, pitched rather higher than was quite natural, seemed to leave her half paralyzed with her own audacity.

Happily the hostess, whose name she didn't know, was very much a get-things-done sort of lady. "Very well, you shall." She rose from her chair with genial authority. "You will be all the better for an hour's rest after such a trying journey."

Girlie got up, too. A considerable effort was needed, but she was able to make it. The mistress of the house piloted the distinguished guest past tables and chairs, through the press of people, of whose glances of covert curiosity she was keenly aware, as far as the staircase paneled in black oak at the end of the hall. They went up together side by side, but Girlie was terribly conscious now at every step she took that she was moving out of fairyland into a country of extreme peril whose nature she simply dare not define.

"I hope you will like your room." The delightfully kind yellow chrysanthemum lady prattled on all the way up the stairs. "South aspect, overlooking the park. We call it the chamber of honor. King Edward used to sleep in it when he came down here for the races, although, of course, we hadn't the place then."

"Oh, I am sure I shall like it," Girlie managed to say, but again in that odd high-pitched voice which sounded so strange to her own ears.

They turned into a corridor carpeted in blue velvet and the hostess opened a door at the end of it. She led the way into the most spaciouly beautiful bedroom Girlie had ever seen. Its size seemed to her quite extraordinary. It was hung in deep crimson and its furniture was Louis Seize. A bright wood fire was crackling on the wide hearth. But, perhaps, what most immediately impressed Miss Cass was the fact that Pikey was busily unpacking the boxes of her mistress, several of whose dresses had already been laid out on the bed.

"Here you are, Lady Elfreda." The voice of the yellow chrysanthemum lady sounded disconcertingly loud as they entered the room. "I do hope you will be comfortable. Your bathroom is through that door. I see your maid is unpacking your things." And then to the kneeling and assiduous Pikey, "Have you all that you want?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Pikey, looking up for one brief instant only.

"If there is anything else you'd like you will ask for it, won't you?" The hostess bestowed a final benediction on the most important of her guests. "You will be able to have a nice rest before dinner. Not until a quarter past eight ... I think I told you." With a last gush of kindness the yellow chrysanthemum lady departed, leaving Girlie Cass to deal with a reality that was rapidly growing stupendous.

For two minutes at least after the hostess had gone silence reigned in the room. Pikey continued her unpacking, still wholly absorbed by her task, while Girlie began to make frantic efforts to emerge completely from her dream and grapple with a situation that had suddenly grown altogether beyond her.

There was the authority of the mistress of Clavering Park that she was Lady Elfreda Catkin, that the bedroom of the late King Edward had been placed at her disposal, and that before her eyes her own maid was unpacking her boxes. So far, so good. Everything was for the best in the best of all possible worlds, no doubt ... but!...!

## VIII

Pikey was still in a rather dazed condition. She had been traveling all day and most of the previous night and she was not so young as she once was; besides, she had not quite shaken off the thrall of a potent vintage wine. As a matter of fact, she had not been really awake since Newbury. And it would seem that the mind can play some decidedly weird tricks when one is past sixty and one has missed a whole night's rest!

For example, Pikey could almost have taken a Bible oath, so vivid was the impression, that her mistress....

However, that was clearly impossible! A cup of tea in the severely correct surroundings of the housekeeper's room, in which, as the representative of an old marquise, she had been at once accorded considerable prestige, had proved to her quite definitely that this disorder of mind reflected no sort of credit upon her.

Her young ladyship had always been a little wild. And as her guardian knew to her cost, she had given more trouble, one way and another, than all the rest of the family together. She might be capable of anything. At the same time there was surely a limit beyond which even Elfreda would not go! Strengthened by this pious thought, the still rather bewildered Pikey had proceeded to unpack.

Not feeling either too proud or too sure of herself, the ancient handmaid went on with her task some little time longer before she ventured to look up to confront her young mistress. At last she rose from her knees and said with a formal air which was a concession to her sense of responsibility, "I think the blue one, my lady, for this evening."

As Pikey spoke she came forward to assist in the removal of the fur coat. She was a Dragon, but she was also a first-class servant who knew her place to a hair's breadth.

The shock she met with half stunned her. From between the hat and the skunk collar of her mistress, a small white face was gazing at her piteously.

There was a silence grim and tense, in which the hearts of both the parties to it seemed to stop beating.

"Why! ... w-what ... are you ... doing ... here!" gasped the luckless Pikey at last.

The gray eyes of Girlie filmed ever so lightly with tears. "I ... I ... Lady Elfreda!" The strangled whisper was half a sob.

Pikey recoiled with her horrified gaze still on the hat and coat of her mistress. And then, being by no means a fool, in one blinding, hideous flash of insight she saw it all....



The little wretch had surpassed herself! Poor Pikey grew faint and rather chill. Her charge had played more than one mad prank in her life of twenty years, but in its daring and its wickedness this exploit was surely incredible. All the same there was the hard, cold fact and it had to be faced.

"Why did you let her!" The voice and the look of the Dragon threatened actual bodily violence to Miss Cass.

"I—I didn't seem able to prevent her."

Reading the gentle, rather scared eyes, the truculent Pikey felt these feeble words to be literally true. At the beck of a rather grim sense of humor the old retainer bared her yellow teeth. It was almost in her heart to admire the Little Beast; yet at the same moment she was consumed with a passion to shake the life out of poor Miss No-Class.

"Where has she gone—tell me that!" So fierce was the Werewolf that a look akin to terror entered Girlie's eyes. The Lady of Laxton, however, did her best to give a coherent account of all that had happened.

"You say she has gone to The Laurels," said Pikey, blankly. "And she has taken your luggage with her." Darkness and eclipse stared the luckless duenna in the face. "I don't know where The Laurels is. And, anyway, I doubt if there would be time to fetch her before dinner."

Miss Cass not only doubted if there would be time to fetch her before dinner; privately she doubted also if in her present mood the wicked Elfreda would come if she were fetched.

"Well, I don't know what to do," groaned Pikey, "and that's the truth." The Deputy looked blankly at the duenna. Her white face grew piteous.

"Whatever do you suppose is going to happen!" The cold ferocity again struck terror into the heart of Girlie Cass.

"L-Lady Elfreda said it would be quite all right," she was just able to gasp. "She said there was no one here who knew her. She said that if"—gathering herself for a supreme effort—"I—I—played up and didn't give myself away it wouldn't be found out." And Miss Cass collapsed against the side of the bed.

"Wouldn't be found out!" It was as much as Pikey could do to keep her hands off the little idiot.

Pikey, however, was not a fool. Already her mind had shaped the question of questions, What must she do? She did not forget that she had been sent specially from Ireland to take charge of one who had always insisted on going her own way, and if she now confessed that she had let herself be tricked in such a preposterous manner she would be severely hauled over the coals and might even lose the place which she valued beyond all things in this life. Again, immediately below the surface of the Dragon's nature was the foolish, fond old nurse. Entering the Carabbas household in early life she had mothered a large family, first in a subordinate capacity, and then when it came to Elfreda's turn, as absolute head of the nursery. Elfreda in consequence held quite a special place in her affections. The family of Carabbas was the whole world and its wife as far as Pikey was concerned; the rest of the universe didn't count at all; but the one who had given her more trouble than all the others together had been her particular charge. Had it ever been really necessary, the Werewolf would have gone to the stake for Elfreda.

If Pikey's first thought was that she must not give herself away, the one that pressed it hard was that she must not give away her favorite. But she was faced with a situation of fantastic difficulty. It was frankly beyond her. She didn't in the least know what to do.

Miss Cass was in similar case, except that somewhere in her confused mind was a pathetic but sublime faith in Lady Elfreda. The daughter of the marquis had solemnly promised with her air of uncanny competence that everything would turn out right if only her deputy “played up,” and somehow the bewildered but secretly flattered Girlie felt bound to believe her. Such a one as Lady Elfreda must know the ropes perfectly. And up to this point her mentor had been amazingly right. Everything had gone almost as merrily as a marriage bell.

“Well, I don’t know what to do, and that’s a fact,” said Pikey again.

In the end it was the lady of Laxton who really took the epic decision. There were several factors in the case which helped her to do so. Her faith was sublime, she had succeeded already, she was enormously ambitious, such an amazing chance for first-hand experience could never recur, and when the worst had been said of her, with all her timidity she was a decidedly shrewd daughter of a long line of commercial sires. Besides at the very moment that the issue hung in the balance her tranced eyes beheld what no pen could describe: An enchanting shimmer of misty blue, silver and tulle laid out on the bed. It was such a dress as one day she might have dreamt of wearing, yet knowing well that she was never likely to do so.

That glorious confection decided Girlie Cass. She must play up, she must play up to the very height of her opportunity. “There is a tide,” etc. Inscrutable fate had ordained that she was to be the daughter of a marquis. Come what may she would be the daughter of a marquis and so prove herself worthy of her destiny.

The little lady, with a courage she knew and felt was superhuman, took off her coat and hat and then she said with a steadiness of tone she could not help admiring in herself, “I think you said the blue one.”

It was quite true that Pikey had said the blue one, but this audacity rendered her speechless. Certainly it solved the most pressing of their problems—for the time being at least—but the grim custodian of Family dignity would dearly have liked to slay Miss No-Class for her impudence.

How dare that sort of person take so much upon herself!

The soul of the lady of Laxton, however, had been fired by the ravishing garment on the bed. And as the whole situation was poised so delicately that it seemed to hang upon a thread, the mere fact that she could muster courage enough for a definite lead sufficed to determine the course of events. Pikey continued to gaze at Miss Impudence with sour disfavor, but she was not slow to realize how small was the option left to her now. Moreover, it was the will of her mistress. And at that moment and in those circumstances, with her own sin of omission so heavy upon her, it would surely be wise to ensure it.

Nevertheless, the Werewolf eyed Miss No-Class with a ferocity that was positively frightening. "Sit down in that chair next the fire so that I can take off your shoes." The tone went with the truculent eyes.

Quivering with a secret excitement that was more than half fear, the deputy daughter of the Marquis of Carabbas obeyed. Pikey knelt and came savagely to grips with a tarnished right foot. It seemed to minister to her inward rage that the shoes of the Deputy were obviously—too obviously!—cheap and that their heels were shod clumsily with rubber. And as if this were not enough for the aristocratic soul of Pikey, she discovered that certain concealed parts of the Deputy's stockings had been freely darned. With a sniff of frank disgust she took up an elegant pair of bedroom slippers which had been set to warm in front of the fire and very reluctantly put them on the plebeian feet of Miss No-Class.

She did put them on, however. Then she rose like a sibyl, slowly and grimly from her knees, looked Miss No-Class straight in the eyes and said, "The first thing for you, my lady, is a bath."

If a studied and ferocious irony had the power to slay, the Deputy-daughter of the Marquis of Carabbas could hardly have survived this first application of her title. The earnestly intelligent student of The Patrician flushed to the roots of her hair. Did this Ogress of a creature mean it for an insult? Did the woman wish to suggest that one who had been educated at the Laxton High School for Young Ladies, who had passed the Oxford Preliminary, who was the daughter of a solicitor, whose insight into human nature had been commended by the Saturday Sentinel, had the woman the effrontery to mean as much as her disgusted tone implied!

Girlye Cass mustered all her reserves. "I don't really think I need a bath." It was a colorable imitation of the tone of Miss Pond, the admired head-mistress of the Laxton High School.

Part of the answer of the Ogress was a snort; the other part was, "You won't wear that dress unless you do have one."

Miss Cass wisely concluded that it would be unworthy of human dignity to sustain the argument. Besides, the Ogress had already produced an entrancing dressing gown of pink silk. "Put on this," she said, ruthlessly, "while I go and get your bath ready."

Pikey thereupon collected a prince among sponges, a superb loofah, a *recherché* cake of scented soap, and grimly retired to the next apartment, leaving the Deputy, tingling with excitement yet raging with mortification, to shed her plebeian garments one by one.

## IX

Glowing from quite the most luxurious bath it had ever been the lot of Girlie Cass to enjoy, that little lady presently returned to submit her sensitiveness to hands of ruthless indelicacy. It had been Pikey's pleasing task "to mother" the six small Catkin ladies. Perhaps the fact may have accounted for much in her present mode of handling the Deputy. Even after her charges had emerged from the nursery, within her own sphere, which was now that of lady's maid, she had always been a tremendous autocrat. Her methods might lack subtlety, but of their effectiveness there could be no doubt. In the case of the Family, however, they were mitigated by the knowledge that they were but the outward expression of her inordinate pride in and absolute devotion to them all. No matter what the Catkin ladies suffered at her hands, they knew in their hearts that Pikey would yield her life cheerfully for any one of them at a moment's notice. The luckless Girlie, however, had not this thought to sustain her. There was no sense of handmaidenly altruism to soften the present pain and ignominy of the lot of Miss No-Class.

One thing there was, however, in this hour of trial to nerve Lady Elfreda's deputy; it was the exquisite garment of misty blue with a shimmer of silver and tulle. Would it fit? For a moment her feelings were harrowed by the fear that it might not. That would be tragedy, indeed. But the fear was groundless. Nature had molded her so daintily that even with the thick woolly combinations she had decided to retain there was room for her small person in that glorious gown.

She looked in the large glass to satisfy herself that such was the case, carefully tucked in the edges of the obtrusive undergarment which so tactlessly showed themselves above the proud corsage, and then turned to confront Pikey with a little air of triumph.

"It fits wonderfully, I think."

Pikey looked Miss No-Class truculently up and down. Then with a scorn that in a moment less exalted would have been annihilating, she deliberately plucked out the concealed edges of the woolly combinations, sniffed loudly and palpably, plucked at the sleeves of the gown, pulled them and patted them, and finally lifted up the skirt. Disdaining comment in mere words, the maid at once produced a wonderful array of gossamer-like undergarments, stockings ravishing in blue silk, and slippers that were a glory of silver buckles and blue satin.

"Take off that dress." The Werewolf look came upon Pikey. "Put on that dressing gown." The fierce eyes seemed to threaten murder. "And then I'll do your hair."

Trembling in spirit, Miss Cass brought herself reluctantly to submit to this grim ordeal. The Ogress took an unholy joy in twisting and pulling and punching, with alternations of savage brushings and combings, yet through it all was poor Girlie upheld by the knowledge that not only was her hair abundant, of a fine color and texture, but it also had a trick of curling naturally. If it came to a "showdown" she was not afraid of anybody in the matter of hair. Without wishing to rate it too highly she had serious doubts whether the head of Lady Elfreda was so well equipped by nature, no matter what art may have done for it. And as a final satisfaction, which present circumstances seemed much to enhance, it was only the previous evening that she had shampooed it thoroughly.

Pikey was pitiless, yet she was no mean coiffeuse. The happy abundance and the charming natural waves of Miss Cass's hair offered scope for her skill. And when she had worked her final will with cruel fingers and unsparing brush, and had gathered the silken mass and bound it artfully with a ribbon of blue and silver threads, the result was a triumph for her and also for her victim, who had been reduced to the verge of involuntary tears. As the maid ungraciously surveyed the fruits of her labors, she had secretly to admit that, owing to some odd freak on the part of nature, no head of her lawful charges had ever done her quite so much credit.

Girlie was then at liberty to devote herself to the rest of her toilet. But she was not permitted to don the gauze-like blue silk stockings until the Ogress had inspected her feet with ominous care.

"I'll cut those," was the curt announcement at the sight of the toenails of Miss Cass.

The proud spirit of a solicitor's daughter was inclined to contest the point. She really did not think her toes were in need of such attention.

"Very well—you don't put on them." The Werewolf pointed to the blue silk stockings. "And you don't put on those neither." And she pointed to the enchanting slippers.

Poor Miss Cass had to suffer one more indignity. Pikey assumed a pair of spectacles, took a pair of scissors, made Girlie sit on a chair and dealt with her toes with scrupulous efficiency. The operation duly performed, Pikey turned her attention to the lovely gown. A cunning needle took in a bit here, let out a bit there, emphasized this, diminished that, until at last she reluctantly muttered, "You ought to do now."

Girlie, ready to weep for relief, turned again to the glass. The picture she saw was beyond her most extravagant hopes. She was—yes—she was beautiful! At the sight of a ravishing self her courage rose. She had not known that mere clothes and that particular way of doing the hair and that particular ribbon in it could mean so much. Somehow the picture in the glass was going to help her enormously in the part she had to play.



Even Pikey, sunk in savage gloom at the prospect before her, could not stifle a feeling of half admiration, which to be sure she did not reveal. It was too much to hope that the preposterous trick would not be found out, but at least in the matter of looks, the Family might have been far less worthily represented. In fact so clear was Pikey on this point that she opened an ancient jewel case and took forth an article that lifted Girlie to the nth degree. It was a necklace of pearls. This lovely thing had only to clasp a white and slender throat, of which Girlie had always been secretly vain, for its owner to be made free of the seventh heaven of delight.

"That belongs to Lady Carabbas." Such was Pikey's proud concession to the light of rapture in the ignorant eyes of Miss No-Class. But she did not tell the Deputy, whose eyes were sparkling with enchantment, that the necklace was but a copy of a famous original that was strictly reserved for state occasions. Beauty, however, is in the eye of the beholder. Girlie was quite sure that these were the most authentic pearls of the Orient. When she looked again in the glass she literally felt their glamour.

Half an hour must pass before Girlie, now slightly delirious, would have to show herself in the drawing room. Blood was drumming in her temples already, an odd kind of singing was in her ears, yet in spite of the sure and clear knowledge that she was poised on the very edge of a measureless chasm, in that half hour the dominant emotion was not fear. Girlie's line of commercial sires were standing by her now; a certain dour practicality rallied to their daughter's call.

Moreover, in her way, Girlie Cass was a fighter. Life for her had never been a bed of roses. And this was her chance. If only she could control her nerves and fix her will this perilous game might be worth while. Besides, whatever happened, she must not give her friend and benefactress away. Looked at rightly this was a perfectly gorgeous adventure. If only she showed pluck she had really very little to lose beyond her situation at The Laurels—a heavy penalty no doubt—yet over against that was set an opportunity for priceless first-hand experience, such as hardly one girl in a million could hope to acquire.

Let her play up and take Courage for her watchword! Even if she could not fill the rôle of a marquis's daughter—and the event had yet to prove whether she could or she could not—the cheval glass opposite told her quite clearly that very few girls indeed could have looked the part better.

X

The clock on the chimneypiece chimed a quarter past eight, and on Pikey's advice the Deputy made her way down to the drawing room. She was horribly afraid, yet as she caught another view of herself in a mirror at the top of the stairs, she was not wholly in the grip of that unworthy emotion. What a necklace! Its value must be fabulous. As the light caught it and transmitted its spurious rays, her slender white throat looked slenderer and whiter than ever before. Then, too, the flush of rose in the center of each cheek and the almost unnatural brightness in her eyes blended with the wonderful frock quite remarkably. She could not help lingering a moment in front of the glass, half astonished by her own beauty.

Hearing a sound behind her she moved on. But she had not gone more than two steps down the stairs when a very friendly voice said, "Well, Lady Elfreda, have you begun yet to study your part?"

The author of "The Lady of Laxton," who was one of the main causes of the mischief, although both were far from suspecting the fact, came alongside her in the middle of the stairs.

"No, I haven't begun yet," said Girlie in a voice she could not recognize as belonging to herself.

Sir Toby was rather taken aback by the confession. The time was short and the part of the little governess was decidedly a long one. Casual to say the least. So like these amateurs!

"We begin rehearsals to-morrow," said the author gently.

That was not a moment, however, for the Deputy-daughter of the Marquis of Carabbas to think of rehearsals. She was within twenty yards of the drawing room. Would she be able to enter it?

Yes, decidedly casual and inclined to be stand-off, thought Sir Toby. He hoped the little idiot had not had her head turned already by success. Sir Toby glanced at her sideways, fully and expertly taking her in without any suggestion that he was doing so. Nailingly pretty, by gad! If her acting was up to her looks they would have a succès fou on Tuesday week. Quite a stepper in her way, but apparently very shy. No doubt she would improve on acquaintance.

Sir Toby's survey of the little Puss was so eminently satisfactory that he had no qualms at all about entering the drawing room with her. Girlie had many, however, about entering it with him. Still it would be easier than going in by oneself. She nerved herself for the severest ordeal of her life. And yet, after all, it proved quite a simple matter.

"Interesting sight," proclaimed a bold looking woman in pink with a marble and platinum voice as soon as she appeared in the room with Sir Toby. "Behold the author and the leading lady."

In almost the same moment the yellow chrysanthemum lady who was looking magnificent in black satin swooped upon her. "Now I must make you known to everybody. The plain but pompous looking, rather overdressed man standing over there with his hands in his pockets, is my husband. Let me introduce you."

The gentleman in question bowed to Lady Elfreda who found the presence of mind to offer her hand. And then as the host, one Richard Minever by name, a rich and rollicking M. P., took the hand of the little lady, he grinned at his wife and said, "Confound your impudence, Kate."

"This is he with whom you will have to go in," said the hostess coolly. "I am very sorry for you but I am afraid it can't be helped. But you will have some one really nice the other side of you. Let me introduce Lord Duckingfield."

Lord Duckingfield was a large man of forty-five with a face that was by no means unattractive. He was full of geniality and charmingly simple and natural; his air as he heartily shook Girlie's hand was that of a father towards her.

"I often see your papa at our Board meetings," said Lord Duckingfield. "He says you are quite the clever one of the family." And as his lordship caught little Miss Grey Eyes broadside on, he felt tempted to add although he refrained from doing so, "He might also have said you were the pretty one."

They went in to dinner almost at once, the host offering a paternal arm to Lady Elfreda and showing the way. The party was not uncomfortably large. Mr. and Mrs. Minever, two tall and cheerful daughters, and half a dozen guests who were staying in the house. But there was an atmosphere of noisy good humor about it which was very welcome to Girlie. The banter and the repartee and the jovial give and take, which if not always in the best of taste, seemed vastly entertaining to every one concerned, all helped to provide a most fortunate cloak for the little lady who sat between the host and Lord Duckingfield.

She was really required to do very little beyond getting on with an excellent dinner. True, her private emotions hardly allowed her to do justice to the menu, but such slight attention was paid to her personally amid the general clamor that she was almost able to enjoy herself. All the same she was resolutely careful not to exceed one glass of champagne. The shrewd northern forebears simply would not hear of more than one glass. But in the one she had, there was magic. It seemed to open her heart to the luxurious play of civilized life around her. She knew it was a chimera that could not possibly last, at any moment the game might be up, but no matter what happened later, she would be a connoisseur in human experience who had lived one glorious hour.

Hoisted upon that high thought, Girlie removed her lips from the rim of her glass and sat up very straight. Yes, for that evening at any rate, she would live her hour; she really would be the daughter of a marquis even if she had to go to prison for it afterwards. Her late father, who had been a lawyer himself, always maintained that the law was the most uncertain thing in the world; so there really was a prospect of its coming to that. In the meantime, however, she would play up for all she was worth if only for the sake of the amazing new friend who had gone to The Laurels in her place, and who at this moment must be bitterly rueing the freak that had led her to forego this delightful meal.

Not only did Girlie sit up physically, she sat up mentally. Keeping her eyes and ears open, she began to take grave and particular notice! Somewhere in her mind floated vague fragments from Hints on Etiquette by a Member of the Aristocracy, and for that reason she boldly discarded her fish-knife, as she seemed to remember that the best people relied exclusively on forks for their fish whenever it was possible to do so. She noted, however, that neither of her neighbors seemed aware of that fact, and Mr. Minever and Lord Duckingfield went down a little in her esteem. But, after all, it merely cast one romantic light the more on the general situation. These people might be very amusing and very jolly and very rich, but even with their titles to help them they could hardly be considered real Aristocrats. And it was because Lady Elfreda Catkin was an aristocrat to her finger tips that she chose darkness and eclipse rather than sully her proud soul by mixing with people who needed fish-knives to grapple with boiled turbot.

"We are expectin' great things of you, Lady Elfreda." The loud voiced little man opposite was addressing her personally. "They say you absolutely knocked 'em in Yorkshire. I hope you'll like your part. It was written for you specially."

"Why, Philpot, you've not seen Lady Elfreda act," said the host in his rich, rollicking tactless way.

"Tisn't always necessary," said the author of "The Lady of Laxton" stoutly, "to see a woman act in order to write a part for her. Sardou did it over and over again. So did Scribe. So has Pin I'm sure—and all of 'um."

"Doesn't sound very convincing, Sir Toby," said the voice of the yellow chrysanthemum lady from the other end of the table, who like her husband could not claim that tact was her long suit. "But it'll be all right on the night no doubt. By the way is there any one here who has seen Lady Elfreda act?"

Girlie held her breath. The pause which followed Mrs. Minever's words seemed so painfully long, so intensely dramatic. Would it never end? A shiver crept along the spine of the Deputy. Beneath the [Pg 81]eyes of the entire table she felt herself to be turning green.

"What?—No one!" said the hostess.

No one had apparently.

"That's a bit of luck for you, Lady Elfreda," said the host with his jovial air.

The whole table laughed. Girlie began to breathe again.

"But Lady Elfreda's escape is only temporary," the hostess announced. "To-morrow Mr. Montagu Jupp is coming. And he claims to have taught Lady Elfreda all the acting she knows."

XI

The heart of the Deputy seemed to stop beating as she heard the sinister words of the hostess. But again as her lips sought the brim of her glass she took courage. No matter what to-morrow had in store she must live this wonderful hour. She would lose her situation for a certainty, perhaps she would have to go to prison, but this evening, come what might, she was determined to yield to a signal experience.

She felt like a flower that expands to the sun. To be young, to be rich, to be highly born, to be beautifully dressed, in a word to be the veritable daughter of a marquis—what a supreme destiny! Nor was it a silly and vulgar snobbishness that made her think so. Such a life as the one she was living now meant poetry, romance, color, joy. To-morrow she would return inevitably to what she was; to-morrow the endless dreary days of governessing would begin again; but to-night—to-night she would drink of the cup!

Nevertheless the shrewd northern forebears insisted that one glass of champagne must be Girlie's limit. But it was not easy to compute the precise measure with the butler always on the watch to keep it up to the brim. Rigidly on guard as she was, a glorious, devil-may-care sort of feeling stole over her. A flush crept on her cheek, her soul leapt to her eyes, so that in the sight of more than one beholder the youngest of the Catkin girls looked uncommonly pretty.

It was after dinner, however, that the ordeal of Miss Cass really began. In the drawing room, over the coffee cups, alone with her own sex, she had to call out the reserves of her courage. The ladies were so much more formidable than the gentlemen! Somehow their manner towards her seemed curiously quizzical! Their lightest remarks, even their way of looking at one were singularly embarrassing. Still Girlie said very little, but smiled a good deal, was content to answer direct questions with a brief "yes" or a briefer "no," so that for the time being she was able to disarm those whom she felt to be her natural enemies. Nevertheless the advent of the gentlemen came as a particular relief.

The return of the gentlemen lessened the tension considerably. Their black coats and white waistcoats seemed to add a subtle quality to the mise-en-scène; somehow they appeared to humanize the atmosphere of the drawing room. Girlie found them much the easier to get on with. For one thing the new peer who was on several Boards with her distinguished parent, the marquis, quite took her under his wing. It seemed he had promised Lady Elfreda's father that he would look after her. And from the outset it was clear that the hostess at any rate was anxious that Lord Duckingfield should be as good as his word.



He was a plain honest midlander, a man almost wholly without pretensions, and although not exactly in the first blush of youth Girlie could not help thinking that he was extremely nice. If she had not known he was a lord she would never have guessed it. There was something very straightforward about him, something very considerate, something very kindly, something very humane. From the first he paid court to her in his rather heavy, fatherly way; yet in this there may have been an ulterior motive, for as he presently said, he hoped Lady Elfreda would teach him to jazz.

"But I don't know how to," Girlie confessed with naïve dismay. "I only know the One Step and I am not at all good at it."

"Well, you'll have to teach me that," said my lord, looking straight into the sweetly serious gray eyes. "Although," he added with a roguish smile, "I've been told that nowadays you smart young ladies know everything."

Exceptions there are to every rule, and in the sight of Lord Duckingfield the little Catkin lady furnished one. She seemed to know hardly anything about anything. But he didn't complain of that. He was old fashioned enough to prefer that style of young woman; the smart modern miss was apt to be too well informed on every subject. It was really a pleasure to meet one quite the reverse; one in fact who was ready, nay eager, to sit metaphorically at your feet. My lord in common with most prosperous men of his age liked the sound of his own voice and this pretty little girl—she really was pretty!—had the subtle art of making him forget that he was indulging a weakness. She hung on his words. She laughed at his stories. When he grew reminiscent, round eyes of serious wonder rewarded him. Yes, quite a nice little filly, both docile and intelligent, and not at all inclined to rate herself too highly, which he had rather feared would be the case, having regard to the stable she came out of.

For a full hour Lord Duckingfield was allowed to monopolize the chief guest. And no one challenged his right. The hostess had reached the conclusion already that she was "heavy cake"; the other ladies were already divided in their minds as to whether Lady Elfreda was or was not half-witted. She would improve on acquaintance no doubt, but as Mrs. Spencer-Jobling, a bold lady in pink, found occasion to hint to Sir Toby, the immediate outlook for his masterpiece was not encouraging.

"But they say she can act like blazes you know." Sir Toby clung to that belief in the teeth of growing skepticism. "Monty Jupp says when he's coached her a bit more she'll be quite equal to any of the professionals."

"Well, we shall see," said Mrs. Spencer-Jobling who prided herself on being without illusion on any subject. "But with Miss Kitwood we should have been absolutely safe."

Sir Toby, allowing his eyes to stray to the animated picture on the distant sofa, was impelled to discount the pessimism of Mrs. Spencer-Jobling. She was quite the prettiest little Puss he had seen in a month of Sundays, and old man Duckingfield, that astute midlander, evidently thought so too.

When bedtime came for the ladies, Sir Toby contrived a broad hint for Lady Elfreda as he politely opened the drawing room door. "I'm afraid you have a hard day to-morrow," he said. "Your part is a long one and there isn't much time to study it before the rehearsals begin. So mind you have a good night's rest."

Alas, had it been Sir Toby's intention to deprive the little lady of the boon he was so urgently recommending no words could have been better calculated for the purpose. They almost ensured a sleepless vigil. At the prospect before her, Girlie felt one more chill along her spine. All the same as she went up the stairs with the other ladies and forced herself by sheer power of will to give them a gay good-night, the paramount emotion was triumph. She had come through a grim ordeal quite brilliantly. No one had appeared to suspect her, and incredible as the fact might seem, she had almost enjoyed herself! The morrow, it was true, was dark indeed, but already her life had known one unforgettable moment.

"Now mind you sleep well, Lady Elfreda." The hostess took an effusive leave of her on the threshold of King Edward's bedroom. "And no one is expected to show at breakfast unless they particularly wish to do so. So we shall not feel offended if you stay in bed all morning and study your part."

## XII

Pikey, with a shawl round her shoulders, was dozing by the bedroom fire. She was awaiting the Deputy's return and doing her best to keep awake. Sleepy as she was, her reception of Miss No-Class was decidedly rough and yet less rough than might have been the case had she not been already informed in the servants' hall by Mr. Pierce, the butler, that in the matter of looks her young ladyship could give all the other ladies points and a beating.

Mr. Pierce meant well, but it was a left handed compliment, that was the best that could be said for it, yet in a sense Pikey felt rather gratified. The verdict of Mr. Pierce at any rate implied that Miss No-Class had borne herself throughout the evening quite as well as was to have been expected. So far, apparently, she had not given herself away.

"You will have your breakfast in bed," said Pikey grimly.

Flown by success, Miss Cass did her best to bring a steady eye to bear upon the maid.

"I have already arranged to do so," she said with a very fair approximation to the manner of the admired Miss Pond. She was still in deadly fear of the Dragon, but she must neglect no opportunity of putting her in her place.

"Oh, you have," said Pikey, more grimly than ever. The Miss-Pond-manner had left her cold. "And you may have to stay in bed for luncheon as well."

"But——" For the moment Girlie was not able to proceed beyond that ineffective monosyllable. Pikey was "undoing her at the back" and even this mild protest earned her a decidedly savage shake.

"It's like this," Pikey ominously explained. "I'm going over to The Laurels the first thing in the morning and it's the best part of four miles away, so Mrs. Bletsoe the housekeeper tells me. And you've got to stop in bed till I come back."

"But——" Miss No-Class protested.

"Let down your hair." Of a sudden the Werewolf took a most formidable long-handled brush from the dressing table for all the world as if it had been a birch rod.

Miss Cass could not repress a tremor of fear as she withdrew the pins and the charming ribbon.

"You'll stay in bed till I return."

Poor Girlie gave a suppressed howl as the best quality hogs' bristle seemed to tear open her scalp. "And Mrs. Bletsoe doubts whether I'll be back by luncheon time if I miss the bus from the Royal Oak at Clavering."

"But——"

The long-handled hairbrush began to draw real salt tears. "Don't you dare to show yourself again until I've seen her young ladyship. To-morrow she's coming here." Suppressed wowl. "Or I'll know the reason." Wowl ad libitum.

The Deputy ventured no more "buts." She feared that this old Sioux might cause her scalp to disappear altogether.

"Do you understand?"

With her hair gathered in one large merciless handful Girlie understood only too well.

"Now you can get into bed." It was the tone of the absolute ruler of the nursery to one who had just received an honest instalment of her deserts and it also implied a promise of more to follow.

Girlie felt it was nothing less than an outrage to treat the daughter of a solicitor in that way; but without unnecessary delay she slipped in between the sheets and made the acquaintance of a friendly hot water bottle.

"Remember, you don't get up—until you are told. And mind you say your prayers." The Dragon switched off the electric light and retired to her own quarters to a chequered night's repose.

Girlie fared no better. Never in the course of her life had sleep seemed so far from her pillow. She grew so excited as the present, the future, and the immediate past flooded her mind that after a while she switched on the light. On a shelf by her bedside were several of her favorite writers, but in this mental crisis even Miss Cholmondeley, Mr. Galsworthy, and Mrs. Humphrey Ward were powerless. After that she tried studying her part, but she could not bring her mind to bear upon it. Finally, as she paced up and down the large room, she tried to continue her essay for the Saturday Sentinel, but none of these alternatives were of the least use. Her nerves were in a state of mutiny. She could not think coherently. The fix she was in grew more terrifying as the hours passed. There seemed to be no way out. She had been mad, worse than mad. Her career was irretrievably ruined. And when the trick was discovered, as within the next four and twenty hours it was bound to be, she might very easily find herself in prison. And yet—!

That “and yet” was the cruel part. Up till now she had carried the thing off brilliantly. In a manner of speaking she had quite enjoyed the evening; so much had she appreciated its charm and its luxury that it had seemed like coming into one’s own. No matter what the sequel was, it would ever remain a golden memory almost capable of making any penalty worth while.

The dawn had begun already to steal through the Venetian blinds of King Edward’s bedroom before Girlie slept at all. All too soon she was aroused by a maid with a well filled tray. Face to face with the cold light of day and the naked reality of a perfectly stupendous present, the Deputy wisely determined that she might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb; accordingly with a wrap round her shoulders she sat up in bed, made a tolerable breakfast and then put forth one more effort to fix her mind on “The Lady of Laxton.”

She was engaged in diligent study when Pikey entered to bestow a final word of admonition upon her before she set out for The Laurels. In spite of the fatigues of travel, Pikey, it seemed, had slept almost as ill as Miss No-Class. They shared an overwhelming responsibility. But the Deputy, comfortably in bed, showed herself very docile in the matter of getting up. She was quite content to stay as she was. It would suit her very well not to get up until the ambassadress returned from The Laurels; it would suit her even better not to get up at all.

The morning was fine and about half-past ten a gauntly-respectable Pikey set forth a grim figure of truculent despair. At the outset fortune was with her. A motor omnibus plied between Clavering and the neighboring villages, passing the Park gates every two hours in the process. Armed with sound advice from the housekeeper's room, Pikey was able "to time" this vehicle and thereby to reach the Pendennis Arms at Clavering in something less than thirty minutes. Inquiry at that center of information disclosed the fact that The Laurels was some two miles away on the outskirts of the town. Colonel Trenchard-Simpson, it seemed, was a local auctioneer whose rank was a mystery and a wonder to the wise.

As no fly or other medium of travel was at hand, Pikey decided to walk to The Laurels. The house was not difficult to find, but the two miles proved to be nearly three, and it took Pikey, not feeling so young as she used to, the best part of an hour to get there. It was a rather mediocre dwelling, at any rate in the eyes of Pikey who had big ideas, standing a little back from the high road. There was a small plantation in front of it and there was no other house near, but Pikey's first impression was that it didn't amount to much; and when the disgruntled visitor opened its gate which was in need of a coat of paint and her rather dazed mind was suddenly flooded with a renewed sense of her mission, this impression was confirmed.

In the stress of a great crisis, Pikey had not paused en route to consider details of procedure, but now that she had reached her destination they simply had to be faced. Should she go up boldly to the front door and ring the bell? Certainly that seemed to be the right course to take. But then arose the question, for whom must she ask if she did so? For Pikey was now "up against" the fact that she had quite forgotten the name of Miss No-Class, even if, and it was a point upon which she was by no means clear, she had ever known it. However she did not spend much time in wreaking a vain rage upon herself, for she realized that by now she was a long way from Clavering Park, and that circumstances called sternly for action. Therefore without delay she walked along the carriage drive and rang the front door bell. The Laurels was a stucco residence of the glorified suburban villa type with A. D. 1880 engraved on the stone lintel.

The summons was answered by a slightly tarnished parlor-maid in a pink print dress. She was inclined to be pert and the aristocratic spirit of Pikey rose and fell in almost the same moment.

"Can I see the governess, please?" said Pikey, breathing hard. That, after all, was the only formula.

"She's out with Miss Joan and Master Peter." The parlor-maid regarded the visitor with an eye of frank disfavor.

Pikey's heart sank. "Which way has she gone?" she bleakly inquired.

"She's gone into Clavering to do some shopping for the mistress."

Pikey took courage. If she could find out the road by which Elfreda was likely to return there was a hope of intercepting her. Happily, as the visitor was duly informed, the hope was much increased by the fact that there was only one road into Clavering.



"I wonder how I can have missed her." Pikey drew a breath of relief. She offered curt thanks to the parlor-maid and was about to turn away from the door, when a sharp voice which was evidently that of the mistress of the house who had caught from afar the deep note of the visitor's Irish intonation, said, "Don't encourage beggars, Jarvis."

With that insult stirring her blood, poor Pikey made off down the carriage drive, slammed her way out of the gate and took the road back to Clavering. Murder was in her heart, but her spirit was sore, her soul faint. It was a long way to Clavering Park, and she had never felt so disgruntled in her life. Indeed, a few yards on as she crossed a small stone bridge which spanned a local streamlet and lingered a moment to look at the water gurgling beneath, for one weak, wild instant she was almost tempted to try drowning as a remedy for a coil that grew more tragic at every thought she gave to it.

A hundred yards ahead was a sharp bend in the road. Rounding it in a state of utter despair, Pikey unexpectedly found herself converging upon a young woman in a green ulster who held a small girl and a smaller boy by the hand. Accompanying them was a tall, distinguished looking soldier in much beribanded khaki, who walked with a slight limp.

Somehow Pikey was not prepared for Elfreda, but she it was, although more than one glance under the cheap hat was needed to satisfy the maid that such was the case. Indeed, Elfreda recognized Pikey before Pikey recognized her. She was prompt, moreover, being a very quick-witted young woman, to meet the situation.

Elfreda's method of dealing with it was delightfully simple. She sent on Miss Joan and Master Peter with the tall warrior in khaki, and then calmly and sternly she confronted the maid. With a coolness that literally took away Pikey's breath she said, "Why, what in the name of fortune are you doing here?"

The luckless Pikey had no answer ready. Elfreda's sheer impudence was sublime. Pikey could only gasp.

Elfreda calmly watched her charges disappear out of sight round the corner. Then she fixed the duenna with a blue eye of concentrated audacity. "Surely you don't mean to say they've found out?"

Pikey was able to affirm that so far they had not.

"Then what on earth are you doing here?" The tone put the maid completely in the wrong.

Such a cynical carrying of the war into the country of the enemy was a little too much for Pikey. But she was not going to admit defeat. With a snort and a scowl she declared that she had come to fetch Elfreda and that no matter what happened it was her fixed resolve not to return to Clavering Park without her mistress.

XIII

It was now the turn of Elfreda to be taken aback.

"Pikey," she said, "are you mad?"

The look in the eyes of the duenna rather suggested that condition. But Elfreda did not yield an inch. "Are you mad, Pikey?" she repeated sternly.

Before such hardihood the spirit of the Dragon quailed. So proper and natural would it have been for Pikey to ask the question that Elfreda by adopting the simple expedient of asking the question herself completely took the wind out of Pikey's sails.

"Go back at once." Elfreda was perfectly amazing. "How dare you come here." She might have been scolding a disobedient dog. "I am quite ashamed of you, Pikey. Didn't I say I would write to you?"

A conflict began in the faithful bosom of Pikey as an eye flashing with scorn transfixed her.

"Tell me, Pikey, didn't I say I would write to you?"

Faced by an attitude so preposterous yet so uncompromising, Pikey began to feel less sure of her ground. The dismal admission was wrung out of her that her charge had promised to do so.

"Very well, then." In spite of her green ulster and her cheap hat Elfreda grew positively majestic. "Go back as quickly as ever you can and don't dare to come here again unless you are sent for. If you wish to communicate with me privately, please do so by letter. Do you understand?"

Notwithstanding a very definite sense of outrage Pikey felt absolutely cowed. This really was a little spitfire and yet she was just as cool as you please.

"It is your duty to look after Miss—Miss What's-her-name and to see that she doesn't make mistakes or get into mischief or give us away or anything of that kind."

To the wretched Pikey's eternal dishonor she could only muster the spirit for a dismal and forlorn acquiescence. Even as she did so, she knew that she was tamely submitting to be put in the wrong. The thought filled her with fury, but there was nothing to be done. Ruefully she realized that the headstrong little wretch was altogether too much for her.

"I—I shall write to Herself."

"Don't dare to do anything of the kind." A blue eye suddenly blazed forth like an angry sapphire. "Please understand that if it is found out I take all responsibility."

Pikey could only gasp.

"But,"—the words of the amazing Elfreda were half ice, half fire—"if you can really behave like a sensible creature nobody need be any the wiser."

"Whatever will his lordship say?"

"I wouldn't worry about his lordship if I were you, Pikey." The voice of the little wretch had taken the soft wheedling tone which somehow had always been able to get round her nurse. "Don't worry about anything. You'll see it will all come right. And if it doesn't, the whole of the responsibility is mine."

Just then Pikey would cheerfully have slain her charge, but alas! she knew herself at heart for a foolish fond old woman who was without any real hope of being able to prevail against her favorite. She never had been able to prevail against her, if it came to that.

Pikey was not merely in the presence of defeat. The final words of Elfreda struck her with panic.

"I want you to let me have two blouses, some silk stockings, a pair of shoes and a decent hat as soon as you can. Send them by post, and mind you pack them carefully. You understand?"

Pikey's heart sank. No matter what she might be on the surface, immediately below it she was very much a woman and by no means deficient in the intuitions of her sex. Such a demand was full of sinister meaning. The martial figure in khaki that had passed on round the corner now recurred vividly to the eye of her mind. "You must either come to Clavering Park or I shall write to Herself." That should have been her rejoinder to this shameless rebel. Beyond doubt a wise woman would have made it, but do as she would at this fatal moment she simply could not find the necessary courage.

"Address the parcel to Miss Cass, in the care of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson at The Laurels. I will write it down for you so that there shall be no mistake."

The amazing Elfreda calmly unbuttoned the green ulster, produced a small pocket diary and wrote down the address with a deliberate care that seemed decidedly ironical. Then she tore out the leaf. "As soon as ever you can, Pikey. You quite understand?"

Once more, at the tone's finality, the duenna could merely gasp. It was the only form of protest she had now the wit or the power to make.

#### XIV

Without another word Elfreda moved on round the corner and crossed the stone bridge. As soon as she came in view of The Laurels she found quite a number of people collected about its gate. It appeared that a man had just stuck a bill on one of its wooden posts, that he was now being severely admonished by the mistress of the house while an edified Miss Joan, an equally edified Master Peter, and an amused young man in khaki looked on.

To add to the piquancy of the scene the bill-sticker, conscious of the fact that he was engaged on work of national importance and that his services were at a premium, was inclined to give as good as he got. "Thought as how you wouldn't mind seein' it were for a charitable h'object," said the offender, doggedly.

Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson, a tall, angular, fresh-complexioned lady with light eyelashes and mouse-colored hair, had a decided weakness for "the high horse."

"You had no right to think anything of the kind," she fluted on her favorite note of high expostulation. "I consider it a great liberty."

In spite of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson's fierce assault the offender stood his ground.

"You might at least have taken the trouble to ask my permission. I have a great mind to have the bill removed. As my name is not thought good enough to appear as a Lady Patroness, although I have subscribed for six tickets in the front seats, perhaps my gate may not be good enough to advertise the performance."

"It can come down if you like, mum," said the bill-sticker doggedly.

The mistress of The Laurels turned impressively to the young man in khaki. "Would you have it down, General, if the gate were yours?"

"I should let it stay up," said the General, who looked surprisingly youthful for the rank accorded him. He spoke briefly and succinctly as one knowing his own mind, on that particular subject at any rate; moreover as he did so he smiled rather broadly in the direction of the new governess who had just come on to the scene.

"Very well, then, it may do so," said Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson. "But tell me, man"—she was determined to ride off the field victorious—"by whose orders did you stick it up?"

"The vicar's, mum."

"The vicar's!" Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson was sensibly mollified. "Then why didn't you say so at once?"

"Because you didn't ax me," said the bill-sticker with the ready defiance of true democracy.

General Norris and the new governess had barely time to exchange one furtive smile before Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson augustly interposed. "Miss Cass, remind me after luncheon that I write to the Vicar to complain of this man's impertinence."

Instead of regarding her employer with the smile sycophantic as any new governess who really knew her business might have been expected to do in such circumstances, Miss Cass again reserved her glance for the young man in khaki. Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson was too busy with the recalcitrant bill-sticker to observe this breach of etiquette, but Miss Joan, a spectacled young woman of seven, who had an uncomfortable habit of noticing everything, noticed it for her. Miss Joan, however, made no comment, the bill-sticker was sent on his way, and the offending poster was allowed to remain on the gate post of The Laurels.

"Grand, original production of 'The Lady of Laxton,'" read the young man in khaki in his precise, good-humored voice. "First performance on any stage. Under the personal direction of the author, Sir Toby Philpot Bart and Montagu Jupp, Esquire, of the Mayfair Theater. The cast will consist of The Lady Elfreda Catkin and the following ladies and gentlemen——"

Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson brought a pair of eyeglasses into action in order to study the dramatic personæ. "Miss Ethel Lancelot is in it, I see. If she is as stiff in her acting as she is in herself she might empty the Assembly Rooms quite easily. But I don't suppose they will be more than half full in any case."

"You have taken six tickets, though," said General Norris cheerfully. "And if this entire list of distinguished patronesses has done the same there may not be so very much room in the building."

"By the way," said Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson, her voice going a whole octave higher, "who is Lady Elfreda Catkin? I don't think she belongs to this part of the world."

"One of the Carabbas girls I believe," said the young man off-handedly.

"Have you met her?"

"No," George Norris spoke with a slight air of boredom. "But the Society Pictorial says she's very clever. Her portrait and all about her is in this week."

"I must look at the Society Pictorial," said Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson. "Have you the time, George?"

"Quarter to one," said George after consulting the watch on his wrist.

"Miss Cass," fluted Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson. "Will you walk on with the children. Please wash their hands and brush their hair."

For one very brief fraction of time it looked almost as if the new governess would have preferred to delegate this simple and elementary duty to Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson herself. That lady was too much occupied with General Norris to observe the fact, but the young woman in spectacles who noticed everything, noticed it all right.

"Come on, Petah," she said. "Come and let Miss Cass wash your hands and brush your hair."

Master Peter, whose age was five, gave himself a shake and a wriggle. "Don't warn-too," he said.

"Petah-darling!" fluted Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson to her son and heir.

Miss Cass made no comment, but she took Miss Joan quietly but firmly in one hand and Master Peter with equal quietude and firmness in the other. Without preface or apology she proceeded to lead them in the direction of the house. It was not quite the mode of procedure of former governesses—her charges had had four within the last twelve months—but the grip of Miss Cass was so resolute that Master Peter was able to shake and wriggle with rather less effect than usual.



"Tell me, George," said Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson, suddenly becoming confidential as the small procession of three passed from view, "what do you think of the new governess?"

The question was really superfluous. By the aid of the sixth sense given to her sex in these little matters, Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson was already fully informed as to what George Norris thought of the new governess. Moreover she had been informed so plainly, that although the new governess had not been four and twenty hours under her roof the subject threatened already to become a matter of some concern.

"I think she is extremely nice." The answer of George Norris was simple, unstudied, genuinely sincere. And it was very much the answer Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson anticipated, except that she had not looked for it to be quite so candid.

The response of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson to what almost amounted to enthusiasm on the part of George Norris was rather formal. "She speaks nicely," she said. "And of course that is of great importance in a governess."

George Norris, who for all his remarkable array of decorations seemed a very simple young man, naïvely said that he supposed it must be of great importance for a governess to speak nicely, yet he may have thought privately, had he ever been tempted to give thought to the subject, that it was in the nature of a governess to do so.

In fact, although he did not put that view into words, his tone rather implied it. But Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson, who subconsciously followed his train of ideas, felt it to be her duty to convict him of error.

"Governesses don't always, I assure you," she said. "Our last one had quite a cockney accent."

George Norris seemed surprised at the revelation.

"I am sure I hope Miss Cass will suit us." The tone of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson did not sound very optimistic. "One finds governesses such a difficult class. You see they are not always ladies."

George Norris betrayed more surprise. But Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson's confession was not without a certain method.

She was by no means well pleased that her guest should have walked into Clavering with Miss Cass. He was a young man who in the course of four years had won really remarkable military distinction, but his hostess could not disguise from herself that his knowledge of the world had hardly kept pace with his martial renown. In a word he lacked social experience.

The truth was Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson had come to regard herself as the social mentor of General Norris. In a peculiar degree she felt responsible for him. His career had been one of the many romances of the war. In August, 1914, he had been a clerk in her husband's office in receipt of a salary of three pounds a week. He had joined up on the morning war was declared, and having some little previous experience with the local volunteer battalion, had gained a commission almost at once. In France he had proved himself a born soldier in much of the hardest fighting of the war, had been twice wounded, had won some very high distinctions, had taken a course at the Staff College and was now a professional soldier and a general officer to boot.

In launching this remarkable young man upon the world Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson may have been a little influenced by the fact that her husband's former clerk had been received with open arms in certain local circles wherein Colonel Trenchard-Simpson and herself were constrained to move with delicacy, even if they might be said to move in them at all. Even those most exclusive people, the Lancelots of Amory Towers, who wielded so much influence in that part of the world, had taken George Norris under their wing. He had neither money nor prospects apart from his profession and very little was known of his origin, but in the little world of Clavering St. Mary's, Colonel (on carpet consideration) Trenchard-Simpson's ex-clerk was cutting just now such an amazingly distinguished figure that the wife of his former employer felt that she really owed it to George Norris to do what she could for him.

He had been housed at The Laurels rather less than a week as an honored guest, but his manly and judicious bearing had impressed his hostess so favorably that she had already invited Miss Dolores Parbury, a niece of her husband's, who lived at Birmingham, to spend a few days under that hospitable roof.

The father of Miss Parbury had been able to leave the fair Dolores some six thousand a year; and as he had been a successful retail grocer and his only daughter had inherited not merely his money but also his view of life, she had rather set her heart upon "marrying a title." It was a nice point, of course, whether a mere Brigadier-General fulfilled this condition, but Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson, after due reflection, came to the conclusion that she was fully justified in the special circumstances in sending for her husband's niece.

Dolores was due to arrive at The Laurels in the course of the afternoon and at luncheon her coming was much discussed. Colonel Trenchard-Simpson, a recently hyphenated auctioneer, with a bald head and a loud voice, was proud of his niece. Six thousand a year is six thousand a year even if it is the fruit of retail grocery. On the other hand Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson in her heart was not quite sure whether Dolores was not a blot on the family escutcheon; she herself was the daughter of a button manufacturer who had dabbled in local politics to the extent of a knighthood. But such glittering accounts were given of her to George Norris that, had the young man been romantically inclined, extravagant hopes must have been raised in his bosom.

The new governess during her first luncheon at The Laurels was really more interested in her immediate surroundings than in the coming of Miss Parbury. There were several reasons for this. Foremost of course were the surprising circumstances. She had not been long enough in them as yet to regret the wicked trick she had played. Everything, so far, was new and strange. She had never seen people quite like these, nor had she ever found herself in this kind of household. Everything, including the table decorations, the menu, the conversation, the style and manner of the parlor-maid, came to her at a new and curious angle. But with Miss Joan one side of her and Master Peter the other, her opportunities for observation were a little curtailed. And when Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson instructed her rather pointedly to cut up the food of the one and to see that the other consumed hers properly, somehow these opportunities were curtailed still further.

There was another drawback also. And it was of an embarrassing, if temporary, character. Joan, it seemed, had told her mother of the meeting of Miss Cass and the strange woman. Moreover, the visit of Pikey had been duly reported by the parlor-maid. "Tell me, Miss Cass," fluted Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson midway through the meal, "who was the person who came to see you this morning?"

Several courses were open to Elfreda. Perhaps the one most obvious was to lie royally. But she was such a calm and collected young woman that she promptly decided to amuse herself by telling the blunt and literal truth. "Oh, that old thing," she said with a careless laugh that did credit to her histrionic powers. "She's an old servant of my mother's who happens to be living here just now."

Unfortunately the offhand tone was a little overdone. It did not actually arouse suspicion, but such a casualness of manner with its underlying arrogance was hardly to be looked for in a governess. It did not occur to Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson that Miss Cass had anything to conceal, but certainly there was something about the new governess that was decidedly odd. There were moments when she seemed almost to patronize her employers, had it been humanly possible for her to do so. Certainly her manner made pursuit of this particular topic very difficult indeed.

Making allowance for all things, Elfreda's first luncheon at The Laurels was a new and salutary experience, yet perhaps it was the young man seated opposite who interested her most. And as it was her nature to follow her own bent as far as circumstances allowed, General Norris received the lion's share of her conversation.

Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson remarked privately to her husband after the meal, while Miss Cass put on the gaiters of Miss Joan and Master Peter and otherwise prepared them for the afternoon's airing, that no matter what else the new governess might be, she certainly was not shy. She talked easily and with point on any subject that came uppermost, but somehow her discourse seemed lacking in that subtle deference which surely should have been exacted by their respective conditions. Nor was she at all well up in her duties, either; she certainly seemed to pay more attention to the guest than to her employers or their offspring; in a word, although she was a young woman of undeniably good address, Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson doubted gravely whether she would suit.

Furthermore, there was one point on which that lady had already reached a decision. She must speak to the new governess on the subject of walking into Clavering with General Norris. As a matter of fact the point was raised rather sooner than Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson had anticipated. The children, duly gaitered and gloved, announced that they were going to show Miss Cass the way to Copt Wood, whereupon General Norris remembered that he had promised to walk over to see some people who lived in that direction and made an offer to accompany the party.

The offer was promptly accepted by the children, but their mother felt obliged to lead the new governess aside before the expedition started and lay down rules for their guidance. She must not take the children to Copt Wood if General Norris insisted on going there, nor must she take them in any other direction in which he proposed to go. And while on the subject she had reluctantly but rather pointedly to refer to their morning's expedition into the town. Such a thing must not occur again.

It is not too much to say that Elfreda felt perfectly furious. She would like to have slain this complacent and overbearing dame. For the time being, however, she was defenseless. Her color mounted high as she said that it was by no wish of hers that they had walked into Clavering together. To this Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson rejoined in a rather "Tell-that-to-the-Marines" sort of tone that whether Miss Cass had wished it or not it must not happen again.

The upshot was that when Miss Joan and Master Peter took the air they were hauled rather peremptorily and decidedly against their inclination in a direction opposite to Copt Wood, while General Norris, who seemed a shade disconsolate, was left to follow a lonely path to that part of the landscape.

While Elfreda and her charges trekked along the high road for a stolid two miles and back again the thoughts of the rebel were dark indeed. She was leading a life that hitherto she had hardly guessed at and already she had found it quite surprisingly full of thorns. There was every reason to congratulate her private stars that it was a kind of life she had never been used to; at the same time even this brief taste of servitude was curiously galling.

On the return of Miss Cass and the children to The Laurels shortly before four o'clock they found the fair Dolores in the act of arrival from Birmingham. She and several imposing boxes were being solemnly disgorged from the household chariot while Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson stood by in an attitude of mingled authority and adoration.

"Oh, the darlings!" was the greeting of Miss Parbury to Miss Joan and Master Peter.

She was a lady with a very loud voice and an assurance of manner that was little short of stupendous. It may have been for these reasons, or for reasons more subtle, that the new governess who was a young woman of quick and extremely definite intuitions decided almost as soon as she saw Miss Parbury that she was not going to like her. For one thing, although her reception of the children was stressed almost to the point of effusion, she hardly so much as looked at the green ulster even when Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson introduced its occupant; she addressed no remark then to Miss Cass nor later over the tea cups when the governess and her charges were allowed to enter the drawing room.

The manner of Miss Parbury was forthcoming, yet she was not a great talker. Her conversation appeared to consist mainly of "I mean to say"—at least impartially considered that was the gist of it. Exactly what Miss Parbury did mean to say, even when she had said all she had to say, would have taken a very wise person to determine. Still she was by no means ineffective in a metallic sort of way. Everything about her was metallic, her voice, her appearance, her dress, her mode of attack, yet when all was said she was hardly as metallic as her hostess. Birmingham, it is true, was Miss Parbury's home town, but Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson had the further advantage of being the daughter of a button manufacturer who had received the honor of knighthood. Both ladies, however, were bright specimens of the particular style they affected; it was in the nature of a physical feat, but not for an instant did they fail to live up to it; and in the case of Miss Parbury, with a cool six thousand a year at the back of her decided good looks, this achievement was rewarded by the number of her conquests in the midland counties. In fact it was clear almost before General Norris had returned from his lonely trek in the vicinity of Copt Wood that the accomplished Miss Parbury did not look for much difficulty in adding another male scalp to her already fairly large collection.

## XV

As Elfreda dressed for dinner in her meager and cheerless bedroom she felt that interesting developments might be at hand. Her sense of humor was keen and she was ready to enjoy every moment of the situation for which she had made herself responsible. It would not be her fault if coming events did not help to lighten her lot. Secretly, however, she was more deeply annoyed than she chose to admit, even to herself, by Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson's ukase. How dare the woman, how dare any woman venture to treat her in that way! She must try to remember, of course, that the position she now chose to occupy was quite outside her experience; at the same time while the new governess in the privacy of her room proceeded to inspect the array of evening garments in the tin trunk labeled "Cass," she felt absurdly hostile, not merely to Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson, but also to the relations and friends of that lady and to all their works.



Consideration of the wardrobe of Miss Cass disclosed it to be strictly, even painfully, limited. In spite of this handicap, Elfreda, however, was fully determined to make the most of herself for that evening, and took considerable pains with her toilette. The best she could muster was a black silk skirt, a semi-décolleté blouse of black chiffon and a pair of velvet slippers. Elfreda was much too matter of fact to paint extravagant pictures of her own appearance, but when she looked in the glass and beheld the prim result of her labors it needed all the humor she possessed to save her from laughing on the wrong side of her mouth.

Still, the fighting spirit of a hundred "Catkin Earls" or so had been awakened in the frilled bosom of the new governess. Black chiffon or no black chiffon, she was out for blood that evening. She went down to dinner on the stroke of eight with certain grim thoughts smoldering in the depths of a heart that had inherited a quite honest share of natural arrogance. In the drawing room General Norris stood in the center of the hearthrug, alone. The master and mistress of the house and the fair Dolores were not quite up to time.

"I hope you enjoyed your walk, Miss Cass." The young man's voice sounded just a shade reproachful.

"Ye-es." There was a world of doubt in the tone of the new governess, but in the odd way she had of looking at people she looked at George Norris. There was a smile in the look, which in spite of the circumstances or perhaps because of them, was somehow queerly attractive. You couldn't call her pretty, the young man decided, but in that smile was something, although perhaps he didn't know it, which spoke to him far more deeply than a merely superficial attractiveness would have done. As for Elfreda, she had reached the conclusion already that this distinguished soldier was a very simple and extraordinarily handsome young man.

Their brief talk was interrupted almost at once by the entrance of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson and the fair Dolores. The lady of Birmingham looked more metallic than ever in a glittering green dress with hair ornament to match, yet so clear was her skin, so good were her teeth, so bright was her hair that most people would have considered her uncommonly handsome. At any rate that was Miss Parbury's estimate of herself and she had all the assurance of recognized beauty. The single glance she cast at the chiffon blouse and the cheap black skirt of the little governess had a touch of scornful pity. Perhaps it would have been pity unadulterated had she not already discussed Miss Cass with her hostess and had they not agreed to doubt whether the new governess quite knew her place.

During dinner, alas, this doubt crystallized into certainty. Miss Cass did not know her place. She insisted on taking such an important part in the conversation that the fair Dolores and even Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson herself came perilously near to being outshone. On every subject that presented itself for discussion she talked confidently and with point, and from time to time, to the growing resentment of the other ladies, she even dared to indulge in a little badinage. Governesses at The Laurels in the last four years had been many, but before the meal was at an end Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson had sorrowfully concluded that this was a new kind of governess altogether.

Miss Cass had been highly recommended by no less a person than Canon Carnaby of Laxton, whose brother, the Reverend Sirius Carnaby, was the venerable incumbent of the neighboring parish of Yeldham, but her conduct at the dinner table, in the stern purview of her critics really amounted to "showing off." For a full half of the meal she entirely monopolized General Norris, that is to say she would have monopolized him had not the hostess and Miss Parbury been determined that she should not; for the other half she was bewildering the company with the originality of her remarks, the independence of her judgment and the range of her information. Just before the meal came to an end, however, she was guilty of a decidedly bad break.

Apart from the military prowess of George Norris, his real claim to distinction in the sight of his former employers was that he had been “taken up” by some very “nice” people. Foremost among these was that exclusive clan the Lancelots of Amory Towers, the chimney pots of whose ancestral seat were visible on a clear day from The Laurels’ back windows. The Lancelots were the sun of the local firmament round which all minor stars and planets were more or less content to revolve. This family was too well established to insist unduly on its position; for generations its name had been known for miles round not merely as a symbol of place and power, but also as a cause of place and power in others. The Lancelots were what their neighbors desired to be; at least that was the opinion of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson, although just what they were beyond the fact that they were “very influential” would have been difficult to say.

Still, there was no gainsaying the fact that George Norris, who four years and three months ago had been a clerk earning a modest three pounds a week in the office of a Clavering auctioneer, had several times been invited to luncheon and dinner by the Lancelots, and Miss Ethel herself, the bright one of the family, had only last week attempted the fox-trot with him in public. It is true that it was at the Assembly Rooms in the cause of mercy, but either Miss Ethel was growing extremely progressive for a virgin of thirty or the stock of George Norris was rising to a perilous height in the local market.

Towards the end of the meal the Lancelots were rather freely discussed and it was then that the new governess by a series of incautious remarks lent piquancy to the conversation. In fact she betrayed a knowledge so intimate of this distinguished clan that Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson was impelled to challenge it. By what means had Miss Cass acquired so much information concerning them?

The new governess inadvertently replied that the Lancelots were old friends of her mother’s.

"Your mother's, Miss Cass?" said Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson sharply; "but I am speaking of the Lancelots of Amory Towers."

In cool tones Elfreda made it quite clear that she also was speaking of the Lancelots of Amory Towers.

"But how does your mother come to know them?" Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson offered open battle to Miss Cass.

The new governess smiled frankly and cheerfully as she caught the eye of the young man opposite. "Well you see——" The unconscious insolence of the slight drawl amounted to downright bad form in any governess, new or otherwise. "Well, you see my father happened to be the butler at Amory Towers and my mother was lady's maid."

A solemn pause ensued. Finally it was broken by a gurgle of suppressed laughter from General Norris. The tension which gripped the dinner table was thereby released, but even in the myopic sight of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson the lie of the new governess was so palpable that she decided at once that Miss Cass would have to take another situation at the end of her month.

For the rest of the evening the other ladies were openly hostile to Miss Cass. In the drawing room this attitude grew quite marked, when during Miss Parbury's brilliant performance—brilliancy was her note in everything, the key, in fact, of her personality—of Opp's Prelude in A minor upon the piano-forte the new governess persistently indulged in loud and animated chatter with General Norris. Broad hints were given that such conduct was unseemly, but they did not make one pennyworth of difference. It was almost as if Miss Cass took a malicious pleasure in flouting Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson and in restricting the opportunities of Miss Parbury who found herself quite at a loss. General Norris was much to blame, no doubt, but he was to be excused on the ground of social inexperience. For the new governess there was no excuse. Such behavior could not be passed over. As the clock on the chimney piece chimed ten Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson was moved to put her just resentment into words.

"Miss Cass"—perhaps the resentment was more apparent in the tone than in the words themselves—"you must really go to bed, I think. The children's breakfast is at half-past eight, you know. They were ten minutes late this morning."

Elfreda rose at once with the meaningful look that both ladies had now come to dislike so intensely. General Norris convoyed her to the drawing room door and opened it with a deference not lost upon them. Moreover they observed the frank and ready smile with which she rewarded the young man and the look he gave her in return.

Elfreda went to her chill nest very well content with her evening's work. She had made the discovery already that but for the presence in the house of General Norris, life at The Laurels as nursery governess would be quite insupportable. However, he was a very interesting young man and the fact lent piquancy to the situation. And the manner in which the other ladies had chosen to bear themselves in it had roused Elfreda's fighting spirit to a perilous pitch. More than ever was she determined to "ride off" the fair Dolores; and she also expected a reasonable measure of amusement in the process.

Meanwhile in the drawing room the mistress of the house was seeking balm for her protégé. "I will see that she dines upstairs to-morrow, dear." With these discreetly whispered words did Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson salve the wounds of the fair Dolores as General Norris closed the door softly and smilingly upon the new governess.

## XVI

In the meantime gloom and anxiety reigned at Clavering Park. By just missing the bus from the Pendennis Arms, Pikey delayed her return from The Laurels until nearly three o'clock. Therefore Miss Cass decided to obey orders and by pleading a headache take luncheon in bed. Several good reasons led her to do so. Apart from the fact that Girlie's respect for her stern custodian was tinged with awe, she was more comfortable in the security of her own room than she was likely to be anywhere else in that house at that moment. Besides, although she had given up a whole morning to the diligent study of "The Lady of Laxton," at present she was very far from being word perfect in her part; thus she did not feel equal to the task of going through a rehearsal that afternoon. And sum and crown of all her woes, was the haunting continual fear of the arrival of Mr. Montagu Jupp.

That veritable Old Man of the Sea was expected from London by the four o'clock train. It needed no great amount of foresight on the part of Miss Cass to realize that when that event happened the game would be up. All the morning as she wrestled with Sir Toby's dialogue, Mr. Montagu Jupp was a specter in the background of her thoughts. Should she make a clean breast of the matter there and then and so anticipate the public exposure that was inevitable later in the day? She was in such a state of panic that there seemed much to be said for that course, yet after all, as further reflection showed, there was nothing to gain by a bootless confession. At all events it would be wise to await the return of Pikey, if only because she had promised to bring Lady Elfreda with her. But there could be no building upon that. It was always possible, of course, that the Evil Genius was already bored sufficiently by her taste of drudgery to come and face the music, but poor Girlie was very far from counting upon the fact.

Pikey, however, returned Elfreda-less but terribly cross. Indeed "cross" was altogether too mild a word for her mood. It was really so savage that for a time the hapless Deputy could do nothing with her. Moreover, so completely was Girlie under the spell of Mr. Montagu Jupp that her will became inert. In sheer desperation she resigned herself to her bed for the rest of that day at least. By that means she would avoid Mr. Montagu Jupp until the morrow and so put off the hour of discovery.

Downstairs, in the meantime, consternation was rife. The sudden indisposition of the leading lady had caused the first rehearsal to be postponed. But Sir Toby was by profession an optimist. He looked at the world he lived in and all the beings who inhabited it through rose-colored spectacles. It was "good form" to do so. Every woman of his acquaintance was "a dear" or she was "charming," every man was "a sportsman" and a good fellow. Clouds had been known to obscure the sun now and again, but after all they were only a temporary matter. He was a believer in a bright and cheerful world. That was the only side of the picture he could ever condescend to recognize. Nevertheless, even Sir Toby allowed, in the privacy of his heart, that "The Lady of Laxton" might prove an ambitious undertaking for a decidedly scratch company at short notice.

However, the author of the piece had a real stand-by in Montagu Jupp. That famous man was said by common report "to know the theater backwards." He had only to set his hand to the business for all to be well. His arrival by the four o'clock train was eagerly awaited. Even Sir Toby's optimism deigned to regard the coming of the great and admired Montagu as a *sine qua non*. He knew all about everything, theatrically speaking. Not only was he a "producer," he was a Napoleon among producers. And on his own showing he had yet to learn the meaning of the word "failure."

Alas, when the omnibus returned from Clavering station on the stroke of five, a chill descended upon the bevy of tea drinkers in the hall. The great man had not arrived. But in lieu of him a telegram had been handed to the chauffeur on the journey home. It was addressed to Sir Toby Philpot and it contained the dire news that Mr. Montagu Jupp was "unavoidably detained, important business."

Sir Toby was stout of heart, but a cloud, an unmistakable cloud passed across the sun of his optimism. There was much to do and but a very little time in which to do it. His star artiste, upon whom so much depended, had taken to her bed; his other stand-by had let him down at the last moment; and the performance was already widely advertised to take place in the Assembly Rooms at Clavering on the following Tuesday. Moreover, Sir Toby in the bounty of his nature had given an undertaking that the performance should be repeated in the Town Hall at the neighboring city of Meichester three days later.

It was the hostess herself who presently bore the news of Mr. Montagu Jupp's non-arrival to King Edward's bedroom. Girlie was sitting up in bed in a beribboned dressing jacket, grappling bravely with the typescript of her part. No doubt it was an act of sheer despair, but her mind in the present state of its infirmity craved occupation. The severe task of committing to memory Sir Toby's dialogue was by way of being an antidote to her many terrors. And when the yellow chrysanthemum lady, full of counsel and solicitude, came and sat by her bed, and bitterly deplored Mr. Jupp's failure to appear, it was almost as if the invalid gained strength from the woes of others. At all events it suddenly occurred to her that she might be able to come down to dinner.



The kindly hostess was far from urging that course upon her guest, but certainly Lady Elfreda's early reappearance would lessen the gloom that had fallen upon Mrs. Spencer-Jobling and other members of the cast, and even upon Sir Toby himself. So sharp was the recoil from the certainty of immediate discovery that Girlie began to feel quite bold. Her long day in bed had been a torture and a weariness, Pikey since her return from The Laurels had been intolerable, and the postponement of the worst had brought such relief that in the sudden reaction Girlie took heart of grace.

A sword hung over her head which sooner or later must fall. In the meantime, desperation nerved her and she decided upon a run for her money. She was not without courage, or it may have been that the rewards of courage inspired her to an unnatural hardihood. At any rate, a festive dinner downstairs, even if a little too highly spiced with adventure, was greatly to be preferred to a further prolonged mope in bed.

When, however, the hostess had left the room and the Deputy informed Pikey of her decision, there was a clash of wills. That autocrat vetoed the proposal ruthlessly. Miss No-Class would be far safer where she was. But the student of The Patrician had made up her mind. Now that Mr. Montagu Jupp was a peril less imminent, she was in such an agreeable state of recoil that the previous evening had become a proud and happy memory. Looking back upon it in perspective, she felt entitled to consider herself a success.

Let her rise to the height of her opportunity! That thought was ever in her mind. A heavy penalty would be exacted from her presently, her career as a governess would be ruined, but in the meantime if she were really wise she would "see life," and boldly play her part in a tragi-comedy which one day might make her as famous as Miss Mary Cholmondeley or Mrs. Elinor Glyn. No matter what the future had in store she would weave into her life a high experience that should even raise her above the Brontës and all their gifts.

Pikey continued to breathe slaughter and fire, but the Deputy, sustained by thoughts of the renown that might one day be hers, showed a firmness amounting to heroism.

"I will have a bath—please. And I will wear the blue dress."

Could Pikey have had her way, she would have beaten the small plebeian soundly and put her back into bed. But the duenna was shaken a good deal by the tribulations of the day. She was feeling weak and she was filled with despair. The unexpected defiance vanquished her. Sullenly she prepared the bath, sullenly she went through the toilette ritual. But on this occasion her proud spirit had to submit to rebuke.

"You are hurting me." The Deputy tried her utmost to speak sternly, even if the result was not as impressive as she could have wished. "I think I can manage my hair quite well myself, thank you."

Pikey was still strong enough not to yield her office, but her methods became less drastic. The Deputy, however, was not permitted to wear the blue dress. She was curtly told that real ladies did not appear in the same frock on two successive evenings. An affair of pink silk was unwillingly placed at her disposal. And when Girlie came to look at herself in the glass, she found it just as becoming and slightly more modern in style. Perhaps it did not go quite so well with her eyes, but in the course of an epic twenty-four hours the rose had deepened in her cheeks, so that all things considered "what she lost on the roundabouts she gained on the swings."

## XVII

The anxieties of the day had not improved the nerves of Miss Cass. They were a little frayed, no doubt, when she was led in to dinner on the arm of the genial, loud-voiced host. Mr. Minever was a great one for chaff and there was something about poor Girlie's woe-begone appearance that was a direct challenge to his powers. Had the Bartlet's masterpiece proved too much for her? If the little man wrote as he talked she was a very wise young woman, in Mr. Minever's opinion, to keep her bed in order to grapple with his dialogue. Sir Toby laughed brightly at all the sallies which reached his end of the table, where the luckless yellow chrysanthemum lady and Mrs. Spencer-Jobling were bearing up with superhuman patience. Still, it has to be said for Sir Toby that he was a little sportsman in his way.

From time to time, as the noisily cheerful meal went on, Sir Toby stole a glance down the table at the innocent cause of the mirth. She really was nailingly pretty, although her color was so high this evening that it could hardly be her own. The little man grew pensive, not to say distrait. By the time the port appeared it had begun to seem rather a pity that Carabbas notoriously "hadn't a bob." Still Grandpapa Angora was on his last legs according to all accounts, and even if keeping up a dukedom was becoming an expensive hobby and supertax was now on a very democratic basis, the head of the clan must surely have kept a little bit in the family stocking just to bring them in out of the rain.

Indeed, that seemed quite a fascinating speculation as Sir Toby preened his small tail feathers and held the door for the ladies to file cheerfully and jauntily out of the room. But one there was neither jaunty nor cheerful. She was a duke's granddaughter it was true, but she was so timid and demure that she might have been a nursery governess. Her one desire, seemingly, was to efface herself altogether. And yet, as Sir Toby reflected, there is something to be said after all for pedigree stock. These Sheffielders—or was it Leeds they came from?—with their familiarity, their badinage, their amazing self-confidence, how tiresome they were! The little Catkin Puss might be dull—dull as a mud fence—but when the worst had been said, she was a Lady!

"Penny for your thoughts, Philpot." The loud-voiced host emphasized this speculative offer by pushing his so-called 1890 towards Sir Toby.

"Worth a sight more than that, ain't they, Pot?" quoth a puffy man opposite with a face as red as a boiled lobster. And then, to Sir Toby's unspeakable annoyance, he winked impudently at the others. "But I'm bound to say I admire your taste."

The retort which rose to the long suffering lips of Sir Toby was, "I wish I could return the compliment!" That would have been a fit reply to one who always made a point of treating him as if he were still in Puppyhole. His tormentor, one Garden by name, was a man of some parts, but in the course of a rather hopeless life, having done most things and most people, he had steadily declined in the world's esteem, until now there was only dramatic criticism, occasional journalism and the tolerance of club acquaintances between the jail, the poorhouse and himself.

Soft, however, was Sir Toby's answer. This same Garden had once kicked him round Sixpenny, and although the experience had not done him as much good as it might have, the little baronet had a deep-seated desire that it should never happen again.

The host, however, that prince of crude fellows whose size in dancing pumps was a large ten, lost no time in putting his foot still deeper in the mire. Before Sir Toby could deal efficiently with his ancient foe, Mr. Minever had coarsely guffawed, "So does Duckingfield." At this breach of taste on the part of the host, Sir Toby glared. And the new peer glared also.

"I fink you are up for the O. B. H.," said Sir Toby in tones that would have re-frozen an icicle.

The host grinned at Garden. "Means he's going to see about pilling me, eh?"

Said that worthy, "If he does, you'll get in for sure."

"S-s-sh! Don't give it away!" Again the host grinned at Garden. "But, seriously, she's as pretty as pretty. And I'm willing to lay a hundred to ten she gets off before next season."

Ruefully and wrathfully reflected Sir Toby, "This man Minever doesn't begin to be Sahib. An awful pity we are not stayin' with somebody else. However...."

As for my lord of Duckingfield, whose hostile gaze was short-circuiting Sir Toby's inmost thoughts, he too was nursing an almost savage antagonism. "Like to punch his head for him"—that was its formula. But whose head it was that the honest and forthright Midlander yearned to punch was not exactly clear. He certainly glared at the host as the desire passed through his mind, but with even greater intensity he glared at Sir Toby.

Howbeit, Sir Toby returned the gesture with interest. The little man had been only too quick to read the thought in the mind of the presumptuous maker of munitions. How dare this newest of new men lift his eyes to a duke's granddaughter?

To some minds it is not the least of the advantages pertaining to an old title that it is competent to ask these questions!

## XVIII

During the epic days which followed, the mind of Sir Toby was haunted by this inquiry. But there were matters almost as vital to vex that ingenuous soul. From the first the rehearsals were not at all satisfactory. The author of "The Lady of Laxton" did not pretend to be more than a tyro in theatrical affairs and the company he had gathered to embody the heir of his invention was as resolutely "amateur," if rather less enthusiastic, than himself. In the first place "social position" was felt to be even more important than histrionic ability, a fact which made the eleventh-hour defection of Mr. Montagu Jupp the more to be deplored. He was to have been the prop and mainstay of "the production." But, as the cynical Garden shrewdly declared, the astute Montagu must have smelt a rat.

"I hope, Pot," said that critic when the second rehearsal had come to its dismal end and a dark specter was invading Sir Toby's life, "you were not such a fool as to let Jupp see the list of your people."

Sir Toby ingenuously admitted that he had.

"Hence the pyramids, my boy." The relentless Garden chuckled. "Unavoidably detained. Important business. Great Cumberland place!" Flaneur of the Dramatic and Sporting Weekly whistled a few bars of Chopin's Funeral March. "You little fathead, you ought to be bled for the simples!"

"I assure you, old man," said Sir Toby, almost tearfully, "Lady Elfreda simply knocked 'em endways in Yorkshire in the 'Duke of Killiecrankie.'"

"But you can't hear a word she says."

It was fatally true, and there was the crux of the whole matter. The star artiste, upon whom so very much depended, might never have been on a stage before. So far she was grievously disappointing. She showed little intelligence and less aptitude, and she was so shy of opening her mouth that it seemed certain that "on the night" she would not be heard by the first row of stalls.

So much was clear already even to the capacity of Sir Toby Philpot. Indeed it was slowly beginning to dawn upon him that somebody must have been "pulling his leg." He had been too ready to take the word of others, of Monty Jupp for example, that Lady Elfreda had so much talent, "that she could play the ingénues out of all the West End theaters." That was the memorable phrase the sagacious and admired Montagu had used. The old wretch had simply been pulling his leg. No wonder that important business kept him from Clavering St. Mary's. "What a fool I have been," reflected the despondent author, "not to take the simple precaution of seeing the girl act before counting upon her to pull us through."

In the course of the third rehearsal, which proved even more trying than the other two, the company began to show unmistakable signs of mutiny. Mrs. Spencer-Jobling, for instance, who felt she had a reputation to lose on the stage if nowhere else, became so openly and mordantly sarcastic that she actually reduced the leading lady to tears. Later in the day a sort of informal meeting was held in the library, at which Garden presided, in the course of which it was decided to present an ultimatum to Sir Toby. Either he must obtain professional assistance and advice or the cast would throw up their parts en masse.

Only five days now remained, for on the following Tuesday the performance was due in the Assembly Rooms. Faced by this ultimatum Sir Toby was in despair. But one fact was clear. If the situation was to be saved a Titan was called for. At all hazards the recalcitrant Montagu must come down to Clavering Park. And all the art, all the tact, all the experience of even that superman would be necessary if the curtain was to rise on Tuesday afternoon.

With the ferocity of despair Sir Toby telephoned at once to the great man's chambers in the Albany. Alas, Mr. Montagu Jupp was out of town, but he was expected from Newmarket in the course of that evening. Soon after dinner Sir Toby telephoned again, but Montagu had not returned. Finally, on the verge of midnight, the author telephoned a third time and on this occasion success rewarded him. The authentic voice of Montagu informed him that he had just donned his pyjamas. That plea, however, was of no avail; for a long twenty minutes he had to suffer the prayers and the entreaties of the unlucky author of "The Lady of Laxton." But to these he was deaf. Mr. Montagu Jupp had reasons of his own for not throwing himself into the breach. He remained adamant. Important business must keep him in town for at least another week, shamelessly adding particularly as he had just lost a valuable day at Newmarket.

Then it was that Sir Toby, knowing all to be lost unless Montagu relented, hastily decided upon a final and desperate throw. He would run up to town by the early morning train and so bring home to the great man the extreme urgency of the whole position. And in the evening he would return with him to Clavering Park if flesh and blood could compass that essential deed.

## XIX

Time was precious indeed if "The Lady of Laxton" was ever to know the vicarious glamour of the footlights, but an acute sense of relief was felt by all the members of the cast when at breakfast time the next morning it was announced that for that day at least there was to be an interregnum. In the absence of Sir Toby there would be no further rehearsal until the following day. And to no member of the company was the news quite so welcome as the leading lady.



Girly had been nearly a week now at Clavering Park and events were nerving her almost to the pitch of desperation. She had reached the point at which she hardly cared what happened. Yet if not exactly a fighter she had the tenacity that often goes with weak natures, and there were certain aspects of the adventure, strange nightmare as it was, that were delightful. In spite of the drawbacks to a position which she had been absolutely mad to accept, this was Life with a very large letter. As far as she herself was concerned it was all a wonder and a wild desire, a never-to-be-forgotten romance, a complex of soul-harrowing torments and delirious possibilities. She really felt that if she could emerge from this position of peril without being damned eternally in the sight of the world, she would have gained so much first-hand experience that she might hope to become one of the foremost novelists of her time and country.

All the same it needed every spark of will power she could summon not to run away. Each night as she came to assuage her throbbing temples with the luxury of King Edward's bedroom and the incidents of the day recurred to her, how she contrived to go on "sticking it" she simply did not know. Time and again as she realized how near she must be to discovery she shuddered in the depths of her soul. And heaven knew what penalty would be exacted when the discovery was inevitably made!

Had a reasonable alternative presented itself she must have bolted after her abject failure at the third rehearsal. By no means a fool, she was only too keenly aware of the veiled hostility and the covert sarcasms of the other ladies. But what could she do? Where could she go? She had no money beyond a few rapidly diminishing Bradburys. She had no home, no friends; above all, she had thrown away her situation without any sort of hope of getting another one. Merely to review such a position was to induce a paralysis of the will. Whatever happened she must hold on a little while longer, if only in self defense. Yet as she clearly foresaw the time was surely coming when she must be found out, or still worse, when her overdriven nerves would give way and compel her to throw up the sponge.

It was a huge relief, therefore, to learn that the rehearsals were suspended until Sir Toby's return. But it was certainly tempered as far as Miss Cass was concerned, by Mr. Minever's announcement at breakfast that the little man had sworn a great oath that he would bring Monty Jupp back with him or he would die in the attempt. Opinion was divided as to whether or not Sir Toby would have to embrace the grim alternative. The majority, however, were so emphatic that Sir Toby's mission was doomed to fail, that the trembling Girlie plucked up a little courage. After all there was still a slender hope that the mysterious Providence which so far had watched over her would continue to do so.

Before the morning was far advanced Girlie had quite an inspiration. She suddenly decided to set forth to The Laurels and seek advice from the person best able to give it. Moreover, this course of action commended itself to Pikey. When the Dragon was informed of the project she agreed that in the circumstances it was quite the best thing the Deputy could do and gave her some sound advice as to the best means of getting there.

Cunning was needed to escape the attentions of the hostess and her fellow guests. Yet it was not really difficult to slip away unseen, for by this time, having become thoroughly unpopular with the other members of the house party, they were now leaving her severely alone. As Girlie's conversation was confined almost exclusively to "Yes" and "No," it had become rather a moot point with the others as to whether this was a form of "side" on the part of Lady Elfreda, or whether it was that she was merely a fool. The more charitable view was perhaps the latter. At any rate, her aloofness no longer caused surprise, while her movements generally roused no particular interest.

Duly instructed by Pikey and favored by a fair share of luck, Girlie arrived at The Laurels about half-past eleven. She was received by a rather supercilious parlor-maid, who met her demand to see Miss Cass by showing her into the drawing room. The parlor-maid then asked the name of the visitor. Girlie met the case by the modest formula, "Please say a lady would like to see her."

It happened, however, that the ever-watchful mistress of the house was lurking near at hand. She had observed the visitor's arrival from the window of the morning room and filled with curiosity she now intercepted the parlor-maid before she could deliver the message to Miss Cass.

"Who is it, Jarvis?"

"A lady, ma'am, to see Miss Cass. She won't give her name, ma'am."

"How odd." Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson ruminated for a brief twenty seconds. Then she added, "I will tell Miss Cass myself."

Further rumination followed. In the class of born-busybodies, Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson had claims to rank high. Curiosity stirred her in regard to this quite attractive-looking and decidedly well-turned-out young woman—Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson prided herself upon being a judge of such matters—who declined to give her name. And the new governess was enough of "a dark horse" already without having secretive callers to intensify the mystery. Therefore it took Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson less than a minute to seek the light for herself.

The mistress of the house entered the drawing room flutelike but dominant, and her unexpected appearance came to the visitor, who was girding herself to do battle with some one very different, as a complete surprise. Frankly, almost naïvely quizzical, the lady of the house made no secret of a desire for information. "Perhaps you will tell me who you are and then I will tell Miss Cass."

Somehow Girlie had not been able to foresee that it would be necessary to provide herself with a name. But only too clearly a name was required. And on the spur of the moment there was only one that came to her. Almost in spite of herself it now sprang automatically to her lips.

"Lady Elfreda Catkin."

It was a terrible blunder, and this Girlie realized at the very moment in which it was made. But, taken so completely by surprise, and faced with the calm insistence of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson, no middle course seemed open. If anything, however, this revelation of identity added fuel to the flame of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson's curiosity. The mystery surrounding the new governess appeared to deepen considerably. And it grew more intriguing than ever.

Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson was visibly impressed. Her first thought was that Miss Cass's boast of the Lancelots being old friends of her mother's was in some sort corroborated, her second thought was that the distinguished friends of the new governess made her so interesting that she was rather glad than otherwise that Miss Cass had not yet received a month's notice. For the past four days, in fact, almost from the moment of the arrival of Dolores Parbury, who had taken a violent dislike to Miss Cass, the mistress of The Laurels had been at the point of terminating the engagement of that lady. But for some reason or other the drastic step had remained in abeyance, and as Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson made a dignified progress to the schoolroom she was inclined to rejoice that it had.

Miss Cass in that slow, cool, oddly imperious voice of hers, which had the malign power of driving the other ladies to secret fury, was in the act of setting a sulky Master Peter and a disgruntled Miss Joan to write to dictation. The children made no secret of the fact that they had a hearty dislike of Miss Cass, and that lady, if austerity of mien and acidity of tongue were any indication, hardly cared to disguise that their feelings were fully reciprocated. But as the smiling Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson floated into the room, with quite a new air of kindly politeness, and informed Miss Cass that Lady Elfreda Catkin had called to see her and that she now awaited her in the drawing room the heavy thunderclouds were momentarily dispersed. All the same, as Miss Cass laid down her book and her pencil they suddenly returned with added density.

"Another friend of your mother's, Miss Cass?" There was not a suspicion of sarcasm in that discreet inquiry. It was the honest child of a shameless curiosity.

"Ye-es." The somewhat ambiguous reply of Miss Cass was extremely reluctant. And there was a look on her face that Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson had no means of interpreting.

"Such a pretty girl." Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson was a little inclined to gush. "And so very young to be such a clever actress."

Miss Cass looked coldly down her arrogant nose. The little idiot must have taken leave of her wits!

The new governess did not seem to be anywise flattered by having such a very interesting young woman to call upon her. Thunderclouds gathered even more heavily about her as she rose from the table and made her way to the drawing room.

Consumed by an intense curiosity, Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson would dearly have liked to put her ear to the keyhole of the drawing room door. But the line has to be drawn somewhere, and with a sigh Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson remembered that she was "a lady." Well it was that she had this scruple, for the conversation the other side of the door must have increased the flame that was devouring her.

"Why are you here?" was Elfreda's greeting to her pale and embarrassed counterfeit.

The answer was tears.

"I—I don't think I can keep on." So complex is the human mind that even in that moment of genuine tragedy poor Girlie could not help noticing with what an air of authority the blue serge skirt she had contrived out of her meager capital and the cunning of her own needle and the woolen jumper she had knitted herself were now invested. The trim form of their present wearer showed them off to rare advantage.

It was a painful meeting, nevertheless. Girlie was at the limit of endurance. In the pitiless view of the evil genius who had brought a highly respectable daughter of suburbia to the verge of ruin she looked even more rabbit-like than when she had seen her last. And at that moment Elfreda's paramount desire was to shake her.

"I hope you don't mean that you are going to run away?" There was a nascent ferocity that threatened actual bodily violence.

"I—I don't know," gasped the visitor.

"You don't mean to say they've found out!"

Girlie reluctantly admitted that they had not yet actually done so, but that it was as certain as anything could be that the hour was near when all must be discovered.

"Not necessarily," was the Stoic's answer, "if only you keep on doing your best."

But there is a limit to human endurance and Miss Cass seemed to have reached it already. Besides she was now in very deep waters indeed and in no sense was she a strong swimmer. Alarming developments threatened continually and she now felt that she simply could not go on.

However, she was in the toils of an implacable will.

"You are bound to go through with it now," said the pitiless Elfreda. "It will let them down shamefully if you run away before the performance. You must at least wait until afterwards."

"But I am sure to be found out."

"You have not been found out yet, and you will not be—if you continue to do your best."

Even if Miss Cass continued to do her best, however, and if by a supreme effort she brought herself finally to face the music, what must be the upshot of it all? She had no place to go to when this tragic farce was at an end. What was to become of her? The nearer she approached the abyss that yawned beneath her feet the wider and blacker it looked. In the end, as she knew only too well, that bottomless pit must devour her.

"But I will certainly find you another situation—when the time comes," said Elfreda staunchly.

It was very well for the reckless author of the mischief to promise so boldly, but what did such a promise amount to? As far as Girlie was concerned the future appeared hopeless.

Besides, the matter had another aspect, of which the Deputy had lately been made aware. She was afraid, she was terribly afraid, that a certain peer was on the verge of proposing to her.

In the circumstances, it was a confession that Girlie felt bound to make to her principal. Humiliating the confession might be, a little demoralizing it certainly was, yet bound up in it was a sense of romance, a secret thrill of adventure. Somehow she felt bound in honor to tell Lady Elfreda what she feared was going to happen. Half shamefacedly she made her odd disclosure, and yet as she did so with many blushes, deep hesitations and some tears, it would be less than just to Girlie or to Girlie's sex to say that pain was her dominant emotion.

As for Elfreda, when she grasped the true meaning of the disjointed, tremulous words, she was able to conceal her real feelings, whatever they might have been. In that art at least she was singularly adept. A light of humor burned in the eyes that seemed to peer into the very soul of Girlie Cass. And then an arrogant lip curled ever so slightly. She was justified, she was more than justified in what she had done! The thought seared the pride of one who as yet had hardly begun to learn her own intrinsic value in the matter-of-fact world of men and things.

So this was the measure of the man whom her parents considered good enough for her! In the sight of this Cræsus any underbred little impostor was as eligible as her authentic self.

Suddenly the red light was hoisted in Elfreda's eyes. That rubbishy little thing to be accepted at her surface value! Elfreda's face grew hard.

"What ought I to do?" twittered poor Girlie.

The eyes of this daughter of a picturesque race altered curiously in the fragment of time that elapsed before she could bring herself to answer the question.

Twittered poor Girlie again—"Do tell me, please, what I ought to do!"

"Do!" The scorn was cold drawn, barbaric. "Why, go back at once and make him propose to you. And"—the eyes were like those of Medusa—"don't let me see or hear from you again until he has done so."

XX

Girlie could only gasp. Elfreda's speech in its frigid nonchalance was stupefying. More fully than ever did she realize that she was in the toils of an Evil Genius. This girl, this amazing girl, had a will of iron. She was growing positively afraid of her.

It was all very well for Lady Elfreda Catkin to issue an ukase, but it was not she who would have to foot the bill. She was a person of importance, she had powerful friends, her position was secure. No matter how deep and angry the waters, no matter how menacing the sky, she belonged to the class that was able to weather the most violent storms. But for the Girlie Casses of the planet it was a very different matter. What for the one might be nothing more than a new and original, if rather perilous, form of entertainment, for the other might mean the end of all things.



Girlie's mind was a chaos as her scared eyes met the implacable ones that were fixed on hers. General damnation was their only portent. She knew she was done for, anyway. It was but a question of putting off the evil day. But if she bolted now she would at least save herself from being publicly found out, whereas if she waited for the inevitable exposure there was no saying what might happen to her.

"Oh, but I daren't let him propose—I simply daren't."

Elfreda harshly told her not to be foolish.

"But—!" Girlie knew only too well that her wriggles were miserably inadequate. And in the midst of them yet another complication presented itself. She remembered that there might be two Richmonds in the field. Signs had not been wanting that the little baronet also was inclined to view her with a favorable eye. Certain cadences of his voice lingered in her ears even now. There seemed but one thing to do. As one seeking the aid of a strength beyond her own she confessed to Elfreda that Sir Toby Philpot also might be on the verge of a proposal.

To this admission Elfreda did not immediately reply. But with that pitiless glance that had the power of striking far below the surface of things, she looked at the Deputy. Was this the kind of little idiot who believes that every man who smiles as he opens a door is in love with her, or was it literally true that at Clavering Park she was un succès fou? Elfreda continued to analyze her mercilessly. Yes, in her way, she was undoubtedly a pretty little thing. And the half-scared manner and the timid voice made her rather a plaintive, rather a pathetic little thing, so that after all it would not be so very remarkable if she made a strong appeal to the male. At the same time, the idea of her playing such havoc was ludicrous and, from Elfreda's own private standpoint, more than a little humiliating.

Here was the richest possible commentary on the sort of people whom her own parents considered good enough for her. Had fuel been needed to sustain Elfreda's fighting spirit it was here in abundance. If only for pure devilment now she would go on with the farce. An odd sparkle in her eyes must have proclaimed her intention, for at the mere sight of it the hapless Deputy gave one further gasp.

"Oh, please—please, do come back with me and put things right!"

Girlie would have done as well to have appealed to a stone. "No, not yet." There was not a hint of compromise. "You must keep it up—until after Tuesday at any rate. I will come to you one day next week, perhaps Wednesday or Thursday. And if you will do your best and stand it as well as you can, no harm shall come to you. I promise that."

It was meager comfort. But to judge by Elfreda's eyes there was no hope just then of anything else. Be the cost what it might her decision was made. Poor Girlie clung for support to an arm of the sofa. Sheer beneath her feet yawned a chasm.

As if to intensify this grim illusion Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson chose that moment to return to the drawing room. Her return, moreover, was fraught with purpose. "Lady Elfreda." So flutelike was the lady of the house that the new governess could not help wondering privately how her voice would have sounded at the Queen's Hall!—"Won't you stay to luncheon? We shall be so glad if you will."

The answer of the distinguished visitor was to regard the new governess with a scared and apprehensive eye. But that lady was quite equal to the situation. She turned to Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson and said with a kind of frigid decision that forbade any possible doubt, "Lady Elfreda is expected for luncheon at Clavering Park."

Thereupon, in a manner that left no loophole for argument, Miss Cass moved to the drawing room door and opened it. As her eyes drew Girlie towards it they seemed full of a latent menace. The visitor was just able to muster a half audible "Good-by. Thank you so much," for the benefit of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson, before she was sternly shepherded if not actually hustled by Elfreda across the hall.

"Do your best. Don't be afraid. I will let you know the day I can come next week. And remember that I take all responsibility." Amid this spate of final low-toned instructions poor Girlie was put out on to the gravel and the front door of The Laurels closed rather peremptorily upon her.

From behind the drawing room curtains Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson watched the slight form of the visitor fade from view along the carriage drive. A tempest raged in the bosom of the lady of the house. If the manner of Miss Cass meant anything she looked down upon her employer; her arbitrary dismissal of the luncheon project could bear no other interpretation. However, the fury of the storm was a little assuaged by a wholesome curiosity; otherwise it might have gone hard with Miss Cass. Not only was that amazing person called upon by the aristocracy, but her attitude towards it was that of one who claims a half scornful equality. She had no more respect for Lady Elfreda Catkin than she had for any one else!

There was balm in that thought. For several days past Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson had been at the point of telling the new governess that she would not suit, and of advertising for some one else. Indeed, for the sake of General Norris and dear Dolores, she had been obliged to ask Miss Cass to dine upstairs. But even now Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson could not quite bring herself to give that lady notice. She was far too interesting; in fact a type of governess altogether new in her present employer's rather chequered experience. The children hated her, but she might be good for them. She would be able to teach them self-assurance.

Taking one consideration with another, Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson still shrank from the drastic step of giving Miss Cass her congé. She would wait, at any rate, until she had told the story to Dolores. Whether she would take the advice of Dolores and get rid of her, that, of course, was the point to decide. Poor dear Dolores loathed Miss Cass.

XXI

By the time that Girlie, homeward bound, had reached the Pendennis Arms at Clavering, she realized that even if the erratic vehicle which went by the gates of the Park was prepared to start immediately, luncheon would be over by the time she got back. She made up her mind accordingly "to go the whole hog," and proceeded to regale herself with a cup of tea and a war bun at an adjacent confectioner's. Then, after an hour's inspection of the small and sleepy town, she set her face towards her temporary home.

She was in no hurry to get there. For one thing she had to evolve some sort of excuse that would cover the fact of her absence from the luncheon table. Again, she had to decide the question whether it was absolutely necessary to return at all. Why not bolt? It would not be difficult. There was a little, only a very little money in her purse, it was true. Should she accept this as the price of her career? That was the question. Just now almost anything seemed better than to return and meet the public exposure which could not long be delayed.

At a bend of the leaf-strewn road, where beyond a rich expanse of park land the imposing chimneys of the Hall rose into view, she suddenly stopped to grapple once again with this sore problem. Only too clearly did she realize that flight was her only chance. As far as she was concerned there could be no other solution. It would be a base betrayal of Lady Elfreda, yet Girlie saw now with painful clearness that her new acquaintance was far too dangerous to be regarded as a friend.

The young woman masquerading at The Laurels was entitled to such small consideration that Girlie felt she could square her conscience on that point at least. But now that her thoughts were centered upon running away, she was met by the fact that she had given up her rooms at Laxton, that she had lost her situation, that she had nowhere to go. In the lee of the park wall there followed a tense five minutes of mental conflict. In the end it may have been her odd strain of megalomania that decided the question. Certainly that fatal flaw had much to answer for. Let her rise to the height of opportunity! Let her not be afraid of life, but drink bravely of the cup of high experience!

Finally, swayed no doubt by these perilous ideas, she passed on by the park wall and through the lodge gates. Defiant of fate and all its machinations, she went straight to her room to tidy herself for tea. In the act of doing so she could not help marveling at her own cynicism. It was so incredible that she could not recognize herself. While she changed her dress and rearranged her hair she began to evolve some sort of a story to cover her absence. As soon as she appeared in the hall she had, of course, to run the gauntlet.

"My dear Lady Elfreda," cried the yellow chrysanthemum lady at the pitch of humorous expostulation, "where have you been?"

Girlie hardened her heart. "Into Clavering." Her courage rose to a dogged defiance. "To do some shopping. I am so sorry. I ought to have told you."

"But your luncheon?" Mrs. Minever's face was a study. "Where did you get it?"

"At a tea shop."

The half amused eyes of the hostess suddenly encountered those of Mrs. Spencer-Jobling. Among her fellow guests the theory was growing that not only was Lady Elfreda suffering from a queer form of "side" but also that she was a little "cracked." Certainly her manner was most odd and her behavior matched it.

Girlie, however, was now at bay. She took her seat in the midst of her critics, sipped tea and pecked at bread and butter. Never in her life had she felt so wretched. The affair was getting unbearable. As she suffered the rather scathing politeness of Mrs. Spencer-Jobling and the icy tones of the other ladies her mind ran upon suicide. But the demon within bade her go on. There was Shelley's authority that what poets learn in suffering they teach in song. Of novelists, no doubt, that maxim was equally true.

XXII

The ladies were still drinking tea when a footman ushered in a visitor.

"Mrs. Lancelot."

The elderly mistress of Amory Towers aroused the curiosity of even the professional blasées who greeted her. She was "County." They might seem to scorn her in the way they scorned all things and everybody, their veiled amusement had a touch of malice no doubt, but there was also Mrs. Lancelot's faculty of engaging the interest of all the world and his wife to be reckoned with.

She was like nothing upon this earth—the yellow chrysanthemum lady, Mrs. Spencer-Jobling and Mrs. Conrad Jones were agreed upon that!—yet in her queer way the old dame stood for something. What she stood for was, no doubt, a bygone phase. She might have stepped out of a page of Punch for the year 1890. Her dress with its decided waist and its antediluvian tuckers round wrist and neck was of amethyst colored merino, a necklet of amethyst hung upon her ample chest, her hair with a Queen Alexandra fringe was barber's blocked after the manner of royalty, her toque baffled all description, but it had pansies in it, and her manner, plain and practical rather than "grand," carried a weight that her odd appearance should have countervailed, yet somehow failed to do so. Mrs. Lancelot, no doubt, was *une figure pour rire*, but only those very accomplished in the world could have got her "range" with a nicety sufficient to take advantage of the fact. Her present critics, for example, inclined to scorn as they were, could not help being fettered a little by a secret sense of their own inadequacy.

A dutiful neighbor, Mrs. Lancelot had called once on the yellow chrysanthemum lady and the call had been promptly returned. There, however, the intercourse had ceased. Somehow they had hardly set each other's genius. But this afternoon there was no hint of that fact in Mrs. Lancelot's entrance or of Mrs. Minever's reception of her. The visitor was cautious, almost comically cautious, as she always was when not quite sure of her bearings; the yellow chrysanthemum lady was slightly more exuberant than usual, as she was apt to be when cherishing a similar doubt on her own part. In the sight of Mrs. Spencer-Jobling, rather *declassée* daughter of a not undistinguished sire, it was as good as a play to see them together: this resolute survivor of a discredited phase of human history—the august visitor's relations had held more than one job about the court of Victoria the Good—and the forthcoming hostess who made no secret of the fact that she was bored by "frills" and "fine shades."

The reason of Mrs. Lancelot's visit to Clavering Park, if not immediately clear, was soon revealed. A discerning but imperious eye fixed itself upon Girlie, who, seated a little apart from the others in a *bergère* chair, was feeling a strong desire to take cover inside her tea cup.

Mrs. Lancelot took a vacant chair by her side and began to converse in a low, intimate tone.

"You are not at all like your mother." Mrs. Lancelot's direct mode of attack made Girlie tremble.

"You are not like your father, either. You look rather tired, my dear."

The Deputy mumbled a brief denial, which unfortunately was quite inaudible.

"Are you feeling tired?"

Girlie had the presence of mind to say that she had been working very hard at the rehearsals.

"Mustn't work too hard. You look quite run down." And then Mrs. Lancelot proceeded energetically, "You must come over to us, my dear. A change will do you good. I have written to your mother to tell her. We are very old friends, your mother and I—old school-fellows, in fact—and, of course, third cousins once removed. You must come at once. I am sure you need a change and Ethel thinks so, too."

Little shivers began to trickle down Girlie's spine. She was in no mood to exchange the ills she knew for the ills she could only surmise, for, as she realized, these might so easily prove the more terrible.

"Yes, you must come to us." In the saurian aspect of Mrs. Lancelot there was something quite alarming. "Your mother would like it. Now, when shall it be?"



The prospect of a visit to Amory Towers reduced Girlie to a frozen silence. A look of fear came in her eyes. Mrs. Lancelot was not one to notice subtleties of any kind, but, happily, the yellow chrysanthemum lady, as soon as she learned what was in the wind, did not hesitate to come to the rescue of her guest. For one thing, the daughter of Lord Carabbas, with all her limitations, was the undoubted *pièce de resistance* of the house party; and Mrs. Minever was inclined to accept Lady Elfreda's reluctance as an unexpected compliment to the life she was leading at Clavering Park. Heaven knew what was passing through the odd creature's mind, but if those scared eyes and that rather hunted look had any meaning, it was clear enough that she infinitely preferred Clavering Park to Amory Towers!

"I'm afraid Lady Elfreda can't be spared—until after the performance on Tuesday, at any rate."

Mrs. Minever's boldness was rewarded by a look of pure gratitude, but also it incurred the penalty of an almost truculent, "Why not, pray?" from the august visitor.

"Well, you see," the yellow chrysanthemum lady stoutly rejoined, "so many rehearsals will be necessary between now and Tuesday. Sir Toby Philpot says everything is so behind hand that as soon as Mr. Jupp arrives they will have to go on all day."

These sinister words fell upon Girlie like a sword. She was between the devil and the deep, deep sea. Paralysis of will was added now to her other miseries. On the verge of collapse, she sank back in her chair.

Mrs. Lancelot, however, was not to be put off. She was a lady who liked her own way, and on most occasions was accustomed to get it. But on this occasion she had to submit to a compromise. Lady Elfreda must come to Amory Towers, but her visit should be deferred until Tuesday the-all-important was safely over.

"Wednesday, then—let us say Wednesday," said the august visitor.

The yellow chrysanthemum lady promised that Wednesday it should be, while Girlie smiled weakly. Mrs. Lancelot, having carried her point more or less, graciously accepted a cup of the fresh tea that had been procured for her. Perhaps, by the light of later events, it had been better for Girlie had she not done so. For Mrs. Lancelot, before taking her leave, proceeded to harrow the souls of her hearers. She had a sinister tale to unfold. A gang of thieves were at work in the neighborhood. The Channings had had the Priory ransacked while they were at dinner, and poor Lady Emily had suffered the loss of a most valuable diamond pendant. There had also been a most suspicious parlor-maid at the Towers, but luckily she had been sent away before anything of real value had been missed. But Major Hocking, the chief constable, thought the gang so dangerous that Mrs. Lancelot had been advised to send her jewels and some of her silver to the bank, and she had accordingly done so.

"I tell you this, Mrs. Minever," said the visitor in her most affairé tone, "because in such times as these one cannot be too careful."

The yellow chrysanthemum lady thought the remark very sensible and expressed her gratitude for the information. It confirmed the rumors she had heard. On the other hand, Mrs. Spencer-Jobling was inclined to think that all stories of the kind were apt to be exaggerated, but Mrs. Lancelot rent her at once with chapter and verse.

"No, after the experience of the Channings one should really take every precaution." And with a rather elaborate leave-taking of Lady Elfreda, and one more informal of people less exalted, Mrs. Lancelot augustly went her way.

## XXIII

Girlie took a long while to array herself for that evening's dreaded meal. The crisis of her fate was now at hand. Realizing to the full all that was involved in the coming of Mr. Montagu Jupp, she had not the courage to ask Mrs. Minever whether that Old Man of the Sea was really on the point of arrival. Only too soon would the fact be known. In her present state of mind she was quite unable to face the dire consequences that must attend his visit; she chose, therefore, to bury her head ostrich-wise in sand by indulging the pitifully vain hope that he was not coming after all.

How frail that hope was the momentous hour of eight revealed very surely. Hardly had she entered the drawing room, striving heroically for a show of composure which her wretched nerves denied her, when lo! amid a cascade of chaff with an undercurrent of laughter and applause, the great and admired Montagu came in his own person upon the scene.

Sir Toby, as usual, led the way. It was his fixed rule of life to lead the way everywhere, under all conditions, in all circumstances, if only he was allowed to do so. At the back of his mind he always seemed to feel that the stars in their courses had ordained that he should be the master of every ceremony. But, in comparison with the mountain of geniality who alternately rolled and grinned as he followed in his wake, Sir Toby was the merest pigmy. Mr. Jupp had the art of monopolizing the attention of all the world, of catching every eye, of dominating every assembly he entered.

Still, the mere arrival of the great man was in the nature of a triumph for Sir Toby. Odds had been freely laid by despondent members of the cast that Montagu would not appear. But his magnetic presence was just what was needed to "pull things together." However, as far as the luckless leading lady was concerned, no one envied him his task.

Quite a thrill seemed to pervade the air of the drawing room at the moment of their greeting. But Girlie, in the toils of sheer desperation, was able for once to muster an inhuman stoicism. Already she had undergone so much that she was now determined to die fighting. Yes, whatever happened, she would die fighting. Heroically, with bright eyes, with set lips, she came forward a pace, as the hostess triumphantly convoyed the great man towards her. "How do you do?" she said, holding out her hand.

The sublime Original, who at that fell moment was consuming cold mutton and mixed pickles in the outer darkness of the nursery at The Laurels, whither she had been banished in disgrace, could not have "played up" better. Mr. Jupp, a little fatigued by travel and with a forward looking mind in regard to his dinner, bowed over the hand that was offered. He did not scrutinize the little lady closely, at any rate just then. He took it for granted that she was what she was. Besides, apart from the fact that the clock on the chimney piece had already struck eight, there was a reason, known only to himself, why he should be in no hurry to traverse the personality of Lady Elfreda Catkin, much less to challenge her identity.

Truth to tell, and the dark secret was locked securely in the bosom of Mr. Montagu Jupp, he had only met Lady Elfreda once, for a few brief moments, so that the faculty of observation not being his long suit, he was not so clear as he might have been as to what she really looked like. The skeleton in Montagu's cupboard which some of his friends, the malicious Garden to wit, shrewdly suspected to be the case, was that he was inclined "to talk through his hat"; in other words, he was prone to claim an intimacy with all the world that the crude facts did not always justify. He had said once in Sir Toby's hearing over an after-dinner whisky and cigar, that "he had taught Lady Elfreda Catkin all the acting she knew," but that incautious statement had been less in response to sober truth than to her highly effective portrait in the Society Pictorial. It was sufficient for un homme du monde that he had talked with her once for five minutes at a garden party. The fact was typical of the man, even a part of his picturesqueness, but at this moment, had the luckless Girlie been aware of it, here was a card incredibly in her favor.

Girlie, alas, did not know that. She went in to dinner and took her accustomed place at the right hand of the host with a growing conviction that she was about to be hanged in public, to say nothing of the drawing and quartering to follow. She felt it was only a question of minutes before Mr. Jupp denounced her. Every time her guilty eye strayed furtively across to his side of the table she perceived his eye, in its degree hardly less guilty, furtively upon her. But she did not know, she could not guess the strength of her own position. She could only marvel as course succeeded course, as her wine glass grew empty and then grew full again, that the inevitable thunderbolt did not descend.

As the meal went on and exposure grew ever more imminent in the mind of the Deputy—a dramatic scene was surely reserved for the drawing room!—she grew increasingly bold. After her glass had been replenished three times she did not care what happened. She would die “game.” This was her very last hour of vicarious splendor, but she had now an intense desire to live it to the full. Her tongue was loosened, her laugh rose higher and more frequent, her eyes grew wonderfully bright. All this harmonized with the spirit of the others, for, as usual, Mr. Jupp had brought an infectious gayety upon the scene. Everybody laughed at everybody else; all were in a mood of festive enjoyment; the almost perilous light-heartedness of “the little Catkin puss” excited no comment—or, if it did, it counted to her for virtue. Certainly her host, who for a week now had endured “heavy cake” with a noble fortitude, was charmed by the change. There might be something in the little noodle after all.

When dinner was over other people began to think so, too. Living in the very crater of Vesuvius with an eruption long overdue, keyed up beyond a self that was rather undercharged, for the first time in her life Girlie let herself go. Somehow it seemed the only course to take. Amid the hilarity the mere presence of Mr. Jupp had induced, that remarkable man sat down at the piano and began to do it considerable violence. Thereupon one of the younger "bloods" began to fox-trot with Mrs. Spencer-Jobling. Sir Toby Philpot, not to be outdone, immediately commandeered the hostess, Mr. Minever promptly laid siege to another lady, and then Girlie grew alive to the fact that Lord Duckingfield was smiling at her and moving resolutely in her direction.

"Just show me how to—won't you, my dear?" His voice was wonderfully persuasive and fatherly.

Girlie's knowledge of the fox-trot was almost as vague as my lord's. But what did that matter? What did anything matter? She rose with a laugh, she intertwined one slender arm with his; slowly she gyrated with this performing bear of a man twice round the drawing room, and then in the wake of the more enterprising couples through the open door and out into the hall.

Mr. Jupp continued to pound the piano. Tango succeeded fox-trot, there was an occasional relapse to the two-step, a brief intermission of some forgotten waltz or other, with now and again, as became a truly modern and progressive mind, a heroic attempt at the jazz. None of the dancers obeyed the music; they didn't really try to do so; each chose the style that seemed the most natural, so that what began as a half serious performance soon degenerated into an amazing go-as-you-please. But it was highly enjoyable. At any rate, Lord Duckingfield thought it was. A strenuous youth in factory and warehouse had left him no time to pay court to Terpsichore. He knew what he liked, however. And what he did like was to wheel slowly and solemnly round on his left foot, with plenty of elbow room and without having too much ground to cover. And if he was most agreeably assisted in these maneuvers by the charmingly pretty bearer of a distinguished name, why so much the better.

This dainty, gray-eyed little girl quite set the genius of my lord. She was so simple. And with all his riches and his ambitions and his recent nobility, at heart he was really simple himself. After a most exhilarating twenty minutes on the hall parquet, in a space hardly more than six feet square, in the course of which Girlie, with the inimitable tact of her sex, contrived neatly to fit step for step, Lord Duckingfield espied a corner almost perilous in its charm and its seclusion in an angle of the stairs. In point of fact he had had his eye on it from the first. By the time he had truly earned a rest he felt that it would come to him as the just reward of his merit and his virtue.

In the room adjacent, on a piano whose extreme resonance was almost unbearable, Mr. Jupp continued to do surprising things, while his fellow guests, each after his or her manner, kept pace with him as far as was humanly possible. At last, however, Lord Duckingfield came to a sudden halt and drew a series of deep breaths. Then, Girlie upon his arm, he made a bee-line for the palm-shrouded alcove beneath the hall stairs. Kindly providence had decreed that two chairs, of the sort called "comfortable," should be there already. Girlie, a little breathless too after her altruistic exertions, found herself at rest in one a brief ten seconds before her cavalier came to anchor in the other.

She was feeling entirely reckless. She didn't care. Her limit had been reached, nay, it had been overstepped. She would drink of the cup. Life was dancing a fiery symbol before her eyes. In spite of the sword that hung by a thread in mid-air she was enjoying her hour. She was enjoying it terribly. If she died of the shame that must follow, at least she would be able to point to an experience beyond the run of women.

"Nice of you, my dear, to help an old duffer like me." The rich, half chuckling tone of Lord Duckingfield had an odd humility that was wonderfully attractive in the ear of a woman.

"Not at all." Softly she lisped in true Galsworthian phrase. A powerful genius enfolded her. With a kind of mad dignity she sat up in the wicker chair.

"Oh, but it is, though," My lord was heavily serious for all that there was a kind of elephantine humor in him. "Not many of you smart young ladies would be bothered with a clumsy old fool like me."

"But you are not clumsy—you are not at all clumsy," It was not the speech of a smart young lady, it was not true, it was not subtle, above all, it was unworthy of the author of "The Patrician," and by the light of the inner mind she knew this only too well, but the stage-manager of the pleasant little comedy understood the business better than did she. The crude simplicity for which she could have wept at the moment her lips betrayed it, really met the situation exactly. In spite of her lineage—or perhaps because of it—Lord Duckingfield was more than ever convinced that she was a very nice little girl.

"You see," he said, and his abrupt fall to an almost disconcerting intimacy was the truest compliment such a highly practical man could have paid her, "you see, I don't pretend to be one of the fancy sort. No Eton and Oxford for me. At your age, my dear, I was earning my thirty shillings a week at the carpenter's bench and thinking myself almighty lucky to be getting it."

She actually had the wit to reward the reminiscence with a ripe Galsworthian "Really!" But again she must have fallen short of the rich quality of her mentor, since my lord went on, for all the world as if she had not been a marquis's daughter, "You don't know, my dear, what I've had to fight against. Most of you young ladies laugh at men like me, but you are one of the sensible kind, so that's why I don't mind telling you of my early life."

The gray eyes smiled at Lord Duckingfield. And as the stage-manager had fixed an electric bulb at a psychological angle midway between the two chairs, so that its rays caught the light of those eyes and set it dancing, Lord Duckingfield was suddenly and acutely aware of quite the sharpest thrill he had ever experienced.



"Of course, I'm very rich now." Lord Duckingfield seemed inclined to carry naïveté to the verge of indelicacy. "Very rich indeed. Your father will make allowances for that. But you are such a very nice little girl that even had you been just plain Miss Brown...."

With a shiver, half enchantment, half dismay, Girlie realized that a sympathetic hand had put forth from the adjacent chair and that it was exquisitely enclosing hers. The close-breathing pause which followed must have meant embarrassment for both, had either been in a condition to respond to that form of emotion. But Girlie had burnt her boats. She was past all caring. As for Lord Duckingfield he was now suddenly alive to the fact that he was quite in love with this pretty gray-eyed mouse.

"You are so sensible." The grip tightened upon the slender arm. "There's no nonsense about you. If you don't mind my saying so you are not at all like most of the smart girls I've met. They are so knowing. And they take so much living up to—for an old duffer like me. Give me something homely and sensible." Inch by inch the wicker chair came closer. She felt one arm, half chivalrous, half masterful, slowly encircle her.

She made no effort to repel this audacity. Somehow it marched with her own state of mind. But in the next moment something had happened, something which had the effect of bringing her up short in the midst of her folly and incidentally of summoning her northern forbears primly upon the scene. Lord Duckingfield took her in his arms and kissed her.

It was the first time in Girlie's life of twenty years that such a thing had happened or had seemed likely to happen. Nothing could have been more subversive of her strait "high-brow" code than to be kissed by a man, and a rather elderly man, without so much as a by-your-leave, in circumstances of semi-publicity. Even if she had a sense of having dined, deep down she knew it to be an epic moment; she was thrilled as she had never been thrilled; it was the event of her life. He might be a real live peer of the realm; all the same his boldness was just a little too much for Miss Cass of Laxton.

Involuntarily she stiffened, involuntarily she drew her chair a few paces away from him. Slightly abashed but wholly impenitent Lord Duckingfield followed her. But Miss Cass of Laxton was not quite lost to a sense of her high destiny. What kind of man was this! How dare he! She must let him know that this was not the form of a budding Charlotte Brontë.

"I beg your pardon," he said, as soon as the mild horror in her eyes had convicted him. He spoke so nicely, so gently, that it was not in her heart to be angry even had it been in her nature to be so.

He proved the depth of his contrition by a sudden descent into autobiography. His early life was unfolded before her, his struggles, his defeats, his slow ascent of fortune's ladder. She could not help admiring this large simplicity, she could not help honoring him for it, but when she perceived that it was leading all-too-surely to what she feared, but by another road, she was overcome. She began to steel herself to bear the blow she had more than half invited.

Don't let me see you or hear from you again until he has proposed to you. Those grim words, brutal and incredible, came upon her ears for the hundredth time. Was she weakly to yield to such cynicism! If a spark of human decency remained to her, she must avert while there was yet time that which too clearly was going to happen.

Spurred to action by a cruel desperation, she rose abruptly. But that did not serve. Lightly, but firmly, Lord Duckingfield grabbed her by the wrist and propelled her with half whimsical precision back to her chair. The deed was accomplished with a kind of humorous deftness, but the "insight" of Miss Cass might have told her, had she been able just then to bring it into play, that the seeming archness of her suitor was a mere mask. Really he was possessed by a most becoming nervousness and this a lady of her powers ought to have divined. Perhaps she did divine it. Underneath Lord Duckingfield's humor was a fitting sense of presumptuous audacity. He, at least, in spite of his democratic sense, could not forget who she was. What more likely than that being a thoroughly clumsy fellow he had already gone too far.

"Lady Elfreda." His voice—his deep voice—sounded rather hoarse. "I want you to help me if you can. I'm in love with you, as I never thought I could be in love with any girl. You are just my sort. I think we understand one another. I am sure I can make you happy. Will you marry me?"

The moment had come. She had but herself to blame. Hers the sole fault that the thing had happened. The blunt words of one whom she was quite sure was a good and simple man fell upon her like a douche. They were like a douche of ice-cool reason. In that instant she saw that this wicked madness must cease. No matter what the cost she must forget her miserable self. Such a horrid farce could not go on.

She felt his honest grip upon her fingers. The pause that followed became more than she could bear. If ever she was to respect herself again, here and now she must make an end. Desperately she assembled the fugitive fragments of her will, but the very stars in their courses were against her now. One phrase, one unforgettable phrase he had used was running like quicksilver in her brain. "You are such a very nice little girl that even had you been just plain Miss Brown...!"

Fatal corollary! She was "just plain Miss Brown" had he but known it. Therefore, as his own words proved, where could be the purpose of his knowing it? The argument was too sweetly specious! Torn as she was, she had not the strength to fight it. Half-heartedly she strove to overcome the spell of those fatal words, but she knew only too well that the task was hopeless.

"Think it over, my dear." He was no longer nervous; he was calm, precise, matter of fact. "I'm not so young as I might be, but anything that money can buy I am in a position to give you. No need for an answer just now. I see you want time to think it over—it's only proper and natural. But to-morrow I hope you'll be able to tell me that I may write to your father."

Again, with an increasing horror, Girlie felt the kiss of an honest man upon her shrinking finger tips.

## XXIV

To bed—to dream, but not to sleep. The situation that shaped itself so fantastically to Girlie's mind in the tardy hours of a long and wakeful night was almost more than she could bear. Here was the last straw. Playing with human souls is a perilous game. In drifting at another's bidding into such a position she had not reckoned upon the cost to herself. She was not of the stuff of which the real adventuress is made. The whole affair was really an outrage upon her deepest instincts. She had neither the cynicism, the native impudence nor "the sense of the theater" to keep the thing going. Somewhere about the hour of four, when the night was at its darkest and her courage was very low, she resolved to make an end. With remorse inflicting such torments upon her there seemed nothing else to do. She spent the rest of the night feverishly planning a way out. None there was, alas, that could hope to spare her the tragic weight of humiliation, and worse than humiliation she had so honestly earned; but as far as possible she must defend herself against a public exposure.

Until getting-up time came she strove with this problem. But she was caught in a trap from which there was no escape. Daylight stealing into the cell of the condemned could not have been more unwelcome than the faint rose of dawn creeping through the blinds of King Edward's bedroom. Girlie did not know how to face another day. The matutinal cup of tea, brought to her at eight o'clock by a very trim housemaid, found her in an abject state of "nerves." She had reached the conclusion by this time that her only hope lay in immediate flight. By some miracle Mr. Jupp had not yet denounced her, but she felt sure it could only be a question of hours. And even if the miracle went on and he still refrained from doing so, the position into which she had allowed herself to drift with Lord Duckingfield was quite unendurable. She was now haunted by the thought of this good and simple man for whom she had a real regard.

Yes, she must get away. But where could she go? To The Laurels? Only too clearly did she realize that there was nothing to hope for from that quarter—at any rate if she flagrantly disobeyed her instructions. Besides in her present state of mental and moral weakness she really went in fear of her Evil Genius.

After a time her mind began to run upon an aunt in Scotland. Now that she had wantonly forfeited her only means of getting a living, that austere dame, an elder sister of her mother's, whom she remembered but faintly, was the only relation or friend to whom she could turn. Her recollection of Aunt Alice was dim and it was not agreeable. Aunt Alice lived a long way off, she was the wife of a struggling doctor with a large family of her own, and the best her niece could hope for was an astonished and grudging welcome. Still there seemed no alternative now.

Wrought upon by the need for action, Girlie got out of bed and took her purse from the left hand drawer of the dressing table. In a state of nervous excitement she hunted for the address of Aunt Alice. Presently she was rewarded with the sight of an old letter bearing the postmark "Inverness." Her heart sank. She knew nothing of Inverness, except that it was somewhere in the north of Scotland.

Further examination of the inside of the purse revealed that her means of getting to Inverness amounted to just two pounds, five shillings and ninepence. Such a meager sum, even if it allowed her to get so far, which at the present cost of travel was very doubtful, would provide absolutely nothing to live upon. That fact alone seemed to make the project hopeless. For one weak instant, in the face of this rebuff, her mind reverted to Lady Elfreda's jewels, to which she had access. But the thought—if thought it could be called—was at once dismissed. Not for a moment could any scheme of that kind be entertained. All the same she indulged in a forlorn little sigh as the fact came home to her once more that nature had not designed her for the adventuress *pur sang*.

In spite, however, of such a lack of means her mind continued to run upon Inverness. Throughout an uncomfortable, appetiteless breakfast the thought of that distant haven obsessed her. She managed to nibble a piece of toast under the eye of the attentive and solicitous Lord Duckingfield, who had so assiduously helped her to this simple fare with a comment upon its meagerness. This morning, as every morning, he was the soul of kindness and courtesy. But she was quite unable to talk to him; in fact, she did not dare to look in his direction. It was a great relief when at last she was able to carry Bradshaw to the good log fire in the hall.

There, upon the scene of the previous evening's tragi-comedy she delved further into the problem of transporting herself from Clavering St. Mary's to the north of Scotland.

One important fact in regard to a very long and tortuous journey was soon established. The sum of two pounds five shillings and ninepence rendered the project hopeless.

Bradshaw in hand, she was still trying to meet a not unexpected facer, when a voice of rather delicately reproachful curiosity came from over her shoulder. It was that of the hostess and Girlie felt a tremor of guilty dismay.

"Not thinking of leaving us, are you, Lady Elfreda?"

Quickly and nervously Girlie replied that she was not.

"Of course you're not," Mrs. Minever laughed. "Until after Tuesday at all events. You have only three days now." Mrs. Minever laughed a second time, perhaps a shade sardonically. "How relieved you'll be! I am sure you have found us very dull. But when you get to Amory Towers you'll be able to play piquet with Mrs. Lancelot. I hope you are a good player. Mrs. Lancelot, I believe, is very proud of her piquet."

The yellow chrysanthemum lady was a little inclined to quiz. She was the soul of good nature, but Girlie's aloof detachment from her surroundings invited criticism. The manner of the chief guest was so constrained, so unnatural, that the only explanation was "side." Evidently this daughter of Lord Carabbas had such a sense of her position that she did not find it easy to mix with other people on terms of equality. Yet when the worst had been said of the yellow chrysanthemum lady she was really the least censorious of women. Besides, she was not in a mood for chaff this morning, no matter how fully it was deserved or how much the occasion called for it. Mrs. Minever, in point of fact, was graver this morning, more resolutely serious than the guest had yet seen her. In Mrs. Minever's own words, "a very provoking thing had happened."

"My dear," said Mrs. Minever in a fluttered tone, "you must please tell your maid to be sure and keep your jewels under lock and key. One of my rings—a rather valuable one—has disappeared. And you heard what Mrs. Lancelot said yesterday? I'm afraid there is not the slightest doubt that a gang of burglars is at work in the neighborhood."

Readily enough Girlie promised to keep her jewels under lock and key.

"Of course it may be some one in the house. We are always changing our servants. My husband is consulting the police."

Girlie's heart sank. She did not need to be very wise or very clever to foresee the bearing such a circumstance would have upon her flight. If she bolted now, without ostensible cause, the mere fact would be terribly against her. Even as it was, when her imposture was revealed, she felt sure it would go hard with her; yet with these deeper grounds for even blacker suspicion, she was likely to be faced with a charge she was wholly unable to meet.

Her nerve was badly shaken, but this new turn of events gave her a sudden distaste for the half-formed plan. Beyond the crude fact that she simply lacked the money to undertake the journey there was now an even stronger reason why she should continue to stand her ground.

All the same the standing of her ground promised to be a soul testing process. It was by no means certain that her courage would hold out. For one thing the mere sight of Lord Duckingfield had the power to involve her in a perfect orgy of conflicting emotions. If the look of him, gravely polite, rather anxiously formal, meant anything, he was clearly waiting for his answer. Why had she not had the strength of mind to let him know the previous evening that he sought the impossible? What was the good of having perceptions and fine feelings, if one did not act in accordance with them?

Then as if the unhappy affair of Lord Duckingfield was not enough, there was the perennial question of Mr. Montagu Jupp. Why he had not denounced her already, heaven alone could tell!

The Deputy was far from suspecting the simple truth that it had not yet begun to dawn upon Montagu that this was not the lady he had met. Having drawn the long bow so freely himself he was not able to criticize her closely; his own impression of the youngest girl of "old man Carabbas" was decidedly vague. Still it was to be supposed that a whole day devoted to the ill-starred "Lady of Laxton" would have done much to enlighten him. As a matter of fact it did not. For Girlie, at the nadir of her fortunes, was now inspired with the courage of despair. Moved to a strange recklessness by the sheer weight of her woes, she rose beyond the level of herself.

This unexpected result was due in part, no doubt, to Mr. Montagu Jupp. That gentleman certainly knew his business. And at rehearsals he had a way with him. Not only had he the art of smoothing tempers and generally "oiling the wheels," but the secret was his also of evolving order out of chaos. The incompetence of Sir Toby and the insubordination of several members of the cast had produced such a hopeless tangle in the improvised theater in the east wing of the house that for the time being even the inefficiency of the leading lady had been overshadowed. But as soon as Montagu set his hand to the plow "The Lady of Laxton" took a decided turn for the better.



Very well that it was so. There were but three days now to the performance in the Assembly Rooms at Clavering, and by all the portents “the most dismal fiasco of modern times,” in the gloomy and mordant words of Garden was in prospect. But Montagu was no common man. He had a faculty for “sizing things up,” moreover he knew how to get them done. Privately he was of opinion that Sir Toby’s masterpiece beat all records in the way of sheer ineptitude, but wild horses would not have dragged it out of him. Besides he had been too long and too intimately associated with the English theater in all its aspects to let a little matter of that kind upset him. None knew better than he what could be really achieved in the way of human imbecility. And after all, as Montagu argued with himself, the players were but a scratch company of extremely amateurish amateurs, while the audience at the best he described as “C3 Provincial.”

Girlie was not a “quick study,” but she was an extremely conscientious one. Long hours of application had made her absolutely word perfect in her part. And there indeed she had a decided “pull” over the others. Not one made the least pretence of being word perfect; several of them could hardly be said to have looked at their lines. For instance, Mrs. Spencer-Jobling was a particularly flagrant offender; but one and all were animated by a robust conviction that “they would be all right on the night”—in this case on Tuesday afternoon.

By comparison with these temper-trying people, Girlie shone. She really did know her words, and although her manner of delivering them left much to be desired, she was docile, intelligent, almost painfully anxious to learn, so that on a first acquaintance and superficially regarded, Mr. Jupp was inclined to consider her “the pick of the lot.” But as he confided to Garden, over a pre-luncheon cocktail, “She was not exactly a Siddons.”

In truth, however, Mr. Jupp, although he was far from guessing the fact, had already exercised a kind of hypnotic influence upon the leading lady. His natural gift "of bringing out the best in people" had had an even greater effect upon Girlie than upon the less impressionable members of the cast. Unconsciously she had at once responded to the magnetic influence of this king among "producers." And yet the process may not have been wholly unconscious after all.

The poor Deputy was at the end of her tether. Not knowing which way to turn, not knowing what to do, convinced that at any moment the fate she so richly deserved must overtake her, she threw in all her reserves. She abandoned herself entirely to the business of the hour. Not daring to look before or after, she was like one under sentence of death. Before being cast forever into outer darkness, her courage seemed to make one last spasmodic flare.

In the course of that day there were two long rehearsals. But Girlie threw so much spirit into her acting and she was on such terms with the words of a diffuse and thankless part, that for the time being her tragic inefficiency was veiled. By comparison with the casual, imperceptive, bored people whose duty it was to play up to her, the leading lady actually shone.

"Yes, old bye—the best of the bunch," Montagu confided to the incredulous Garden over a well-earned whisky and soda during an interval for tea. "Not saying much of course. She can't act for sour apples but she does try."

"But, my son"—Garden the incredulous, to whom sooner or later all secrets were revealed, knew only too well the weakness of his man—"that ass over there said that you said this little filly could play all the ingénues off the West End stage."

"Did I?" Mr. Jupp spoke with the innocence of a rather large size in cherubs, whom he so much resembled.

"You did."

"Well, old bye," Montagu fondled a pendulous chin, "one says so many damn silly things in the course of a lifetime, doesn't one?"

Garden was fain to admit that it might be so, but of all the foolishness ever perpetrated Montagu Jupp's original dictum upon Lady Elfreda's acting was "the terminus."

All the same, to the general astonishment, including that of Sir Toby that hardened optimist, by the end of a long and strenuous day the stock of Lady Elfreda was showing a decided tendency to rise. Those who had worked with the leading lady at her worst, and a pretty hopeless worst it had seemed, could not understand the change. They resented the excellence of her memory—she actually knew all her stupid words by heart!—yet beyond everything else they resented the new air of intelligence that had come upon her.

The spirit and the interest she had been able to display in response to the demands of Mr. Montagu Jupp told heavily against her now. The others bitterly recalled her long week of silence, of indifference to her fellow guests, of her strange ignorance of every subject on which their tongues had run. They were now forced to conclude that all this had been a pose. It was a new form of "side." Moreover it was a form so subtle that it was very difficult to meet. Lady Elfreda's pretense of not knowing anything about anything was pure affectation in the eyes of those whose aim in life was to know everything about everything and not be ashamed of saying so. And they would not be able to forgive it. It was a subtle way of "scoring them off."

"Sidey little cat, I hate her," thus Mrs. Spencer-Jobling in the depths of her heart. "Anyway, on Tuesday, with a bit of luck, I think I ought to be able to kill her big scene in the third act."

A mad world! As soon as Lady Elfreda began to show signs of leading her comrades out of the slough of despond in which for a whole week they had been engulfed, her unpopularity crystallized into virile personal dislike. Henceforward, among the ladies of the house party at any rate, she was never mentioned by name; she was always referred to as the S. L. C.

## XXV

Had Girlie's state of mind allowed her to enjoy a sense of triumph, she might have fittingly indulged it when dinner time approached. She had been through a most severe ordeal and had emerged with flying colors. Really, she had "kept up her end" splendidly. How she had contrived to do so was more than she could say; a latent genius must have taken possession of her; but Mr. Montagu Jupp, that terrible Old Man of the Sea whose arrival she had dreaded beyond all things, whose mere appearance upon the scene was to prove the last straw, had congratulated her personally, if not exactly upon her acting, upon her knowledge of her part. Moreover, she still lived. Mr. Jupp, for some inexplicable reason, had not given her away. He had addressed her several times as "Lady Elfreda" without a hint of *arrière pensée*, and in all good faith. And the praises of this remarkable man had added so much to her prestige, that she was quite sure that Mrs. Spencer-Jobling and the other ladies were now furiously jealous.

Mr. Jupp's attitude was so incomprehensible and her own success so great a surprise to herself, that in spite of everything she had a secret satisfaction when she came to dress for dinner. But that emotion was brief. Hardly had the Deputy submitted herself to the hands of Pikey when she learnt that the maid was in a towering passion.

"What do you think?"—Grab!—"Me of all people"—Twist!—"I've a mind to have the law of 'em"—Shake!—"So I have"—Shake!

Thus the prelude. And the aria to follow was quite as impressive.

It seemed that Mrs. Pike having been duly informed that a diamond and sapphire ring was missing and that the master of the house, although not knowing whom to suspect, was consulting the police, had had the singular ill-fortune to overhear two of the servants discussing the matter. And in the course of the conversation one of them had said "that she wouldn't be at all surprised if that old Marchioness had taken it. Anyhow, she was quite sure that the Marchioness was not quite right in her head."

For several hours poor Pikey had brooded savagely upon the implication. It was the deepest insult—second-hand though it was—that she had ever received. She hardly knew how to bear it. Even now, as she prepared a bath for the Deputy, she was not at all sure that she would not lodge a complaint with the mistress of the house.

Such a reminder of the perils all around dashed Girlie at once. The new sense of elation was nipped before it had time to bloom. This unlucky disappearance of the pearl necklace added very dark tints to the picture, for when the inevitable exposure occurred it was in the nature of things that suspicion would fall upon herself. Even as it was Pikey was so incensed by what she had heard that she was quite likely to court disaster by making a fuss.

After a bath which was less enjoyable than it might have been, Girlie did her best to combat this half-formed resolution of the maid. Before doing so, however, she gently but firmly took charge of the hairbrushes and insisted upon applying them personally to her own scalp. It needed courage, but it called for even greater courage to allow Pikey to do her office in her present savage mood.

A hairbrush in each hand, the Deputy begged the Werewolf not to stir up strife unnecessarily. But somehow the appeal did but minister to Pikey's wrath.

"Yes, I'll tell the mistress of the house." The Werewolf bared her fangs.

"If you do," said the miserable Deputy, "everything may come out."

"I hope it does. I'm sick and tired of this."

"But if it does come out, they are certain to suspect me and I may have to go to prison."

It was the falsest of all false moves. Girlie realized the fact almost as soon as it was made. But this cruel situation was always driving her too hard.

"So much the better if you do have to go to prison." Pikey's words were scornful and deliberate. "I hope you will, I'm sure."

The callous speech took away Girlie's breath. But for the moment only. In the next she had unconsciously proved that she was not the Girlie of a week ago. "If you give me away"—the thin, high-pitched voice quivered ominously—"and I do have to go to prison, I'll take good care, Mrs. Pike, that you come, too."

The words gave pause to Mrs. Pike.

"They can't touch me—not the police can't," she said after a brief period of reflection. "I am not pretending to be her ladyship. I am not pretending to be any one."

"No, you're not," said Girlie. "But"—inspired by the bizarre knowledge that may lurk in an out-of-the-way corner of the brain of a solicitor's daughter—"you are an accessory after the fact, please don't forget that."

The chance shot went home. Pikey was reduced to savage mumblings. For the time being, at least, she had met with her quietus.

XXVI

When Girlie went down to dinner she was sustained by a subtle feeling of inward power. For the first time in her life she was upheld by perhaps the most desirable of all human emotions. As she entered the drawing room she caught the eye of Mr. Montagu Jupp. And, miracle of miracles, it was an approving eye. There was no doubt about that, since Girlie belonged to the sex that does not make mistakes in those little matters!

Yes, it was an approving eye. In the sight of Montagu and his peers, when the little Catkin lady came into the room timidly, with that rather hunted-fawn-look in her gray eyes, with the slight flush in her cheeks that went so well with the smart pink frock and the twist of ribbon in her fluffy fair hair, she really was a pretty little Puss. No wonder, thought the critics, that the worthy Duckingfield was up against his fate.

His prolonged tête-a-tête the previous evening in the alcove under the hall stairs had not passed without notice. In fact, it had been commented upon very freely. And while from the demeanor of my lord it was by no means clear that his suit was prospering, his "dash" was rather admired. That is to say, it was rather admired by the members of his own sex, who are always apt to cherish that quality, particularly in one of their middle-aged representatives. As far as the ladies were concerned, however, they could see absolutely nothing in the little noodle and they would not allow "that she was even pretty." Still the episode itself, the look of my lord and the flush on the face of the S. L. C. lent a touch of romance to the evening. And romance is an elusive thing that is always welcome, even when furnished by the lives of other people.

Dinner was almost hilarious. All agreed that the great Montagu was beginning to do wonders already. He had even contrived in his magnetic way to draw a few sparks out of Lady Elfreda. This evening she was like a new person. She was a thing of wreathed smiles, of spasmodic giggles, and there could be no doubt that her acting was improving. But it was Montagu himself who was the key. He had his jest with everybody. No one was safe from his chaff. He took upon himself the rôle of the whimsical father of a comically stupid family. No one resented his humor although neither age nor sex was spared. He disparaged the food and the wine, he complained that his hostess was getting fat, he objected to the way in which Mrs. Spencer-Jobling did her hair. Everybody was sent into fits of laughter by his knack of saying the things that are not said; but the audacious art with which he masked their grim and sometimes brutal candor left him perfect master of the field.

The amazing Montagu, to the delight of the others, even went to the length of asking Lord Duckingfield “whether he had written yet to papa?” It was vain for the stolid Midlander to assume an air of childlike innocence. The table rocked with a laughter whose volume seemed to imperil the wine glasses and the crockery, when my lord was told that he had better make haste and do so “or that little Perisher will get there before you,” the statement being punctuated by an accusing finger in the direction of Sir Toby.

The revels of the evening, of which a lively meal was the prelude, were not perhaps the fine flowers of taste, but that they were greatly enjoyed by all concerned there could be no doubt. If exceptions there were to the rule they were furnished by the Deputy and Lord Duckingfield. Yet Lady Elfreda’s suitor was too much a man of the world to mind particularly; he may even have been rather flattered than otherwise to find himself so famous; while, as for Girlie, having been through so much and having so much more to go through, she feasted and laughed bravely, so that when the time came to retire to the drawing room with the other ladies she felt that she simply didn’t care what happened.

All the same, a brief withdrawal from the sphere of influence of Mr. Montagu Jupp convinced the Deputy that her fit of abandon was but temporary. Defenseless in the drawing room, at the tender mercies of her own sex, fear soon laid an icy finger upon her. So resolutely did the other ladies give her the cold shoulder—even the hostess who had been so kind appeared for some reason no longer her friend—that horrible doubts flooded back into her mind. How much did they know? What had they guessed? Suddenly Mrs. Spencer-Jobling made a sinister reference to clever thieves who got into smart houses and how they sometimes flaunted a title for the purpose, whereupon the well-informed Mrs. Conrad Jones cited the case of an adventurous lady from a hat shop who was able to steal diamonds by passing herself off as the daughter of a peer and thereby earned seven years penal servitude.



Icy fingers ran along the spine of the Deputy. Here was the writing on the wall. The half exultant tones of Mrs. Spencer-Jobling and Mrs. Conrad Jones seemed to leave no margin of hope. Surely they must know everything! The coffee cup began to shake in Girlie's hand. Even the tall footman eyed her disdainfully. Only a remarkable effort of the will saved her from dropping the milk jug.

After a terrible twenty minutes, in which however nothing happened, the men came in, and as usual they brought with them an immediate change of atmosphere. Their geniality again banished for the time being the awful specter that stalked ever in the background of Girlie's mind. She laughed hysterically as Mr. Jupp cakewalked to the piano and proceeded, by request, to give his famous imitation of a hen laying an egg with musical accompaniment. He then rolled back his cuffs and struck a series of dominant chords. "Now, ladies and gemmen." It was an exact imitation of "Pony" Moore, the prince of Christy minstrels. "Set to partners, please. Now, my lord—her ladyship is ready for you. And I've asked the butler to have a curtain drawn across the alcove in the hall, so you may treat it as a private box."

Shrieks of approval greeted this sally. Girlie's mingled with them, although she was ready to sink through the floor. She dare not look in the direction of Lord Duckingfield, but that robust gentleman was made of sterner stuff. There was a light in his eye which informed Mr. Montagu Jupp that any other man in England would have incurred a punch on the nose. Montagu, however, a licensed jester who turned the most sacred things to mirth and ribaldry with none to gainsay him, continued to bang the piano, and Lord Duckingfield with the air of the very good fellow he undoubtedly was, turned to Lady Elfreda, bowed and gallantly offered his arm.

The history of the previous evening repeated itself. If possible, the proceedings were a little more riotous. Mr. Jupp continued to wave his magic wand and he had only to do that for mirth and harmony to prevail. Who could withstand his abounding spirits, his joy in life, his Gargantuan humor? He was a great natural force, he filled the bill, the general effect of him was overwhelming, irresistible.

After a few minutes of discreet maneuvering upon the hall floor, Girlie's partner, to her intense dismay, steered boldly for the alcove beneath the stairs. There was no false shame about Lord Duckingfield. Too many battles had he fought and won to permit a little crude badinage to turn him from a fixed purpose. He was in deadly earnest, whether the others guessed it or not; and in any case they didn't matter. His mind was made up. If this little girl would marry him she would make him a very proud and happy man.

"Well?" he said, as he sank into a chair by her side.

How nice he was! That was the thought that passed through Girlie's mind as his honest eyes came slowly to the level of hers. She was in a state of excitement akin to hysteria, but even at that moment his worth and his kindness dominated her.

Far as she was in the mire she was not quite lost even now to a sense of shame. As she felt his eyes upon her she realized that this was the time to tell him all. She must not count the cost. He was far too good to be played with so cruelly. Besides, she owed it to herself, to her ignoble self, to make what reparation she could. Let it be made while there was still an opportunity.

For his own part he was baffled by her odd constraint. There was something on her mind. He could only guess at what it was. But he was ready to put his fortune to the proof.

"I am sure I could make you happy." His hand touched hers, but she had the wit to keep her eyes from his.

Had she not known before, she knew then that it was in his power to bring her happiness. And it was just that fact which seemed to catch her by the heel as she was about to fling herself over the precipice.

If she did her plain duty and confessed everything, and heaven knew that she was trying now to school her tongue to the task, it would be at a terrible cost. And, face to face with this necessity, she felt she simply could not pay the price. She would be bound to lose him. And she liked this man so much that she could not muster the force of will, at any rate just then, wantonly to put herself out of court altogether.

Such a failure was illogical, but human weakness is generally that. She knew perfectly well that whatever happened this man could never be hers. He was altogether beyond and above her and her circumstances. It would make no difference really if he learned the truth from her lips to-night, or if he learned it a few days hence by the logic of events.

She saw her duty now a dead sure thing. But she had not the power of will to do it, not to-night at least. She heard the odd change in his voice as her silence began to hurt him; even if she could not actually see the eyes of anxiety and bewilderment with which he looked at her, she knew what his feelings were.

For himself he was puzzled, baffled, disconcerted. He was sure that Lady Elfreda liked him. Her shyness, her blushes, her charming hesitations told him that. What was it then that held her back? Why could she not give a straightforward answer to a plain question? There could be but one explanation. It was one he was loth to accept, yet being the kind of man he was, he knew how to do so.

"You don't think I'm good enough." The pressure of a decidedly masculine hand tightened upon her fingers. "Well, my dear, I don't blame you. I am what I am." He sighed heavily. "And you are what you are. All the same, I think I could have made you happy."

Quick tears sprang to Girlie's eyes. The problem for her now was not to let him see them. But this, alas, was beyond her present resources. Her tears were not to be concealed. Lord Duckingfield permitted himself a whimsical sigh. She was a little fool. And at that moment it called for a good deal of self-control not to tell her so.

XXVII

In the schoolroom at The Laurels that evening, Miss Cass was condemned to a lonely and unappetizing meal. Banished in disgrace from the dinner table, debarred the drawing room and its social joys, "sent to Coventry" because of her own wickedness, she had only hard thoughts and the meager fare of war upon which to subsist.

To-night meat had given out at The Laurels, as it so often did in the present time of famine, and Miss Cass had to be content with overboiled codfish and an insipid sauce, followed by tapioca pudding. Elfreda's general dislike of her surroundings had not been made less when she had found tapioca pudding to be a standing dish in The Laurels nursery, just as under the régime of Pikey at Castle Carabbas it had enjoyed similar preëminence. Moreover, it was of the true consistency, thick, slabby and odious, in every way a worthy rival of that which Elfreda and her sisters had fondly believed to be without a peer in any human household.

Poetic justice, of course. It served her right. She was paid out finely. Anyhow, a plateful of this delicacy gave one a sense of having eaten it, which was more than could be said for the inadequate portion of codfish; and this was something, for Elfreda's appetite being extremely healthy, a week of the daily schoolroom ration had sharpened it to the keenness of a razor's edge.

Fortitude was certainly needed for such a situation, but Elfreda was fully determined "to stick it out." Just what was involved in that process would have been difficult to say. She had no definite scheme in her mind, but apart from sheer physical discomfort and boredom, which were by no means to be lightly faced, she was still enjoying the comedy she had so audaciously created. Her mood remained highly rebellious. A second letter from her mother, redirected by Pikey from Clavering Park, was so full of calm assumptions, that it merely added fuel to the flame. But when all was said, it was the position in which she found herself now that really made the thing worth while. The fighting blood of her turbulent forbears had been aroused. She was determined to avenge the covert insults of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson and of her niece, Miss Dolores Parbury.

This evening, all the same, low diet and a sense of loneliness caused her resolution to weaken a bit. The thing was growing horribly dull. Banishment had clipped her wings. Isolation had taken a good deal of spice out of the entertainment. And, to add to a growing depression, she lacked resources within herself. She cared little for reading, and even had she had a taste for it, the books on the schoolroom shelf were not enticing. Nor was she expert with her needle. Nay, she was frankly bored by the use of it, which was a pity, since Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson had been at pains to inform Miss Cass that governesses at The Laurels were expected to help with the children's mending.

Elfreda was doing her best to meet these requirements, but up till now the result had been disaster. No, she had no claims to be considered a needlewoman, and as the schoolroom clock struck nine, with a sigh of irritation she resigned her needle to the work-basket of the real Miss Cass and sought other fields of conquest. At the bottom of Miss Cass's trunk she had found a new novel in which the future Charlotte Brontë had rather recklessly invested quite a number of her shillings. Into this work Elfreda had already made several spasmodic dips, but by the time a quarter past nine had chimed from the chimneypiece she had at last reached the definite and final conclusion that she preferred "The Swiss Family Robinson."

Alas, even that classic work, which divided the honors of the shelf in the angle next the extremely chilly fireplace with Mrs. Turner's "Cautionary Tales" and "Eric, or Little by Little," failed to excite Elfreda's enthusiasm. She fixed a look of ferocious disgust on the work-basket, that equally unexciting alternative. What a life the Miss Casses of the world were condemned to live! She suppressed a shiver and controlled a yawn. As soon as the horrid hand of that horrid clock touched the half hour she would go to bed.

Man disposes! And no doubt the saying applies with equal truth to woman. For at twenty-seven minutes past nine there came a discreet knock on the schoolroom door.

"Come in," said Miss Cass, coldly.

The invitation was accepted by General Norris, who came in rather furtively. He was at pains to close the door behind him softly and then he said with an odd hesitation which made Elfreda smile, "I say, Miss Cass, excuse me, but can you lend me a book?"

Elfreda promptly offered the new novel which had been ravished from the tin trunk.

"Thanks so much," said the young man. As a proof of his gratitude, he seated himself on the schoolroom table. He produced a cigarette case tentatively. "I suppose there'll be an awful row if I smoke here," he said.

"Yes, there will be," said Elfreda. And then she added slowly, with the sang froid that was so fascinating to this young man, "but what does it matter if there is?"

No, this was not an ordinary girl. George Norris couldn't help being thrilled by her. "But, I say, it might be rather uncomfortable for you—mightn't it?"

"More uncomfortable than this?" Elfreda's smile embraced the fire in the miserable grate, the schoolroom linoleum, the red tablecloth stained freely with ink.

"But it's your living, you know." This was a very practical young fellow. In the next instant, however, he was blushing for his indiscretion. "I beg your pardon. Impertinent to say that. One oughtn't to have said it. But what I meant was it's seldom wise to quarrel with one's bread and butter."

"I am quarreling violently with mine," said Elfreda.

"In real earnest?" George Norris was thrilled again. "Do you mean that? Not giving up governessing, are you—if it's a fair question?"

"Yes, I hope I am," said Elfreda, with a heartfelt sigh.

"Hooray. That's capital." His satisfaction seemed extraordinarily sincere.

The curiosity of Elfreda was piqued by it. A gleam from those perilous eyes of hers called upon General Norris for an explanation.

"You're so much too good for this sort of thing." Involuntarily he took a cigarette from its case, placed it in his mouth and struck a match on the sole of his shoe.

"But I am not in the least clever." She saw the necessity of putting up some sort of a defense.

"No, you are something much better than clever. You know the world. You know the things that are things. And that's why"—one of his pleasant hesitations came upon him—"Mrs. T.-S.—she's my hostess, but I can't help saying it—and Miss P. have such a down on you. Rotten, I call it. But I don't pretend to understand women."

He looked at her and she looked at him. Suddenly he grew embarrassed by a sense of his own imprudence, but she was not in the least embarrassed. To hide a too palpable confusion he opened the book she had given him and his eye caught the name "Ethel H. Cass" on the fly leaf.

"Your name's Ethel," he said irrelevantly. But he felt bound to say something. "One of my favorite names." Trivial, perhaps—but he was really afraid of silence just now.

"I am always called Girlie at home." She spoke with a spice of deliberate enjoyment. After all, this was quite a promising little scene in the comedy.

He was not sure that he liked Girlie so much. She seemed perhaps a shade disappointed that he didn't, but those deep and dancing eyes with wonderful flecks of light in them somehow told him to look out.

"Where is your home—if I may ask?" He flew off rather nervously at a tangent.

"I live at Laxton." The sparkle of her eyes was almost wicked.

"Laxton," he said. For an instant he was let down a bit. Laxton was very suburban London.

"Always lived there?" It was by no means a bad imitation of serene indifference.

"Always. My father was a solicitor. He died some years ago."

"A solicitor." One of the learned professions—still George Norris would have put him down as something else. Suddenly he laughed, perhaps a shade queerly. "You'd never guess what my father was."



"I'm quite sure I couldn't." Not the eyes alone in the unconscious insolence of their candor, but also the coolly deliberate words held the very genius of provocation. He half understood why those unsportsmanlike women downstairs disliked this Miss Cass so profoundly.

"I expect you've had no end of an education," he said with a little sigh.

"Why do you think that?"

"I know you have."

She didn't think well to undeceive him.

"You know everything." A very naïf young man. "Seen no end of the world. I daresay you've been abroad teaching English to the children of foreign royalties."

She smiled enigmatically. But even if his shot was a good one it didn't explain her. This girl was a mystery. And no doubt she was "pulling his leg," just as she had pulled the leg of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson the other day at luncheon when she solemnly assured her that her father was a butler and her mother a lady's maid. As he remembered that piece of impertinence he had a sudden desire to box her adorable ears.

Although, he did not let his mind dwell very long on any such form of emotional luxury. "I wish I knew the ropes as you do." A cloud came upon a singularly frank and manly countenance. "You see, I want to go on with my job, but I'm afraid"—he sighed heavily—"I'm hardly up to it in peace time."

She asked why, having done so well in the war, he was not going to be equal to the peace?

"Now the fighting's over you need other things. Influence and education and so on."

"Don't you know anybody who could pull strings?" A chord of real sympathy fused a voice that had a knack at such odd, unexpected moments as these of sounding quite delightful.

"No—frankly, I don't. You see, in August, '14, I was a clerk in the office of an auctioneer. If my mother could have had her way I should have been given the education I stand so much in need of now. But my father thought it wouldn't answer. And in the circumstances and from his own point of view he was right."

"Surely"—her slow, deep voice seemed to grow more delightful than ever—"when one is the soldier you are, that sort of thing doesn't matter."

"I'm afraid it does." He dissented sadly. "If one is not to be sidetracked by peace requirements one must have every card in the game. You see, there won't be enough billets to go round and men of my sort will be the first to feel the pinch. I may not be quite up to my job, but somehow"—he drew long and whimsically at his cigarette—"I hardly see myself going back to a stool in an auctioneer's office."

She didn't either, but she didn't tell him so. There was really no need. He had done so much, and at the back of the curious diffidence which she did not altogether like and which was his involuntary tribute to her strong personality, was the power of will that gets what its possessor wants. And he interested her enormously. At the moment she had seen him first she had felt his attraction. Day by day it had grown. And now as he sat on the schoolroom table talking with the intimacy of a schoolboy she began to feel a little overpowered. He was very simple, very wholesome, very good to look at, and he had proved himself a particularly fine soldier.

It must have been her silence which told him more than she desired he should learn. Certainly her inscrutable eyes gave no information. For quite abruptly, apropos of nothing at all, he said, "I wonder if I might call you Girlie!"

Her odd, sudden laugh sounded a little wild to her own fastidious ear. The sense of the theater, her private curse, was really just a little too much for her just then. Delicious, perfectly delicious situation!

"Mind you"—his frankness was always skirting the indelicate—"it's not at all the right name for you. In fact, it's just about the last name you ought to have had. I daresay you got it as a baby, but why it should have stuck to you the dear Lord knows."

He suddenly moved towards her. But the look of her, the droop of the eyelids, the curved thrust of a strong chin informed him that this was not the time for a wise man to risk too much.

With a sigh he took refuge in his cigarette. More than ever was she an enigma, a mystery. This cool perfection of manner, this almost uncanny power of taking care of oneself seemed to give the lie almost as plainly to the Laxton solicitor's daughter as it did to the butler and the lady's maid. What was a girl of this sort doing in this galley? He was not altogether a fool, even if she treated him like one. Her arrogance was boundless, it simply asked for punishment, but at this tantalizing moment he realized ruefully that it called for heavier metal than George Norris to administer it.

His curiosity was horribly piqued. Confound the little vixen!—he began to swing his slippers feet—what wouldn't he give to bring her down from her pedestal! No girl, at any rate of the wage-earning class, was entitled to bear herself with this sort of devilment.

Suddenly he determined to give her a kiss. Never mind the consequences. He would risk the proving that he was not a gentleman. As far as that went, had he not sufficiently attested the fact already? Yes, that was just the secret of the whole affair. And this impudent "solicitor's daughter" stunt was her way of letting him know it. He began to understand the deadly resentment of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson and dear Dolores.

If ever a girl did deserve to be taken down a peg! Still at the very last moment, he learned that it was not so easy for George Norris to play the cad. He had a desire to press the very life out of this splendid little beast. The mere look of her was a challenge and a defiance, but he was bound to remember that she was a dependent in the house, very much the underdog, without a means of defending herself. No, whatever her deserts, it could hardly be called cricket....

With a start he grew aware that those curious eyes were fixed steadily upon his own; they might even be said to look right through them. He had just time to catch the faintly perceptible curl of a scornful lip, when without warning the door behind him opened. Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson came magnificently in, a figure of avenging fate in black satin and jet embroidery.

George Norris was still seated on the table and Miss Cass in a low chair of decrepit wicker work, was looking up at him with a smile of challenge in her eyes.

"So here you are, George." The overtones of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson's voice had more resonance than beauty. "I've been looking for you everywhere. We are going to have a little music."

"So sorry." George was not impenitent. "But I just came out you know to smoke a cigarette."

"Yes, you said so." It was evidently not the remark Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson wanted to make, yet a gathering frown declared that becoming words refused to occur to her at the moment. As an alternative, she turned frigidly to the governess.

"Have you darned the children's socks, Miss Cass?" The answer was a cheerful affirmative.

"Then, as coal and electric lights are rationed, perhaps you will not mind going to bed."

Miss Cass said, with a smile whose candor seemed to add to its intensity, that she would not mind at all.

Still as George Norris got off the table he was decidedly glad that at the last moment he had been able to curb a natural inclination. Never had he felt so sorry for any one as he felt at that moment for Miss Cass. Nor had he ever been so much attracted by any one. A young man of practical rather than ardent temperament, he hoped he was not going to make a fool of himself or to lose his head.

XXVIII

By the powers that obtained in the drawing room the point was much debated whether Miss Cass could or could not be allowed to accompany the children on Tuesday afternoon to the Assembly Rooms. There was much to be said both "for" and "against." Had it been left to Miss Parbury to decide the question "the againsts" would have had it easily. She disliked Miss Cass with a concentration that was almost terrible. Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson had come to dislike her also with an almost equal intensity, but in her case natural feelings were tempered by political considerations.

In the first place Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson had taken six tickets for the performance of "The Lady of Laxton" and these included one for Miss Cass. It was now proposed that Colonel Trenchard-Simpson should occupy a stall in her stead, but it seemed that he had important business on Tuesday afternoon; besides, as he said, "he was blowed if he fancied sitting up amongst half the old Tabbies in the county."

This strengthened the hand of the "fors" considerably, but in the end that which really gained the day for Miss Cass may have been her boasted acquaintance with the Lancelots and above all, her singular intimacy with the star artiste, Lady Elfreda Catkin. General Norris also may indirectly have brought a certain amount of pressure to bear, because right up till Tuesday at breakfast when it was announced that the "fors" definitely had it, he was uncertain whether his leg, which for several days past had been "throbbing," would allow him to attend the performance of the "Lady of Laxton."

Strange as it may seem, as soon as the decision went finally in favor of Miss Cass "the throbbing" grew much less and General Norris felt he would be able to undertake the journey into Clavering.

As far as it went, all this was very well, but when the gracious decision was communicated to Miss Cass, that perverse lady felt she would have much preferred to stay at home. Happily she did not say so to Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson, but as she considered the problem over an irritating and inadequate early luncheon in the schoolroom, with Miss Joan one side of her and Master Peter the other, she came within an ace of flatly refusing to go.

Her charges were not entirely responsible for Miss Cass's frame of mind. It is true that ten days of intimacy with their ways had caused their governess to dislike them more cordially than she had ever thought it possible to dislike any human beings, but there were other reasons. The choicest scene in the comedy was at hand, but she was by no means sure that she had not lost her taste for it now.

A régime of underfeeding and solitude may have shaken her nerve a little. Her appetite for adventure may have lost something of its edge. Still, such an opportunity to see yourself as others see you was an all-potent lure, and even if she was going to be revolted by the spectacle, as most likely would prove to be the case, it would at least help to relieve a tedium that was becoming intolerable. Besides she was not one to funk the last fence even at the end of a most punishing day.

As the day was fine and there was only a limited amount of accommodation in the family chariot, Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson decreed that the children should walk with their governess to the Assembly Rooms. The distance was rather more than a mile, and in the course of the journey Elfreda was able to indulge in a little constructive thinking.

She could not forget that she was now faced with the footing of the bill. In the course of the next day or so it would have to be met. She had made a definite promise to Miss Cass to declare the true state of affairs and shoulder the entire responsibility. There would be the devil to pay all round. Her father would be furious, her mother would never forgive her, but having the natural temperament of a fighter she was not afraid of either. Besides, she consoled herself with the thought that it served them right. It might teach them not to be quite so cynical in arranging other people's lives.

There was a place, however, where she now perceived the shoe was going to pinch. She had just discovered that she was in love with General Norris. Had she been quite honest with herself she would have made that discovery on the very evening of her arrival. Looking back across the expanse of fantastic difficulties in which she had landed herself, she saw that it was General Norris who had supplied the motive power from day to day. Without the charm of that most alluring personality she would never have been able "to stick it." Life as they lived it at The Laurels would have defeated her after one irksome and humiliating twenty-four hours.

A hardened sinner, she was wholly unrepentant. Quite a number of undesirable people had been gorgeously "scored off." It was not a case for regrets on their account, but as, flanked by Miss Joan and Master Peter on either hand, she trudged resolutely into Clavering to witness the climax of her audacity at the Assembly Rooms and proceeded to draw up a kind of moral balance sheet as she did so, she realized pretty clearly that there was one item in it that must throw a considerable strain on her resources. She was in love with George Norris. And, still worse, he was in love with her.

Readers of Thackeray will not need to be told that the Clavering Assembly Rooms are in the High Street, which is the second turn on the left when you have crossed the charming little bridge over the River Morwen. On arrival Miss Cass and her charges found they had a few minutes to spare, as the performance was not announced to begin until half-past two. All the same the press of carriages in the High Street was considerable. In fact, it might almost be said to amount to congestion.

The performance for the first time on any stage of "The Lady of Laxton," by Sir Toby Philpot, Bart., was under such distinguished auspices that it was recognized locally as quite a function. For a full quarter of an hour before the curtain went up the weirdest of vehicles with the weirdest of occupants—how they would have delighted the heart of Michael Angelo Titmarsh, Esquire!—streamed incessantly into the High Street. They were so many, so various, so infrequently seen that even Mr. Shuker, the dealer in antiques whose shop was next door to the Assembly Rooms, who was the recognized local authority on "The County," was almost if not quite defeated by such an array. Had it been humanly possible for The County to baffle Mr. Shuker, on this historical occasion Mr. Shuker would have been baffled undoubtedly.

For instance, that closed one-horse brougham whose lozenged panel displayed a couchant lion and a rampant unicorn with the simple but appropriate motto *Festina Lente* was—well, never mind who. There really isn't time just now to go fully into the matter. The Armistice is hardly more than a fortnight old, you know. But you may take it, my dear Titmarsh, our friend Mr. Shuker could have told you.



Elfreda, holding her charges by the hand, passed resolutely up the three steps into the vestibule and mingled with the throng. And what a throng! She seemed to have known these funny people all her life. Surely that old thing in the Victorian bonnet was bowing to her. Could it be old Lady S.? An antique voice level with her right ear was saying with its curious drawl, "My brother Alec was at Eton with her father." Into her left ear a voice very similar was saying, "The dear Duke, I suppose, would be her grandfather." And at the back a third voice remarked, "The youngest of six, I believe, but they have all married well. A very gifted family."

It was a relief to Elfreda's feelings when she got through the crowd into the hall itself. The platform embellished with footlights and a drop curtain had been transformed into a stage. So great was the flux of grandees from miles around that the party from The Laurels had been relegated to the back row of the stalls. Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson saw in this circumstance one more subtle affront to her social position; all the same the family chariot had arrived a clear five minutes before Miss Cass, Master Peter and Miss Joan because, as Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson shrewdly observed to Miss Parbury and General Norris, "the people were likely to be more amusing than the performance."

In a sense, this prophecy was strikingly borne out. The performance, at any rate in its early phases, promised very little in the way of amusement. The play itself was almost unbelievably infantile, but this would not have mattered had not the acting been at the same level. Hardly had the curtain been up five minutes before it was clear that the patience of the audience was going to be sorely tried.

By that time, it was fully realized “behind” that they were “for it.” The brief opening scene between a couple of comic servants, although calling for liberal prompts from the indefatigable Mr. Jupp, really passed off very well; but its defect was, as the candid critic of the Dramatic Pictorial was not slow to inform the author, it didn’t last long enough. The action of the play really began with the entrance of Sir Toby himself and with it began the trouble. The little baronet, of course, had cast himself for the part of the hero; it was only human that he should do so, but nature having endowed him with very few inches, a voice so loud as to verge upon the uncanny and an aggressiveness of manner which a certain amount of stage nervousness served rather cruelly to accentuate, those skilled in the signs began to fear the worst, even before the worst had happened.

When the time came for the entrance of Lady Elfreda it was painfully realized, not by her fellow players merely, but by their friends in front, that upon her frail shoulders the whole weight of the play would rest. Unfortunately the house was not composed exclusively of the polite public of the stalls; a less polite, a more general public was herded in other parts of the building. There was a liberal sprinkling of outspoken warriors in khaki and hospital blue. From the beginning they had been inclined “to guy” Sir Toby.

It was a terribly anxious moment when the heroine came on. All felt her entrance to be the crux of the play. According to the dramatist’s instructions she had to greet Lord Longacre rapturously as an old and dear friend. But even Mr. Montagu Jupp had doubts as to whether the leading lady would be able to achieve rapture. Had that man of infinite wisdom but known it, the problem for poor Girlie was whether the leading lady would be able to come on at all.

By the time an expert, who had come from London for the purpose, had duly painted her face and penciled her eyebrows and the call boy had announced that the curtain was up, she had to muster the courage to enter the wings and await her "cue." She never knew how she was able to accomplish this. In point of fact she was in such a state of nerves that it was only the personal intervention of Mr. Jupp which saved her from coming upon the scene a full two minutes too soon.

When at last she did come on, partly by her own volition and partly propelled by Mr. Jupp, she was received with a special round of applause. It was thoroughly well meant, because everyone in the house understood how much depended upon her, and there is nothing like encouragement. But, alas, as far as Girlie was concerned, the effect of that round of applause was paralyzing. Somehow it seemed to complete the grisly process of her undoing.

Standing stock still and looking ready to faint, not a word crossed her lips. Sir Toby, however, in response to instructions, whispered sternly from the wings, crossed the stage heroically and grasped her by the hand. Another long moment of petrified silence followed and then he led her to a chair. Girlie, hardly conscious that the eyes of a bewildered and resentful audience were fixed upon her, sank down overcome by guilt, terror and exhaustion.

## XXIX

To draw a veil over the first act of the "Lady of Laxton" is the part of mercy. Speaking out of a long and therefore chequered theatrical experience, Messrs. Garden and Montagu Jupp quite agreed with one another that it was absolutely unique. They had never witnessed anything like it. From first to last not a word of Lady Elfreda's performance was audible, a fact which threw into uncanny relief Sir Toby Philpot's robust interpretation of the beau rôle. The best friend of the worst enemy of the little man had never accused him of being inaudible on any occasion. And now feeling the entire fortunes of the play rested wholly upon himself, he gave rein to his amazing vocal powers. Thus the joint efforts of the hero and the heroine achieved a result never likely to be forgotten by those who were present.

At first the audience did its best to bear up. The polite public in the stalls sat silent and motionless, but it soon became clear that the less polite public in other parts of the house was not going to behave with equal fortitude. Ominous coughs began to arise. A wag in hospital blue at the back requested Cuthbert to give the girl a chance. Catcalls followed. Then came boos, cheers and counter cheers. Finally the curtain descended with a remarkable abruptness which, however, was a real relief to everybody.

Girlie returned to the improvised green room in a state of collapse. Suddenly her overdriven nerves gave way. To the consternation of the other members of the cast, whose cup was already full, she uttered a kind of howl and broke into hysterical weeping. No one had power to pacify her. For once even the art and the tact of Mr. Montagu Jupp were at fault. Pikey, grim and reluctant, was summoned from the audience, but the appearance of the maid upon the scene seemed to increase, if anything, the leading lady's distress.

It was clear, of course, that the play was at an end. At least, it was clear to all except the author of the piece. Even now, in spite of all that had happened, the valiant Sir Toby declined to admit defeat. He boldly proposed to carry on. In the second act Lady Elfreda's part could be read by Mrs. Minever.

"Be sugared to that, my boy," said Mr. Montagu Jupp.

Even now, in spite of a series of suppressed sobs from the green room sofa, the still undefeated Sir Toby showed signs of a fight. But the firmness of Montagu's veto verged upon brutal candor. "They'll never stand another act of you, my son," said the great man in a Napoleonic aside.

"Let alone of your so-called play," said the equally candid Garden. "Don't you recognize 'the bird' when you hear it, you little ass?"

"'Twas Lady Elfreda let the whole thing down," the little man persisted.

"Well, that's a matter of opinion, my boy," said the genial Montagu. "But I think myself, if we are going to carry on, that piano yonder had better be moved on to the stage and if they'll stand for it I'll give them a few selections from my refined musical entertainment."

"The very thing, Juppy." Garden laughed and then he winked at various members of the company. But it was seen at once that the great man, inimitable in resource, had found a possible way out.

All the same, there was one exception to the general chorus of approval. The author of the "Lady of Laxton" lifted up his voice in a loud wail of protest. "But the second act is mag-nif-i-cent, simply mag-nif-i-cent."

"Even if it's as good as 'The Importance of Being Earnest' it will not be played, my son," said Garden with grim finality. "Not on this occasion."

While the yellow chrysanthemum lady did her best to calm Lady Elfreda's shattered nerves, the grand piano was trundled forth into the middle of the proscenium, the curtain went up, and notwithstanding incipient boos and catcalls from the obscurer parts of the house, Mr. Jupp announced that owing to the sudden indisposition of Lady Elfreda Catkin, the remainder of the program would take the form of a refined musical entertainment. Thereupon the great man, beaming with good humor, sat down at the piano, struck a chord, slewed round on the piano stool to face the already much relieved audience, and said, "Ladies and gemmen, the first item on the program is that old but touching ballad, 'Down Went Maginty to the Bottom of the Sea.'"

Corney Grain himself could hardly have bettered Montagu's performance. The effect was magical, not merely upon the turbulent spirits at the back of the hall, but also upon the more patient sufferers in the more expensive seats. Not only did Montagu render the ditty in an inimitable manner, but he also induced the warriors in khaki and hospital blue to join in the chorus.

As a matter of fact very little in the way of inducement was needed. The lines: I feel sure he must be wet, For they haven't found him yet. were given with enormous gusto.

The change which came over the audience was quite remarkable. In the reaction from the boredom of the first act of Sir Toby's comedy, "the house" began to bubble with enthusiasm. The broad human appeal of Mr. Jupp was irresistible. "Down Went Maginty" was so rapturously received that he had no compunction about following with "Oh, Dem Golden Slippers," which went equally well and "I Fear No Foe in Swan Pyjamas." In fact, "the old Pony Moore touch" was simply invaluable. Even the stern old dowagers whose brothers "had been at Eton with the dear Duke" were enchanted. For a full three-quarters of an hour Mr. Jupp was kept hard at it with songs and patter, jokes and conjuring tricks. No man could have worked more heroically in the cause of charity. The situation was saved.

XXX

While Mr. Jupp so nobly held the breach, a doctor was summoned from the audience to attend Lady Elfreda. On his advice she was sent home at once to bed in the care of her maid. She was so overwrought that the doctor, fearing serious consequences, followed her to Clavering Park, stopping on the way at a chemist's in the town to procure a bromide.

Lord Duckingfield, a much embarrassed witness of the play's fiasco, had already come to the conclusion even before the ignominious descent of the curtain at the end of Act I, that Lady Elfreda had been driven too hard by the strain of perpetual rehearsal and that she had been induced to undertake a rôle beyond her powers. He had now an anxious consultation with Mrs. Minever as to what ought to be done. Both were so genuinely concerned that it was decided to telegraph to Lady Elfreda's father and ask him to come at once to Clavering Park.

He was usually to be found in London at the Old Buck House Club. There a telegram was sent after a judicious formula had been decided upon so as not to alarm the paternal feelings of Lord Carabbas unduly.

The yellow chrysanthemum lady, who was really the soul of kindness, did not wait for the end of the performance, but accompanied by Lord Duckingfield she took a taxi as far as the post-office and personally dispatched the fateful telegram. Then, deeply anxious for Lady Elfreda's welfare, they went on together to Clavering Park.

By the time Mrs. Minever reached home, Girlie, much soothed by the ministrations of the doctor, had been put to bed. Here, in as much comfort as a bad and thoroughly alarmed conscience would permit, she was found with the grim and scandalized Pikey sitting by her side.

"How are you, my dear?" said the hostess, kindly.

The invalid, although still looking very white and strained, said feebly that she was feeling much better.

"I am so glad." Mrs. Minever took the hand of the sufferer gently within her own. "The whole thing has been a little too much for you, I'm afraid. You must keep very quiet for a day or two, and the doctor says you must not think of going to Mrs. Lancelot's, at least not until the end of the week."

Girlie's deep sigh expressed acute relief. With a feeling that was almost content she closed her eyes. In the next moment, however, she had opened them again in horror.

"The doctor says you must stay in bed—at any rate until your father comes."

"My father!" Girlie's gasp had a thrill in it.

"Yes, my dear." The voice of Mrs. Minever was very gentle. "Lord Duckingfield and I have just telegraphed to Lord Carabbas. We have told him not to be alarmed, but we have begged him to come down here to-night, if he can, or by the first train to-morrow."



It was as much as ever Girlie could do to repress a groan. But this fortitude was beyond the panic-stricken Pikey, who was following closely every word of the conversation. She walked to the window in a state of terror. At that moment she hardly knew how to keep from throwing herself out of it.

The hostess strictly enjoined the patient to get some sound and refreshing sleep and not to worry about anything, and then she left the room. As the kind lady withdrew she little guessed the scene of desolation upon which she softly closed the door. The Deputy and the duenna were left frozen with horror. They looked at one another in tragic dismay.

In the end it was left to the unfortunate Pikey to break the silence.

"Himself!" she gasped. Putting her hands before her eyes she began to shake miserably.

It needed only this show of impotence to re-awaken Girlie's latent hysteria. Tears began to flow down her white cheeks once again. A longing to kill her came upon the Werewolf.

In a little while, however, Girlie grew calmer. She was able to make a supreme effort for self-control. And, caught in the toils if ever human creature was, she was even nerved to a little constructive thinking.

"L-Lady Elfreda m-must know at once."

Pikey remained mute and rigid as a stone.

"You m-must go to her and tell her that her f-father is c-coming."

Far from Pikey's intention though it might be to accept dictation from Miss No-Class she could yet judge that the proposal was not lacking in practical wisdom. Still she did not relish turning out on a winter's evening on such an errand. But desperate diseases call for desperate remedies. After all, it was the only thing to be done. Elfreda was the key of the situation. And the sooner Elfreda understood what the situation now was the better for all concerned.

Finally, and with great reluctance, Pikey consented to set out for The Laurels immediately. She was really persuaded to do so less by the forlorn entreaties of the Deputy than by the hard logic of events. Weakly and foolishly false to her trust, Pikey felt that she had perhaps stronger reason than any one else to fear the coming of Himself.

XXXI

During the remainder of that terrible day Girlie stayed in bed. And to count the tardy minutes against Pikey's return was her only occupation. Alas, it began to seem presently that the duenna would never come back. Hour after hour passed. Girlie's heart sank to zero. Visions of ignominious disaster rose before her eyes. Lying there, passing in review all that had happened in the last incredible ten days it was impossible to recognize in such a queer adventuress the rather prim and certainly retiring person she had always known herself to be. Some strange virus had infected her. Force of example in the first place, no doubt, but allied also to a vaulting ambition which had o'erleaped itself.

Nine o'clock struck. Would Pikey never come back? Soon, however, the hostess came to see if her guest was quite comfortable, and to bid her good-night. The kind lady was full of solicitude. She felt sure that Lady Elfreda was a delicate flower and that the heavy task laid upon her had proved too much for her strength. The doctor had prescribed a sleeping draught which, in the absence of the maid, Mrs. Minever herself administered. The patient was then assured that the doctor would pay her a visit the next morning, and then the yellow chrysanthemum lady gave the sufferer a kiss and left her to a much needed night's repose.

Despite the draught, however, Girlie had never in her life felt so little like sleeping. Wide-eyed and miserable, she tossed on a damp pillow, awaiting the arrival of the one person who could help her now. Surely Elfreda must come to the rescue. And she must come to-night. There was no time to lose. For it seemed to the guilty sufferer that it was of the last importance that Mrs. Minever and her guests should be prepared for the truth before the truth was rudely revealed by Lord Carabbas.

Shortly after ten Pikey returned. But she returned alone. Very tired and sorely disgruntled she had only cold comfort to offer. Her reception, to say the least, had been ungracious. And Elfreda had merely laughed when she was told that her father had been sent for, but her message to Miss Cass was that she would come to Clavering Park in the course of the next day and clear things up. In the meantime, in the cool and cynical words of Elfreda, the best thing for Miss Cass was to stop in bed.

Even this simple alternative proved to be a counsel of perfection. Left to her own devices throughout the darkness of many interminable hours, Girlie's torments grew. The sleeping draught could not cope with her agitated brain. After a while, unable to lie still, she paced the large room. Why had she done as she had done? What madness had urged her? Was there no way of escape!

Between five and six o'clock, however, of that long vigil she came to a final resolve. She decided to go away. Exactly where her very small resources would take her she did not know, but in her present state of mind any place in the three kingdoms was to be preferred to Clavering Park.

Accordingly, fired with resolve, she packed a few necessities of travel into the most portable case she could find. She then dressed for a journey and with a sinking heart examined once again the contents of her purse. Her means, alas, were but two pounds seven shillings—two pounds seven shillings with which to face a cruelly inhospitable world!

That brutal fact must have given her pause had anything been capable of doing so now. But so little was she a reasonable being just then that the sheer hopelessness of such a flight could not turn her from her purpose. Before setting out on her travels she sat down at an escritoire and scribbled a hasty and tremulous line.

"I cannot bear this a moment longer. I am going away—I don't know where. E. H. Cass."

She sealed the note in an envelope duly addressed "To the Lady Elfreda Catkin." This done, she adjusted that lady's velours hat and fur coat, grasped her traveling bag and leather-handled umbrella and crept noiselessly, like the little thief she felt herself to be, out of King Edward's room and down the richly carpeted central staircase.

By now it was nearly half-past six. At present there was not a sign of the servants, but the light was already beginning to show above the famous elms in the park. Gentle-footed as a cat, Girlie crept like a ghost across the hall parquet. To do that cost her one pang more. That particular spot was full of memories. No matter what experiences the future held she would never be able to forget the kindly simple man who had wanted to marry her.

She stole through the shadows of a dim corridor to the heavily barred front door. It proved a nerve-racking business to withdraw its chains and bolts, yet it was not these things which suddenly brought her up short with an icy gasp of fear.

Without warning of any kind a hand was laid upon her shoulder. As she half turned a strange face confronted hers in the semi-darkness of the corridor.

"Early abroad." Whoever the speaker might be his appearance was a little strained, a little odd. His voice, with its queer, rather mocking laugh, seemed equally so. Something there was in the dark, heavily mustached, rather Semitic countenance, that sent a chill through Girlie's heart.

Powerless to speak, she felt her knees sinking under her. Instinct, that fatal instinct for the world and its ways, told her at once who and what this man was. His next sinister words were not needed to enlighten her, although they did so quite unmistakably.

"You had better go back to bed, hadn't you?" The voice was soft, but it was soft with menace. "You see, I've been looking out for this. Played it up rather high, haven't you—er—Miss?—I haven't the pleasure of knowing your name. But we shall know it soon enough, unless, of course"—the laugh was not at all kind—"you are in a position to prove to the satisfaction of Lord Carabbas that you are really his daughter."

Girlie, mute and shaking, realized that the end had come. She continued to listen sickly to the malicious and unpleasant voice. "As I say, we don't know who you are, we don't know what your record may be, but if without putting us to further trouble you will tell us where Mrs. Minever's sapphire and diamond ring is to be found I'll give you my word that the police will make it as easy for you as they can."

Bereft of speech, Girlie could only tremble. She had to lean against the wall for support. This man was a detective from Scotland Yard who, at the instance of Mrs. Minever, had come to Clavering Park to clear up the matter of the missing jewelry.

"Now be a sensible young woman and go straight back to your room without making a fuss. And just see that you stay there until I've had a chance to have a little talk with the lady of the house. If you go quietly and behave sensibly I'll undertake to do what I can for you."

There was only one thing for it now, and that was to take the detective's advice. This, accordingly, Girlie did. She returned to her room and sat forlornly by the window gazing on to the park awaiting further developments. After a time, in spite of the fur coat, the chill of a November morning fell upon her. Finding that her teeth were chattering, she decided to return to her down-quilted bed.

Here, in this temporary security, she toyed with the excellent breakfast which in the course of time was brought to her. And then she exerted her will to the uttermost in order to deal with events as they arose.

The first event to arise was the coming of Mrs. Minever. Upon the brisk entrance of that lady into the room shortly before ten, Girlie looked up from an uneasy pillow to scan the face of the hostess eagerly so that she might read her doom. But her doom was by no means easy to read. The hostess was her usual bright and cheerful self. She had, moreover, the air of solicitude of the previous night. Girlie, steeling herself to bear terrible reproaches, was quite at a loss to understand what had occurred.

"I do hope you have slept, my dear." There was absolutely no hint of the early morning drama of the hall door. "The doctor will be here soon. In the meantime, you must stay where you are and keep very quiet."

Immensely reassured by the tone Girlie decided to do as she was told. All the same she hardly knew how to hide her surprise. She had been looking forward to a very different scene.

In point of fact, Mrs. Minever was taking no chances. The detective had told his story. He had presented his theory for what it was worth, and to Mrs. Minever's keen indignation he had not scrupled to throw doubt upon the identity of the chief guest. Mrs. Minever had pooh-poohed the theory. It really seemed the most unlikely she had ever heard. Not only was there the evidence of the guest's coronetted luggage and personal belongings, there was the word of Mr. Montagu Jupp and also the fact that she had been accepted by the Lancelots. No, Mrs. Minever was not inclined to take risks of that kind. She was almost tempted to call the detective a fool for his pains. His theory was monstrous. The poor child was merely overwrought.

By this time, besides, there was another factor in the case. A telegram had been received from Lord Carabbas. Already that peer was en route by the 8.50 from Paddington, which was due at Clavering St. Mary's about midday. His arrival upon the scene would set every doubt at rest.

In the meantime, Mrs. Minever, like the wise woman she was, gave no countenance to these fantastic suspicions. Yet had she been at all inclined to do so she must have observed the look of unmistakable horror that came into the eyes of her guest when she was told that her father would arrive in a few hours. Mrs. Minever's one desire was to reassure the nervous and excitable creature. And so little perceptive was the good lady that presently she withdrew from King Edward's room strong in the belief that she had done so.

Smitten with an ever-growing fear, Girlie lay shivering with dread. The coming of Elfreda was the only hope left to her. Would that intransigent turn up at Clavering Park before her father? If she did not the consequences would be too dire to contemplate.

Hardly had Mrs. Minever left the room when the luckless Pikey came in. She was half paralyzed by the news. A look of absolute terror entered the eyes of the Werewolf. The bill about to be presented for payment was quite beyond the duenna's power to meet. She simply did not know how to face Himself. The whole situation was altogether too much for her.

As for the Deputy she could only continue to hope against hope for the arrival of Elfreda.

In a short time the doctor came to see the patient. He considered her pulse and concluded that she was much better, but advised her to stay in bed and promised to come again the next day. Girlie, however, did not follow this advice. For within an hour of the doctor's visit she found lying in bed to be more than she could bear. Tormented by a restlessness that was really painful, any change was welcome. Therefore she dressed once more. And as she did so a sort of courage came to her. She realized the plain fact that whether or no Elfreda chose to appear at Clavering Park further concealment would soon be out of the question.

At a moment when there was nobody about Girlie ventured downstairs as far as the hall. She was now faced with one of two alternatives. Either she must make a last attempt to get away before public exposure overtook her or she must abandon herself to the mercy of Lord Carabbas. Sitting in her favorite nook by the good log fire with a shawl draped round her shivering shoulders she did her best to grapple with a truly terrible problem. Alas, she soon found that it was not to be grappled with. Her brain refused to act. Her will was inert.

The minutes ticked on relentlessly. In the process of time the hall clock chimed twelve. Girlie in a paralysis of despair settled her miserable self yet more deeply into her shawl. It would need every ounce of will she could muster to sustain the accumulated weight of humiliation that was about to fall upon her.

XXXII

It happened, however, that Girlie Cass was soon to find herself involved in a middle course. The hall clock had scarcely ceased to strike when Lord Duckingfield came in from his morning walk. Almost at once his eye lit on the small abject figure cowering by the fire.

"Why, here you are, Lady Elfreda," he said, cheerily. "I hope you are feeling better."

"Oh, much better—much better, thank you." The timid, hesitating voice was very forlorn, but it could find no other words to speak.

"I'm so glad." And then the honest Midlander studied his watch. "Your father should be here in about half an hour—if his train is punctual."



A look of simple terror came into the eyes of the Deputy, but she was seated too much in the shadow for Lord Duckingfield to be able to see it. All the same, that gentleman stood looking at her rather oddly and then suddenly he sat down in a chair by her side. "I don't want to bore you." The tone was very humble. "But before your father comes, I should like you, my dear, if possible, to reconsider your decision."

Such words, spoken as they were with kindness, delicacy, self-evident sincerity, had the effect of precipitating Girlie's overthrow. She perceived the real goodness of this man. Wild instinct prompting her, she suddenly took the bit between her teeth. Before she quite understood what she was doing she began to tell him everything.

"Suppose"—her voice was so faint that it was scarcely audible—"suppose I don't happen to be the daughter of Lord Carabbas?"

"Yes, by all means," he said, with boyish glee. "Let us suppose you are plain Miss Brown. Why not? Rank doesn't make a pennyworth of difference as far as I am concerned. True, I've set up a title of my own. But it's only for advertising purposes." The laugh of my lord was very frank. "It helps me in business you know. In many ways, I don't mind telling you I should be more comfortable without any rank at all."

In the silence, the rather irksome silence which followed, this almost too-honest man began to feel, as he so often did, that "he had put his foot in it as usual." That phase, however, was brief. For suddenly he began to realize that he was listening to the recital of a story almost inconceivably strange.

Girlie's confession achieved a certain dignity. Her amazing account of a weak nature in the toils of a strong one gathered force and coherence as it went on. Lord Duckingfield could hardly believe his ears. As he turned to look at the scared and quivering creature by his side he became the prey of strong emotions. The one, however, by which he was dominated was anger. The little fraud, how dare she! How dare any slip of a girl play such a trick! For a moment a primitive savagery filled his heart. Yet being a man who prided himself on his sense of humor, after the first shock he was able to laugh.

His mirth was not very spontaneous, nevertheless. It sounded hollow. He would be a public laughing stock. But to do Lord Duckingfield justice, he saw at once that this aspect of the case was not the one that was going to hurt most. Rooted somewhere in his robust nature was a genuine regard for this inconceivably weak and foolish child. She was extremely pretty, her helplessness was pathetic, she appealed to the highly developed protective instinct of a strong-willed male of five and forty.

It was the most genuinely comic story he had ever heard. And it was entirely amazing. He did not doubt that every word was true. But for all his balance of mind and his largeness of view he could not escape a sense of chagrin. She had led him on to make a fool of himself. Apart from the question of her chicanery, which he shrewdly saw went no deeper than sheer folly, it was going to be very hard to forgive her. His personal dignity was shattered. True, there was nothing, absolutely nothing in the whole affair with which he need reproach himself, but for many a long year the little world in which he moved would tell the story against him.

No, he couldn't help feeling angry. Yet, as he looked at this little fool, as he looked into those gray eyes now filmed with tears that from the first had appealed to him so oddly, he clearly perceived that she was not the culprit-in-chief. There was sterner stuff, a force far more potent behind it all. The real Lady Elfreda, whoever she was, whoever she might be, was the prime mover in what had happened. At her door must be laid the guilt of this mad escapade. Common justice required that on her shoulders the whip must fall.

Still this absurd, this charmingly pretty Miss Cass ought not to be let off lightly. But the story she told revealed the naked truth. And somehow the naked truth, unflattering as it was to her and to himself, brought no dishonor. She had been incredibly weak, she had been morbidly vain, for out of the depths she had confessed that the Saturday Sentinel said she had "insight" and therefore she had been tempted to seize the providential chance of becoming a Miss Cholmondeley or a Mrs. Humphry Ward; therefore, in the circumstances of the case, it was impossible for a man cursed with a sense of humor to lay a heavy hand upon her. She didn't deserve to be let off lightly, yet he didn't feel inclined even now to hurt her very much.

One question there was, however, that he was impelled to put to her. And on the answer to it a great deal must depend. Why had she not told him sooner? Why had she encouraged him to make such a fool of himself? He felt obliged to ask this. And, towering over her, an avenging figure, he asked it sternly.

"Don't you see what a hole you've landed me in?" he said. "Don't you think you might have had the decency to stop me a bit sooner?"

Tears came into the scared eyes. But it was the tone of the words rather than the words themselves that drew them.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" The sight of her tears seemed to make him a shade less magisterial. In spite of himself he couldn't help softening a little. And in Miss Cass's present state of emotion the merest hint of softness was too much for her.

"I d-daren't," she sobbed. "I s-simply daren't."

"Why not?" It was half indignation, half overmastering curiosity.

"I l-like you so much I c-couldn't bear to give you up." The truth came out in a gulp.

Once more he laughed. But in the act of doing so he realized how much this rather rubbishy little thing had hurt him.

XXXIII

Defeated by the absurdity of the situation Lord Duckingfield suddenly ended his interview with Miss Cass. He still had a desire to chastise her. But there were certain reservations in his mind in regard to the little donkey. She had been inconceivably weak, inconceivably foolish, inconceivably vain; nevertheless it was the real Lady Elfreda who must be asked to pay the bill. Even the indignant fancy of my lord hardly knew how to paint the wanton cynicism of that young woman.

In the midst of the preposterous scene with the incredible Miss Cass the angry gentleman felt a craving for fresh air. He warded off that lady's threat of hysteria by turning his back upon her and striding to the hall door. Let him banish her from his mind—at any rate until he had been able to think over the matter in all its bearings and he had made some attempt to adjust his mental processes to a quite unparalleled affair.

However, as he learned all too soon, even that modest program was not going to be easy to fulfill. For as he came to the hall door he found himself in the midst of flurry and commotion. The Park omnibus was in the act of arrival from the station. With pomp and [Pg 246]circumstance it had just drawn up to the threshold and was solemnly disgorging a really imposing vision on to the front steps.

The honest Duckingfield, confronted by a purple visage with a monocle glowing in the middle, an overcoat trimmed with astrachan and a superb expanse of buff gaiter, had to take a very tight hold upon himself. The worthy Midlander was not in any way a brilliant fellow, but five and forty years of traffic with the world had imbued him with a keen sense of the human comedy. This somewhat superlative arrival of Lady Elfreda's father cast quite a strain upon his resources.

"Hallo, Ducks!" Lord Carabbas offered the large and genial hand of his race. "Good of you to send that wire. How's that unfortunate girl of mine?"

"Oh, better—she's much better." But the eye of Ducks was a little evasive; anyhow, it sedulously avoided the eye of the noble marquis.

"Devilish glad to hear it." Paterfamilias appeared to be greatly relieved. "I thought from your wire, that she was in for a bad time. Been overdoing it, evidently."

"Ye-es, overdoing it—been overdoing it." Ducks again avoided the eye of the anxious parent.

"Great strain, these theatrical performances, hey?"

"No doubt."

"Hope she hasn't upset the whole house."

"Oh, no—not at all." Ducks drew on his reserve of conventional politeness.

"Well, I'll go and have a look at 'Freda. See you anon."

Lord Carabbas passed into the house. Lord Duckingfield passed out of it. Perhaps it was a pity some imp of mischief did not prompt the worthy Midlander to stay and witness the progress of his distinguished friend. Lord Carabbas, a mass of judicious pomp and fair weather geniality, waddled slowly across the hall parquet. En route he passed a pretty little girl shivering by the log fire in the lee of the stairs. The gallant Irishman, with an unrivaled eye for female charms, noted her with a smile of approval.

It was a dank morning of November, but for nearly an hour the man from the Midlands traipsed solemnly round the park. His mind was in strange disorder; the oddest things were happening in it, but amid the flux of thought one phrase slowly crystallized. And the phrase was significant. "If she belonged to me," it ran, "by gad, I think I know what I should like to do with her." And the grip of a very honest man tightened on the stout ash plant in his hand.

XXXIV

While events at the Hall were moving so swiftly to a final crisis, at The Laurels also there had been developments.

Having witnessed the fiasco of the Assembly Rooms, Elfreda had now to face the fact that the game was up. So far as it went the game had been quite amusing, but—and the "but" was decidedly a big one—it was by no means clear that it was going to prove worth the candle.

Over a belated tea in the nursery, as Elfreda grimly reviewed the situation in all its bearings, she was almost tempted for a moment to deplore her mischievous folly. But only for a moment. There was nothing of the weakling about her. Illogically enough, she was deeply angry with Miss Cass for making such a pitiable exhibition of herself, yet when she came to think matters over amid the boredom and discomfort of thick bread and butter and lukewarm tea and the table talk of Master Peter and Miss Joan, she was ready to believe that the ignominious collapse of the play added a new spice to the adventure. A set of vulgar people had been properly "scored off" and for the time being that was all she cared.

Nevertheless, before the evening was out she had to withstand a threat of "cold feet." About seven o'clock the terrified Pikey arrived with the news that Himself had been telegraphed for in hot haste. The immediate effect was certainly to diminish Elfreda's sense of victory. She was not really afraid of her father, she was not afraid of any one, but when "The Dadda" was fully roused he was an awkward customer to tackle.

There was a rather bad quarter of an hour with Pikey. It was also a rather ignominious one. The foolish old thing had got "cold feet" so badly herself that she vowed, even with tears, that she would never return to Clavering Park at all. Stern threats were required to bring her to reason. And it was not until Elfreda had made a solemn promise to appear in the course of the next day at Clavering Park that Pikey could be induced to return that evening. She, at any rate, had a wholesome fear of "The Dadda."

Forced not very willingly into a definite promise, Elfreda had now to carry it out. Her immediate surroundings were decidedly uncomfortable, but they did not lack interest. Indeed, they had a romantic interest. Miss Dolores Parbury had marked down General Norris for her own, but the passing of each day merely confirmed the determination of the new governess to thwart that lady. He was such an engaging young man that, leaving out the personal equation, it would go to Elfreda's heart, nay, it might almost be said to impinge on her professional pride to abandon such a charming novice to the wolves. She was quite sure that as soon as she withdrew from the scene the wolves would gobble up George Norris.

The following morning, tense prelude to a momentous day, found Elfreda's mind divided against itself. Even if she was not looking forward to a meeting with "The Dadda" she was unrepentant for the mischief she had wrought; but now that she was in the presence of the fact she simply hated the idea of giving up George Norris. He was really very attractive. And, taking the problem he presented on the lowest ground of all, it would be unpleasantly like defeat to allow him to be carried off by somebody else.

The morning lessons in the schoolroom had always been irksome. And to-day they soon became intolerable. The governess with such grave issues weighing upon her made little or no attempt to give her mind to the daily routine. Besides she was in the blackest of moods. This morning she was hating everybody and everything. Her temper, which had suffered ten long days unnatural repression, had now a dangerous edge.

It was the amiable custom of Master Peter and Miss Joan to begin the day with a quarrel. And it was regarded as the first duty of the custodian of these spoiled darlings to calm their ugly little tempers without losing her own. From the first, as far as Elfreda was concerned, this had seemed to ask almost too much of human nature. A creature of curiously strong antipathies she disliked Miss Joan and Master Peter so intensely that the time had now come when she found it exceedingly difficult to stay in the same room with them.

"Don't, Jo-an, you are pulling my hair!"

"Pe-tah, you story—you wicked story!"

It was the beginning of the daily duet. And it was part of the price exacted by Nemesis of Miss Cass's deputy. The Lady Elfreda Catkins of the planet must not suppose that for the average nursery governess life is a bed of roses. No doubt it was in the interests of human nature as a whole that they should not. All the same, by the time the duet had been repeated for the eleventh successive morning, the Deputy-Miss Cass would have given much to slay Master Peter and Miss Joan.

The governess made several attempts to ensue peace. But this morning her task was not easy. She was feeling, perhaps too keenly, the pressure of events. No longer perfect mistress of a sure and balanced self, she allowed her small tyrants to perceive with the uncanny acuteness that small tyrants have, that just now the game was in their favor. And they were tempted to presume on their knowledge. The thoughts of Miss Cass seemed elsewhere. This morning there was less sting in her rebuke; on the surface, at all events, her manner towards them was not quite so uncompromising.



The duet went on. And so forbearing was Miss Cass that its most popular passages were repeated. New embellishments were even added to the original performance. For instance, when Miss Joan encored a particularly neat and effective pinch, Master Peter, disdaining mere words, suddenly got right home with a well directed hack on Miss Joan's shin.

Miss Joan responded with a little howl of fury. This protest having completely failed to attract the notice of Miss Cass, Miss Joan proceeded to deliver an honestly resounding box on Master Peter's ear.

The reply of Master Peter was to fling ink over Miss Joan's copy book.

And then things really began to happen. Miss Joan cast a hasty glance at the governess in order to be quite sure that private thoughts still engaged the whole of that lady's attention, and then she fairly went for Master Peter. First the kick was returned with interest and then ink in liberal quantities was daubed over Master Peter's face and collar. This last indignity, however, proved too much for the self-respect of a Briton. Master Peter's rejoinder took the form of a piercing howl.

Now the howl of Master Peter had such a quality that it drew Miss Cass abruptly from her reverie. Her private thoughts were of darkness and eclipse, of battle, murder and sudden death, but the sound of Master Peter and more particularly the sight of him seemed quite to harmonize with them. Master Peter proved just a little too much for Miss Cass in the present state of her nerves.

The reckless Miss Joan did not understand that she had come already to the edge of a sheer precipice. Therefore she gave Master Peter's hair one final tweak. The voice of Master Peter ascended to heaven. In almost the same instant something snapped in the brooding soul of Miss Cass. Pent-up forces were unsealed. The deep resentments of eleven long and weary days suddenly burst their bonds. Horse, foot and artillery, the new governess fell upon Miss Joan.

At the moment of onset Miss Joan merely wondered what had happened. She seemed to realize vaguely that it was something very unpleasant. As her spectacles flew off and her mouse-colored locks escaped the custody of their puce-colored ribbon, she found herself projected into a new experience. An experience quite surprisingly new. She couldn't breathe. Her eyeballs seemed to rattle against the back of her ears. And her knees were in continual danger of knocking chips off her chin.

The new governess was small, she might even be said to be "petite," but she was extraordinarily vigorous, nay she was more than vigorous. She was remarkably strong. Generations of stern self-discipline had curbed the natural spirit of a Berserk, which, all unknown to its possessor, still lurked below the surface. But eleven days, eleven long embittered days of Miss Joan and Master Peter, had unchained primeval forces. The new governess fell upon that child and shook her. She fell upon Miss Joan and shook her until it became a wonder that one breath remained in the small body. It was far from the act of a "lady," yet it was almost inhumanly exhilarating.

This terrific assault was at its height, and Master Peter, who had decided to join forces against the common foe, was indulging in shrill screams which Miss Joan would have been only too ready to second had she been in a condition to do so, when Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson opened the schoolroom door.

For a moment the fond mother stood mute and rigid, a tragedy queen.

"Miss Cass!"

The voice of hard horror was no longer flutelike.

"Miss Cass!"

It was clear that Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson expected the heavens to fall.

XXXV

Speaking figuratively, the heavens fell. The scene which appalled the mother of these cherished darlings was more than she could bear. As soon as Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson realized what was taking place before her eyes it was just as much as ever personal dignity could achieve to save her from falling tooth and nail upon the governess.

"Miss Cass, are you mad?"

For a few brief, glad moments Miss Cass may have been mad. But as the governess released the gasping Miss Joan and confronted Miss Joan's mamma she was perfect mistress of herself once more. All the same, there was a dangerous spark in the center of each sapphire blue eye.

"I consider it an outrage, Miss Cass!" The speech was punctuated with a stamp of fury.

"Little beast!" That may or may not have been the phrase that fell from under the breath of the scornful Miss Cass. But as she stood tense as an arrow returning look for look, it sounded uncommonly like it. The fingers of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson fairly itched to fly at the little vixen; indeed it was almost a miracle that they did not, but an ever-present sense of personal dignity was again her salvation.

As for Miss Cass, she was amazing. The light in her eyes positively invited the older and the weightier lady to a rough and tumble. It was that light, no doubt, which enabled Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson to realize that the situation was now at the extreme verge of the permitted for really well-bred people. Certainly, if the human eye can speak Miss Cass asked Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson "to come on."

Of course, as a very little reflection showed, it was quite impossible for Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson to oblige her. Besides, as soon as the outraged maternal feelings had steadied themselves a bit, they found a trick worth two of that.

For a week past, Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson had been a painful pilgrim in the valley of decision. Should she or should she not send away the new governess? With a feeling of “uplift” perilously akin to joy she decided suddenly to dismiss Miss Cass upon the spot.

It was the only thing to do. But the act itself in its barbaric simplicity was very stimulating.

“I must ask you to pack up your boxes, Miss Cass.” In Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson’s anger there was a quality of suppressed splendor which made it sublime. Besides, the phrase itself was an unconscious plagiarism from the previous day’s ill-fated masterpiece at the Assembly Rooms: in very similar terms had Sir Toby’s ill-fated heroine received her congé.

But Miss Cass remained unmoved, stoical, cynically indifferent.

“Please have them packed immediately. I will ask Miss Parbury to look out a train to London for you.”

That excellent afterthought came as a final bolt. The incensed lady paused dramatically to mark its effect. Miss Cass did not blench. Unquestionably, such a shaft must have gone right home, but the little governess knew how to conceal the wound.

The whole scene was decidedly humiliating, but after all, it didn’t matter particularly—at any rate, to the Lady Elfreda Catkin. What was going to matter was the triumph of Miss Parbury. A very attractive young soldier would have to be abandoned to the siren of Birmingham.

It was just there that the shoe really began to pinch. A moment’s thought showed Elfreda that in any case the shoe must have pinched just there. That romance had already reached its appointed end. Still, it was a trifle galling to be “sacked” so ignominiously. Miss Parbury would gloat. Yes, it was rather astute of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson to ask that lady to look out a train!

"I'm afraid, Miss Cass"—in the exhilaration of the hour Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson became flutelike once more—"it will be quite impossible to give you a reference. And I shall write at once to Canon Carnaby to say so. I am exceedingly sorry. In regard to your salary, I shall consult my husband. Here are two pounds which will take you to your home." The magisterial lady produced a brace of reluctant Bradburys. "You may or may not be entitled to a full month. As I say, I must consult my husband."

There was not the slightest need for Miss Cass to smile. Such a moment should have been really painful, at any rate to a properly constituted mind. But Miss Cass did smile, moreover so scornfully that Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson found it hard to veil her fury.

"Please go at once and pack your boxes, Miss Cass. There is a train to London about two, I believe. But Miss Parbury will be able to tell you."

"Pray don't give any one trouble on my account." The tone of Miss Cass had the bite of an acid. "I am reasonably good with a Bradshaw." The calm effrontery of the creature was astounding.

"I am sure Miss Parbury will consider it a pleasure." A shade below the belt, no doubt, but then there are no Queensbury Rules for the ladies, God bless them!

Beneath the entranced gaze of Master Peter and Miss Joan the hated Miss Cass made a slow and dignified exit. They were quite surprised that she didn't even slam the door. But if looks are a guide she must have been really sorry for herself that she was so awfully much of a lady.

"Jo-an darling, run and ask dear Dolores to look out the London trains. Or stay, I'll go and ask her myself. And then I'll write to Canon Carnaby."

XXXVI

The news traveled quickly. Dear Dolores received it almost at once; and received it, moreover, with a modesty that did credit to her self-respect; but as she turned her prompt attention to Bradshaw's Guide she could hardly refrain from humming "Any Time's Kissing Time" and kindred melodies from Chu Chin Chow. After all, it is neither just nor wise to exact too much of human nature.

The second person to be informed was General Norris. That gentleman, who had just returned from his morning constitutional, was in the act of crossing the hall when he suddenly found himself involved in a riot.

Master Peter and Miss Joan burst out of the schoolroom dancing a sort of fandango.

"She's got the sack, she's got the sack!"—Miss Joan.

"Hooray, Hooray, Hooray!"—Master Peter.

Explanations were immediately demanded. Explanations were at once forthcoming.

"You might almost be said to be pleased," was the sad comment of George Norris at the end of their thrilling story. And he was such a very simple young man that the sound of his voice suggested tears.

"What do you think?" The idiom of Miss Joan was a little primitive, no doubt—she took after her father's side, poor dear child! "She a perfect beast, isn't she, Pe-tah?"

"A horrible beast," Petah agreed.

But in the eyes of George Norris there was a look that seemed to contradict them flatly.

He was such a naïf young man that the lurid story of the morning's war, which to be sure lost nothing in the telling, came as quite a shock. And the shock left him sore, rueful, angry. He was not at all inclined to accept the tale in all its nakedness—things had been left out, things had been put in—and as he had known from the first, these unsportsmanlike women had had “an awful down” on the little governess.

The crux of the matter was that she was a rather special kind of governess. Only too evidently she was used to the best people and the best houses. George Norris was too good a sportsman himself to be hard upon Mrs. T.-S. from whom he had received many kindnesses or upon Miss P. who was by way of being a dasher, but the trouble with these ladies was that they were quite unable to forgive Miss Cass her trick of making them look cheap. A minx, of course, a perfectly charming minx who spent her time scoring them off. She had deserved all she had got. But as man is the being he is in the world of the present, George Norris would have liked beyond all things just now to have knocked the heads of Master Peter and Miss Joan together.

The young man in his distress, which he had neither the art nor the tact to conceal, sought Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson. He found her seated at a writing table in the morning room. And flanking her, in a low chair by the fire, was Miss Parbury poring over with an air of intense absorption, the intricate pages of Bradshaw's Guide.

“There's a train at a quarter-past two, I see,” Miss Parbury announced as General Norris entered the room.

“That is the one. She must go by that.” Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson dipped her pen augustly. “Tell me, what's the date, dear?”

Miss Parbury had a doubt as to the date, but General Norris succinctly furnished it from the top of The Times newspaper which providentially was at hand.

Dear Canon Carnaby,

It is with the greatest reluctance that I write to tell you that the governess whom you recommended so highly has not been a success. In fact, she has proved so altogether unsatisfactory that I am having to dispense with her services at a moment's notice. You will be grieved to learn that I am unable to give her a reference. In my humble opinion she is wholly unsuited to the care of young children. Her temper, to put the case mildly, is under imperfect control and much as it distresses me to have to say so, she does not invariably speak the truth; also her manners leave much to be desired. On several occasions she has been openly and intentionally disrespectful. I am sorry to have to write in this way of one who has been able to recommend herself to your kindness, but it seems right that you should know the sort of person she really is.

With kind regards, believe me, very sincerely yours,

M. Eleanor Trenchard-Simpson.

She read the letter over with a glow of quiet satisfaction and then gave it to Miss Parbury for perusal and criticism. Miss Parbury's criticism was that she didn't think it was strong enough.

Taking it altogether, Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson was inclined to think the letter didn't lack force.

"I don't know about that." Miss Parbury fixed one arctic eye upon the mobile countenance of General Norris. "Considering that she has just pretty nearly killed poor Joan."

"Killed poor Who?" The development of the issue was growing too much for the feelings of an impressionable soldier.

"Didn't you hear the uproar in the school room, George?" A shade of maternal reproach softened Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson's note of indignation.

George confessed that he had not.



"Why, even Cook heard it in the basement. And when I went into the schoolroom what do you suppose was happening?"

George had not the faintest idea.

"I found Miss Cass"—it was the voice of a Niobe mourning her young—"shaking the life—literally shaking the life out of the poor darling."

"Well, the poor darling seems a pretty lively corpse, I must say."

It was, of course, a remark that ought not to have been made. A military career has a tendency to make the best and the nicest of men unfeeling. There was that to be said for George Norris. Both ladies, however, were clearly wounded a little. Their quiet air of triumph was almost vanquished by such gaucherie. Men are so amazing! Some men are, at any rate. How was it possible to defend such a creature! Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson painted a full-length portrait of the wicked Miss Cass, and as a final touch invited the young man to read the letter she had just addressed on the subject to the Rector of Laxton.

The invitation was an error of judgment. And it really seemed odd that one so conspicuously a member of the sex which specializes in finesse in all its branches should have made such a mistake.

George Norris read the letter to Canon Carnaby with amazement. Nay with more than amazement. The young man found it hard to conceal his wrath.

XXXVII

Miss Cass was duly informed that her train was the two-ten. The family chariot had been ordered for half-past one, an insurance as far as was humanly possible against her missing it. Luncheon, in the meantime, was served to her in the schoolroom.

George Norris was quite upset. Clearly he was expected to share the righteous indignation of the ladies of the household, but this was asking too much of human nature. As for Miss Parbury's air of triumph, he found it intolerable.

In truth, this was a dark hour. For the young man now realized that he was very much in love. The drama of this abrupt departure brought home the fact rather unpleasantly. A very little reflection showed that his hesitations and moral cowardice of the last few days were going to cost him dear.

On three consecutive mornings had he made up his mind to propose to Miss Cass before the day was out. But the end of each day had found him unequal to the task. He didn't quite know why. Sheer human weakness, no doubt, had led him to put off till the morrow. And it was now too late.

Somehow the little governess had always contrived to keep him rather at a distance. He had never quite known the ground on which he stood. She was a most dexterous fencer, her heart was not worn on her sleeve; and in spite of his military renown he was not quite sure of himself. But the "sacking" at a moment's notice of this extremely fascinating little lady brought things at once to a head.

It roused the chivalry in the breast of George Norris to the danger point. He felt that he must speak now or forever hold his peace. This was a chance that could not recur. If he let her go now he was never likely to meet her again. In a state of high tension he began to range the house, yet halting always at the schoolroom door with two sinister words echoing and reëchoing in his mind. Too late! Too late! was their diabolic chorus.

Even now he was set upon one last attempt. She must not go away like that. It was the fifty-ninth minute of the eleventh hour, he would have to rush his fences horribly, but no matter he must put all to the touch.

The schoolroom door confronted him. But in spite of the row of decorations on his tunic his courage suddenly failed. One can hardly propose to a girl in the middle of her luncheon! Some men might be equal to such a task: a strenuous military life had taught George Norris that some men are equal to anything, but even in this impasse he thanked his stars that he was not of their number. No, confound it all, he must let her eat her luncheon anyway!

The grandfather clock in the hall chimed a quarter-past one. He was cutting it decidedly fine! Again one of his fatal hesitations came upon him. Only a fool would think of butting in now. Better far be content with obtaining her permanent address and sending through the post an offer in his best English. But the Dr. Jekyll in his composition—or was it the Mr. Hyde?—assured him that such a bloodless proceeding was bound to fail. Wiser by far, thought Jekyll-Hyde, to trust implicitly to the personal equation. Let him go ahead with the business, luncheon or no luncheon, then and now!

Yes, after all, that was the sound commonsense of the matter. The hand of George Norris sought the knob of the schoolroom, but before he could turn it, the door of the room opposite came abruptly open. "George," said Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson with a glance at the venerable article of furniture across the hall, "Tell me, isn't that clock slow?"

With a stab of keen annoyance George looked at his watch. Alas, the clock was certainly slow, by a full ten minutes. And in confirmation of the dire fact a severe parlor-maid and a giggling subordinate emerged at that moment round a bend into the visible part of the staircase in charge of Miss Cass's rather meager but heavily burdened tin trunk.

In almost the same instant there came a sharp peal at the front door bell. It was an intimation that John Small was round with the family chariot.

XXXVIII

Whatever the disabilities of General Norris there was not a suspicion of false shame about his hostess. She took the knob of the schoolroom door out of the young man's hand and turned it for him.

"Miss Cass." The flutelike note rang clear and free. "No wish to hurry you, Miss Cass, but the carriage is waiting."

Miss Cass lifted her eyes calmly from her cheese.

Then she glanced at the watch on her wrist—an adorably neat watch on an adorably neat wrist—quite leisurely. "Thank you," she said drily. It was really the driest "Thank you" George Norris had ever heard.

As she rose from the table with a deliberation which to Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson was rather infuriating, that lady observed the hat of the retiring governess. It was decidedly expensive. And her gloves and shoes could not possibly have been warranted by her salary. On the other hand George Norris observed none of these things. He was occupied far too much with their wearer. But above all, he was occupied with that sinister chorus in his brain, "Too late, too late!"

All was lost. And he had but himself to blame. In a kind of dull rage he stepped up to the open door to watch the lading of Miss Cass's luggage on to the chariot. The mien of John Small was a comedy in itself. He at least was ready to welcome the departure of one who had kept him in his place as determinedly as he attempted to rise above it. As John Small hoisted the tin trunk on to the back of the dog cart he had the look of a man well satisfied.

That look was oddly reflected in the bearing of Miss Dolores Parbury, who at the chosen moment emerged from the morning room to speed the parting guest. There was a kind of wary triumph in it, a triumph not so much open and avowed as tacit and concealed. After all, Miss Cass was only the governess. But there the triumph was, at any rate, for the eye of George Norris, who suddenly found that it was more than he could bear. As he caught the slightly averted glance of Miss Cass that was like nothing so much as a sword half-sheathed, his heart went out to her. In defeat she was sublime. Faults she might have; her manner with young children might leave something to be desired, but au fond she was a fearless warrior and she had been endowed with so much charm that nature hardly seemed to be playing fair to the average members of Miss Cass's sex in allowing her to treat it as a proprietary article.

The gallant George did not try to analyze the situation. He was a man of action, for one thing. Besides, there really was not time. This was the crisis of his fate, and events were moving with alarming rapidity. Before he could regain complete control of his mind, the inimitable Miss Cass was making her adieux.

With the faintly mischievous smile which invited intimacy and yet repelled it, she offered her hand.

"Good-by!" she said.

But George, hypnotized by the touch of her fingers, felt quite unable to say good-by. He knew that immediately beyond the little lady two pairs of eyes, scorpion in their burning intensity, were directed upon him. He knew that anything he said or did now would be used in evidence against him, but it was asking too much of human nature to let her go like that. He didn't know her plans, he didn't even know her address! A mine had been sprung under his feet by the forces of injustice; but he would never be able to forgive himself if he lost her without making a sign.

The forces of injustice were ruthlessly dominating the scene. But what did it matter? What did anything matter? This was Fate's hour. If at such a moment he failed to show himself a man it would tell heavily against him in the ultimate assize.

"I'll come to the station and see you off!" The daring of the speech was incredible; at least, so it seemed in the ear of two of the ladies. In the ear of the lady to whom it was addressed, by one of those piquancies which make the human comedy the infinitely delightful thing it is, it was accepted at its face value with a complacency that was hardly decent.

"How extremely kind of you!"

A shiver ran through the stout fibers of Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson. The robust Miss Parbury had a horrid momentary feeling that some one was in the act of walking across her grave.

"But, my dear George,"—the voice of the hostess was imperious, yet by comparison with the organ tones around her it sounded oddly high and thin—"luncheon is at a quarter to two. Aren't you forgetting?"

The intrepid young man was not forgetting. He could easily obtain a sandwich at the station.

"But how absurd!"

Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson waited an instant for the departing governess to agree that it was absurd, as any self-respecting governess must surely have done in the circumstances, but she waited in vain.

"It is not in the least necessary. Small is quite able to help with Miss Cass's luggage. Are you not, Small?"

"Yes, m'm," came a slow but truculent response from the seat of Jehu.

"Oh, no." The young man was amazing. "Much better let me. Porters are in such short supply at all the stations these days. Besides, I want to send off a wire. So that if there's room at the back of the cart for me as well as for that trunk—?"

"Woa-a-a horse!"

George, the incredible, had one foot on the back step already. Miss Cass, smiling and calm, was seated deftly in front. If the look of her had a meaning she knew only too well that all the cards were in her hand.

Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson saw that the game was going against her heavily, but she gathered herself for a final throw. "My dear George, you will catch your death," she cried.

It was a dank morning of November. There was even a thin spatter of rain. George, the overcoatless, reluctantly lifted his foot from the step of the dogcart. "I'll get my British Warm," he said.

Too elemental for a thought of treachery to enter his mind, the young man turned suddenly into the house in quest of that garment.

Openly and palpably fighting for victory Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson saw her chance. No modest scruple stayed her. "Drive on, Small," she said sternly, as soon as the young man had passed indoors. "Don't wait for General Norris."

Small, ready at all times to obey his mistress, was prepared to do so now. He may or he may not have had a full grasp of the case. Such fellows are not always so wooden-witted as they appear. But he valued his place and beyond a doubt he would not have waited for General Norris had it not been for the prompt intervention of the lady who shared with him the front seat. With a suddenness very disconcerting to John, the shameless Miss Cass sprang to her feet. "My box is not very secure, I'm afraid. It might fall out at the back."

"Your trunk is quite all right, Miss Cass," promptly and energetically countered Mrs. Trenchard-Simpson. "It cannot possibly fall out. Small, drive on."

Hardly a minute was occupied by the entire incident. But the situation was saved. Before John Small had a chance of getting under way, General Norris, becomingly clad in his British Warm had emerged from the house and had again placed his foot on the back step of the chariot.

"Never mind your box, Miss Cass," he said cheerily. "I'll take care of that."

XLIX

All the way to Clavering Station George Norris took extremely good care that the tin trunk of Miss Cass did not fall from the back of the dogcart. His task was not difficult, for the box was so comfortably disposed under the seat that it showed not the slightest disposition to do so. But had it been a tin trunk with any spirit of opinions of its own it might easily have achieved a crash to Mother Earth at the sharp turn into the high road by The Laurels gate and at divers trappy places along the route, for there really was a much preoccupied young man in charge of it.

The truth of the matter was that it had almost immediately dawned on George Norris that should the 2:10 Up be punctual it would leave very little time for a proposal in form. Moreover, it would have to take place on the station platform. Such are the inconveniences of a dogcart. In the circumstances of the case it seemed hardly less than a grave oversight on the part of Fate to have omitted to provide a closed brougham, no matter how antiquated, one-horse or otherwise, for such an occasion.

Certainly it meant cutting the whole thing very fine. According to the rate of John Small's progress they were not likely to reach Clavering station much before two o'clock and that left little time for the business in hand. As a matter of historical fact, it wanted exactly one minute to the hour when they drew up beneath the portico of the station yard.



George had to justify his presence by seeking a porter in the station interior. To do him justice they undoubtedly were in short supply, but he was able to corral one in something under two minutes and returned with him in triumph to find Miss Cass handsomely tipping John Small for services unwillingly rendered. In fact, when John withdrew, chariot and all, he was quite a changed man. From the moment he had first set eyes on the new governess he had been her enemy, but if anything was meant by the manner of his final exit from the station yard she was almost entitled to look on him now in the light of a friend.

The departure of John left a bare six minutes or so for the all-important matter to be transacted, always providing that the train was punctual. Happily the porter was very reassuring on this point. According to his estimate the 2:10 Up was bound to be anything from twenty to forty minutes late. Moreover, if he was betting on it he would back the second figure rather than the first. So far, so good.

However, there was a dramatic surprise in store for George Norris. Indeed, there was a series of surprises. And they began almost at the moment John. Small and his chariot left the station yard.

"Please label this," George directed the attention of the porter to the tin trunk. "Waterloo or Paddington?" he inquired of its owner.

Then came surprise the First.

"I think it had better be put in the cloak room," said Miss Cass. "And these, I think, had better go with it." She indicated the pilgrim basket and another miscellaneous article ranged beside it. "I am not going by this train," she added quite casually.

The heart of George Norris gave a leap.

"So much the better." And the young man spoke with the simplicity which made him so attractive.

With quite a sense of relief he saw the luggage of Miss Cass stowed away in the cloak room. And then, like a man of will who has just been confirmed in a great decision, he addressed that lady. "I don't know what your plans are," he said, "but if I may, I would like to have a little talk with you."

The only answer of Miss Cass was a smile. But she made no difficulties about having a talk with General Norris. As intending passengers were now rapidly assembling for the Up train, they crossed the bridge to the deserted Down platform. No one else was there. They took one brief turn and then sat down on a wooden bench thoughtfully provided by the railway company.

This the hour and this the opportunity. There was no beating about the bush. George knew his own mind and proceeded to ensue it. "Ethel," he said, taking one small gloved hand in his own, "will you marry me?"

It was by no means an easy fence to tackle, but George's methods were decidedly workmanlike. "There's only my pay, but I've just been offered a good billet in East Africa. The climate is first rate, there's any amount of things to do and one can live at much less cost than one does here. Of course, there's no saying exactly how it will pan out, but anyhow, will you chance it?"

It took Miss Cass but a very short time to express her willingness "to chance it." She too, it seemed, had the valuable faculty of knowing her own mind. Not in anywise immodestly did she rush upon her fate; she was able to display the conventional diffidence of one fully acquainted with the rules of the game, but it was not difficult to set the doubts of George Norris at rest. From the moment he had climbed into the back of the cart she had known that he was hers.

En route to the station there had been an opportunity to weigh the pros and the cons of the matter in her cool and sagacious mind. All the same, it was not coolness nor was it sagacity that had carried the day with her. She liked this young man because she liked him. He was the new, highly efficient type the war had evolved. She knew nothing about him, but instinctively she would trust this man as she would trust few men when it came to a tight place. And there was an air of romance about him.

It was an act of foolhardiness, no doubt, for a girl of position, but she had been made reckless by recent events. Besides, she was "out" for freedom. She had had one brief taste of it, and making due allowance for its drawbacks, her appetite was keen for more. Irksome the experiences of the last ten days had certainly been, yet she was quite determined now to do as she chose with her own life. She asked nothing highfalutin' nor did she look for it, but she meant, if possible, to escape altogether from the stuffy circle of Castle Carabbas with its hierarchical connections and its feudal ideas. Now was the moment for those autocratic people, her father and mother, to learn once for all the limit of their power.

As there was no one else on the Down platform, they were able to seal the compact in the fashion ordained by nature and custom. "But, do you know," the young man confessed even at this delicious moment, "if you hadn't been so much up against it I mightn't have had the pluck to ask you."

Such naïveté delighted her. Also, it was very intriguing.

"But why not?" she archly inquired. "I'm only a friendless governess, am I not, with food and house-room provided and a wage of thirty pounds a year?"

"Yes, you are down on your luck," he frankly admitted. "But I don't mind betting a shilling that you haven't been so always. Now tell me honestly, haven't you once been Top Dog?"

She didn't try to conceal her amusement even if she masked a proper feminine curiosity. "I don't know why you should think so," she said with the smile provocative which yet was a counterfeit of complete indifference.

"There's something about you"—his naïveté was charming—"that is always giving you away. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if this was your first situation."

"But didn't you say the other day"—she would have been less than her sex had she not enjoyed drawing him out—"that you thought I had been abroad in the service of foreign royalties?"

"I've had all sorts of theories about you," he confessed. "But it won't surprise me at all if none of them meets the case."

She archly expressed relief, the light of humor in her eye. He was enchanted by the look of her and yet he was a little anxious too. At the back of his mind there was a subtle feeling that "he was having his leg pulled." The feeling had always been there, even from the first moment he had talked with her. Somehow she was immensely mature for her years. She appeared to have so much in hand. And a word here and there, an odd phrase, a chance inflection of voice, even her way of looking at people and her manner of entering a room were continually giving her away.

Besides, he had seen from the first that the other ladies of the household had regarded her as a natural enemy. Perhaps it was the sense of their injustice that had first drawn him to her. But from day to day he had increasingly admired the bold and implacable skill with which she had carried the war into the country of her foes. She mightn't have one shilling to rub against another, this mysterious little lady, but she had rare courage, great will power and infinite resources of her own.

All the same, sitting delightfully close to her on a seat of the deserted Down platform and the great deed done, even at this exquisite moment he was not absolutely sure that she was not laughing at him. And in spite of the elation within this feeling grew upon him as they talked. Somehow, he was less certain of the prize he had won than a victorious suitor should have been. And he had not to look far for reasons.

The 2:10 Up was duly signalled, a full twenty minutes late. Presently it drew up with a prodigious rattle at the platform opposite.

"I suppose you are going up by the next," said George. "But it's not so good as this one, you know. It doesn't start till something past five and it won't get there until a good bit past one in the morning. I know, because I've traveled by it for my sins."

Ethel—already he had permission to call her Ethel because somehow Girlie didn't suit her at all!—rejoined that no matter what her sins might be it was not necessary for her to travel to town by the 5:40.

"What, you are staying the night here in Clavering!" His tone was a complex not unpleasing of hope, fear, surprise, bewilderment.

"Ye-es, in the neighborhood, I think, unless I suddenly change my plans."

"With your mother's friends, the Lancelots, I suppose?" He couldn't help laughing as he recalled the audaciously comic turn she had given to the topic of the Lancelots at the family luncheon.

"I'm sure they'll put me up for a night if I ask them," she said demurely.

"Oh, I'm sure they will. They'll be delighted." But even now he didn't really know if he was justified in taking her friendship with the Lancelots seriously.

She was a mystery, that was the truth of the matter. And her answer to his next question provided ample confirmation of the fact.

The question itself was a simple one. What were her immediate plans? In his rôle of accepted suitor he felt it incumbent upon him to ask. Had she relations in the district? If she had, might he accompany her forthwith and be presented to them.

Her reply was brief but it was surprising. "Oh, yes, do come with me by all means—to Clavering Park."

"To Clavering Park!"

"Yes—to meet my father."

To meet her father! The gaze he fixed upon her was blankly incredulous. But in the fragment of time necessary for a survey of her expressive countenance the fable of the dead solicitor's daughter collapsed completely and for ever.

XL

To Clavering Park—to meet her father!

George had been pretty sure from the first that she was playing a part. But what was the part she was playing? Who was her father if he was not a deceased solicitor? He did not forget her other picturesque statement that she was the offspring of a butler and a lady's maid. George was inclined to think that so far as he himself was concerned it might simplify matters considerably if this proved to be the case. Still, it would not be wise to build hopes upon it.

The young man began to view a developing situation with a deepening anxiety. Instinct told him that there might be rocks ahead. "By the way, who is your father? What is his name?"

"You must come and meet him." With a laugh defiant rather than gay she got up abruptly from the station bench.

Perforce it had to be left at that, for the time being at all events. George was prepared to go with her to the world's end if she commanded him, so why not to Clavering Park? He rose, too, from the bench and went with her across the bridge to the Up platform just as the belated 2.10 was in the act of moving off.

In the station yard was a decrepit taxi which they were able to hire and in about half an hour the lodge gates of Clavering Park confronted them. By now the bewilderment and curiosity of George were almost unbearable. He was in the seventh heaven, it was true, but native commonsense grimly warned him that his heaven was strangely insecure. The romance of the circumstances was weaving a spell of its own; the sense of enchantment increased as the mystery grew; he was beginning slowly to realize what a truly delightful thing she was to possess and on that very account, as became one who had learned much in a hard school, he understood how necessary it was to take care. There must be no counting of chickens. Somehow the nearer they drew to their destination the less favorable grew the portents. By the time the lodge gates had opened and their taxi had rattled through, the sense of "Ethel's" innate Top-Doggishness had developed quite remarkably.

"Those trees and the deer remind me of my home." She might have been speaking for the sake of conversation; on the other hand her intention may have been to prepare his mind for certain revelations to follow.

"Tell me, Ethel, where is your home?" In his own apprehensive ear his voice sounded odd, strained, nervous.

"I live in Ireland."

"I used to live there too," he said. "Ireland was where I was brought up."

"Really. Now that's very interesting." The tones of her voice were so soft and warm and rich that they made him think of velvet. "Do tell me exactly where."

"I was brought up at a place called Bally Euchra in County Kildare."

She gave a faint cry of suppressed astonishment. "What a small world! Bally Euchra of all places! Why, my grandfather lives there."

Barely had he time to echo her surprise with a faint cry of his own when the taxi drew up beneath the portico in front of the house, thereby denying him the opportunity of asking who her grandfather could possibly be.

It was just as well, no doubt, that such was the case, for had that particular question been answered, there is little doubt that George Norris would have bolted for his life!

XLI

George rang the bell. Of the servant who promptly answered it "Ethel" asked if Lord Carabbas was there and if so could they see him. The man said he would inquire and showed them in.

"Lord Carabbas!" Midway between astonishment and dismay Ethel's cavalier muttered to himself that name of ill omen as they entered the house.

The servant politely indicated chairs in the hall and then went in search of Lord Carabbas.

In the waning light of the November afternoon the hall seemed to be deserted. But it was not. Deep in a corner near the large open fireplace was an unsuspected presence. And scarcely had they time to realize that a third person was there when the presence sprang out upon them.



With a cry that was half a sob, half a shriek, Girlie fell upon Elfreda and flung both arms round her. By means of the spate of wild words that followed, Elfreda learned that Girlie was ruined irretrievably, that her career was blighted and that she fully expected to be sent to prison.

"Sent to prison! Pray, whatever for!"

With the aid of a second spate of half suppressed sobs Girlie told the story of the missing necklace; she also disclosed that a Scotland Yard detective was going to arrest her on suspicion.

George Norris, embarrassed considerably by a scene of which he was rather an unwilling witness and the cause of which was very obscure, nervously withdrew some paces into the hall proper. He was greatly troubled. The plot was thickening. But as to what had actually occurred he was quite in the dark. Here, however, was mystery indeed. Moreover, the march of events still gave no clew as to the ground on which he stood.

Still, he was at the threshold of enlightenment.

In a short time the servant returned. He was accompanied, however, not by Lord Carabbas but by the mistress of the house. Mrs. Minever greeted Elfreda in a sort of flutter of curiosity. She then went on rather incoherently to explain that Lord Carabbas was out. Would the visitors care to wait for him as he was expected back quite soon? With surprising coolness Elfreda promptly accepted the invitation.

George for his part could still only view the situation with bewilderment. He was altogether in the dark. His bewilderment, moreover, was now tinged by alarm. For reasons of his own he had no particular desire at that moment to meet Lord Carabbas. The stern fact had not yet dawned upon the young man that Lord Carabbas was the father of "Ethel."

There was no way of retreat now that things had gone so far. Besides, as George stood listening to [Pg 287]the conversation of Ethel and Mrs. Minever he was quickly devoured by a passion for further enlightenment.

"But do you mind telling me who you are?" he heard Mrs. Minever say.

Elfreda gave her name. Any attempt at concealment would have been useless. As the amazing story was now by way of being public property the mistress of the house had already guessed her visitor's identity, but the unsuspecting George was stupefied. In the next moment, while his mind was still chaos, he awoke to the fact that Lady Elfreda was gravely presenting him to Mrs. Minever.

Poor George was staggered. He could but dimly grasp the truth. Overcome by a sense of his own inadequacy, he felt he was growing more and more ridiculous. "But I don't understand," he said faintly.

"I'm afraid I must ask Lady Elfreda to explain," said Mrs. Minever with her color rapidly mounting, with an odd tremor in her voice and with a rather forced laugh.

"Please ask Miss Cass to enlighten you." And Elfreda cast a wicked glance at that ineffectual lady.

"Miss Cass!" Poor George seemed more bewildered than ever.

"Ask her to tell you what has happened." The amazing Elfreda spoke with the slightly bored air of one dismissing a tedious matter. And then, for all the world as if it no longer existed for her, at Mrs. Minever's suggestion she turned calmly upon her heel and accompanied that lady to the drawing room.

George Norris left alone with Miss Cass in the agreeable vicinity of the good log fire made his halting plea for further enlightenment. Girlie, stricken as she was by the sense of her own guilt and the humiliation of her own absurdity, had great difficulty in complying with the request. Even upheld as she was now by the arrival of Lady Elfreda, it still called for a mighty effort to hold her tears in check.

Howbeit she was able to tell the incredible story after a fashion. It was such a poor and halting fashion, its lapses were so many that the unlucky George had to fill in the gaps as well as he could. The task was not easy for George's naturally quick intelligence did not serve him well in these trying moments. But as with ever-growing dismay he really got the hang of the story at last, he hardly knew whether to laugh like a sportsman or to allow a sense of outrage to consume him. For he himself, as he was not slow to realize, had merely been fooled and put in a false position like every one else.

He was able to muster a laugh, but the underside of it was not mirth exactly. Over head and ears in love with the wicked little witch he certainly was, but he saw at once that all their plans were knocked awry. Laugh as he might at the absolute success of the trick that had been played, the cynicism and the arrogance which deprived every one of any rights in such an affair could not be passed over. Even the most injudicious of lovers must not omit that aspect of the case.

"But why—but why," said the bewildered young man, as he gazed in humorous horror at the tear-stained Miss Cass, "why in the name of heaven did you let her do it?"

"She made me," was Girlie's simple and pathetic answer.

"Made you!" Like several other people he felt a desire to shake this pretty little noodle. But a sense of justice forced him to conclude that what she said was true. Such a will as hers would be nought in the scale with the implacable Elfreda's. Recalling as he now did each phase of that young woman's career of eleven days' humorous devilment at The Laurels, he was inclined to exonerate Miss Cass. There was but one door where the blame could lie.

"The little devil!" George gave a sly whistle. "And I suppose her father has gone to The Laurels to fetch her?"

Girlie said that Lord Carabbas had.

"Well, if he's the Lord Carabbas I remember"—George burst into a sudden laugh—"she'll have to consider herself lucky if she doesn't get a thoroughly sound whipping."

Girlie shuddered and turned pale. This display of emotion was followed by silence. She herself had in prospect a penalty even more severe. A stricken conscience was causing her a great deal of pain. She felt that she deserved to suffer, and although it was good to hear this young soldier laugh heartily at the whole affair, there was something in his manner which implied that privately he thought so too. Poor Girlie had nothing of the picturesque aplomb of the culprit in chief. Her sense of guilt was there for all to see.

As for George Norris, this remarkable conversation with the real Miss Cass had suddenly made life very difficult. His dream was shattered. For all his merit as a soldier and the distinction he had won, he was an extremely modest fellow. It was not for men like himself to aspire to the Lady Elfreda Catkins of the world, however much he might adore them. Secretly he was full of resentment. Such mischievous impudence was entirely amazing. He had a strong desire to punish her, but with the perversity of a very human being, her attraction for him was never so great as now she stood revealed in all her wickedness.

Laugh he might, but the mirth of George Norris was of the kind that seeks to cover a deep wound. He was far more in love with this dainty rogue than was either wise or desirable. But he had now to meet the fact squarely that she was beyond his reach. True, he could claim to be her accepted suitor, but circumstances alter cases.

Yes, the case was altered. The only course now was to pocket his pride along with the rest of his fine feelings and return at once to The Laurels a sadly humiliated man. The little wretch! How dare she? Once more he posed that futile question as he gazed at the visibly wilting form of the real Miss Cass.

Even Lady Elfreda's calm retirement to the drawing room was an added impertinence. It was her way, no doubt, of turning him down. She had fooled him, as she had fooled every one else, to the utmost limit and then cast him off like an old glove. Suddenly the decent George began "to see red." He would give a good deal to get back a little of his own.

The longer George talked with Miss Cass the more fully did he seem to realize that only one line of conduct would now consort with his dignity. All the same, it was not going to be easy to follow. To say the least his position was very uncomfortable. The immediate problem, as it seemed to him now, was whether or no he should take a formal leave of Lady Elfreda. Merely to say good-by or not to say good-by—which course would best salve his damaged feelings?

He was still talking with Miss Cass and striving vainly to get a just perception of his own relation to such a set of exceptional circumstances when this problem automatically solved itself. Lady Elfreda came into the hall with an unknown gentleman.

George rose rather stiffly. "I think I'll be going," he said lamely.

"Oh, no," said the scapegrace with cheerful promptitude. "I want you to stay and meet my father. He should soon be here now."

Such a charmingly easy acceptance of the situation took George aback. "But will your father want to meet me?" he said, fixing an eye sufficiently humorous upon the unknown gentleman.

The unknown gentleman, a large and genial one, was plainly threatened with a fit of laughter.

"Lord Duckingfield, let me introduce General Norris," said the scapegrace coolly. Her air of taking everything for granted struck Lord Duckingfield and George Norris as exceedingly comic.

Bows were exchanged. Both men, however, maintained an eloquent silence, although to judge by a certain archness of look with which each regarded the other it was clear that their minds spoke the same language.

George, all the same, was suffering acutely from the sense of his position. Even if he was over head and ears in love with the little rogue, that was no reason for courting a public humiliation. "I think I must get back to The Laurels," he said with all the firmness he could muster. "Good-by, Lady Elfreda."

XLII

Fate was against George Norris.

Lady Elfreda persisted that he must stay and meet her father. The unwisdom of such a course was open and palpable, but he was a chivalrous fellow and, in spite of the facer dealt him by her wicked trick, he was still in the mood for adventure. Moreover, he was simply devoured by curiosity as to what would happen next.

For a man of average spirit it was worth running a risk of personal insult to learn the next turn in the game. What was to be the end of this amazing comedy? That question lurked in the genial eye of Lord Duckingfield. And the arch glance of that peer seemed to tell George Norris that to beat a retreat at such a moment would be conduct unworthy of a soldier, a sportsman and the possessor of a sense of humor.

Besides, to run away just now would be extremely difficult. Not for the first time this charming little vixen was pitting her will against his, not for the first time was he experiencing its steel-like quality. There was a heavy account to settle with her but she really was delightful. And her "gameness" was magnificent. "Of course, you'll stay. You must meet The Dadda. He's great fun." The affectionate lisp might have been inspired by a favorite golliwog.

"I hope you'll stay, General Norris." A smiling but anxious-looking hostess had appeared just in time to enforce the appeal. "Have some tea, at any rate, before you leave us." Not wishing to show himself a poltroon in the sight of the world General Norris accepted the invitation.

In about five minutes tea was brought into the hall. And then one by one the guests appeared from odd corners of the house. They were hardly more than a round half dozen, a company by no means formidable either in number or in quality, but as the muster grew, George for the first time in his life was afflicted with a desire that the floor might open and swallow him.

There was no reason, of course, why George Norris should suffer this feeling. But he was a member of the weaker sex. She, to whom such an emotion would have been entirely appropriate, gave no sign of turning a hair.

Upon the hostess devolved the task of making Lady Elfreda known to those who might be said to be her victims. It was performed heroically. One and all might be sharing a mild sense of outrage, they might be fuming inwardly at the arrogance of this chit who was hardly out of her teens, but it was hard not to admire her sang-froid in the presence of the enemy.

Really she was as unconcerned as if nothing had happened. She partook of some excellent tea and some cake equally excellent with a zest that atoned for a decidedly scratch luncheon at The Laurels. Poor George, on the other hand, who had had no luncheon at all was unable to peck a crumb. He had been four years in France, his record was vouched for by the row of decorations on his tunic, but at this moment he was ready to own freely that here was the tightest corner he had ever been in.

Everybody behaved beautifully, but it was soon clear to George that one and all were looking forward with huge enjoyment to the appearance of "The Dadda" upon the scene. His return could not be long delayed. And the miserable George was bound to deduce from the suppressed tones and the sly looks all about him that he had been cast for an important part in the play.

Had George been as brave morally as he was in the field he would have made a bolt for The Laurels after his second cup of tea. Such publicity was altogether too much. He felt these hard-bitten worldlings were simply gloating over the possibilities of the situation. Still, even in the extremity of stage fright he was bound to remember that he had asked this little girl to marry him and that she had consented to do so. Of course, the preposterous circumstances made the whole thing invalid, but as now he wrestled with his moral weakness it came home to him that he was very honestly in love with this minx. She was adorable. And as man is the being he is in the world of the present, she was the more adorable because so palpably out of his reach.

In point of time it was not very long and yet quite long enough for the peace of mind of George Norris before certain tokens heralded the return of Lord Carabbas.



Perhaps the tidings were first promulgated by Hobson, the butler, as he moved up to the front door. He was an impassive fellow, but the look on his face and the sight of him nervously crossing the hall parquet seemed to demoralize more impressionable members of the community. From Sir Toby Philpot there arose a cry which resembled the shriek of a plover. Nothing could check it except a violent attack of coughing which intervened at the precise moment that a lowering, heavy-jowled, empurpled face suddenly projected itself from behind the large screen of Chinese lacquer which shut off the cozy inner hall from the outer darkness of the universe.

Apart from the muffled sound of Sir Toby's attack the silence was of the tomb. Lord Carabbas himself stood speechless, glowering upon the company not unlike a bull confronted by a red umbrella. Swiftly, however, with a cry of charmed surprise, Lady Elfreda rose from her place beside the hostess. "So here you are, papa! You have been to The Laurels, I hear. So sorry we missed you."

As those tones of gay welcome rode the storm it was recognized at once that rumor had not over-painted this young woman's powers as an actress. Montagu Jupp had been well within the mark when he had said that their possessor was capable of playing all the ingénues off the London stage. The intrepid coolness with which she came forward to greet her parent was sublime.

Lord Carabbas lowered his head a point as if about to charge. For the moment, however, his animal energy was confined to a few syncopated sounds in his throat.

Not in the least abashed Lady Elfreda continued to keep a firm hold on the situation.

"Let me introduce George Norris, papa." It really was sublime. For all the buzzing in his ears General Norris was able to rise from his chair and bow with solemnity.

Lord Carabbas did not return the bow. Indeed, if the eyes of my lord had a meaning they simply affirmed a desire to kill General Norris.

Tea was over, happily, and the spectators, although fascinated by a scene more richly comic than any it was their avowed business to create, did not allow private considerations to balk a sense of sportsmanship. It seemed only fair, at any rate, to a blameless young soldier and an innocent peer, to give them a chance. Mrs. Minever had the presence of mind to lead the way to the drawing room. And the others began silently, if in some cases reluctantly, to melt away. They would have given much to remain, but decent people, after all, must sacrifice a little to the manes of fair play.

In spite of her feeling that she had a prescriptive right to be there, Girlie rose and followed in the wake of the others. But a great effort of will was needed in order to do so. And yet to stay in her nook, a thrilled and guilty witness of the scene, would call for more courage than she possessed.

"But I don't understand." Those were the words Girlie heard as she rose from her place by the fire. The tone in which they were uttered was deep, stern, menacing. Lord Carabbas, his voice trembling with fury, looked first at Lady Elfreda and then at her cavalier. "Perhaps you will explain." The voice tailed off so queerly that Girlie half expected Lord Carabbas to hit General Norris a blow. Without waiting for any such dreadful development she hurriedly retired to King Edward's bedroom.

So tense was the moment that George Norris stepped back involuntarily, as if a blow was fully expected.

Elfreda, however, was magnificent.

"General Norris has asked me to marry him, papa, and I should like to do so." The precision of the speech had a sort of astringent humor which somehow had the effect of keeping "The Dadda" in hand. It served to remind him that, in spite of the strain which had been cast upon him, it was his duty to remember that beyond all things he was a gentleman.

There was a long moment of silence in which it seemed to George Norris that anything might happen, and then Lord Carabbas, obviously making a tremendous effort to keep calm, fixed the young man with the eye of war and growled, "I don't think I have the pleasure of your acquaintance and yet I seem to know your face."

There was another long and tense moment. Involuntarily George Norris stepped back another pace. And then he said in that curiously frank manner which Lady Elfreda liked so much, "Don't you remember me, sir? I am George Norris."

"Norris—George Norris?" My lord's brow was a thundercloud. But that was merely the process of thought. For the moment his memory had betrayed him.

"Perhaps, sir," said the young man in his straightforward fashion, "you will remember my father better than you remember me."

Lord Carabbas shook his head. Plainly he was still at a loss.

"My father, sir, was butler for nearly thirty years at Bally Euchra," said General Norris modestly.

XLIII

A pin might have been heard to fall on the hall parquet. And then the voice of Lord Carabbas rose to a bellow.

"What! Son of old Norris!"

"Yes, sir," said the modest George. But there was a note in the voice of my lord that at once enabled George Norris to assume perfect mastery over himself. "And my father married Miss Hook, the maid to your mother the Duchess." With an air mildly ironical the young man turned as he spoke to the girl at his side.

Lady Elfreda was biting her lip sharply. She had turned rather pale.

Another pin might have been heard to fall on the hall parquet and then George Norris said very quietly and calmly: "I should like you to understand, sir, that when I asked Lady Elfreda to marry me I was under the impression that she was a governess without a situation, without money, without friends."

Lord Carabbas nodded truculently. He was wise, no doubt, not to trust himself with words.

"And, of course, you will understand, also, that when Lady Elfreda did me the honor to accept my offer she had no idea that I was the only son of her grandfather's late head butler and her grandmother's second—I believe it was second—maid."

The young man ended this speech with a slight bow for the benefit of Lady Elfreda. And then quite suddenly he exploded in laughter. Lady Elfreda had the wit to respond with a tempered outburst of her own. But it lacked spontaneity. For all her power of will she was obviously laughing now on the wrong side of her mouth. As for Lord Carabbas, sore, bewildered, seeking to fix a quarrel, he saw a new affront in the method by which this son of old Norris chose to handle a matter quite without precedent.

"I'm hanged if I can see anything to laugh at," he said.

Again Lord Carabbas stood looking from one to the other of the culprits as if he would dearly like to commit murder. But at this grim moment he was saved from any rash or overt act by the composure of his daughter and the manly commonsense of this son of old Norris.

"I suppose, sir, I ought to apologize," he said matter-of-factly, "for landing you in this hocus. But, of course, I hadn't the least idea——"

"No, that I quite see," snapped Lord Carabbas.

"And of course it alters the case."

Lord Carabbas saw that too. His nod, at any rate, affirmed as much. And basking in a sense of acute relief that the more pressing evil was in process of being removed, he suddenly remembered what was due to this brilliant son of an old family retainer.

Recovering his air of grand seigneur, Lord Carabbas, with as much heartiness as he could muster, congratulated George Norris on his achievements in the field. They did him great credit and his lordship was quite sure that George's parents, who had retired years ago from the Duke's service to the keeping of an hotel near a golf links in County Down, a more lucrative if less distinguished proposition, must be proud of their son.

George modestly hoped that the old people were. Lord Carabbas grew quite reassured. "By the way," he said, "were you ever in the Duke's service? I seem to remember you."

"I was never really in the house, sir, except that as a boy I did odd jobs; but at sixteen I contrived to get into the estate office. You see, sir," George laughed, "I was always inclined to be ambitious. There was an idea at the back of my mind that one day I might become a land agent."

Lord Carabbas nodded approvingly. "Now the war is over I don't know what your plans are, but I daresay that something might be arranged."

"As a matter of fact, sir," said George, "I have just received the offer of a billet in British East Africa. You see, I have decided to make the Army my profession."

Again Lord Carabbas nodded approvingly. Such a career sounded almost as attractive as the offer of a stool in the Bally Euchra Estate Office. Still, the civilian career might be the less precarious. Anyhow, Lord Carabbas would be pleased to do what he could in the matter if the son of old Norris cared to consider the project.

George thanked Lord Carabbas. Thereupon that peer congratulated him upon his success, hoped that whatever course he took would prove to be the right one and shook him gravely but cordially by the hand. Having thus disposed of one whom he was bound to regard as his protégé, my lord went up to his room and proceeded resolutely to compose his ruffled feelings in a mustard bath.

#### XLIV

There now remained for George Norris the task of taking a final leave of the lady of his choice. Recent developments should have made the task easy, but when it came to the point he found it supremely difficult.

While The Dadda was still in the act of ascending the stairs George offered the hand of farewell. "Good-by, Lady Elfreda." This trying business was like a chemist's draught; let it be attacked at once and got over quickly.

Lady Elfreda, however, had to be consulted in the matter of pace and even in the mode of procedure. Completely ignoring the hand of farewell she asked calmly with that leisureliness which was at times so exasperating, "When do you start for East Africa?"

"I am going up to town to-morrow," said George, "to see them at the War Office. I'm hoping to get out pretty soon."

"It'll be very jolly if you do." She looked at him with the odd directness which sometimes was so delightful and sometimes so disconcerting.

Her manner gave no hint of the gulf that had opened between them. He was troubled exceedingly. Educated by the usage of a hard world he was not unduly sensitive or inclined to take himself too seriously, but still he was not proof altogether against a feeling of resentment. He had been so properly fooled that her air of unconcern seemed an added impertinence. Still, it was no use mounting the high horse. He must grin and bear the blow. Perhaps the process would be a little easier for the fact that in his own mind he was quite sure he didn't really deserve it.

George was still trying to make a final exit without loss of dignity and Lady Elfreda in a subtle way seemed to be trying her utmost to compromise it still further when Mrs. Minever arrived from the drawing room. The young man was at such a serious disadvantage that he was ready to welcome the lady of the house as an agent of providence. But she, it seemed, was not so much prepared to offer a means of escape as to fix still further the shackles of embarrassment upon him. She hoped General Norris would stay to dinner.

Nothing was further from the wish or the intention of General Norris, but for a reason only known to herself, Mrs. Minever was not at all inclined to take a polite refusal. "The Laurels is on the telephone. It will be easy to let them know—unless you have some particular engagement? And the car shall take you there afterwards."

The urgency of Mrs. Minever backed by the dynamic glance of the enchantingly wicked Elfreda made it very difficult for George Norris to be firm.

"But my clothes," he said rather weakly, to end a pause which he felt was undoing him.

Really, it was the feeblest of moves. The yellow chrysanthemum lady merely cast a glance at the displays of ribands peeping shyly from beneath his open overcoat. "I hope," she said archly, "the King's uniform will always be good enough for us."

George saw he was done. The light in the eye of the wicked Elfreda told him so. Evidently some new game was in the wind—but in for a penny, in for a pound! It was a moment for philosophy. Besides, a natural appetite for adventure had been enormously whetted by the amazing events of the past three hours.

There was no help for it. With a reluctance which in the depths of his heart George Norris knew to be not wholly sincere he allowed Mrs. Minever to lead him to the telephone.

XLV

Girlie, in the meantime, had gone to ground in King Edward's bedroom. The public eye was no place for her. All she asked now, if so much was permitted her, was to retire permanently into private life. She even cherished the modest hope that she might be allowed to make her escape from that house by the first train in the morning.

Shivering at her thoughts over the recently lighted bedroom fire, her faith was still pinned upon Lady Elfreda. It was a much-tired, a sorely-shattered faith, but it was now her only stand-by. The task would devolve upon Lady Elfreda of convincing Mrs. Minever and the others that her Deputy was really not "an adventuress" at all, or any kind of criminal in disguise, but the well educated daughter of a solicitor, who, no matter what her folly, was quite incapable of theft.

It was a horrid position for a budding Charlotte Brontë to occupy. As she viewed in perspective the eleven epic days she had contrived to live through since leaving London she could but marvel at herself. Oh, why had she ever embarked on this maddest of schemes! Her place was lost, her character was lost, she had used abominably a man who had gained her admiration and respect, whom she would have found it very easy to love. Never again could she hold up her head, not even if Lady Elfreda was able to satisfy the police that her Deputy was a reasonably innocent member of society!



Shivering over the logs as they spluttered to a reluctant heat, Girlie had never felt so low and miserable in her life. Remorse was whipping her severely. Ruin stared her in the face. Whatever would become of her! A hopeless future loomed ahead. No ray of hope was visible. Her mad enterprise had ended in the only way it could have done.

Soon after the clock had struck seven Girlie, fathoms deep in gloom, was startled by the entrance of Lady Elfreda. By now the poor Deputy had begun to feel a profound dislike of this cynical girl who had involved her in ruin. Howbeit, she still found it difficult not to admire her. Such assurance, such decision, such competence, such spirit were marvelous. She seemed to have every attribute of a She Napoleon.

"Where's that stupid old Pikey?" she said. In her manner of pressing the bell Girlie felt there was something magnificent. "She ought to be here rooting me out some clothes for this evening."

"I suppose," said Girlie dismally, yet heroically suppressing her tears, "I must leave this room now."

"Oh, no." There was a regal indifference to the room even if it was King Edward's. "There's one next door will do for me. But I must have something to put on this evening." She pressed the bell again just as Pikey entered, half truculent, half scared.

Girlie was still in awe of the Werewolf. Even the partial collapse of Pikey under the stress of events did not allow the Deputy to get on terms with her. But Elfreda's method of handling the creature was almost an education. In the sight of her lawful charge she counted for rather less than nobody.

"Pikey, what am I to wear this evening?" At the moment this was the question of questions for Elfreda.

"There's nothing you can wear," Pikey muttered dismally.

"Nothing? Don't be absurd. I know you packed at least five evening dresses."

Pikey flashed a savage glance at Miss Cass.

"She's worn them all," said Pikey in a tone of shameful confession.

"Of course. Why not?" said a very polite and very prompt Elfreda. No one likes other people wearing one's clothes, but Pikey's implication that their patrician owner would never be able to use them again was a little too much. It was one more barb for Miss No-Class.

Elfreda, however, with a woman's understanding of the case did her best to soften it. She was the soul of tact and she was quite charming to Miss Cass.

"Please choose the one you like best for this evening." Her winning grace brought back to poor Girlie's mind their never-to-be-forgotten journey from London.

Girlie declined the offer with tears.

"I—I c-couldn't think of going down to dinner this evening," she said with a little shiver.

"But, of course, you are going down to dinner." Napoleon—Hannibal—Etc.; the sinister cycle of their first meeting was being enacted again.

"Oh, no, I couldn't—I really couldn't—I could never face them all!"

"But of course you will." Each slow syllable of the Evil Genius seemed to burn itself in Girlie's heart. "If you don't play up now you will spoil everything."

Girlie shuddered. She fought against her tears. "I—I am ruined and disgraced. I—I don't know whatever will become of me."

"I don't either," Elfreda grimly agreed, "if you let go now."

With the power of will that made her so formidable Elfreda ordered Pikey to lay out Madame Lucile's new pink dress for Miss Cass.

"That is the one I think. It goes perfectly with your coloring. You must let Pikey do your hair. And you shall have my nicest necklace."

At the word "necklace" Girlie shuddered again. The prison gates loomed before her eyes.

"And you shall have my new Pinet slippers if they'll fit you. Now do be sensible. This evening you must simply play up for all you are worth."

It was all very well, but nature has set a limit to what flesh and blood can endure. Stage fright had once more fixed its talons on Girlie. "Oh, no, I can't face them to-night," she said miserably.

She was reckoning, however, without the dæmonic force that encompassed her. Its power over weak vessels was truly remarkable. And among these Pikey was foremost. The Werewolf, after all, was no more than a lath painted to look like iron and none knew that quite so well as her mistress. She ordered the disgruntled old woman about with the genial arrogance she might have bestowed on a favorite dog. And Pikey, mumbling under her breath, was only too ready to do her bidding

As for Miss Cass, she found herself in the midst of her toilet before she could quite realize what was taking place. Elfreda superintended it. "Yes, the pink one, Pikey. And those stockings, I think."

As ever, she was curiously impersonal but her taste was sure, she could bring her mind down to details and it was inflexible. Miss Cass was clay in her hands. Yet even now there was just one matter in which the unfortunate Deputy was able to muster a mind of her own. She insisted that no alien fingers should touch her hair.

"Better let Pikey, hadn't you? She's used to hair. She's really rather clever with it."

Here it was, however, that Miss Cass made her stand. She took the terrible, long-handled brush gently but firmly from Pikey's grasp. "I am used to doing it myself—I am really."

Pikey's sniff of disdain confirmed that statement. Elfreda was loth to yield the point, but time was fleeting. And Miss Cass, hairbrush in hand, was displaying such skill that it seemed vain to contest it.

"Perhaps you had better come and give me a hand, Pikey."

With a devout sense of thankfulness Girlie watched mistress and maid retire to the room next door.

XLVI

When Elfreda returned about half an hour later she was dressed for the evening. Girlie was thrilled by the picture of charm and fascination that she made. If not exactly pretty, she had a highly finished daintiness and beyond everything the strength of personality which transcends physical beauty yet is in itself a form of beauty. Somehow the sight of Elfreda cap-à-pie, bright, strong and audacious meant a great deal to her fellow conspirator.

"Now please remember," said the Evil Genius with that impersonal air which seemed to add to her power, "you simply must play up."

Poor Girlie had no spirit left in her. So black was the future that it was mere mockery to speak of "playing up." Besides, where was the necessity now?

Elfreda looked her up and down with an eye of frank but not unkindly criticism.

"Don't let go, whatever you do—for your own sake. Your dress is most becoming." She really was pretty. Madame Lucile's latest creation might have been made for her. And the forlorn look in her tear-dimmed eyes was an added weapon ... if the little noodle only knew how to use it!

Elfreda led the way along the corridor and downstairs to the drawing room. There seemed to be a buzz of suppressed excitement as they came in. Most of the others were already there. They did not want to miss a moment of the comedy. All might be said to be on tiptoe to learn the next turn in the game.

Girlie would dearly have liked to sink through the floor, yet she was sustained by the imperious power which still enslaved her. And before dinner was announced an event occurred which did much to lessen the painful tension of the Deputy. In fact it appeared to have an immediate effect upon everybody. Mrs. Minever pointed to an article which enclosed the third finger of her left hand and said with a rather forced laugh, "Behold, the missing ring!"

"You don't mean to say you've found it, Kate," cried her lord.

Sure enough, Mrs. Minever had. It seemed that the precious ring had merely been mislaid. She was willing to take the whole of the blame upon herself, although it should really belong to a stupid and forgetful servant.

"Well, I call that the limit!"

Mr. Minever was not alone in so regarding the incident. A deep growl of humorous disgust slowly permeated the room. "There now, didn't I say that man from Scotland Yard was a perfect fool!"

A shout of laughter greeted the indignant words of Lord Duckingfield. It was freely owned that the worthy Midlander had said so from the first. He had stood alone in his defense of the little governess. His sportsmanship had been admired, if skeptics deplored his gullibility. And now at this dramatic moment, like the big-hearted man he was, he contrived to underscore this admirable quality. For as the hostess and Lord Carabbas led the way to the dinner table, he moved across to Girlie, bowed to her and offered his arm.

It was a very hilarious meal. Everybody realized that they were on their honor "to play up," There could be no middle course. In the eyes of the fastidious these people might be vulgar, they might be second-rate, yet they were fully entitled to plume themselves on their sportsmanship.

Certainly an excellent dinner blended with their high spirits enabled them to carry the thing off brilliantly. Even Lord Carabbas, feeling his reputation as a sportsman to be at stake, made quite a brave showing. He still cherished homicidal feelings towards his youngest daughter, but the character of the food, the quality of the wine, the chaff and the gayety helped him to keep them well in hand. It was a dickens of a business, but he must "stick it" to the bitter end.

By one of those odd strokes of fortune which seem so inconsequent and yet obey the laws of reason, Miss Cass suddenly became the heroine of the hour. Everybody seemed thankful that an undeserved stigma had been removed; besides, the only means of punishing the culprit-in-chief was to canonize the understudy. The patrician impudence of Lady Elfreda could not be forgiven. It went so deep that it could only be wiped out with blood. Meanwhile, it had to be suffered and this was best achieved by absolving Miss Cass and even making much of her.

Perhaps for that reason General Norris, an undoubted figure of romance, was not acclaimed as the hero. The proud position was reserved for Sir Toby Philpot or with more accuracy it might be said that Sir Toby reserved it for himself. The little baronet had all the airs of a Congreve or a Sheridan with a dash of Molière thrown in. Superior people who had said "The Lady of Laxton" was far-fetched or impossible had been refuted wonderfully by what had occurred. The series of situations he had devised for his masterpiece had been outdone by these amazing events.

What a consolation it is that no matter what absurdities imagination may bring forth, Real Life never has any difficulty in going one better!

Odd as the circumstances were, there was not a suspicion of constraint. Mr. Montagu Jupp saw to that. As a matter of course he presided over the revels. His badinage rolled from one end of the table to the other, his wit vollied unceasingly. True to himself, in as rare a moment as life had given him, he spared neither age nor sex nor social position. Even an enraged parent finding a most excellent dinner to be a real stimulus to a sense of humor could not resist Montagu's audacity. It was not so much what he said, it was the way in which he said it. Nevertheless, the great man's words were exceedingly to the point.

What, for example, could have been more apposite than the impromptu speech in which he proposed the health of Lord Duckingfield? He rose at a moment when a lull was threatening and in terms which set the table in a roar he offered that peer sincere felicitations on his approaching marriage. Moreover, he ventured to link with the toast the name of their friend Miss Cass.

The toast was honored with acclamation. No doubt the acclamation was the louder for the fact that these primitive people were fully aware that for once even the admired Montagu had sailed rather close to the wind. There was a moment when the success of the ballon d'essai hung in the balance. In this world there is a limit to most things, after all!

For the brief space of thirty seconds the look on the face of the worthy Midlander seemed to promise an early delivery of the long-delayed punch on Montagu's nose. It was nearly fifty years since he had last received one at his private school. But as the sequel proved, Montagu's wonderful faculty of divination had judged to a nicety the thickness of the ice.

Lord Duckingfield rose slowly and heavily to his feet and thanked the company for their kind words. He thanked them not only on his own behalf, but—turning to the bewildered little girl at his side with [Pg 318]the most courtly bow he could command—also on behalf of the lady who he hoped would do him the honor to become his wife.

The effect of the announcement may have been a trifle marred by a loud shriek from the little baronet. Stimulated by Sir Toby's threat of hysteria, Mr. Jupp broke suddenly into "For he's a jolly good fellow." The strain was promptly taken up and musical honors were bestowed upon my lord.

In the meantime the bewildered Girlie was passing through a sort of dream. She could not believe her ears. At any rate, she could not believe the words of Lord Duckingfield. She was really in love with this good fellow. It was not merely that he alone could stand between her and a cruel world, it was not merely that he was her only protector; she loved him for his manliness, his generosity, his large simplicity. But a girl like herself could never hope to be his wife, particularly after having made of him a public laughing stock.

Still it is the unexpected that happens. An hour later, in the lee of the hall stairs, Lord Duckingfield was able to prove to Girlie Cass that he fully intended to be as good as his word.



About the same time, in the seclusion of the library, Elfreda took pains to prove to George Norris that she also was determined to keep faith with him. A stormy interview with her father did something to nerve her for the task. But, in any case, her mind was made up. Her year in London with the V. A. D. had opened her eyes to the world and the things around her. She saw a chance of permanent escape from the stuffy circle in which she had been brought up. Her pompous, caste-ridden parents, her narrow, conventional sisters—what did they stand for, after all?

XLVII

Brigadier General Norris, C.M.G., and Lady Elfreda Norris proceeded to East Africa at the end of January. The climate suits them, they get on well with the natives and they like the life immensely. So far there is not a cloud on their horizon. Just at first General Norris was a trifle anxious about money, because the daughter of even an impoverished marquis is apt to think expensively. But early in March Grandpapa Angora died at the ripe age of eighty-seven and the old gentleman really “cut up” better than most people expected. Anyhow, when the will was proved each of his grandchildren benefited to the tune of thirty thousand pounds. Moreover, in the year 1916, George Norris, or Captain Norris as he was then, on the advice of a friend in the City invested the whole of his savings in Burmah Oil, and like a wise young man forgot all about the matter for several years. So you see, there’s really no need for the young couple to worry about money.

However, these are mundane matters. What is vastly more important is that the Lady Elfreda Norris has already presented to the Empire a sturdy young male. And if the printers come out again on strike, before this work sees the light she is quite likely to have presented it with another one.

It is very doubtful if Lady Duckingfield will ever be a Miss Cholmondeley or a Mrs. Humphry Ward. Charlotte Brontë is out of the question. 4b Berkeley Square and Mount Pleasant, Wolverhampton, are really so comfortable that all thought of "sturm und drang" has passed for ever. And no one can be a Charlotte Brontë without it. Still, Lady Duckingfield is not quite dead to ambition. The Saturday Sentinel paid her such charming compliments on her essay, "The Art of Mr. Galsworthy," that she has in contemplation critical estimates of other modern novelists. Her next subject will be...?

No, please guess again....

However.

There is no moral to this story. Life itself has no moral. The most deserving people don't always come out "on top." And vice versa.

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Most hyphenation has been regularized; variant and non-English spelling has been retained as typeset.

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