

WILLIAM MAUGHAM

PLAYS: LADY FREDERICK,
THE EXPLORER, A MAN
OF HONOUR

William Maugham
**Plays: Lady Frederick, The
Explorer, A Man of Honour**

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William Somerset Maugham Plays: Lady Frederick, The Explorer, A Man of Honour

LADY FREDERICK

CHARACTERS

Lady Frederick Berolles

Sir Gerald O'Mara

Mr. Paradine Fouldes

Marchioness of Mereston

Marquess of Mereston

Admiral Carlisle

Rose

Lady Frederick's Dressmaker

Lady Frederick's Footman

Lady Frederick's Maid

Thompson

A Waiter at the Hotel Splendide

Time: *The Present Day*

Acts I and II —*Drawing-room at the Hotel Splendide, Monte Carlo.*

Act III —*Lady Frederick's Dressing-Room.*

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THE FIRST ACT

Scene: Drawing-room of the Hotel Splendide at Monte Carlo. A large, handsomely furnished room, with doors right and left, and French windows at the back leading to a terrace. Through these is seen the starry southern night. On one side is a piano, on the other a table with papers neatly laid out on it. There is a lighted stove.

Lady Mereston, in evening dress, rather magnificently attired, is reading the papers. She is a handsome woman of forty. She puts down the paper impatiently and rings the bell. A servant answers. He has a French accent.

Lady Mereston

Did Mr. Paradine Fouldes come this evening?

Servant

Yes, miladi.

Lady Mereston

Is he in the hotel now?

Servant

Yes, miladi.

Lady Mereston

Will you send some one up to his room to say I'm waiting to see him?

Servant

Pardon, miladi, but the gentleman say 'e was on no account to be disturbed.

Lady Mereston

Nonsense. Mr. Fouldes is my brother. You must go to him immediately.

Servant

Mr. Fouldes his valet is in the 'all. Will your ladyship speak with him?

Lady Mereston

Mr. Fouldes is more difficult to see than a cabinet minister.
Send his servant to me.

Servant

Very good, miladi.

[Exit Servant, and presently Thompson, Mr. Fouldes' man, comes in.]

Thompson

Your ladyship wished to see me.

Lady Mereston

Good evening, Thompson. I hope you had a comfortable journey.

Thompson

Yes, my lady. Mr. Fouldes always has a comfortable journey.

Lady Mereston

Was the sea calm when you crossed?

Thompson

Yes, my lady. Mr. Fouldes would look upon it as a great liberty if the sea was not calm.

Lady Mereston

Will you tell Mr. Fouldes that I should like to see him at once?

Thompson

[*Looking at his watch.*] Excuse me, my lady, but Mr. Fouldes said no one was to disturb him till ten o'clock. It's more than my place is worth to go to him at five minutes to.

Lady Mereston

But what on earth's he doing?

Thompson

I don't know at all, my lady.

Lady Mereston

How long have you been with Mr. Fouldes?

Thompson

Twenty-five years, my lady.

Lady Mereston

I should have thought you knew how he spent every minute of his day.

[Paradine comes in. He is a very well-dressed man of forty-odd. Self-possessed, worldly, urbane. He is never at a loss or put out of countenance. He overhears Lady Mereston's last words.]

Fouldes

When I engaged Thompson I told him the first thing he must

learn was the very difficult feat of keeping his eyes open and shut at one and the same time.

Lady Mereston

My dear Paradine, I've been waiting to see you for the last two hours. How tiresome you are.

Fouldes

You may give me a kiss, Maud, but don't be rough.

Lady Mereston

[*Kissing his cheek.*] You ridiculous creature. You really might have come to see me at once.

Fouldes

My dear, you cannot grudge me a little repose after a long and tedious journey. I had to repair the ravages to my person caused by twenty-seven hours in the train.

Lady Mereston

Don't be so absurd. I'm sure your person is never ravished.

Fouldes

Ravaged, my dear, ravaged. I should look upon it as an affectation at my age if I were not a little upset by the journey from London to Monte Carlo.

Lady Mereston

I'll be bound you ate a very hearty dinner.

Fouldes

Thompson, did I eat any dinner at all?

Thompson

[*Stolidly.*] Soup, sir.

Fouldes

I remember looking at it.

Thompson

Fish, sir.

Fouldes

I trifled with a fried sole.

Thompson

Bouchées à la Reine, sir.

Fouldes

They have left absolutely no impression upon me.

Thompson

Tournedos à la Splendide.

Fouldes

They were distinctly tough, Thompson. You must lodge a complaint in the proper quarter.

Thompson

Roast pheasant, sir.

Fouldes

Yes, yes, now you mention it, I do remember the pheasant.

Thompson

Chocolate ice, sir.

Fouldes

It was too cold, Thompson. It was distinctly too cold.

Lady Mereston

My dear Paradine, I think you dined uncommonly well.

Fouldes

I have reached an age when love, ambition and wealth pale into insignificance beside a really well-grilled steak. That'll do, Thompson.

Thompson

Very well, sir.

[He goes out.]

Lady Mereston

It's too bad of you, Paradine, to devour a substantial meal when I'm eating out my very heart with anxiety.

Fouldes

It seems to agree with you very well. I've not seen you look

better for years.

Lady Mereston

For heaven's sake be serious and listen to me.

Fouldes

I started immediately I got your telegram. Pray tell me what I can do for you?

Lady Mereston

My dear Paradine, Charlie's head over ears in love.

Fouldes

It's not altogether an unexpected condition for a young man of twenty-two. If the lady's respectable, marry him and resign yourself to being a dowager. If she's not, give her five hundred pounds and pack her off to Paris or London or wherever else she habitually practises her arts and graces.

Lady Mereston

I wish I could. But who d'you think it is?

Fouldes

My dear, there's nothing I detest more than riddles. I can imagine quite a number of fair ladies who would look without disdain upon a young marquess with fifty thousand a year.

Lady Mereston

Lady Frederick Berolles.

Fouldes

By Jupiter!

Lady Mereston

She's fifteen years older than he is.

Fouldes

Then she's not old enough to be his mother, which is a distinct advantage.

Lady Mereston

She dyes her hair.

Fouldes

She dyes it uncommonly well.

Lady Mereston

She paints.

Fouldes

Much better than a Royal Academician.

Lady Mereston

And poor Charlie's simply infatuated. He rides with her all the morning, motors with her all the afternoon, and gambles with her half the night. I never see him.

Fouldes

But why should you think Lady Frederick cares two straws for him?

Lady Mereston

Don't be ridiculous, Paradine. Every one knows she hasn't a penny, and she's crippled with debts.

Fouldes

One has to keep up appearances in this world. Life nowadays for the woman of fashion is a dilemma of which one horn is the Bankruptcy Court and the other – dear Sir Francis Jeune.

Lady Mereston

I wish I knew how she manages to dress so beautifully. It's one of the injustices of fate that clothes only hang on a woman really well when she's lost every shred of reputation.

Fouldes

My dear, you must console yourself with the thought that she'll probably frizzle for it hereafter.

Lady Mereston

I hope I'm not wicked, Paradine, but to wear draperies and wings in the next world offers me no compensation for looking dowdy in a Paquin gown in this.

Fouldes

I surmised she was on the verge of bankruptcy when I heard she'd bought a new motor. And you seriously think Charlie wants to marry her?

Lady Mereston

I'm sure of it.

Fouldes

And what d'you want me to do?

Lady Mereston

Good heavens, I want you to prevent it. After all he has a magnificent position; he's got every chance of making a career for himself. There's no reason why he shouldn't be Prime Minister – it's not fair to the boy to let him marry a woman like that.

Fouldes

Of course you know Lady Frederick?

Lady Mereston

My dear Paradine, we're the greatest friends. You don't suppose I'm going to give her the advantage of quarrelling with

me. I think I shall ask her to luncheon to meet you.

Fouldes

Women have such an advantage over men in affairs of this sort. They're troubled by no scruples, and, like George Washington, never hesitate to lie.

Lady Mereston

I look upon her as an abandoned creature, and I tell you frankly I shall stop at nothing to save my son from her clutches.

Fouldes

Only a thoroughly good woman could so calmly announce her intention of using the crookedest ways to gain her ends.

Lady Mereston

[*Looking at him.*] There must be some incident in her career which she wouldn't like raked up. If we could only get hold of that...

Fouldes

[*Blandly.*] How d'you imagine I can help you?

Lady Mereston

A reformed burglar is always the best detective.

Fouldes

My dear, I wish you could be frank without being sententious.

Lady Mereston

You've run through two fortunes, and if we all got our deserts you would be starving now instead of being richer than ever.

Fouldes

My second cousins have a knack of dying at the psychological moment.

Lady Mereston

You've been a horrid, dissipated wretch all your life, and heaven knows the disreputable people who've been your bosom friends.

Fouldes

With my knowledge of the world and your entire lack of scruple we should certainly be a match for one defenceless woman.

Lady Mereston

[*Looking at him sharply.*] Common report says that at one time you were very much in love with her.

Fouldes

Common report is an ass whose long ears only catch its own braying.

Lady Mereston

I was wondering how far things went. If you could tell Charlie of the relations between you...

Fouldes

My good Maud, there were no relations – unfortunately.

Lady Mereston

Poor George was very uneasy about you at the time.

Fouldes

Your deceased husband, being a strictly religious man, made a point of believing the worst about his neighbours.

Lady Mereston

Don't, Paradine; I know you didn't like one another, but remember that I loved him with all my heart. I shall never get over his death.

Fouldes

My dear girl, you know I didn't mean to wound you.

Lady Mereston

After all, it was largely your fault. He was deeply religious, and as the president of the Broad Church Union he couldn't countenance your mode of life.

Fouldes

[*With great uncton.*] Thank God in my day I've been a miserable sinner!

Lady Mereston

[*Laughing.*] You're quite incurable, Paradine. But you will help me now. Since his father's death, the boy and I have lived a very retired life, and now we're quite helpless. It would break my heart if Charlie married that woman.

Fouldes

I'll do my best. I think I can promise you that nothing will come of it.

[The door is flung open, and Lady Frederick enters, followed by Mereston, a young boyish man of twenty-two; by her brother, Sir Gerald O'Mara, a handsome fellow of six-and-twenty; by Captain Montgomerie, Admiral Carlisle, and Rose, his daughter. Lady Frederick is a handsome Irish woman of thirty to thirty-five, beautifully dressed. She is very vivacious, and light-hearted. She has all the Irish recklessness and unconcern for the morrow. Whenever she wants to get round anybody she falls into an Irish brogue, and then, as she knows very well, she is quite irresistible. Captain Montgomerie is a polished, well-groomed man of thirty-five, with suave manners. The Admiral is bluff and downright. Rose is a pretty ingénue of nineteen.]

Lady Mereston

Here they are.

Lady Frederick

[Enthusiastically going to him with open arms.] Paradine!
Paradine! Paradine!

Mererston

Oh, my prophetic soul, mine uncle!

Fouldes

[*Shaking hands with Lady Frederick.*] I heard you were at the Casino.

Lady Frederick

Charlie lost all his money, so I brought him away.

Lady Mereston

I wish you wouldn't gamble, Charlie dear.

Mererston

My dear mother, I've only lost ten thousand francs.

Lady Frederick

[*To Paradine Fouldes.*] I see you're in your usual robust health.

Fouldes

You needn't throw it in my face. I shall probably be very unwell to-morrow.

Lady Frederick

D'you know Admiral Carlisle? This is my brother Gerald.

Fouldes

[*Shaking hands.*] How d'you do?

Lady Frederick

[*Introducing.*] Captain Montgomerie.

Captain Montgomerie

I think we've met before.

Fouldes

I'm very pleased to hear it. How d'you do. [*To Mererston.*]
Are you having a good time in Monte Carlo, Charles?

Mererston

A 1, thanks.

Fouldes

And what do you do with yourself?

Mererston

Oh, hang about generally, you know – and there's always the tables.

Fouldes

That's right, my boy; I'm glad to see that you prepare yourself properly for your duties as a hereditary legislator.

Mererston

[*Laughing.*] Oh, shut it, Uncle Paradine.

Fouldes

I rejoice also to find that you have already a certain command of the vernacular.

Mererston

Well, if you can browbeat a London cabby and hold your own in repartee with a barmaid, it oughtn't to be difficult to get on all right in the House of Lords.

Fouldes

But let me give you a solemn warning. You have a magnificent chance, dear boy, with all the advantages of wealth and station. I

beseech you not to throw it away by any exhibition of talent. The field is clear and the British people are waiting for a leader. But remember that the British people like their leaders dull. Capacity they mistrust, versatility they cannot bear, and wit they utterly abhor. Look at the fate of poor Lord Parnaby. His urbanity gained him the premiership, but his brilliancy overthrew him. How could the fortunes of the nation be safe with a man whose speeches were pointed and sparkling, whose mind was so quick, so agile, that it reminded you of a fencer's play? Every one is agreed that Lord Parnaby is flippant and unsubstantial; we doubt his principles and we have grave fears about his morality. Take warning, my dear boy, take warning. Let the sprightly epigram never lighten the long periods of your speech nor the Attic salt flavour the roast beef of your conversation. Be careful that your metaphors show no imagination and conceal your brains as you would a discreditable secret. Above all, if you have a sense of humour, crush it. Crush it.

Mereston

My dear uncle, you move me very much. I will be as stupid as an owl.

Fouldes

There's a good, brave boy.

Mereston

I will be heavy and tedious.

Fouldes

I see already the riband of the Garter adorning your shirt-front. Remember, there's no damned merit about that.

Mereston

None shall listen to my speeches without falling into a profound sleep.

Fouldes

[*Seizing his hand.*] The premiership itself is within your grasp.

Lady Mereston

Dear Paradine, let us take a stroll on the terrace before we go to bed.

Fouldes

And you shall softly whisper all the latest scandal in my ear.

[He puts on her cloak and they go out.]

Lady Frederick

May I speak to you, Admiral?

Admiral

Certainly, certainly. What can I do for you?

[While Lady Frederick and the Admiral talk, the others go slowly out. Through the conversation she uses her Irish brogue.]

Lady Frederick

Are you in a good temper?

Admiral

Fairly, fairly.

Lady Frederick

I'm glad of that because I want to make you a proposal of marriage.

Admiral

My dear Lady Frederick, you take me entirely by surprise.

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] Not on my own behalf, you know.

Admiral

Oh, I see.

Lady Frederick

The fact is, my brother Gerald has asked your daughter to marry him, and she has accepted.

Admiral

Rose is a minx, Lady Frederick, and she's much too young to marry.

Lady Frederick

Now don't fly into a passion. We're going to talk it over quite calmly.

Admiral

I tell you I won't hear of it. The boy's penniless.

Lady Frederick

That's why it's so lucky you're rich.

Admiral

Eh?

Lady Frederick

You've been talking of buying a place in Ireland. You couldn't want anything nicer than Gerald's – gravel soil, you know. And you simply dote on Elizabethan architecture.

Admiral

I can't bear it.

Lady Frederick

How fortunate, then, that the house was burnt down in the eighteenth century and rebuilt in the best Georgian style.

Admiral

Ugh.

Lady Frederick

And you'd love to have little grandsons to dandle on your knee.

Admiral

How do I know they wouldn't be girls?

Lady Frederick

Oh, it's most unusual in our family.

Admiral

I tell you I won't hear of it.

Lady Frederick

You know, it's not bad to have the oldest baronetcy in the country but one.

Admiral

I suppose I shall have to pack Rose off to England.

Lady Frederick

And break her heart?

Admiral

Women's hearts are like old china, none the worse for a break or two.

Lady Frederick

Did you ever know my husband, Admiral?

Admiral

Yes.

Lady Frederick

I was married to him at seventeen because my mother thought it a good match, and I was desperately in love with another man. Before we'd been married a fortnight he came home blind drunk, and I had never seen a drunken man before. Then I found out he was a confirmed tippler. I was so ashamed. If you only knew what my life was for the ten years I lived with him. I've done a lot of foolish things in my time, but, my God, I have suffered.

Admiral

Yes, I know, I know.

Lady Frederick

And believe me, when two young things love one another it's better to let them marry. Love is so very rare in this world. One really ought to make the most of it when it's there.

Admiral

I'm very sorry, but I've made up my mind.

Lady Frederick

Ah, but won't you alter it – like Nelson. Don't be hard on Rose. She's really in love with Gerald. Do give them a chance. Won't you? Ah, do – there's a dear.

Admiral

I don't want to hurt your feelings, but Sir Gerald is about the most ineligible young man that I've ever come across.

Lady Frederick

[*Triumphantly.*] There, I knew we should agree. That's precisely what I told him this morning.

Admiral

I understand his place is heavily mortgaged.

Lady Frederick

No one will lend a penny more on it. If they would Gerald would borrow it at once.

Admiral

He's got nothing but his pay to live upon.

Lady Frederick

And his tastes are very extravagant.

Admiral

He's a gambler.

Lady Frederick

Yes, but then he's so good looking.

Admiral

Eh?

Lady Frederick

I'm glad that we agree so entirely about him. Now there's

nothing left but to call the young things in, join their hands and give them our united blessing.

Admiral

Before I consent to this marriage, madam, I'll see your brother

Lady Frederick

Damned?

Admiral

Yes, madam, damned.

Lady Frederick

Now listen to me quietly, will you?

Admiral

I should warn you, Lady Frederick, that when I once make up my mind about a thing, I never change it.

Lady Frederick

Now that is what I really admire. I like a man of character. You know, I've always been impressed by your strength and determination.

Admiral

I don't know about that. But when I say a thing, I do it.

Lady Frederick

Yes, I know. And in five minutes you're going to say that Gerald may marry your pretty Rose.

Admiral

No, no, no.

Lady Frederick

Now look here, don't be obstinate, I don't like you when you're obstinate.

Admiral

I'm not obstinate. I'm firm.

Lady Frederick

After all, Gerald has lots of good qualities. He's simply devoted to your daughter. He's been a little wild, but you know you wouldn't give much for a young man who hadn't.

Admiral

[*Gruffly.*] I don't want a milksop for a son-in-law.

Lady Frederick

As soon as he's married, he'll settle into a model country squire.

Admiral

Well, he's a gambler, and I can't get over that.

Lady Frederick

Shall he promise you never to play cards again? Now, don't be horrid. You don't want to make me utterly wretched, do you?

Admiral

[*Unwillingly.*] Well, I'll tell you what I'll do – they shall marry if he doesn't gamble for a year.

Lady Frederick

Oh, you duck. [*She impulsively throws her arms round his neck and kisses him. He is a good deal taken aback.*] I beg your pardon, I couldn't help it.

Admiral

I don't altogether object, you know.

Lady Frederick

Upon my word, in some ways you're rather fascinating.

Admiral

D'you think so, really?

Lady Frederick

I do indeed.

Admiral

I rather wish that proposal of marriage had been on your own behalf.

Lady Frederick

Ah, with me, dear Admiral, experience triumphs over hope. I must tell the children. [*Calling.*] Gerald, come here. Rose.

[Gerald and Rose come in.]

Lady Frederick

I always knew your father was a perfect darling, Rose.

Rose

Oh, papa, you are a brick.

Admiral

I thoroughly disapprove of the marriage, my dear, but – it's not easy to say no to Lady Frederick.

Gerald

It's awfully good of you, Admiral, and I'll do my best to make Rose a ripping husband.

Admiral

Not so fast, young man, not so fast. There's a condition.

Rose

Oh, father!

Lady Frederick

Gerald is to behave himself for a year, and then you may marry.

Rose

But won't Gerald grow very dull if he behaves himself?

Lady Frederick

I have no doubt of it. But dullness is the first requisite of a good husband.

Admiral

Now you must pack off to bed, my dear. I'm going to smoke my pipe before turning in.

Rose

[*Kissing* Lady Frederick.] Good-night, dearest. I'll never forget your kindness.

Lady Frederick

You'd better not thank me till you've been married a few years.

Rose

[Holding out her hand to GERALD.] Good-night.

Gerald

[Taking it and looking at her.] Good-night.

Admiral

[Gruffly.] You may as well do it in front of my face as behind my back.

Rose

[Lifting up her lips.] Good-night.

[He kisses her, and the Admiral and Rose go out.]

Lady Frederick

Oh lord, I wish I were eighteen.

[She sinks into a chair, and an expression of utter weariness comes over her face.]

Gerald

I say, what's up?

Lady Frederick

[Starting.] I thought you'd gone. Nothing.

Gerald

Come, out with it.

Lady Frederick

Oh, my poor boy, if you only knew. I'm so worried that I don't know what on earth to do.

Gerald

Money?

Lady Frederick

Last year I made a solemn determination to be economical.
And it's ruined me.

Gerald

My dear, how could it?

Lady Frederick

I can't make it out. It seems very unfair. The more I tried not
to be extravagant, the more I spent.

Gerald

Can't you borrow?

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] I have borrowed. That's just it.

Gerald

Well, borrow again.

Lady Frederick

I've tried to. But no one's such a fool as to lend me a penny.

Gerald

Did you say I'd sign anything they liked?

Lady Frederick

I was so desperate I said we'd both sign anything. It was Dick Cohen.

Gerald

Oh lord, what did he say?

Lady Frederick

[*Imitating a Jewish accent.*] What's the good of wathing a nithe clean sheet of paper, my dear lady?

Gerald

[*Shouting with laughter.*] By George, don't I know it.

Lady Frederick

For heaven's sake don't let's talk of my affairs. They're in such a state that if I think of them at all I shall have a violent fit of hysterics.

Gerald

But look here, what d'you really mean?

Lady Frederick

Well, if you want it – I owe my dressmaker seven hundred pounds, and last year I signed two horrid bills, one for fifteen hundred and the other for two thousand. They fall due the day after to-morrow, and if I can't raise the money I shall have to go through the Bankruptcy Court.

Gerald

By George, that's serious.

Lady Frederick

It's so serious that I can't help thinking something will happen. Whenever I've got in a really tight fix something has turned up and put me on my legs again. Last time, Aunt Elizabeth had an apoplectic fit. But of course it wasn't really very profitable because mourning is so desperately expensive.

Gerald

Why don't you marry?

Lady Frederick

Oh, my dear Gerald, you know I'm always unlucky at games of chance.

Gerald

Charlie Mereston's awfully gone on you.

Lady Frederick

That must be obvious to the meanest intelligence.

Gerald

Well, why don't you have him?

Lady Frederick

Good heavens, I'm old enough to be his mother.

Gerald

Nonsense. You're only ten years older than he is, and nowadays no nice young man marries a woman younger than himself.

Lady Frederick

He's such a good fellow. I couldn't do him a nasty turn like that.

Gerald

How about Montgomerie? He simply stinks of money, and he's not a bad sort.

Lady Frederick

[*Surprised.*] My dear boy, I hardly know him.

Gerald

Well, I'm afraid it means marriage or bankruptcy.

Lady Frederick

Here's Charlie. Take him away, there's a dear. I want to talk to Paradine.

Enter Paradine Fouldes with Mereston.

Fouldes

What, still here, Lady Frederick?

Lady Frederick

As large as life.

Fouldes

We've been taking a turn on the terrace.

Lady Frederick

[*To Mereston.*] And has your astute uncle been pumping you, Charlie?

Fouldes

Eh, what?

Mereston

I don't think he got much out of me.

Fouldes

[*Good-naturedly.*] All I wanted, dear boy. There's no one so transparent as the person who thinks he's devilish deep. By the way, what's the time?

Gerald

About eleven, isn't it?

Fouldes

Ah! How old are you, Charlie?

Mereston

Twenty-two.

Fouldes

Then it's high time you went to bed.

Lady Frederick

Charlie's not going to bed till I tell him. Are you?

Mereston

Of course not.

Fouldes

Has it escaped your acute intelligence, my friend, that I want to talk to Lady Frederick?

Mereston

Not at all. But I have no reason to believe that Lady Frederick wants to talk to you.

Gerald

Let's go and have a game of pills, Charlie.

Mereston

D'you want to be left alone with the old villain?

Fouldes

You show no respect for my dyed hairs, young man.

Lady Frederick

I've not seen him for years, you know.

Mereston

Oh, all right. I say, you're coming for a ride to-morrow, aren't you?

Lady Frederick

Certainly. But it must be in the afternoon.

Fouldes

I'm sorry, but Charles has arranged to motor me over to Nice in the afternoon.

Mereston

[*To Lady Frederick.*] That'll suit me A 1. I had an engagement, but it was quite unimportant.

Lady Frederick

Then that's settled. Good-night.

Mereston

Good-night.

[He goes out with Gerald. Lady Frederick turns and good-humouredly scrutinises Paradise Fouldes.]

Lady Frederick

Well?

Fouldes

Well?

Lady Frederick

You wear excellently, Paradine.

Fouldes

Thanks.

Lady Frederick

How do you manage it?

Fouldes

By getting up late and never going to bed early, by eating whatever I like and drinking whenever I'm thirsty, by smoking strong cigars, taking no exercise, and refusing under any circumstances to be bored.

Lady Frederick

I'm sorry you had to leave town in such a hurry. Were you amusing yourself?

Fouldes

I come to the Riviera every year.

Lady Frederick

I daresay, but not so early.

Fouldes

I've never surrendered so far to middle age as to make habits.

Lady Frederick

My dear Paradine, the day before yesterday, Lady Mereston, quite distracted, went to the post office and sent you the following wire: "Come at once, your help urgently needed. Charlie in toils designing female, Maud." Am I right?

Fouldes

I never admit even to myself that a well-dressed woman is mistaken.

Lady Frederick

So you started post-haste, bent upon protecting your nephew, and were infinitely surprised to learn that the designing female was no other than your humble servant.

Fouldes

You'd be irresistible, Lady Frederick, if you didn't know you were so clever.

Lady Frederick

And now what are you going to do?

Fouldes

My dear lady, I'm not a police officer, but a very harmless, inoffensive old bachelor.

Lady Frederick

With more wiles than the mother of many daughters and the subtlety of a company promoter.

Fouldes

Maud seems to think that as I've racketted about a little in my time, I'm just the sort of man to deal with you. Set a thief to catch a thief, don't you know? She's rather fond of proverbs.

Lady Frederick

She should have thought rather of: When Greek meets Greek, then comes the tug of war. I hear Lady Mereston has been saying the most agreeable things about me.

Fouldes

Ah, that's women's fault; they always show their hand. You're the only woman I ever knew who didn't.

Lady Frederick

[*With a brogue.*] You should have avoided the Blarney Stone when you went to Ireland.

Fouldes

Look here, d'you want to marry Charlie?

Lady Frederick

Why should I?

Fouldes

Because he's got fifty thousand a year, and you're head over ears in debt. You've got to raise something like four thousand pounds at once, or you go under. You've got yourself a good deal talked about during the last ten years, but people have stood you because you had plenty of money. If you go broke they'll drop you like a hot potato. And I daresay it wouldn't be inconvenient to change Lady Frederick Berolles into Lady Mereston. My sister has always led me to believe that it is rather attractive to be a Marchioness.

Lady Frederick

Unlike a duchess, its cheap without being gaudy.

Fouldes

You asked me why you might want to marry a boy from ten to fifteen years younger than yourself, and I've told you.

Lady Frederick

And now perhaps you'll tell me why you're going to interfere

in my private concerns?

Fouldes

Well, you see his mother happens to be my sister, and I'm rather fond of her. It's true her husband was the most sanctimonious prig I've ever met in my life.

Lady Frederick

I remember him well. He was president of the Broad Church Union and wore side-whiskers.

Fouldes

But she stuck to me through thick and thin. I've been in some pretty tight places in my day, and she's always given me a leg up when I wanted it. I've got an idea it would just about break her heart if Charlie married you.

Lady Frederick

Thanks.

Fouldes

You know, I don't want to be offensive, but I think it would be a pity myself. And besides, unless I'm much mistaken, I've got a little score of my own that I want to pay off.

Lady Frederick

Have you?

Fouldes

You've got a good enough memory not to have forgotten that you made a blithering fool of me once. I swore I'd get even with you, and by George, I mean to do it.

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] And how do you propose to stop me if I make up my mind that I'm going to accept Charlie?

Fouldes

Well, he's not proposed yet, has he?

Lady Frederick

Not yet, but I've had to use every trick and device I can think of to prevent him.

Fouldes

Look here, I'm going to play this game with my cards on the table.

Lady Frederick

Then I shall be on my guard. You're never so dangerous as when you pretend to be frank.

Fouldes

I'm sorry you should think so badly of me.

Lady Frederick

I don't. Only it was a stroke of genius when Nature put the soul of a Jesuit priest into the body of a Yorkshire squire.

Fouldes

I wonder what you're paying me compliments for. You must be rather afraid of me.

[They look at one another for a moment.]

Lady Frederick

Well, let's look at these cards.

Fouldes

First of all, there's this money you've got to raise.

Lady Frederick

Well?

Fouldes

This is my sister's suggestion.

Lady Frederick

That means you don't much like it.

Fouldes

If you'll refuse the boy and clear out – we'll give you forty thousand pounds.

Lady Frederick

I suppose you'd be rather surprised if I boxed your ears.

Fouldes

Now, look here, between you and me high falutin's rather absurd, don't you think so? You're in desperate want of money, and I don't suppose it would amuse you much to have a young hobbledohoy hanging about your skirts for the rest of your life.

Lady Frederick

Very well, we'll have no high falutin! You may tell Lady Mereston that if I really wanted the money I shouldn't be such

an idiot as to take forty thousand down when I can have fifty thousand a year for the asking.

Fouldes

I told her that.

Lady Frederick

You showed great perspicacity. Now for the second card.

Fouldes

My dear, it's no good getting into a paddy over it.

Lady Frederick

I've never been calmer in my life.

Fouldes

You always had the very deuce of a temper. I suppose you've not given Charlie a sample of it yet, have you?

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] Not yet.

Fouldes

Well, the second card's your reputation.

Lady Frederick

But I haven't got any. I thought that such an advantage.

Fouldes

You see Charlie is a young fool. He thinks you a paragon of all the virtues, and it's never occurred to him that you've rather gone the pace in your time.

Lady Frederick

It's one of my greatest consolations to think that even a hundred horse-power racing motor couldn't be more rapid than I've been.

Fouldes

Still it'll be rather a shock to Charlie when he hears that this modest flower whom he trembles to adore has...

Lady Frederick

Very nearly eloped with his own uncle. But you won't tell him that story because you hate looking a perfect ass.

Fouldes

Madam, when duty calls, Paradine Fouldes consents even to look ridiculous. But I was thinking of the Bellingham affair.

Lady Frederick

Ah, of course, there's the Bellingham affair. I'd forgotten it.

Fouldes

Nasty little business that, eh?

Lady Frederick

Horrid.

Fouldes

Don't you think it would choke him off?

Lady Frederick

I think it very probable.

Fouldes

Well, hadn't you better cave in?

Lady Frederick

[*Ringing the bell.*] Ah, but you've not seen my cards yet. [*A servant enters.*] Tell my servant to bring down the despatch-box which is on my writing-table.

SERVANT.

Yes, miladi.

[Exit.

Fouldes

What's up now?

Lady Frederick

Well, four or five years ago I was staying at this hotel, and Mimi la Bretonne had rooms here.

Fouldes

I never heard of the lady, but her name suggests that she had an affectionate nature.

Lady Frederick

She was a little singer at the Folies Bergères, and she had the loveliest emeralds I ever saw.

Fouldes

But you don't know Maud's.

Lady Frederick

The late Lord Mereston had a passion for emeralds. He always thought they were such pure stones.

Fouldes

[*Quickly.*] I beg your pardon?

Lady Frederick

Well, Mimi fell desperately ill, and there was no one to look after her. Of course the pious English ladies in the hotel wouldn't go within a mile of her, so I went and did the usual thing, don't you know.

[Lady Frederick's man comes in with a small despatch-box which he places on a table. He goes out. Lady Frederick as she talks, unlocks it.]

Fouldes

Thank God I'm a bachelor, and no ministering angel ever smooths my pillow when I particularly want to be left alone.

Lady Frederick

I nursed her more or less through the whole illness, and afterwards she fancied she owed me her worthless little life. She wanted to give me the precious emeralds, and when I refused was so heart-broken that I said I'd take one thing if I might.

Fouldes

And what was that?

Lady Frederick

A bundle of letters. I'd seen the address on the back of the envelope, and then I recognised the writing. I thought they'd be much safer in my hands than in hers. [*She takes them out of the box and hands them to Paradine.*] Here they are.

[He looks and starts violently.]

Fouldes

89 Grosvenor Square. It's Mereston's writing. You don't mean? What! Ah, ah, ah. [*He bursts into a shout of laughter.*]

The old sinner. And Mereston wouldn't have me in the house, if you please, because I was a dissolute libertine. And he was the president of the Broad Church Union. Good Lord, how often have I heard him say: "Gentlemen, I take my stand on the morality, the cleanliness and the purity of English Family Life." Oh, oh, oh.

Lady Frederick

I've often noticed that the religious temperament is very susceptible to the charms of my sex.

Fouldes

May I look?

Lady Frederick

Well, I don't know. I suppose so.

Fouldes

[*Reading.*] "Heart's delight"... And he signs himself, "your darling chickabiddy." The old ruffian.

Lady Frederick

She was a very pretty little thing.

Fouldes

I daresay, but thank heaven, I have some sense of decency left, and it outrages all my susceptibilities that a man in side-whiskers should call himself anybody's chickabiddy.

Lady Frederick

Protestations of undying affection are never ridiculous when they are accompanied by such splendid emeralds.

Fouldes

[*Starting and growing suddenly serious.*] And what about Maud?

Lady Frederick

Well?

Fouldes

Poor girl, it'd simply break her heart. He preached at her steadily for twenty years, and she worshipped the very ground he trod on. She'd have died of grief at his death except she felt it her duty to go on with his work.

Lady Frederick

I know.

Fouldes

By Jove, it's a good card. You were quite right to refuse the emeralds: these letters are twice as valuable.

Lady Frederick

Would you like to burn them?

Fouldes

Betsy!

Lady Frederick

There's the stove. Put them in.

[He takes them up in both hands and hurries to the stove. But he stops and brings them back, he throws them on the sofa.]

Fouldes

No, I won't.

Lady Frederick

Why not?

Fouldes

It's too dooced generous. I'll fight you tooth and nail, but it's not fair to take an advantage over me like that. You'll bind my hands with fetters.

Lady Frederick

Very well. You've had your chance.

Fouldes

But, by Jove, you must have a good hand to throw away a card like that. What have you got – a straight flush?

Lady Frederick

I may be only bluffing, you know.

Fouldes

Lord, it does me good to hear your nice old Irish brogue again.

Lady Frederick

Faith, and does it?

Fouldes

I believe you only put it on to get over people.

Lady Frederick

[*Smiling.*] Begorrah, it's not easy to get over you.

Fouldes

Lord, I was in love with you once, wasn't I?

Lady Frederick

Not more than lots of other people have been.

Fouldes

And you did treat me abominably.

Lady Frederick

Ah, that's what they all said. But you got over it very well.

Fouldes

I didn't. My digestion was permanently impaired by your

brutal treatment.

Lady Frederick

Is that why you went to Carlsbad afterwards instead of the Rocky Mountains?

Fouldes

You may laugh, but the fact remains that I've only been in love once, and that was with you.

Lady Frederick

[Smiling as she holds out her hand.] Good-night.

Fouldes

For all that I'm going to fight you now for all I'm worth.

Lady Frederick

I'm not frightened of you, Paradine.

Fouldes

Good-night.

[As he goes out, Captain Montgomerie enters.]

Lady Frederick

[Yawning and stretching her arms.] Oh I'm so sleepy.

Captain Montgomerie

I'm sorry for that. I wanted to have a talk with you.

Lady Frederick

[Smiling.] I daresay I can keep awake for five minutes, you know – especially if you offer me a cigarette.

Captain Montgomerie

Here you are.

[He hands her his case and lights her cigarette.]

Lady Frederick

[*With a sigh.*] Oh, what a comfort.

Captain Montgomerie

I wanted to tell you, I had a letter this morning from my solicitor to say that he's just bought Crowley Castle on my behalf.

Lady Frederick

Really. But it's a lovely place. You must ask me to come and stay.

Captain Montgomerie

I should like you to stay there indefinitely.

Lady Frederick

[*With a quick look.*] That's charming of you, but I never desert my London long.

Captain Montgomerie

[*Smiling.*] I have a very nice house in Portman Square.

Lady Frederick

[*Surprised.*] Really?

Captain Montgomerie

And I'm thinking of going into Parliament at the next election.

Lady Frederick

It appears to be a very delightful pastime to govern the British nation, dignified without being laborious.

Captain Montgomerie

Lady Frederick, although I've been in the service I have rather a good head for business, and I hate beating about the bush. I wanted to ask you to marry me.

Lady Frederick

It's nice of you not to make a fuss about it. I'm very much obliged but I'm afraid I can't.

Captain Montgomerie

Why not?

Lady Frederick

Well, you see, I don't know you.

Captain Montgomerie

We could spend the beginning of our married life so usefully in making one another's acquaintance.

Lady Frederick

It would be rather late in the day then to come to the conclusion that we couldn't bear the sight of one another.

Captain Montgomerie

Shall I send my banker's book so that you may see that my antecedents are respectable and my circumstances – such as to inspire affection.

Lady Frederick

I have no doubt it would be very interesting – but not to me.

[She makes as if to go.]

Captain Montgomerie

Ah, don't go yet. Won't you give me some reason?

Lady Frederick

If you insist. I'm not in the least in love with you.

Captain Montgomerie

D'you think that much matters?

Lady Frederick

You're a friend of Gerald's, and he says you're a very good sort. But I really can't marry every one that Gerald rather likes.

Captain Montgomerie

He said he'd put in a good word for me.

Lady Frederick

If I ever marry again it shall be to please myself, not to please my brother.

Captain Montgomerie

I hope I shall induce you to alter your mind.

Lady Frederick

I'm afraid I can give you no hope of that.

Captain Montgomerie

You know, when I determine to do a thing, I generally do it.

Lady Frederick

That sounds very like a threat.

Captain Montgomerie

You may take it as such if you please.

Lady Frederick

And you've made up your mind that you're going to marry me?

Captain Montgomerie

Quite.

Lady Frederick

Well, I've made up mine that you shan't. So we're quits.

Captain Montgomerie

Why don't you talk to your brother about it?

Lady Frederick

Because it's no business of his.

Captain Montgomerie

Isn't it? Ask him!

Lady Frederick

What do you mean by that?

Captain Montgomerie

Ask him? Good-night.

Lady Frederick

Good-night. [*He goes out. Lady Frederick goes to the French*

window that leads to the terrace and calls.] Gerald!

Gerald

Hulloa!

[He appears and comes into the room.]

Lady Frederick

Did you know that Captain Montgomerie was going to propose to me?

Gerald

Yes.

Lady Frederick

Is there any reason why I should marry him?

Gerald

Only that I owe him nine hundred pounds.

Lady Frederick

[*Aghast.*] Oh, why didn't you tell me?

Gerald

You were so worried, I couldn't. Oh, I've been such a fool. I tried to make a *coup* for Rose's sake.

Lady Frederick

Is it a gambling debt?

Gerald

Yes.

Lady Frederick

[*Ironically.*] What they call a debt of honour?

Gerald

I must pay it the day after to-morrow without fail.

Lady Frederick

But that's the day my two bills fall due. And if you don't?

Gerald

I shall have to send in my papers, and I shall lose Rosie. And then I shall blow out my silly brains.

Lady Frederick

But who is the man?

Gerald

He's the son of Aaron Levitzki, the money-lender.

Lady Frederick

[*Half-comic, half-aghast.*] Oh lord!

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

The scene is the same as in Act I. Admiral Carlisle is sleeping in an armchair with a handkerchief over his face. Rose is sitting on a grandfather's chair, and Gerald is leaning over the back.

Rose

Isn't papa a perfectly adorable chaperon?

[The Admiral snores.]

Gerald

Perfectly.

[A pause.]

Rose

I've started fifteen topics of conversation in the last quarter of an hour, Gerald.

Gerald

[*Smiling.*] Have you?

Rose

You always agree with me, and there's an end of it. So I have to rack my brains again.

Gerald

All you say is so very wise and sensible. Of course I agree.

Rose

I wonder if you'll think me sensible and wise in ten years.

Gerald

I'm quite sure I shall.

Rose

Why, then, I'm afraid we shan't cultivate any great brilliancy of repartee.

Gerald

Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever.

Rose

Oh, don't say that. When a man's in love, he at once makes a pedestal of the Ten Commandments and stands on the top of them with his arms akimbo. When a woman's in love she doesn't care two straws for Thou Shalt and Thou Shalt Not.

Gerald

When a woman's in love she can put her heart on the slide of a microscope and examine how it beats. When a man's in love, what do you think he cares for science and philosophy and all the rest of it!

Rose

When a man's in love he can only write sonnets to the moon.
When a woman's in love she can still cook his dinner and darn
her own stockings.

Gerald

I wish you wouldn't cap all my observations.

[She lifts up her face, and he kisses her lips.]

Rose

I'm beginning to think you're rather nice, you know.

Gerald

That's reassuring, at all events.

Rose

But no one could accuse you of being a scintillating talker.

Gerald

Have you ever watched the lovers in the Park sitting on the benches hour after hour without saying a word?

Rose

Why?

Gerald

Because I've always thought that they must be bored to the verge of tears. Now I know they're only happy.

Rose

You're certainly my soldier, so I suppose I'm your nursery-maid.

Gerald

You know, when I was at Trinity College, Dublin —

Rose

[*Interrupting.*] Were you there? I thought you went to Oxford.

Gerald

No, why?

Rose

Only all my people go to Magdalen.

Gerald

Yes.

Rose

And I've decided that if I ever have a son he shall go there too.

[The Admiral starts and pulls the handkerchief off his face. The others do not notice him. He is aghast and astounded at the conversation. Lady Frederick comes in later and stands smiling as she listens.]

Gerald

My darling, you know I hate to thwart you in any way, but I've quite made up my mind that my son shall go to Dublin as I did.

Rose

I'm awfully sorry, Gerald, but the boy must be educated like a gentleman.

Gerald

There I quite agree, Rose, but first of all he's an Irishman, and it's right that he should be educated in Ireland.

Rose

Darling Gerald, a mother's love is naturally the safest guide in these things.

Gerald

Dearest Rose, a father's wisdom is always the most reliable.

Lady Frederick

Pardon my interfering, but – aren't you just a little previous?

Admiral

[*Bursting out.*] Did you ever hear such a conversation in your life between a young unmarried couple?

Rose

My dear papa, we must be prepared for everything.

Admiral

In my youth young ladies did not refer to things of that sort.

Lady Frederick

Well, I don't suppose they're any the worse for having an elementary knowledge of natural history. Personally I doubt whether ignorance is quite the same thing as virtue, and I'm not quite sure that a girl makes a better wife because she's been brought up like a perfect fool.

Admiral

I am old-fashioned, Lady Frederick; and my idea of a modest girl is that when certain topics are mentioned she should swoon. Swoon, madam, swoon. They always did it when I was a lad.

Rose

Well, father, I've often tried to faint when I wanted something that you wouldn't give me, and I've never been able to manage it. So I'm sure I couldn't swoon.

Admiral

And with regard to this ridiculous discussion as to which University your son is to be sent, you seem to forget that I have the right to be consulted.

Gerald

My dear Admiral, I don't see how it can possibly matter to you.

Admiral

And before we go any further I should like you to know that the very day Rose was born I determined that her son should go to Cambridge.

Rose

My dear papa, I think Gerald and I are far and away the best judges of our son's welfare.

Admiral

The boy must work, Rose. I will have no good-for-nothing as my grandson.

Gerald

Exactly. And that is why I'm resolved he shall go to Dublin.

Rose

The important thing is that he should have really nice manners, and that they teach at Oxford if they teach nothing else.

Lady Frederick

Well, don't you think you'd better wait another twenty years or so before you discuss this?

Admiral

There are some matters which must be settled at once, Lady Frederick.

Lady Frederick

You know, young things are fairly independent nowadays. I don't know what they'll be in twenty years' time.

Gerald

The first thing the boy shall learn is obedience.

Rose. Certainly. There's nothing so hateful as a disobedient child.

Admiral

I can't see my grandson venturing to disobey me.

Lady Frederick

Then you're all agreed. So that's settled. I came to tell you your carriage was ready.

Admiral

Go and put on your bonnet, Rose. [*To Lady Frederick.*] Are you coming with us?

Lady Frederick

I'm afraid I can't. Au revoir.

Admiral

A tout à l'heure.

[He and Rose go out.]

Gerald

Have you ever seen in your life any one so entirely delightful as Rose?

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] Only when I've looked in the glass.

Gerald

My dear Elizabeth, how vain you are.

Lady Frederick

You're very happy, my Gerald.

Gerald

It's such a relief to have got over all the difficulties. I thought it never would come right. You are a brick, Elizabeth.

Lady Frederick

I really think I am rather.

Gerald

The moment you promised to arrange things I felt as safe as a house.

Lady Frederick

I said I'd do my best, didn't I? And I told you not to worry.

Gerald

[Turning round suddenly.] Isn't it all right?

Lady Frederick

No, it's about as wrong as it can possibly be. I knew Cohen was staying here, and I thought I could get him to hold the bills over for a few days.

Gerald

And won't he?

Lady Frederick

He hasn't got them any more.

Gerald

[*Startled.*] What!

Lady Frederick

They've been negotiated, and he swears he doesn't know who has them.

Gerald

But who could have been such a fool?

Lady Frederick

I don't know, that's just the awful part of it. It was bad enough before. I knew the worst Cohen could do, but now... It couldn't be Paradine.

Gerald

And then there's Montgomerie.

Lady Frederick

I shall see him to-day.

Gerald

What are you going to say to him?

Lady Frederick

I haven't an idea. I'm rather frightened of him.

Gerald

You know, dear, if the worst comes to the worst...

Lady Frederick

Whatever happens you shall marry Rose. I promise you that.

[Paradine Fouldes appears.]

Fouldes

May I come in?

Lady Frederick

[Gaily.] It's a public room. I don't see how we can possibly prevent you.

Gerald

I'm just going to take a stroll.

Lady Frederick

Do.

[He goes out.]

Fouldes

Well? How are things going?

Lady Frederick

Quite well, thank you.

Fouldes

I've left Charlie with his mother. I hope you can spare him for a couple of hours.

Lady Frederick

I told him he must spend the afternoon with her. I don't approve of his neglecting his filial duty.

Fouldes

Ah!.. I saw Dick Cohen this morning.

Lady Frederick

[*Quickly.*] Did you?

Fouldes

It seems to interest you?

Lady Frederick

Not at all. Why should it?

Fouldes

[*Smiling.*] Nice little man, isn't he?

Lady Frederick

[*Good humouredly.*] I wish I had something to throw at you.

Fouldes

[*With a laugh.*] Well, I haven't got the confounded bills. I was too late.

Lady Frederick

Did you try?

Fouldes

Oh – yes, I thought it would interest Charlie to know how extremely needful it was for you to marry him.

Lady Frederick

Then who on earth has got them?

Fouldes

I haven't an idea, but they must make you very uncomfortable. Three thousand five hundred, eh?

Lady Frederick

Don't say it all at once. It sounds so much.

Fouldes

You wouldn't like to exchange those letters of Mereston's for seven thousand pounds, would you?

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] No.

Fouldes

Ah... By the way, d'you mind if I tell Charlie the full story of your – relations with me?

Lady Frederick

Why should I? It's not I who'll look ridiculous.

Fouldes

Thanks. I may avail myself of your permission.

Lady Frederick

I daresay you've noticed that Charlie has a very keen sense of humour.

Fouldes

If you're going to be disagreeable to me I shall go. [*He stops.*] I say, are you quite sure there's nothing else that can be brought up against you?

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] Quite sure, thanks.

Fouldes

My sister's very jubilant to-day. What about the Bellingham affair?

Lady Frederick

Merely scandal, my friend.

Fouldes

Well, look out. She's a woman, and she'll stick at nothing.

Lady Frederick

I wonder why you warn me.

Fouldes

For the sake of old times, my dear.

Lady Frederick

You're growing sentimental, Paradine. It's the punishment which the gods inflict on a cynic when he grows old.

Fouldes

It may be, but for the life of me I can't forget that once —

Lady Frederick

[*Interrupting.*] My dear friend, don't rake up my lamentable past.

Fouldes

I don't think I've met any one so entirely devoid of sentiment as you are.

Lady Frederick

Let us agree that I have every vice under the sun and have done with it.

[*A Servant comes in.*]

Servant

Madame Claude wishes to see your ladyship.

Lady Frederick

Oh, my dressmaker.

Fouldes

Another bill?

Lady Frederick

That's the worst of Monte. One meets as many creditors as in Bond Street. Say I'm engaged.

Servant

Madame Claude says she will wait till miladi is free.

Fouldes

You make a mistake. One should always be polite to people whose bills one can't pay.

Lady Frederick

Show her in.

Servant

Yes, miladi.

[Exit Servant.]

Fouldes

Is it a big one?

Lady Frederick

Oh, no; only seven hundred pounds.

Fouldes

By Jove.

Lady Frederick

My dear friend, one must dress. I can't go about in fig-leaves.

Fouldes

One can dress simply.

Lady Frederick

I do. That's why it costs so much.

Fouldes

You know, you're devilish extravagant.

Lady Frederick

I'm not. I'm content with the barest necessities of existence.

Fouldes

You've got a maid.

Lady Frederick

Of course I've got a maid. I was never taught to dress myself.

Fouldes

And you've got a footman.

Lady Frederick

I've always had a footman. And my mother always had a footman. I couldn't live a day without him.

Fouldes

What does he do for you?

Lady Frederick

He inspires confidence in tradesmen.

Fouldes

And you have the most expensive suite of rooms in the hotel.

Lady Frederick

I'm in such a dreadful mess. If I hadn't got nice rooms I should brood over it.

Fouldes

Then, as if that weren't enough, you fling your money away at the tables.

Lady Frederick

When you're as poor as I am, a few louis more or less can make absolutely no difference.

Fouldes

[*With a laugh.*] You're quite incorrigible.

Lady Frederick

It's really not my fault. I do try to be economical, but money slips through my fingers like water. I can't help it.

Fouldes

You want a sensible sort of a man to look after you.

Lady Frederick

I want a very rich sort of a man to look after me.

Fouldes

If you were my wife, I should advertise in the papers that I wasn't responsible for your debts.

Lady Frederick

If you were my husband, I'd advertise immediately underneath that I wasn't responsible for your manners.

Fouldes

I wonder why you're so reckless.

Lady Frederick

When my husband was alive I was so utterly wretched. And afterwards, when I looked forward to a little happiness, my boy died. Then I didn't care any more. I did everything I could to stupefy myself. I squandered money as other women take morphia – that's all.

Fouldes

It's the same dear scatter-brained, good-hearted Betsy that I used to know.

Lady Frederick

You're the only person who calls me Betsy now. To all the others I'm only Elizabeth.

Fouldes

Look here, what are you going to do with this dressmaker?

Lady Frederick

I don't know. I always trust to the inspiration of the moment.

Fouldes

She'll make a devil of a fuss, won't she?

Lady Frederick

Oh, no; I shall be quite nice to her.

Fouldes

I daresay. But won't she be very disagreeable to you?

Lady Frederick

You don't know what a way I have with my creditors.

Fouldes

I know it's not a paying way.

Lady Frederick

Isn't it? I bet you a hundred louis that I offer her the money and she refuses it.

Fouldes

I'll take that.

Lady Frederick

Here she is.

[Madame Claude enters, ushered in by the Servant. She is a stout, genteel person, very splendidly gowned, with a Cockney accent. Her face is set to sternness, decision to make a scene, and general sourness.]

Servant

Madame Claude.

[Exit Servant. Lady Frederick goes up to her enthusiastically and takes both her hands.]

Lady Frederick

Best of women. This is a joyful surprise.

Madame Claude

[*Drawing herself up.*] I 'eard quite by chance that your ladyship was at Monte.

Lady Frederick

So you came to see me at once. That was nice of you. You're the very person I wanted to see.

Madame Claude

[*Significantly.*] I'm glad of that, my lady, I must confess.

Lady Frederick

You dear creature. That's one advantage of Monte Carlo, one meets all one's friends. Do you know Mr. Fouldes? This is Madame Claude, an artist, my dear Paradine, a real artist.

Madame Claude

[*Grimly.*] I'm pleased that your ladyship should think so.

Fouldes

How d'you do.

Lady Frederick

Now, this gown. Look, look, look. In this skirt there's genius, *mon cher*. In the way it hangs my whole character is expressed. Observe the fullness of it, that indicates those admirable virtues which make me an ornament to Society, while the frill at the bottom just suggests those foibles – you can hardly call them faults – which add a certain grace and interest to my personality. And the flounce. Paradine, I beseech you to look at it carefully. I would sooner have designed this flounce than won the Battle of Waterloo.

Madame Claude

Your ladyship is very kind.

Lady Frederick

Not at all, not at all. You remember that rose chiffon. I wore it the other day, and the dear Archduchess came up to me and said: "My dear, my dear." I thought she was going to have a fit. But when she recovered she kissed me on both cheeks and said: "Lady Frederick, you have a dressmaker worth her weight in gold." You heard her, Paradine, didn't you?

Fouldes

You forget that I only arrived last night.

Lady Frederick

Of course. How stupid of me. She'll be perfectly delighted to hear that you're in Monte Carlo. But I shall have to break it to her gently.

Madame Claude

[*Unmoved.*] I'm sorry to intrude upon your ladyship.

Lady Frederick

Now what are you talking about? If you hadn't come to see me I should never have forgiven you.

Madame Claude

I wanted to have a little talk with your ladyship.

Lady Frederick

Oh, but I hope we shall have many little talks. Have you brought your motor down?

Madame Claude

Yes.

Lady Frederick

That's charming. You shall take me for a drive in it every day. I hope you're going to stay some time.

Madame Claude

That depends on circumstances, Lady Frederick. I 'ave a little business to do here.

Lady Frederick

Then let me give you one warning – don't gamble.

Madame Claude

Oh, no, my lady. I gamble quite enough in my business as it is. I never know when my customers will pay their bills – if ever.

Lady Frederick

[*Slightly taken aback.*] Ha, ha, ha.

Fouldes

[*With a deep guffaw.*] Ho, ho, ho.

Lady Frederick

Isn't she clever? I must tell that to the Archduchess. She'll be so amused. Ha, ha, ha, ha. The dear Archduchess, you know she loves a little joke. You must really meet her. Will you come and lunch? I know you'd hit it off together.

Madame Claude

[*More genially.*] That's very kind of your ladyship.

Lady Frederick

My dear, you know perfectly well that I've always looked upon you as one of my best friends. Now who shall we have? There's you and me and the Archduchess. Then I'll ask Lord Mereston.

Madame Claude

The Marquess of Mereston, Lady Frederick?

Lady Frederick

Yes. And Mr. Fouldes, his uncle.

Madame Claude

Excuse me, are you the Mr. Paradine Fouldes?

Fouldes

[*Bowing.*] At your service, madam.

Madame Claude

I'm so glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Fouldes.
[*Unctuously.*] I've always heard you're such a bad man.

Fouldes

Madam, you overwhelm me with confusion.

Madame Claude

Believe me, Mr. Fouldes, it's not the ladies that are married to saints who take the trouble to dress well.

Lady Frederick

Now we want a third man. Shall we ask my brother – you know Sir Gerald O'Mara, don't you? Or shall we ask Prince Doniani? Yes, I think we'll ask the Prince. I'm sure you'd like him. Such a handsome man! That'll make six.

Madame Claude

It's very kind of you, Lady Frederick, but – well, I'm only a tradeswoman, you know.

Lady Frederick

A tradeswoman? How can you talk such nonsense. You are an artist – a real artist, my dear. And an artist is fit to meet a king.

Madame Claude

Well, I don't deny that I'd be ashamed to dress my customers in the gowns I see painted at the Royal Academy.

Lady Frederick

Then it's quite settled, isn't it, Madame Claude – oh, may I call you Ada?

Madame Claude

Oh, Lady Frederick, I should be very much flattered. But how did you know that was my name?

Lady Frederick

Why you wrote me a letter only the other day.

Madame Claude

Did I?

Lady Frederick

And such a cross letter too.

Madame Claude

[*Apologetically.*] Oh, but Lady Frederick, that was only in the way of business. I don't exactly remember what expressions I may have made use of —

Lady Frederick

[*Interrupting, as if the truth had suddenly flashed across her.*] Ada! I do believe you came here to-day about my account.

Madame Claude

Oh, no, my lady, I promise you.

Lady Frederick

You did; I know you did. I see it in your face. Now that really wasn't nice of you. I thought you came as a friend.

Madame Claude

I did, Lady Frederick.

Lady Frederick

No, you wanted to dun me. I'm disappointed in you. I did think, after all the things I've had from you, you wouldn't treat me like that.

Madame Claude

But I assure your ladyship...

Lady Frederick

Not another word. You came to ask for a cheque. You shall have it.

Madame Claude

No, Lady Frederick, I wouldn't take it.

Lady Frederick

What is the exact figure, Madame Claude?

Madame Claude

I – I don't remember.

Lady Frederick

Seven hundred and fifty pounds, seventeen and ninepence. You see, I remember. You came for your cheque and you shall have it.

[She sits down and takes a pen.]

Madame Claude

Now, Lady Frederick, I should look upon that as most unkind. It's treating me like a very second-rate establishment.

Lady Frederick

I'm sorry, but you should have thought of that before. Now I haven't got a cheque; how tiresome.

Madame Claude

Oh, it doesn't matter, Lady Frederick. I promise you it never entered my 'ead.

Lady Frederick

What shall I do?

Fouldes

You can write it on a sheet of paper, you know.

Lady Frederick

[*With a look, aside to him.*] Monster! [*Aloud.*] Of course I can. I hadn't thought of that. [*She takes a sheet of paper.*] But how on earth am I to get a stamp?

Fouldes

[*Much amused.*] I happen to have one on me.

Lady Frederick

I wonder why on earth you should have English stamps in Monte Carlo?

Fouldes

[*Handing her one.*] A penny stamp may sometimes save one a hundred louis.

Lady Frederick

[*Ironically.*] Thanks so much. I write the name of my bank on the top, don't I? Pay Madame Claude...

Madame Claude

Now, it's no good, Lady Frederick, I won't take it. After all I 'ave my self-respect to think of.

Lady Frederick

It's too late now.

Madame Claude

[*Sniffing a little.*] No, no, Lady Frederick. Don't be too 'ard on me. As one lady to another I ask you to forgive me. I did come about my account, but – well, I don't want the money.

Lady Frederick

[*Looking up good-humouredly.*] Well, well. [*She looks at the cheque.*] It shall be as you wish. There. [*She tears it up.*]

Madame Claude

Oh, thank you, Lady Frederick. I look upon that as a real favour. And now I really must be getting off.

Lady Frederick

Must you go? Well, good-bye. Paradine, take Madame Claude to her motor. Ada!

[*She kisses her on the cheek.*]

Madame Claude

[*Going.*] I am pleased to have seen you.

[Paradine offers his arm and goes out with Madame Claude. Lady Frederick goes to the window, stands on a chair and waves her handkerchief. While she is doing this Captain Montgomerie enters.]

Captain Montgomerie

How d'you do?

Lady Frederick

[*Getting down.*] How nice of you to come. I wanted to see you.

Captain Montgomerie

May I sit down?

Lady Frederick

Of course. There are one or two things I'd like to talk to you about.

Captain Montgomerie

Yes?

Lady Frederick

First I must thank you for your great kindness to Gerald. I didn't know last night that he owed you a good deal of money.

Captain Montgomerie

It's a mere trifle.

Lady Frederick

You must be very rich to call nine hundred pounds that?

Captain Montgomerie

I am.

Lady Frederick

[*With a laugh.*] All the same it's extremely good of you to give him plenty of time.

Captain Montgomerie

I told Gerald he could have till to-morrow.

Lady Frederick

Obviously he wants to settle with you as soon as ever he can.

Captain Montgomerie

[*Quietly.*] I often wonder why gambling debts are known as debts of honour.

Lady Frederick

[*Looking at him steadily.*] Of course I realise that if you choose to press for the money and Gerald can't pay – he'll have to send in his papers.

Captain Montgomerie

[*Lightly.*] You may be quite sure I have no wish to bring about such a calamity. By the way, have you thought over our little talk of last night?

Lady Frederick

No.

Captain Montgomerie

You would have been wise to do so.

Lady Frederick

My dear Captain Montgomerie, you really can't expect me to marry you because my brother has been so foolish as to lose more money at poker than he can afford.

Captain Montgomerie

Did you ever hear that my father was a money-lender?

Lady Frederick

A lucrative profession, I believe.

Captain Montgomerie

He found it so. He was a Polish Jew called Aaron Levitzki. He came to this country with three shillings in his pocket. He lent half-a-crown of it to a friend on the condition that he should be paid back seven and six in three days.

Lady Frederick

I'm not good at figures, but the interest sounds rather high.

Captain Montgomerie

It is. That was one of my father's specialities. From these humble beginnings his business grew to such proportions that at his death he was able to leave me the name and arms of the great family of Montgomerie and something over a million of money.

Lady Frederick

The result of thrift, industry, and good fortune.

Captain Montgomerie

My father was able to gratify all his ambitions but one. He was eaten up with the desire to move in good society, and this he was never able to achieve. His dying wish was that I should live in those circles which he knew only...

Lady Frederick

Across the counter?

Captain Montgomerie

Precisely. But my poor father was a little ignorant in these matters. To him one lord was as good as another. He thought a Marquess a finer man than an Earl, and a Viscount than a Baron. He would never have understood that a penniless Irish baronet might go into better society than many a belted earl.

Lady Frederick

And what is the application of this?

Captain Montgomerie

I wanted to explain to you one of the reasons which emboldened me last night to make you a proposal of marriage.

Lady Frederick

But surely you know some very nice people. I saw you luncheon the other day with the widow of a city knight.

Captain Montgomerie

Many very excellent persons are glad to have me to dine with them. But I know quite well that they're not the real article. I'm as far off as ever from getting into those houses which you have been used to all your life. I'm not content with third-rate earls and rather seedy dowagers.

Lady Frederick

Forgive my frankness, but – aren't you rather a snob?

Captain Montgomerie

My father, Aaron Levitzki, married an English woman, and I have all the English virtues.

Lady Frederick

But I'm not quite sure that people would swallow you even as my husband.

Captain Montgomerie

They'd make a face, but they'd swallow me right enough. And when I asked them down to the best shoot in England they'd come to the conclusion that I agreed with them very well.

Lady Frederick

[*Still rather amused.*] Your offer is eminently businesslike, but you see I'm not a business woman. It doesn't appeal to me.

Captain Montgomerie

I only ask you to perform such of the duties of a wife as are required by Society. They are few enough in all conscience. I should wish you to entertain largely and receive my guests, be polite to me, at least in public, and go with me to the various places people go to. Otherwise I leave you entire freedom. You will find me generous and heedful to all your wishes.

Lady Frederick

Captain Montgomerie, I don't know how much of all that you have said is meant seriously. But, surely you're not choosing the right time to make such a proposal when my brother owes you so much money that if you care to be hard you can ruin him.

Captain Montgomerie

Why not?

Lady Frederick

D'you mean to say...?

Captain Montgomerie

I will be quite frank with you. I should never have allowed Gerald to lose so much money which there was no likelihood of his being able to pay, if I had not thought it earned me some claim upon your gratitude.

Lady Frederick

[*Shortly.*] Gerald will pay every penny he owes you to-morrow.

Captain Montgomerie

[*Blandly.*] Where d'you suppose he'll get it?

Lady Frederick

I have no doubt I shall be able to manage something.

Captain Montgomerie

Have you not tried this morning, entirely without success?

Lady Frederick

[*Startled.*] What?

Captain Montgomerie

You do not forget that you have sundry moneys of your own which are payable to-morrow?

Lady Frederick

How d'you know that?

Captain Montgomerie

I told you that when I took a thing in hand I carried it through. You went to Dick Cohen, and he told you he'd parted with the bills. Didn't you guess that only one man could have the least interest in taking them over?

Lady Frederick

You?

Captain Montgomerie

Yes.

Lady Frederick

Oh, God.

Captain Montgomerie

Come, come, don't be worried over it. There's nothing to be alarmed about. I'm a very decent chap – if you'd accepted me right away you would never have known that those bills were in my possession. Think it over once more. I'm sure we should get on well together. I can give you what you most need, money and the liberty to fling it away as recklessly as you choose; you can give me the assured and fixed position on which – my father's heart was set.

Lady Frederick

And if I don't accept, you'll make me a bankrupt and you'll ruin Gerald?

Captain Montgomerie

I refuse to consider that very unpleasant alternative.

Lady Frederick

Oh! I can't, I can't.

Captain Montgomerie

[*Laughing.*] But you must, you must. When shall I come for your answer? To-morrow? I'll come with the bills and Gerald's I.O.U. in my pocket, and you shall burn them yourself. Good-bye.

[He kisses her hand and goes out. Lady Frederick remains staring in front of her. Mereston enters, followed by Lady Mereston and Paradine.]

Mereston

[*Going to her eagerly.*] Hulloo! I wondered what on earth had become of you.

Lady Frederick

[*With a laugh.*] It's only two hours since I chased you away from me.

Mereston

I'm afraid I bore you to death.

Lady Frederick

Don't be so silly. You know you don't.

Mereston

Where are you going now?

Lady Frederick

I have rather a headache. I'm going to lie down.

Mereston

I'm so sorry.

[Lady Frederick goes out. Mereston stares after her anxiously, and makes a step towards the door.]

Lady Mereston

[Sharply.] Where are you going, Charlie?

Mereston

I never asked Lady Frederick if I could do anything.

Lady Mereston

Good heavens, there are surely plenty of servants in the hotel to get her anything she wants.

Mereston

Don't you think a drive in the motor would do her good?

Lady Mereston

[*Unable to control herself.*] Oh, I have no patience with you. I never saw such a ridiculous infatuation in my life.

Paradine

Steady, old girl, steady.

Mereston

What on earth d'you mean, mother?

Lady Mereston

Presumably you're not going to deny that you're in love with that woman.

Mereston

[*Growing pale.*] Would you mind speaking of her as Lady Frederick?

Lady Mereston

You try me very much, Charlie. Please answer my question.

Mereston

I don't want to seem unkind to you, mother, but I think you have no right to ask about my private affairs.

Fouldes

If you're going to talk this matter over you're more likely to come to an understanding if you both keep your tempers.

Mereston

There's nothing I wish to discuss.

Lady Mereston

Don't be absurd, Charlie. You're with Lady Frederick morning, noon and night. She can never stir a yard from the hotel but you go flying after. You pester her with your ridiculous attentions.

Fouldes

[*Blandly.*] One's relations have always such an engaging frankness. Like a bad looking-glass, they always represent you with a crooked nose and a cast in your eye.

Lady Mereston

[*To Mereston.*] I have certainly a right to know what you mean by all this and what is going to come of it.

Mereston

I don't know what will come of it.

Fouldes

The question that excites our curiosity is this: are you going to ask Lady Frederick to marry you?

Mereston

I refuse to answer that. It seems to me excessively impertinent.

Fouldes

Come, come, my boy, you're too young to play the heavy father. We're both your friends. Hadn't you better make a clean breast of it? After all, your mother and I are interested in nothing so much as your welfare.

Lady Mereston

[*Imploring.*] Charlie!

Mereston

Of course I'd ask her to marry me if I thought for a moment that she'd accept. But I'm so terrified that she'll refuse, and then perhaps I shall never see her again.

Lady Mereston

The boy's stark, staring mad.

Mereston

I don't know what I should do if she sent me about my

business. I'd rather continue in this awful uncertainty than lose all hope for ever.

Fouldes

By George. You're pretty far gone, my son. The lover who's diffident is in a much worse way than the lover who protests.

Lady Mereston

[*With a little laugh.*] I must say it amuses me that Lady Frederick should have had both my brother and my son dangling at her skirts. Your respective passions are separated by quite a number of years.

Mereston

Lady Frederick has already told me of that incident.

Fouldes

With the usual indiscretion of her sex.

Mereston

It appears that she was very unhappy and you, with questionable taste, made love to her.

Fouldes

Do your best not to preach at me, dear boy. It reminds me of your lamented father.

Mereston

And at last she promised to go away with you. You were to meet at Waterloo Station.

Fouldes

Such a draughty place for an assignation.

Mereston

Your train was to start at nine, and you were going to take the boat over to the Channel Isles.

Fouldes

Lady Frederick has a very remarkable memory. I remember hoping the sea wouldn't be rough.

Mereston

And just as the train was starting her eye fell on the clock. At that moment her child was coming down to breakfast and would ask for her. Before you could stop her she'd jumped out of the carriage. The train was moving, and you couldn't get out, so you were taken on to Weymouth – alone.

Lady Mereston

You must have felt a quite egregious ass, Paradine.

Fouldes

I did, but you need not rub it in.

Lady Mereston

Doesn't it occur to you, Charlie, that a woman who loves so

easily can't be very worthy of your affection?

Mereston

But, my dear mother, d'you think she cared for my uncle?

Fouldes

What the dickens d'you mean?

Mereston

D'you suppose if she loved you she would have hesitated to come? D'you know her so little as that? She thought of her child only because she was quite indifferent to you.

Fouldes

[*Crossly.*] You know nothing about it, and you're an impertinent young jackanapes.

Lady Mereston

My dear Paradine, what can it matter if Lady Frederick was in love with you or not?

Fouldes

[*Calming down.*] Of course it doesn't matter a bit.

Lady Mereston

I have no doubt you mistook wounded vanity for a broken heart.

Fouldes

[*Acidly.*] My dear, you sometimes say things which explain to me why my brother-in-law so frequently abandoned his own fireside for the platform of Exeter Hall.

Mereston

It may also interest you to learn that I am perfectly aware of Lady Frederick's financial difficulties. I know she has two bills falling due to-morrow.

Fouldes

She's a very clever woman.

Mereston

I've implored her to let me lend her the money, and she absolutely refuses. You see, she's kept nothing from me at all.

Lady Mereston

My dear Charlie, it's a very old dodge to confess what doesn't matter in order to conceal what does.

Mereston

What do you mean, mother?

Lady Mereston

Lady Frederick has told you nothing of the Bellingham affair?

Mereston

Why should she?

Lady Mereston

It is surely expedient you should know that the woman you have some idea of marrying escaped the divorce court only by the skin of her teeth.

Mereston

I don't believe that, mother.

Fouldes

Remember that you're talking to your respected parent, my boy.

Mereston

I'm sorry that my mother should utter base and contemptible libels on – my greatest friend.

Lady Mereston

You may be quite sure that I say nothing which I can't prove.

Mereston

I won't listen to anything against Lady Frederick.

Lady Mereston

But you must.

Mereston

Are you quite indifferent to the great pain you cause me?

Lady Mereston

I can't allow you to marry a woman who's hopelessly immoral.

Mereston

Mother, how dare you say that?

Fouldes

This isn't the sort of thing I much like, but hadn't you better

hear the worst at once?

Mereston

Very well. But if my mother insists on saying things, she must say them in Lady Frederick's presence.

Lady Mereston

That I'm quite willing to do.

Mereston

Good.

[He rings the bell. A servant enters.]

Fouldes

You'd better take care, Maudie. Lady Frederick's a dangerous woman to play the fool with.

Mereston

[To the servant.] Go to Lady Frederick Berolles and say Lord

Mereston is extremely sorry to trouble her ladyship, but would be very much obliged if she'd come to the drawing-room for two minutes.

Servant

Very well, my lord.

[Exit.]

Fouldes

What are you going to do, Maud?

Lady Mereston

I knew there was a letter in existence in Lady Frederick's handwriting which proved all I've said about her. I've moved heaven and earth to get hold of it, and it came this morning.

Fouldes

Don't be such a fool. You're not going to use that?

Lady Mereston

I am indeed.

Fouldes

Your blood be upon your own head. Unless I'm vastly mistaken you'll suffer the greatest humiliation that you can imagine.

Lady Mereston

That's absurd. I have nothing to fear.

Lady Frederick. *comes in*

Mereston

I'm so sorry to disturb you. I hope you don't mind?

Lady Frederick

Not at all. I knew you wouldn't have sent for me in that fashion without good cause.

Mereston

I'm afraid you'll think me dreadfully impertinent.

Lady Mereston

Really you need not apologise so much, Charlie.

Mereston

My mother has something to say against you, and I think it right that she should say it in your presence.

Lady Frederick

That's very nice of you, Charlie – though I confess I prefer people to say horrid things of me only behind my back. Especially if they're true.

Fouldes

Look here, I think all this is rather nonsense. We've most of us got something in our past history that we don't want raked up, and we'd all better let bygones be bygones.

Lady Frederick

I'm waiting, Lady Mereston.

Lady Mereston

It's merely that I thought my son should know that Lady Frederick had been the mistress of Roger Bellingham. [Lady Frederick *turns quickly and looks at her; then bursts into a peal of laughter.* Lady Mereston *springs up angrily and hands her a letter.*] Is this in your handwriting?

Lady Frederick

[*Not at all disconcerted.*] Dear me, how did you get hold of this?

Lady Mereston

You see that I have ample proof, Lady Frederick.

Lady Frederick

[*Handing the letter to Mereston.*] Would you like to read it? You know my writing well enough to be able to answer Lady Mereston's question.

[He reads it through and looks at her in dismay.]

Mereston

Good God!.. What does it mean?

Lady Frederick

Pray read it aloud.

Mereston

I can't.

Lady Frederick

Then give it to me. [*She takes it from him.*] It's addressed to my brother-in-law, Peter Berolles. The Kate to whom it refers was his wife. [*Reads.*] Dear Peter: I'm sorry you should have had a row with Kate about Roger Bellingham. You are quite wrong in all you thought. There is absolutely nothing between them. I don't know where Kate was on Tuesday night, but certainly she was not within a hundred miles of Roger. This I know because...

Mereston

[*Interrupting.*] For God's sake don't go on.

[*Lady Frederick looks at him and shrugs her shoulders.*]

Lady Frederick

It's signed Elizabeth Berolles. And there's a postscript: You may make what use of this letter you like.

Mereston

What does it mean? What does it mean?

Lady Mereston

Surely it's very clear? You can't want a more explicit confession of guilt.

Lady Frederick

I tried to make it as explicit as possible.

Lady Mereston

Won't you say something? I'm sure there must be some explanation.

Lady Frederick

I don't know how you got hold of this letter, Lady Mereston. I agree with you, it is compromising. But Kate and Peter are dead now, and there's nothing to prevent me from telling the truth.

[Paradine Fouldes takes a step forward and watches her.]

Lady Frederick

My sister-in-law was a meek and mild little person, as demure as you can imagine, and no one would have suspected her for a moment of kicking over the traces. Well, one morning she came to me in floods of tears and confessed that she and Roger Bellingham [*with a shrug*] had been foolish. Her husband suspected that something was wrong and had kicked up a row.

Fouldes

[*Drily.*] There are men who will make a scene on the smallest provocation.

Lady Frederick

To shield herself she told the first lie that came into her head. She said to Peter that Roger Bellingham was my lover – and she threw herself on my mercy. She was a poor, weak little creature, and if there'd been a scandal she'd have gone to the dogs altogether. It had only been a momentary infatuation for Roger, and the scare had cured her. At the bottom of her heart she loved her husband still. I was desperately unhappy, and I didn't care much what became of me. She promised to turn over a new leaf

and all that sort of thing. I thought I'd better give her another chance of going straight. I did what she wanted. I wrote that letter taking all the blame on myself, and Kate lived happily with her husband till she died.

Mereston

It was just like you.

Lady Mereston

But Lord and Lady Peter are dead?

Lady Frederick

Yes.

Lady Mereston

And Roger Bellingham?

Lady Frederick

He's dead too.

Lady Mereston

Then how can you prove your account of this affair?

Lady Frederick

I can't.

Lady Mereston

And does this convince you, Charlie?

Mereston

Of course.

Lady Mereston

[*Impatiently.*] Good heavens, the boy's out of his senses. Paradine, for Heaven's sake say something.

Fouldes

Well, much as it may displease you, my dear, I'm afraid I agree with Charlie.

Lady Mereston

You don't mean to say you believe this cock-and-bull story?

Fouldes

I do.

Lady Mereston

Why?

Fouldes

Well, you see, Lady Frederick's a very clever woman. She would never have invented such an utterly improbable tale, which can't possibly be proved. If she'd been guilty, she'd have had ready at least a dozen proofs of her innocence.

Lady Mereston

But that's absurd.

Fouldes

Besides, I've known Lady Frederick a long time, and she has at least a thousand faults.

Lady Frederick

[*With flashing eyes.*] Thanks.

Fouldes

But there's something I will say for her. She's not a liar. If she tells me a thing, I don't hesitate for a moment to believe it.

Lady Frederick

It's not a matter of the smallest importance if any of you believe me or not. Be so good as to ring, Charlie.

Mereston

Certainly.

[He rings, and a Servant immediately comes in.]

Lady Frederick

Tell my servant that he's to come here at once and bring the despatch-box which is in my dressing-room.

Servant

Yes, miladi.

[Exit.]

Fouldes

[Quickly.] I say, what are you going to do?

Lady Frederick

That is absolutely no business of yours.

Fouldes

Be a brick, Betsy, and don't give her those letters.

Lady Frederick

I think I've had enough of this business. I'm proposing to finish with it.

Fouldes

Temper, temper.

Lady Frederick

[*Stamping her foot.*] Don't say temper to me, Paradine.

[She walks up and down angrily. Paradine sits at the piano and with one finger strums "Rule Britannia."]

Mereston

Shut up.

[He takes a book, flings it at his head and misses.]

Fouldes

Good shot, sir.

Lady Frederick

I often wonder how you got your reputation for wit, Paradine.

Fouldes

By making a point of laughing heartily at other people's jokes.

[The Footman enters with the despatch-box, which Lady Frederick opens. She takes a bundle of letters from it.]

Fouldes

Betsy, Betsy, for heaven's sake don't! Have mercy.

Lady Frederick

Was mercy shown to me? Albert!

Footman

Yes, miladi.

Lady Frederick

You'll go to the proprietor of the hotel and tell him that I propose to leave Monte Carlo to-morrow.

Mereston

[*Aghast.*] Are you going?

Footman

Very well, my lady.

Lady Frederick

Have you a good memory for faces?

Footman

Yes, my lady.

Lady Frederick

You're not likely to forget Lord Mereston?

Footman

No, my lady.

Lady Frederick

Then please take note that if his lordship calls upon me in London I'm not at home.

Mereston

Lady Frederick!

Lady Frederick

[To Footman.] Go.

[Exit Footman.]

Mereston

What d'you mean? What have I done?

[Without answering Lady Frederick takes the letters. Paradine is watching her anxiously. She goes up to the stove and throws them in one by one.]

Lady Mereston

What on earth is she doing?

Lady Frederick

I have some letters here which would ruin the happiness of a very worthless woman I know. I'm burning them so that I may never have the temptation to use them.

Fouldes

I never saw anything so melodramatic.

Lady Frederick

Hold your tongue, Paradine. [*Turning to Mereston.*] My dear Charlie, I came to Monte Carlo to be amused. Your mother has persecuted me incessantly. Your uncle – is too well-bred to talk to his servants as he has talked to me. I've been pestered in one way and another, and insulted till my blood boiled, because apparently they're afraid you may want to marry me. I'm sick and tired of it. I'm not used to treatment of this sort; my patience is quite exhausted. And since you are the cause of the whole thing I have an obvious remedy. I would much rather not have anything more to do with you. If we meet one another in the street you need not trouble to look my way because I shall cut you dead.

Lady Mereston

[*In an undertone.*] Thank God for that.

Mereston

Mother, mother. [*To Lady Frederick.*] I'm awfully sorry. I feel that you have a right to be angry. For all that you've suffered I beg your pardon most humbly. My mother has said and done things which I regret to say are quite unjustifiable.

Lady Mereston

Charlie!

Mereston

On her behalf and on mine I apologise with all my heart.

Lady Frederick

[*Smiling.*] Don't take it too seriously. It really doesn't matter. But I think it's far wiser that we shouldn't see one another again.

Mereston

But I can't live without you.

Lady Mereston

[*With a gasp.*] Ah!

Mereston

Don't you know that my whole happiness is wrapped up in you? I love you with all my heart and soul. I can never love any one but you.

Fouldes

[*To Lady Mereston.*] Now you've done it. You've done it very neatly.

Mereston

Don't think me a presumptuous fool. I've been wanting to say this ever since I knew you, but I haven't dared. You're brilliant and charming and fascinating, but I have nothing whatever to offer you.

Lady Frederick

[*Gently.*] My dear Charlie.

Mereston

But if you can overlook my faults, I daresay you could make something of me. Won't you marry me? I should look upon it as a great honour, and I would love you always to the end of my life. I'd try to be worthy of my great happiness and you.

Lady Frederick

You're very much too modest, Charlie. I'm enormously flattered and grateful. You must give me time to think it over.

Lady Mereston

Time?

Mereston

But I can't wait. Don't you see how I love you? You'll never meet any one who'll care for you as I do.

Lady Frederick

I think you can wait a little. Come and see me to-morrow morning at ten, and I'll give you an answer.

Mereston

Very well, if I must.

Lady Frederick

[*Smiling.*] I'm afraid so.

Fouldes

[*To Lady Frederick.*] I wonder what the deuce your little game is now.

[She smiles triumphantly and gives him a deep, ironical curtsy.]

Lady Frederick

Sir, your much obliged and very obedient, humble servant.

END OF THE SECOND ACT

THIRD ACT

Scene: Lady Frederick's *dressing-room*. At the back is a large opening, curtained, which leads to the bedroom; on the right a door leading to the passage; on the left a window. In front of the window, of which the blind is drawn, is a dressing-table. Lady Frederick's maid is in the room, a very neat pretty Frenchwoman. She speaks with a slight accent. She rings the bell, and the Footman enters.

Maid

As soon as Lord Mereston arrives he is to be shown in.

Footman

[*Surprised.*] Here?

Maid

Where else?

[The Footman winks significantly. The Maid draws herself up with dignity, and with a dramatic gesture points to the door.]

Maid

Depart.

[The Footman goes out.]

Lady Frederick

[From the bedroom.] Have you drawn the blind, Angélique?

Maid

I will do so, miladi. *[She draws the blind, and the light falls brightly on the dressing-table.]* But miladi will never be able to stand it. *[She looks at herself in the glass.]* Oh, the light of the sun in the morning! I cannot look at myself.

Lady Frederick

[As before.] There's no reason that you should – especially in my glass.

Maid

But if 'is lordship is coming, miladi must let me draw the blind. Oh, it is impossible.

Lady Frederick

Do as you're told and don't interfere.

[The Footman enters to announce Mereston. The Maid goes out.]

Footman

Lord Mereston.

Lady Frederick

[As before.] Is that you, Charlie? You're very punctual.

Mereston

I've been walking about outside till the clock struck.

Lady Frederick

I'm not nearly dressed, you know. I've only just had my bath.

Mereston

Must I go?

Lady Frederick

No, of course not. You can talk to me while I'm finishing.

Mereston

All right. How are you this morning?

Lady Frederick

I don't know. I haven't looked at myself in the glass yet. How are you?

Mereston

A 1, thanks.

Lady Frederick

Are you looking nice?

Mereston

[Going to the glass.] I hope so. By Jove, what a strong light. You must be pretty sure of your complexion to be able to stand that.

Lady Frederick

[Appearing.] I am.

Mereston

[Going forward eagerly.] Ah.

[She comes through the curtains. She wears a kimono, her hair is all dishevelled, hanging about her head in a tangled mop. She is not made up and looks haggard and yellow and lined. When

Mereston sees her he gives a slight start of surprise. She plays the scene throughout with her broadest brogue.

Lady Frederick

Good-morning.

Mereston

[Staring at her in dismay.] Good-morning.

Lady Frederick

Well, what have you to say to me?

Mereston

[Embarrassed.] I – er – hope you slept all right.

Lady Frederick

[Laughing.] Did you?

Mereston

I forget.

Lady Frederick

I believe you slept like a top, Charlie. You really might have lain awake and thought of me. What is the matter? You look as if you'd seen a ghost.

Mereston

Oh no, not at all.

Lady Frederick

You're not disappointed already?

Mereston

No, of course not. Only – you look so different with your hair not done.

Lady Frederick

[*With a little cry.*] Oh, I'd forgotten all about it. Angélique, come and do my hair.

Maid

[*Appearing.*] Yes, miladi.

[*Lady Frederick sits down at the dressing-table.*]

Lady Frederick

Now, take pains, Angélique. I want to look my very best. Angélique is a jewel of incalculable value.

Maid

Miladi is very kind.

Lady Frederick

If I'm light-hearted, she does it one way. If I'm depressed she does it another.

Maid

Oh, miladi, the perruquier who taught me said always that a good hairdresser could express every mood and every passion of the human heart.

Lady Frederick

Good heavens, you don't mean to say you can do all that?

Maid

Miladi, he said I was his best pupil.

Lady Frederick

Very well. Express – express a great crisis in my affairs.

Maid

That is the easiest thing in the world, miladi. I bring the hair rather low on the forehead, and that expresses a crisis in her ladyship's affairs.

Lady Frederick

But I always wear my hair low on the forehead.

Maid

Then it is plain her ladyship's affairs are always in a critical condition.

Lady Frederick

So they are. I never thought of that.

Mereston

You've got awfully stunning hair, Lady Frederick.

Lady Frederick

D'you like it, really?

Mereston

The colour's perfectly beautiful.

Lady Frederick

It ought to be. It's frightfully expensive.

Mereston

You don't mean to say it's dyed?

Lady Frederick

Oh, no. Only touched up. That's quite a different thing.

Mereston

Is it?

Lady Frederick

It's like superstition, you know, which is what other people

believe. My friends dye their hair, but I only touch mine up. Unfortunately, it costs just as much.

Mereston

And you have such a lot.

Lady Frederick

Oh, heaps. [*She opens a drawer and takes out a long switch.*] Give him a bit to look at.

Maid

Yes, miladi.

[She gives it to him.]

Mereston

Er – yes. [*Not knowing what on earth to say.*] How silky it is.

Lady Frederick

A poor thing, but mine own. At least, I paid for it. By the way,

have I paid for it yet, Angélique?

Maid

Not yet, miladi. But the man can wait.

Lady Frederick

[*Taking it from Mereston.*] A poor thing, then, but my hairdresser's. Shall I put it on?

Mereston

I wouldn't, if I were you.

Maid

If her ladyship anticipates a tragic situation, I would venture to recommend it. A really pathetic scene is impossible without a quantity of hair worn quite high on the head.

Lady Frederick

Oh, I know. Whenever I want to soften the hard heart of a creditor I clap on every bit I've got. But I don't think I will to-

day. I'll tell you what, a temple curl would just fit the case.

Maid

Then her ladyship inclines to comedy. Very well, I say no more.

[Lady Frederick takes two temple-curls from the drawer.]

Lady Frederick

Aren't they dears?

Mereston

Yes.

Lady Frederick

You've admired them very often, Charlie, haven't you? I suppose you never knew they cost a guinea each?

Mereston

It never occurred to me they were false.

Lady Frederick

The masculine intelligence is so gross. Didn't your mother tell you?

Mereston

My mother told me a great deal.

Lady Frederick

I expect she overdid it. There. Now that's done. D'you think it looks nice?

Mereston

Charming.

Lady Frederick

Angélique, his lordship is satisfied. You may disappear.

Maid

Yes, miladi.

[She goes.

Lady Frederick

Now, tell me you think I'm the most ravishing creature you ever saw in your life.

Mereston

I've told you that so often.

Lady Frederick

[Stretching out her hands.] You are a nice boy. It was charming of you to say – what you did yesterday. I could have hugged you there and then.

Mereston

Could you?

Lady Frederick

Oh, my dear, don't be so cold.

Mereston

I'm very sorry, I didn't mean to be.

Lady Frederick

Haven't you got anything nice to say to me at all?

Mereston

I don't know what I can say that I've not said a thousand times already.

Lady Frederick

Tell me what you thought of all night when you tossed on that sleepless pillow of yours.

Mereston

I was awfully anxious to see you again.

Lady Frederick

Didn't you have a dreadful fear that I shouldn't be as nice as you imagined? Now, come – honestly.

Mereston

Well, yes, I suppose it crossed my mind.

Lady Frederick

And am I?

Mereston

Of course.

Lady Frederick

You're sure you're not disappointed?

Mereston

Quite sure.

Lady Frederick

What a relief! You know, I've been tormenting myself dreadfully. I said to myself: "He'll go on thinking of me till he imagines I'm the most beautiful woman in the world, and then, when he comes here and sees the plain reality, it'll be an awful blow."

Mereston

What nonsense! How could you think anything of the kind?

Lady Frederick

Are you aware that you haven't shown the least desire to kiss me yet?

Mereston

I thought – I thought you might not like it.

Lady Frederick

It'll be too late in a minute.

Mereston

Why?

Lady Frederick

Because I'm just going to make up, you silly boy.

Mereston

How? I don't understand.

Lady Frederick

You said I must be very sure of my complexion. Of course I

am. Here it is.

[She runs her fingers over a row of little pots and vases.]

Mereston

Oh, I see. I beg your pardon.

Lady Frederick

You don't mean to say you thought it natural?

Mereston

It never occurred to me it might be anything else.

Lady Frederick

It's really too disheartening. I spend an hour every day of my life making the best complexion in Monte Carlo, and you think it's natural. Why, I might as well be a dairymaid of eighteen.

Mereston

I'm very sorry.

Lady Frederick

I forgive you... You may kiss my hand. [*He does so.*] You dear boy. [*Looking at herself in the glass.*] Oh, Betsy, you're not looking your best to-day. [*Shaking her finger at the glass.*] This won't do, Betsy, my dear. You're very nearly looking your age. [*Turning round quickly.*] D'you think I look forty?

Mereston

I never asked myself how old you were.

Lady Frederick

Well, I'm not, you know. And I shan't be as long as there's a pot of rouge and a powder puff in the world. [*She rubs grease paint all over her face.*]

Mereston

What *are* you doing?

Lady Frederick

I wish I were an actress. They have such an advantage. They only have to make up to look well behind the footlights; but I have to expose myself to that beastly sun.

Mereston

[*Nervously.*] Yes, of course.

Lady Frederick

Is your mother dreadfully annoyed with you? And Paradine must be furious. I shall call him Uncle Paradine next time I see him. It'll make him feel so middle-aged. Charlie, you don't know how grateful I am for what you did yesterday. You acted like a real brick.

Mereston

It's awfully good of you to say so.

Lady Frederick

[*Turning.*] Do I look a fright?

Mereston

Oh, no, not at all.

Lady Frederick

I love this powder. It plays no tricks with you. Once I put on a new powder that I bought in Paris, and as soon as I went into artificial light it turned a bright mauve. I was very much annoyed. You wouldn't like to go about with a mauve face, would you?

Mereston

No, not at all.

Lady Frederick

Fortunately I had a green frock on. And mauve and green were very fashionable that year. Still I'd sooner it hadn't been on my face... There. I think that'll do as a foundation. I'm beginning to

feel younger already. Now for the delicate soft bloom of youth. The great difficulty, you know, is to make both your cheeks the same colour. [*Turning to him.*] Charlie, you're not bored, are you?

Mereston

No, no.

Lady Frederick

I always think my observations have a peculiar piquancy when I have only one cheek rouged. I remember once I went out to dinner, and as soon as I sat down I grew conscious of the fact that one of my cheeks was much redder than the other.

Mereston

By George, that was awkward.

Lady Frederick

Charlie, you are a good-looking boy. I had no idea you were so handsome. And you look so young and fresh, it's quite a pleasure to look at you.

Mereston

[*Laughing awkwardly.*] D'you think so? What did you do when you discovered your predicament?

Lady Frederick

Well, by a merciful interposition of Providence, I had a foreign diplomatist on my right side which bloomed like a rose, and a bishop on my left which was white like the lily. The diplomatist told me risky stories all through dinner so it was quite natural that this cheek should blush fiery red. And as the Bishop whispered in my left ear harrowing details of distress in the East End, it was only decent that the other should exhibit a becoming pallor. [*Meanwhile she has been rouging her cheeks.*] Now look carefully, Charlie, and you'll see how I make the Cupid's bow which is my mouth. I like a nice healthy colour on the lips, don't you?

Mereston

Isn't it awfully uncomfortable to have all that stuff on?

Lady Frederick

Ah, my dear boy, it's woman's lot to suffer in this world. But it's a great comfort to think that one is submitting to the decrees of Providence and at the same time adding to one's personal attractiveness. But I confess I sometimes wish I needn't blow my nose so carefully. Smile, Charlie. I don't think you're a very ardent lover, you know.

Mereston

I'm sorry. What would you like me to do?

Lady Frederick

I should like you to make me impassioned speeches.

Mereston

I'm afraid they'd be so hackneyed.

Lady Frederick

Never mind that. I've long discovered that under the influence

of profound emotion a man always expresses himself in the terms of the *Family Herald*.

Mereston

You must remember that I'm awfully inexperienced.

Lady Frederick

Well, I'll let you off this time – because I like your curly hair. [*She sighs amorously.*] Now for the delicate arch of my eyebrows. I don't know what I should do without this. I've got no eyebrows at all really... Have you ever noticed that dark line under the eyes which gives such intensity to my expression?

Mereston

Yes, often.

Lady Frederick

[*Holding out the pencil.*] Well, here it is. Ah, my dear boy, in this pencil you have at will roguishness and languor, tenderness and indifference, sprightliness, passion, malice, what you will. Now be very quiet for one moment. If I overdo it my whole day

will be spoilt. You mustn't breathe even. Whenever I do this I think how true those lines are:

"The little more and how much it is.

The little less and what worlds away."

There! Now just one puff of powder, and the whole world's kind. [*Looking at herself in the glass and sighing with satisfaction.*] Ah! I feel eighteen. I think it's a success, and I shall have a happy day. Oh, Betsy, Betsy, I think you'll do. You know, you're not unattractive, my dear. Not strictly beautiful, perhaps; but then I don't like the chocolate-box sort of woman. I'll just go and take off this dressing-gown. [*Mereston gets up.*] No, don't move. I'll go into my bedroom. I shall only be one moment. [*Lady Frederick goes through the curtains.*] Angélique.

[The Maid enters.

Maid

Yes, miladi.

Lady Frederick

Just clear away those things on the dressing-table.

Maid

[*Doing so.*] Very well, miladi.

Lady Frederick

You may have a cigarette, Charlie.

Mereston

Thanks. My nerves are a bit dicky this morning.

Lady Frederick

Oh, blow the thing! Angélique, come and help me.

Maid

Yes, miladi.

[*She goes out.*]

Lady Frederick

At last.

[She comes in, having changed the kimono for a very beautiful dressing-gown of silk and lace.]

Lady Frederick

Now, are you pleased?

Mereston

Of course I'm pleased.

Lady Frederick

Then you may make love to me.

Mereston

You say such disconcerting things.

Lady Frederick

[*Laughing.*] Well, Charlie, you've found no difficulty in doing it for the last fortnight. You're not going to pretend that you're already at a loss for pretty speeches?

Mereston

When I came here, I had a thousand things to say to you, but you've driven them all out of my head. Won't you give me an answer now?

Lady Frederick

What to?

Mereston

You've not forgotten that I asked you to marry me?

Lady Frederick

No, but you asked me under very peculiar circumstances. I wonder if you can repeat the offer now in cold blood?

Mereston

Of course. What a cad you must think me!

Lady Frederick

Are you sure you want to marry me still – after having slept over it?

Mereston

Yes.

Lady Frederick

You are a good boy, and I'm a beast to treat you so abominably. It's awfully nice of you.

Mereston

Well, what is the answer?

Lady Frederick

My dear, I've been giving it you for the last half-hour.

Mereston

How?

Lady Frederick

You don't for a moment suppose I should have let you into those horrible mysteries of my toilette if I'd had any intention of marrying you? Give me credit for a certain amount of intelligence and good feeling. I should have kept up the illusion, at all events till after the honeymoon.

Mereston

Are you going to refuse me?

Lady Frederick

Aren't you rather glad?

Mereston

No, no, no.

Lady Frederick

[*Putting her arm through his.*] Now let us talk it over sensibly. You're a very nice boy, and I'm awfully fond of you. But you're twenty-two, and heaven only knows my age. You see, the church in which I was baptized was burnt down the year I was born, so I don't know how old I am.

Mereston

[*Smiling.*] Where was it burnt?

Lady Frederick

In Ireland.

Mereston

I thought so.

Lady Frederick

Just at present I can make a decent enough show by taking infinite pains; and my hand is not so heavy that the innocent eyes of your sex can discover how much of me is due to art. But in ten years you'll only be thirty-two, and then, if I married you, my whole life would be a mortal struggle to preserve some semblance of youth. Haven't you seen those old hags who've never surrendered to Anno Domini, with their poor, thin, wrinkled cheeks covered with paint, and the dreadful wigs that hide a hairless pate? Rather cock-eyed, don't you know, and invariably flaxen. You've laughed at their ridiculous graces, and you've been disgusted too. Oh, I'm so sorry for them, poor things. And I should become just like that, for I should never have the courage to let my hair be white so long as yours was brown. But if I don't marry you, I can look forward to the white hairs fairly happily. The first I shall pluck out, and the second I shall pluck out. But when the third comes I'll give in, and I'll throw my rouge and my poudre de riz and my pencils into the fire.

Mereston

But d'you think I should ever change?

Lady Frederick

My dear boy, I'm sure of it. Can't you imagine what it would be to be tied to a woman who was always bound to sit with her back to the light? And sometimes you might want to kiss me.

Mereston

I think it very probable.

Lady Frederick

Well, you couldn't – in case you disarranged my complexion. [Mereston *sighs deeply*.] Don't sigh, Charlie. I daresay I was horrid to let you fall in love with me, but I'm only human, and I was desperately flattered.

Mereston

Was that all?

Lady Frederick

And rather touched. That is why I want to give a cure with

my refusal.

Mereston

But you break my heart.

Lady Frederick

My dear, men have said that to me ever since I was fifteen, but I've never noticed that in consequence they ate their dinner less heartily.

Mereston

I suppose you think it was only calf-love?

Lady Frederick

I'm not such a fool as to imagine a boy can love any less than a man. If I'd thought your affection ridiculous I shouldn't have been so flattered.

Mereston

It doesn't hurt any the less because the wounds you make are

clean cut.

Lady Frederick

But they'll soon heal. And you'll fall in love with a nice girl of your own age, whose cheeks flush with youth and not with rouge, and whose eyes sparkle because they love you, and not because they're carefully made up.

Mereston

But I wanted to help you. You're in such an awful scrape, and if you'll only marry me it can all be set right.

Lady Frederick

Oh, my dear, don't go in for self-sacrifice. You must leave that to women. They're so much more used to it.

Mereston

Isn't there anything I can do for you?

Lady Frederick

No, dear. I shall get out of the mess somehow. I always do. You really need not worry about me.

Mereston

You know, you *are* a brick.

Lady Frederick

Then it's all settled, isn't it? And you're not going to be unhappy?

Mereston

I'll try not to be.

Lady Frederick

I'd like to imprint a chaste kiss on your forehead, only I'm afraid it would leave a mark.

[The Footman comes in and announces Paradine Fouldes.]

Footman

Mr. Paradine Fouldes.

[Exit.]

Fouldes

Do I disturb?

Lady Frederick

Not at all. We've just finished our conversation.

Fouldes

Well?

Mereston

If any one wants to know who the best woman in the world is send 'em to me, and I'll tell them.

Lady Frederick

[Taking his hand.] You dear! Good-bye.

Mereston

Good-bye. And thanks for being so kind to me.

[He goes out.]

Fouldes

Do I see in front of me my prospective niece?

Lady Frederick

Why d'you ask, Uncle Paradine?

Fouldes

Singularly enough because I want to know.

Lady Frederick

Well, it so happens – you don't.

Fouldes

You've refused him?

Lady Frederick

I have.

Fouldes

Then will you tell me why you've been leading us all such a devil of a dance?

Lady Frederick

Because you interfered with me, and I allow no one to do that.

Fouldes

Hoity-toity.

Lady Frederick

You weren't really so foolish as to imagine I should marry a boy who set me up on a pedestal and vowed he was unworthy to kiss the hem of my garment?

Fouldes

Why not?

Lady Frederick

My dear Paradine, I don't want to commit suicide by sheer boredom. There's only one thing in the world more insufferable than being in love.

Fouldes

And what is that, pray?

Lady Frederick

Why, having some one in love with you.

Fouldes

I've suffered from it all my life.

Lady Frederick

Think of living up to the ideal Charlie has of me. My hair would turn a hydrogen yellow in a week. And then to be so desperately adored as all that – oh, it's so dull! I should have to wear a mask all day long. I could never venture to be natural in case I shocked him. And notwithstanding all my efforts I should see the illusions tumbling about his ears one by one till he realised I was no ethereal goddess, but a very ordinary human woman neither better nor worse than anybody else.

Fouldes

Your maxim appears to be, marry any one you like except the man that's in love with you.

Lady Frederick

Ah, but don't you think I might find a man who loved me though he knew me through and through? I'd far rather that he saw my faults and forgave them than that he thought me perfect.

Fouldes

But how d'you know you've choked the boy off for good?

Lady Frederick

I took good care. I wanted to cure him. If it had been possible I would have shown him my naked soul. But I couldn't do that, so I let him see...

Fouldes

[Interrupting.] What!

Lady Frederick

[Laughing.] No, not quite. I had a dressing-gown on and other paraphernalia. But I made him come here when I wasn't made

up, and he sat by while I rouged my cheeks.

Fouldes

And the young fool thought there was nothing more in you than a carefully prepared complexion?

Lady Frederick

He was very nice about it. But I think he was rather relieved when I refused him.

[There is a knock at the door.]

Gerald

[Outside.] May we come in?

Lady Frederick

Yes do.

Enter Gerald and Rose and the Admiral.

Gerald

[Excitedly.] I say, it's all right. The Admiral's come down like

a real brick. I've told him everything.

Lady Frederick

What do you mean? Good-morning, dear Admiral.

Admiral

Good-morning.

Gerald

I've made a clean breast of it. I talked it over with Rosie.

Rose

And we went to papa together.

Gerald

And told him that I owed Montgomerie nine hundred pounds.

Rose

And we thought papa would make an awful scene.

Gerald

Raise Cain, don't you know.

Rose

But he never said a word.

Gerald

He was simply ripping over it.

Lady Frederick

[*Putting her hands to her ears.*] Oh, oh, oh. For heaven's sake
be calm and coherent.

Gerald

My dear, you don't know what a relief it is.

Rose

I saw Gerald was dreadfully worried, and I wormed it out of him.

Gerald

I'm so glad to be out of the clutches of that brute.

Rose

Now we're going to live happily ever afterwards.

[All the while the Admiral has been trying to get a word in, but each time he is about to start one of the others has broken in.]

Admiral

Silence. *[He puffs and blows.]* I never saw such a pair in my life.

Lady Frederick

Now do explain it all, Admiral. I can't make head or tail out of these foolish creatures.

Admiral

Well, they came and told me that Montgomerie had an I.O.U. of Gerald's for nine hundred pounds and was using it to blackmail you.

Fouldes

Is that a fact?

Lady Frederick

Yes.

Admiral

I never liked the man's face. And when they said his terms were that you were to marry him or Gerald would have to send in his papers, I said ...

Fouldes

Damn his impudence.

Admiral

How did you know?

Fouldes

Because I'd have said it myself.

Gerald

And the Admiral stumped up like a man. He gave me a cheque for the money, and I've just this moment sent it on to Montgomerie.

Lady Frederick

[*Taking both his hands.*] It's awfully good of you, and I'm sure you'll never regret that you gave Gerald a chance.

Admiral

May I have a few words' private conversation with you?

Lady Frederick

Of course. [*To the others.*] Make yourselves scarce.

Fouldes

We'll go on the balcony, shall we?

Admiral

I'm sorry to trouble you, but it'll only take three minutes.
[*Gerald and Rose and Fouldes go on to the balcony.*]

Lady Frederick

[*When they've gone.*] There.

Admiral

Well, what I wanted to say to you was this: I like Gerald, but I think he wants guiding. D'you follow me?

Lady Frederick

I'm sure he will take your advice always.

Admiral

It's a woman's hand that he wants. Now if you and I were to join forces we could keep him out of mischief, couldn't we?

Lady Frederick

Oh, I'll come and stay with you whenever you ask me. I love giving good advice when I'm quite sure it won't be taken.

Admiral

I was thinking of a more permanent arrangement. Look here, why don't you marry me?

Lady Frederick

My dear Admiral!

Admiral

I don't think an attractive woman like you ought to live alone. She's bound to get in a scrape.

Lady Frederick

It's awfully good of you, but...

Admiral

You don't think I'm too old, do you?

Lady Frederick

Of course not. You're in the very prime of life.

Admiral

There's life in the old dog yet, I can tell you.

Lady Frederick

I feel sure of that. I never doubted it for a moment.

Admiral

Then what have you got against me?

Lady Frederick

You wouldn't like to commit polygamy, would you?

Admiral

Eh?

Lady Frederick

You see, it's not a question of marrying me only, but all my

tradespeople.

Admiral

I hadn't thought of that.

Lady Frederick

Besides, you're Rose's father, and I'm Gerald's sister. If we married I should be my brother's mother-in-law, and my step-daughter would be my sister. Your daughter would be your sister-in-law, and your brother would just snap his fingers at your fatherly advice.

Admiral

[Confused.] Eh?

Lady Frederick

I don't know if the prayer-book allows things like that, but if it does I think it's hopelessly immoral.

Admiral

Well, shall I tell them I've changed my mind and they can't marry?

Lady Frederick

Then there'd be no reason for us to – commit the crime, would there?

Admiral

I hadn't thought of that. I suppose not.

Lady Frederick

You're not cross with me, are you? I'm very much flattered, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Admiral

Not at all, not at all. I only thought it might save trouble.

Lady Frederick

[*Calling.*] Gerald. Come along. [*They come in.*] We've had our little talk.

Gerald

Everything satisfactory?

Lady Frederick

[*With a look at the Admiral.*] Quite.

Admiral

[*Gruffly.*] Quite.

Lady Frederick's Footman enters

Footman

Captain Montgomerie wishes to know if he may see your

ladyship.

Lady Frederick

I'd forgotten all about him.

Gerald

Let me go to him, shall I?

Lady Frederick

No, I'm not afraid of him any longer. He can't do anything to you. And as far as I'm concerned it doesn't matter.

Gerald

Then I'll tell him to go to the devil.

Lady Frederick

No, I'm going to tell him that myself. [*To the Footman.*] Ask Captain Montgomerie to come here.

Footman

Yes, miladi.

[Exit.]

Lady Frederick.

[Walking up and down furiously.] I'm going to tell him that myself.

Fouldes

Now keep calm, Betsy.

Lady Frederick

[Very deliberately.] I shall not keep calm.

Fouldes

Remember that you're a perfect lady.

Lady Frederick

Don't interfere with me. I ate humble pie yesterday, and it

didn't agree with me at all.

[Footman *enters to announce* Captain Montgomerie, *who follows him, and immediately withdraws.*

Footman

Captain Montgomerie.

Captain Montgomerie

How d'you do.

[*He is obviously surprised to see the others.*

Lady Frederick

[*Pleasantly.*] Quite a party, aren't we?

Captain Montgomerie

Yes. [*A pause.*] I hope you don't mind my coming so early?

Lady Frederick

Not at all. You made an appointment for half-past ten.

Captain Montgomerie

I trust you have good news for me.

Lady Frederick

Captain Montgomerie, every one here knows the circumstances that have brought you.

Captain Montgomerie

I should have thought it wiser for both our sakes not to make them too public.

Lady Frederick

[*Very amiably.*] I don't see why you should be ashamed because you made me a proposal of marriage?

Captain Montgomerie

I'm sorry you should think it a laughing matter, Lady Frederick.

Lady Frederick

I don't. I never laugh at an impertinence.

Captain Montgomerie

[*Taken aback.*] I beg your pardon.

Lady Frederick

Surely the receipt of my brother's letter was sufficient answer for you. After that you must have guessed there was no likelihood that I should change my mind.

Captain Montgomerie

What letter? I don't understand.

Gerald

I sent you a note this morning enclosing a cheque for the money I lost to you.

Captain Montgomerie

I've not received it.

Gerald

It must be waiting for you at the hotel.

[Captain Montgomerie pauses and looks meditatively at the assembled company.]

Lady Frederick

I think there's nothing for which I need detain you longer.

Captain Montgomerie

[Smiling.] I don't think I've quite finished yet. Has it slipped your memory that the two bills fall due to-day? Allow me to present them.

[He takes them out of his pocket-book.]

Lady Frederick

I'm very sorry I can't pay them – at present.

Captain Montgomerie

I regret that I can't wait. You must pay them.

Lady Frederick

I tell you it's impossible.

Captain Montgomerie

Then I shall get an order against you.

Lady Frederick

That you may do to your heart's content.

Captain Montgomerie

You realise the consequences. It's not very nice to be an

undischarged bankrupt.

Lady Frederick

Much nicer than to marry a rascally money-lender.

Fouldes

May I look at these interesting documents?

Captain Montgomerie

Certainly. [*Blandly.*] I haven't the least wish to be offensive.

Fouldes

[*Taking them.*] You fail lamentably in achieving your wish. Three thousand five hundred pounds in all. It seems hardly worth while to make a fuss about so small a sum.

Captain Montgomerie

I'm in urgent need of money.

Fouldes

[*Ironically.*] So rich a man as you?

Captain Montgomerie

Even a rich man may be temporarily embarrassed.

Fouldes

Then be so good as to wait for one moment. [*He sits down at a table and writes a cheque.*] No sight is more affecting than that of a millionaire in financial straits.

Lady Frederick

Paradine!

Fouldes

[*Handing the cheque.*] Now, sir, I think that settles it. Will you exchange my cheque for those bills?

Captain Montgomerie

Damn you, I forgot you.

Fouldes

You may not be aware that it's unusual to swear in the presence of ladies.

Captain Montgomerie

[Looking at the cheque.] I suppose it's all right.

[Paradine goes to the door and opens it.]

Fouldes

There is the window, and here is the door. Which will you choose?

[Captain Montgomerie looks at him without answering, shrugs his shoulders and goes out.]

Lady Frederick

Oh, Paradine, you are a brick.

Gerald

I say it's awfully good of you.

Fouldes

Nonsense. I've got a strong sense of effect, and I always cultivate the dramatic situation.

Lady Frederick

I shall never be able to pay you back, Paradine.

Fouldes

My dear, I'm not entirely devoid of intelligence.

Admiral

Well, well, I must be off to take my constitutional.

Lady Frederick

And Rose and Gerald must take care of you. We shall all meet at luncheon.

Admiral

Yes, yes.

[The Admiral, Rose and Gerald go out. Lady Frederick goes up to Paradine and takes his hands.]

Lady Frederick

Thanks awfully. You are a good friend.

Fouldes

By George, how your eyes glitter!

Lady Frederick

It's only belladonna, you know.

Fouldes

I'm not such a fool as my nephew, my dear.

Lady Frederick

Why did you do it?

Fouldes

D'you know what gratitude is?

Lady Frederick

Thanks for past favours and a lively sense of benefits to come.

Fouldes

Well, yesterday you had my sister in the hollow of your hand.

She gave you great provocation, and you burnt those confounded letters.

Lady Frederick

My dear Paradine, I can't get over my own magnanimity. And what are the benefits to come?

Fouldes

Well it might be five per cent. on the capital.

Lady Frederick

I don't know why you should squeeze my hands all the time.

Fouldes

But it isn't. Look here, don't you get awfully tired of racketting about?

Lady Frederick

Oh, my dear friend, I'm sick to death of it. I've got half a mind to retire from the world and bury myself in a hermitage.

Fouldes

So have I, and I've bought the lease of a little house in Norfolk Street, Park Lane.

Lady Frederick

Just the place for a hermitage – fashionable without being vulgar.

Fouldes

And I propose to live there quite quietly, and I shall just subsist on a few dried herbs, don't you know.

Lady Frederick

But do have them cooked by a really good French chef; it makes such a difference.

Fouldes

And what d'you say to joining me?

Lady Frederick

I?

Fouldes

You.

Lady Frederick

Oh, I *am* a success to-day. That's another proposal of marriage.

Fouldes

It sounds very much like it.

Lady Frederick

I've already had three this morning.

Fouldes

Then I should think you've said "no" quite often enough.

Lady Frederick

Come at ten o'clock to-morrow, and you shall see me make up.

Fouldes

D'you think that would choke me off? D'you suppose I don't know that behind that very artificial complexion there's a dear little woman called Betsy who's genuine to the bottom of her soul?

Lady Frederick

Oh, don't be so sentimental or I shall cry.

Fouldes

Well, what is it to be?

Lady Frederick

[*Her voice breaking.*] D'you like me still, Paradine, after all these years?

Fouldes

Yes. [*She looks at him, her lips quivering. He stretches out his arms, and she, breaking down, hides her face on his shoulder.*] Now don't be an ass, Betsy... I know you'll say in a minute I'm the only man you ever loved.

Lady Frederick

[*Looking up with a laugh.*] I shan't... But what will your sister say?

Fouldes

I'll tell her there was only one way in which I could save Charlie from your clutches.

Lady Frederick

What?

Fouldes

By marrying you myself.

Lady Frederick

[Putting up her face.] Monster.

[He kisses her lips.]

THE END

THE EXPLORER

CHARACTERS

Alexander Mackenzie
Richard Lomas
Dr. Adamson
Sir Robert Boulger, Bt.
George Allerton
The Rev. James Carbery
Captain Mallins
Miller
Charles
Lady Kelsey
Mrs. Crowley
Lucy Allerton

Time: *The Present Day*

Scene: The First and Third Acts take place at Lady Kelsey's house; the Second at Mackenzie's camp in Central Africa; and the Fourth at the house of Richard Lomas.

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THE FIRST ACT

Scene: Lady Kelsey's *drawing-room in Mayfair. At the back is a window leading on to a balcony. On the right a door leads to the staircase, and on the left is another door. It is the sumptuous room of a rich woman.*

[Lady Kelsey is seated, dressed in black; she is a woman of fifty, kind, emotional, and agitated. She is drying her eyes. Mrs. Crowley, a pretty little woman of twenty-eight, very beautifully dressed, vivacious and gesticulative, is watching her quietly. The Rev. James Carbery, a young curate, tall and impressive in appearance, ponderous and self-important, is very immaculate in a silk waistcoat and a large gold cross.

Carbery

I cannot tell you how sincerely I feel for you in this affliction, Lady Kelsey.

Lady Kelsey

You're very kind. Every one has been very kind. But I shall never get over it. I shall never hold up my head again.

Mrs. Crowley

Nonsense! You talk as if the whole thing weren't perfectly monstrous. Surely you don't for a moment suppose that your brother-in-law won't be able to explain everything away?

Lady Kelsey

God forbid! But still, it's dreadful to think that at this very moment my poor sister's husband is standing in the felon's dock.

Carbery

Dreadful, dreadful!

Lady Kelsey

If you only knew the agonies I've suffered since Fred was arrested! At first I couldn't believe it, I wouldn't believe it. If I'd only known such a thing was possible, I'd have done anything to help him.

Carbery

But had you any idea he was in difficulties?

Lady Kelsey

He came to me and said he must have three thousand pounds at once. But I'd given him money so often since my poor sister died, and every one said I oughtn't to give him any more. After all, someone must look after his children, and if I don't hoard my money a little, George and Lucy will be penniless.

Mrs. Crowley

Oh, you were quite right to refuse.

Lady Kelsey

I thought it would only go in senseless extravagances as all the rest has gone, and when he said it was a matter of life and death, I couldn't believe it. He'd said that so often.

Carbery

It's shocking to think a man of his position and abilities should have come to such a pass.

Mrs. Crowley

Dear Mr. Carbery, don't draw the very obvious moral. We're all quite wretched enough as it is.

Lady Kelsey

And two days later Lucy came to me with a white face to say that he had been arrested for forging a cheque.

Carbery

I only met him once, and I'm bound to say I thought him a most charming man.

Lady Kelsey

Ah, that's what ruined him. He was always so entirely delightful. He could never say no to any one. But there's not an

atom of harm in him. I'm quite certain he's never done anything criminal; he may have been foolish, but wicked never.

Mrs. Crowley

Of course he'll be able to clear himself. There's not the least doubt about that.

Lady Kelsey

But think of the disgrace of it. A public trial. And Fred Allerton of all people! The Allertons were always so proud of their family. It was almost a mania with them.

Mrs. Crowley

For centuries they've cherished the firm belief that there was no one in the county fit to black their boots.

Carbery

Pride goeth before a fall.

Mrs. Crowley

[*Smiling.*] And proverbs before a clergyman.

Lady Kelsey

They wouldn't give him bail, so he's remained in prison till now. Of course, I made Lucy and George come here.

Mrs. Crowley

You've been quite charming, Lady Kelsey, as every one knew you'd be. But don't think of these wretched weeks of suspense. Think only that Mr. Allerton has got his chance at last. Why, the trial may be over now, and he may this very minute be on his way to this house.

Carbery

What will he do when it's over? The position will be surely a little unpleasant.

Lady Kelsey

I've talked it over with Lucy, and – I've made it possible for them all to go abroad. They'll need rest and quiet. Poor things, poor things!

Carbery

I suppose Miss Allerton and George are at the Old Bailey.

Lady Kelsey

No, their father begged them to stay away. They've been in all day, waiting for the papers.

Mrs. Crowley

But who is going to bring you the news? Surely you're not going to wait for the papers?

Lady Kelsey

Oh, no, Dick Lomas is coming. He's one of the witnesses for Fred, and my nephew Bobby Boulger.

Mrs. Crowley

And what about Mr. Mackenzie? He told me he would be there.

Carbery

Is that the great traveller? I thought I saw in the paper that he'd already started for Africa.

Lady Kelsey

Not yet. He's going at the beginning of the month. Oh, he's been so good to us during this time. All our friends have been good to us.

Carbery

I shouldn't have thought there was much of the milk of human kindness to overflow in Alexander Mackenzie. By all accounts he dealt with the slave-traders in Africa with a good deal of vigour.

Mrs. Crowley

The slave-traders must be quaking in their shoes if they know he's starting out again, for he's made up his mind to exterminate them, and when Alec Mackenzie makes up his mind to do a thing, he appears to do it.

Lady Kelsey

He has the reputation of a hard man, but no one could be more delightful than he has been to me.

Mrs. Crowley

I don't think I like him, but he's certainly a strong man, and in England just now every one's so weak and floppy, it's rather a relief to come across somebody who's got a will of iron and nerves of steel.

[George Allerton comes in. He is a very young man, good-looking, though at the moment pale and haggard, with a rather weak face.]

George

I thought Lucy was here. [*To Carbery and Mrs. Crowley.*]
How d'you do? Have you seen Lucy?

Mrs. Crowley

I went to her room for a moment.

George

What is she doing?

Mrs. Crowley

Reading.

George

I wish I could take it as calmly as she does. An outsider would think there was nothing the matter at all. Oh, it's too awful!

Lady Kelsey

My dear, you must bear up. We must all hope for the best.

George

But there is no best. Whatever happens, it means disgrace and dishonour. How could he? How could he?

Lady Kelsey

No one knows your father as I do, George. I'm sure he's never been anything but thoughtless and foolish.

George

Of course he's not been actually criminal. That's absurd. But it's bad enough as it is.

Mrs. Crowley

You mustn't take it too much to heart. In another half-hour at the utmost your father will be here with everything cleared up, and you'll be able to go back to Oxford with a clear conscience.

George

D'you think I can go to Oxford again when my father has been tried for forgery? No, no! No, no! I'd rather shoot myself.

Lady Kelsey

My poor boy... Where have you been all day?

George

Heaven knows! I've walked through the streets till I'm dog-tired. Oh, the suspense is too awful. My feet carried me to the Old Bailey, and I would have given anything to go in and see how things were going, but I'd promised the Pater I wouldn't.

Lady Kelsey

How did he look this morning?

George

He was most awfully worn and ill. I don't believe he'll ever get over it. I saw his counsel before the case began. They told me it

was bound to come all right.

Mrs. Crowley

Is there anything in the evening papers?

George

I haven't dared to look. The placards are awful.

Carbery

Why, what do they say?

George

Can't you imagine? "Gentleman charged with forgery."
"County gentleman at the Old Bailey." And all the rest of it.
Damn them! Damn them!

Lady Kelsey

It may be all over by now.

George

I feel that I shall never sleep again. I couldn't close my eyes last night. To think that one's own father...

Lady Kelsey

For goodness' sake be quiet.

George

[*Starting.*] There's a ring at the bell.

Lady Kelsey

I've given orders that no one is to be admitted but Dick Lomas and Bobbie.

Mrs. Crowley

It must be finished by now. It's one or the other of them come to tell you the result.

Lady Kelsey

Oh, I'm so frightfully anxious.

George

Aunt, you don't think...

Lady Kelsey

No, no, of course not. They *must* find him not guilty.

[The Butler enters followed by Dick Lomas, a clean-shaven dapper man, with a sharp face and good-natured smile. He is between thirty-five and forty, but slim and youthful. With him comes Sir Robert Boulger, Lady Kelsey's nephew, a good-looking, spruce youth of twenty-two.]

Butler

Mr. Lomas, Sir Robert Boulger.

George

[*Excitedly.*] Well, well? For God's sake tell us quickly.

Dick

My dear people, I have nothing to tell.

George

Oh!

[*He staggers with sudden faintness and falls to the floor.*]

Dick

Hulloa! What's this?

Mrs. Crowley

Poor boy!

[*They crowd round him.*]

George

It's all right. What a fool I am! I was so strung up.

Dick

You'd better come to the window.

*[He and Boulger take the boy's arms and lead him to the window.
George leans against the balcony.]*

Carbery

I'm afraid I must go away. Every Wednesday at four I read *Little Lord Fauntleroy* to forty charwomen.

Lady Kelsey

Good-bye. And thanks so much for coming.

Mrs. Crowley

[Shaking hands with him.] Good-bye. A clergyman always helps one so much to bear other people's misfortunes.

[Carbery goes out, and in a moment Robert Boulger comes back into the room.]

Lady Kelsey

Is he better?

Boulger

Oh, much. He'll be all right in a minute. [*Lady Kelsey goes to the window, and he turns to Mrs. Crowley.*] You are a brick to come here to-day, when they're all in such awful trouble.

Mrs. Crowley

[With a little hesitation.] Did you really come away before the trial was ended?

Boulger

Why, of course. What did you think? You don't imagine they'll convict him?

Mrs. Crowley

It's too dreadful.

Boulger

Where is Lucy? I was hoping to get a glimpse of her.

Mrs. Crowley

I wouldn't trouble her to-day if I were you. I think she most wants to be left alone.

Boulger

I wanted to tell her that if I could do anything at all, she had only to command.

Mrs. Crowley

I think she knows that. But I'll give her the message if you like... You're very devoted.

Boulger

I've been madly in love with her ever since I was ten.

Mrs. Crowley

Take care then. There's nothing so tedious as the constant lover.

[Dick comes into the room and speaks to Robert Boulger.]

Dick

George is quite well now. He wants you to smoke a cigarette with him.

Boulger

Certainly.

[He goes on to the balcony.]

Dick

[When Boulger is gone.] At least, he will the moment he sees

you.

Mrs. Crowley

What do you mean by that?

Dick

Merely that I wanted to talk to you. And Robert Boulger, being a youth of somewhat limited intelligence, seemed in the way.

Mrs. Crowley

Why did you leave the Old Bailey?

Dick

My dear lady, I couldn't stand it. You don't know what it is to sit there and watch a man tortured, a man you've known all your life, whom you've dined with times out of number, in whose house you've stayed. He had just the look of a hunted beast, and his face was grey with terror.

Mrs. Crowley

How was the case going?

Dick

I couldn't judge. I could only see those haggard, despairing eyes.

Mrs. Crowley

But you're a barrister. You must have heard his answers. What did he reply to all the questions?

Dick

He seemed quite dazed. I don't think he took in the gist of his cross-examination.

Mrs. Crowley

But the man's innocent.

Dick

Yes, we all hope that.

Mrs. Crowley

What d'you mean? There can be no doubt about that. When he was arrested Lucy went to him and begged him to tell her the exact truth. He swore that he wasn't guilty.

Dick

Poor Lucy! She's borne up wonderfully. She'll stick to her father through thick and thin.

Mrs. Crowley

[*Abruptly.*] Mr. Lomas, you're trying to put me off. It's not fair to let Lucy buoy herself up with false hopes. She's absolutely convinced that her father will be acquitted.

Dick

Well, in another half-hour we shall all know. When I left, the

judge was just going to sum up.

Mrs. Crowley

Mr. Lomas, what is your opinion?

[He looks at her steadily for a moment.]

Dick

Were you very much surprised when you heard Fred Allerton was arrested?

Mrs. Crowley

Good heavens, I was overwhelmed!

Dick

[Dryly.] Ah!

Mrs. Crowley

If you aggravate me I shall box your ears.

Dick

When first I knew Fred he was a very rich man. You know that the Allertons are one of the oldest families in Cheshire?

Mrs. Crowley

Yes. I think Lucy's only failing is an inordinate pride in her family. She thinks it very snobbish to have any particular respect for a peer of the realm, but only natural to look up to persons of good family.

Dick

Ah, you see, you and I who have a quite indecent lack of ancestors, can't realise what the cult of family may be. There are families in the remote parts of England – not very rich, not very clever, and not very good-looking – who would look askance at a belted earl who came to demand their daughter's hand in marriage. They have a natural conviction that they're the salt of the earth, and in their particular corner they rule more absolutely than half the monarchs in Europe. The Allertons were like that. But Fred somehow seemed to belong to a different stock. The first thing he did was to play ducks and drakes with his fortune.

Mrs. Crowley

But men ought to be extravagant. That's what they're there for.

Dick

Women always took his side because he had an irresistible charm of manner.

Mrs. Crowley

I think George has, too, a little.

Dick

I hope for Lucy's sake he will turn out a different man from his father. I wish he weren't so like him in appearance. At last Fred Allerton had squandered every penny, and he married Lady Kelsey's sister, one of the three rich daughters of a Liverpool merchant. But he ran through her money, too, gambling, racing, and so forth, and she died of a broken heart – adoring him still.

Mrs. Crowley

You're as well informed as an encyclopædia, Mr. Lomas.

Dick

You see, I was made the trustee for the poor remains of Mrs. Allerton's fortune, and I know how Lucy has managed to keep all their heads above water. She's wonderful. Ever since she was a child she's held the reins in her own hands. She's stuck to her father, though Lady Kelsey implored her to leave him to his own foolish ways. She saw that George was decently educated. She hid from the world all the little shifts and devices to which she had to resort in order to keep up an appearance of decency.

Mrs. Crowley

I suppose you, too, think Fred Allerton little better than a scamp?

Dick

My dear lady, when a man has had to leave his club because he plays cards too well, it's at least permissible to suppose that

there's something odd about him.

Mrs. Crowley

Here's Lady Kelsey. For heaven's sake try and amuse her a little.

[Lady Kelsey *comes back into the room.*

Lady Kelsey

Oh, Dick, I'm so full of my own troubles, I forgot to ask about yours. I'm so sorry to hear that you're ill.

Dick

On the contrary, I'm in the very best of health.

Lady Kelsey

But I saw in the papers that you were going to give up your seat in the House owing to ill-health.

Dick

Of course, I'd forgotten. My heart is seriously deranged.

Mrs. Crowley

How dreadful! What is the matter with it?

Dick

Can you ask? I've banged it about at your feet so long that its functions are excessively impaired. And it's beaten all my waistcoats out of shape.

Mrs. Crowley

Don't be so foolish. I was quite alarmed.

Dick

I'm going to retire.

Lady Kelsey

From the bar as well?

Dick

From the bar as well. Henceforth I shall cultivate only such arts and graces as are proper to the man of leisure. My fellow men are a great deal too strenuous, and I propose to offer them the spectacle of a complete idler who demands from the world neither honours nor profit, but only entertainment.

Mrs. Crowley

D'you mean to say you're going to give up a large practice and a position which may be very important merely to gratify a foolish whim?

Dick

I haven't time to work. Life is so much too short. A little while ago it occurred to me that I was nearly forty. [*To Mrs. Crowley.*] D'you know the feeling?

Mrs. Crowley

No, of course not. Don't be so uncivil.

Dick

By the way, how old are you?

Mrs. Crowley

Twenty-nine!

Dick

Nonsense! There's no such age.

Mrs. Crowley

I beg your pardon, upper parlourmaids are always twenty-nine.

Dick

For years I've spent eight hours a day meddling with silly persons' silly quarrels, and eight hours more governing the nation. I've never been able to spend more than half my income. I'm merely working myself to death in order to leave a fortune to my nieces, two desperately plain girls with red noses.

Lady Kelsey

But what are you going to do?

Dick

Oh, I don't know. Perhaps I'll try my hand at big game shooting, if Alec will take me on this expedition of his. I've always thought shooting would be an agreeable pastime if partridges were the size of well-grown sheep and pheasants a little larger than a cow.

Mrs. Crowley

Then the breakdown in your health is all humbug?

Dick

Absolute humbug. If I were to tell the truth people would shut me up in a lunatic asylum. I've come to the conclusion that there's only one game in the world worth playing, and that's the game of life. I'm rich enough to devote myself to it entirely.

Mrs. Crowley

But you'll get bored to death.

Dick

Not I! Why, I'm growing younger every day. My dear Mrs. Crowley, I don't feel a day more than eighteen.

Mrs. Crowley

You certainly look quite twenty-five.

Dick

I haven't a white hair in my head.

Mrs. Crowley

I suppose your servant plucks them out every morning.

Dick

Oh, very rarely. One a month at the outside.

Mrs. Crowley

I think I see one on the left temple.

Dick

Really! How careless of Charles! I must speak to him.

Mrs. Crowley

Let me pluck it out.

Dick

I shall allow you to do nothing so familiar.

[George comes hurriedly into the room.]

George

There's Alec Mackenzie. He's just driven up in a cab.

Dick

He must have come from the trial. Then it's all over.

Lady Kelsey

Quick! Go to the stairs, or Miller won't let him up.

[George runs across the room and opens the door.]

George

[Calling.] Miller, Miller, Mr. Mackenzie's to come up.

[Lucy Allerton, hearing a commotion, comes in. She is older than George, a tall girl, white now, with eyes heavy from want of sleep. She has lived in the country all her life, and has brought up to London a sort of remoteness from the world. She is beautiful in a very English manner, and her clear-cut features are an index to a character in which the moral notions are peculiarly rigid. Self-control is a quality which she possesses in a marked degree, and

one which she enormously admires in others.

Lucy

Who is it?

George

It's Alec Mackenzie. He's come from the trial!

Lucy

Then it's finished at last. [*She shakes hands with Dick.*] It's so good of you to come.

Boulger

You're perfectly wonderful, Lucy. How can you be so calm?

Lucy

Because I'm quite sure of the result. D'you imagine I'd doubt my father for a moment?

Dick

Oh, Lucy, for heaven's sake don't be so sure. You must be prepared for everything.

Lucy

Oh, no, I know my father. D'you think I've not studied him during these years that I've looked after him? He's a child, with all a child's thoughtlessness and simplicity. And God knows, he's weak. I know his faults better than any one, but it would be impossible for him to do anything criminal.

[The Butler enters, followed by Alec Mackenzie. Alec is a tall, wiry man, well-knit, with dark hair and a small red moustache and beard, cut close to the face. He is about five-and-thirty. He has great ease of manner, and there is about him an air as though he were accustomed that people should do as he told them.]

Butler

Mr. Mackenzie!

George

Is it finished? For God's sake tell us quickly, old man.

Lucy

Why didn't father come with you? Is he following?

Alec

Yes, it's all over.

Lady Kelsey

Thank goodness. The suspense was really too dreadful.

George

I knew they'd acquit him. Thank God!

Dick

[*Looking at Alec's face.*] Take care, George.

[Suddenly Lucy goes up to Alec and looks at him. An expression of horror distorts her features.]

Mrs. Crowley

Lucy, what is it?

Alec

I don't know how I am going to tell you.

Lucy

You say the trial was over when you came away?

Alec

Yes.

Lucy

The jury had given their verdict?

George

Lucy, what are you driving at? You don't think...?

Alec

Your father asked me to come and break it to you.

George

He's not dead?

Alec

Perhaps it would be better if he were.

Lucy

They found him guilty?

Alec

Yes.

George

[*With a groan of despair.*] Oh! But it's impossible.

Lucy

[*Putting her hand on his arm.*] Ssh!

Lady Kelsey

My God, my God! I'm thankful that his wife is dead.

Lucy

I'm awfully stupid, but if he was innocent, how could they find him guilty? I don't know what you mean.

Alec

I am afraid it's very clear.

Lucy

There must be some horrible mistake.

Alec

I wish there were.

George

[*Breaking down into tears and sinking into a chair.*] Oh, God!

What shall I do?

Lucy

Don't do that, George. We want all our calmness now.

George

Don't you see they all expected it? It was only you and I who believed in his innocence.

Lucy

[*To Alec.*] Did you hear the evidence?

Alec

Yes.

Lucy

And you followed it carefully?

Alec

Very.

Lucy

What impression did it leave on your mind?

Alec

What can it matter how it affected me?

Lucy

I want to know.

Dick

Lucy, you're torturing us all.

Lucy

If you had been on the jury would your verdict have been the same as theirs?

Alec

I should have been obliged to judge according to my conscience.

Lucy

I see. And you have no doubt that he was guilty?

Alec

Don't ask me these horrible questions.

Lucy

But it's very important. I know that you are a perfectly honest and upright man. If you think he was guilty, there is nothing more to be said.

Alec

The case was so plain that the jury were not out of the box for more than ten minutes.

Lucy

Did the judge say anything?

Alec

[*Hesitatingly.*] He said there could be no doubt about the justice of the verdict.

Lucy

What else?.. [*He looks at her without answering.*] You had better tell me now. I shall see it in the papers to-morrow.

Alec

[*As though the words were dragged out of him.*] He called it a very mean and shameful crime, worse than another man's because your father was a gentleman of ancient family and bore a name of great honour.

Dick

[*To Mrs. Crowley.*] These judges have a weakness for pointing a moral.

Lucy

And what was the sentence? [*A pause.*] Well?

Alec

Seven years' penal servitude.

George

Oh, God!

Dick

My dear girl, I can't tell you how sorry I am.

Lady Kelsey

Lucy, what is it? You frighten me.

Lucy

Try and bear up, George. We want all the strength we've got, you and I.

[Mrs. Crowley *puts her arms round Lucy and kisses her.*

Mrs. Crowley

Oh, my dear, my dear!

Lucy

[*Disengaging herself.*] You're all very kind, and I know you sympathise with me...

Mrs. Crowley

[*Interrupting her.*] You know that we'll do everything we can to help you.

Lucy

It's so good of you. There's really nothing that any one can do. Would you all mind leaving me alone with George? We must talk this over by ourselves.

Mrs. Crowley

Very well. Mr. Lomas, will you put me into a cab?

Dick

Certainly. [*To Lucy.*] Good-bye, dear, and God bless you.

Lucy

[*Shaking hands with him.*] Don't worry too much about me. If there's anything I want, I'll let you know.

Dick

Thanks.

[*He goes out with Mrs. Crowley.*]

Alec

May I speak to you for a few minutes alone?

Lucy

Not now, Mr. Mackenzie. I don't want to seem rude, but ...

Alec

[*Interrupting.*] I know, and I wouldn't insist unless it were a matter of the most urgent importance.

Lucy

Very well. George, will you take Aunt Alice to her room? I shall want you in a moment.

George

Yes.

Lucy

[*To Lady Kelsey.*] Won't you lie down and try and sleep a little? You must be dreadfully exhausted.

Lady Kelsey

Ah, don't think of me now, dear. Think of yourself.

Lucy

[*Smiling.*] It's purely selfish. It eases me a little to fuss about you.

George

I'll wait in the smoking-room, Lucy.

Lucy

Do!

[George *and* Lady Kelsey *go out*.

Alec

I think your self-command is wonderful. I've never admired you more than at this moment.

Lucy

You make me feel such a prig. It's not really very strange if I keep my head, because I've had an immensely long training. Since I was fifteen I've been alone to care for George and my father... Won't you sit down?

Alec

I can say what I want in a very few words. You know that in

a week I start for Mombassa to take charge of the expedition in North-East Africa. I may be away for three or four years, and I shall be exposed to a certain amount of danger. When I left Africa last time to gather supplies, I determined I would crush those wretched slave-traders, and now I think I have the means to do it.

Lucy

I think you are engaged on a very great work.

Alec

I don't know whether you ever noticed that – that I cared more for you than for any one in the world. But with the long journey in front of me I didn't think it was right to say anything to you. It wasn't fair to ask you to bind yourself during my long absence. And there was always the risk that a stray bullet might put an end to me. I made up my mind that I must wait till I returned. But things have changed now. Lucy, I love you with all my heart. Will you marry me before I go?

Lucy

No, I can't do that. It's very generous of you, but I couldn't.

Alec

Why not? Don't you know that I love you? It would help me so much if I knew that you were waiting for me at home.

Lucy

I must look after my father. I shall go and live near the – prison, so that I can see him whenever it's possible.

Alec

You can do that as well if you're my wife... You have before you a very difficult and trying time. Won't you let me help you?

Lucy

I couldn't. Heaven knows, I'm grateful to you for offering to marry me on this day of my bitter humiliation. I shall never forget your great kindness. But I must stand alone. I must devote myself to my father. When he's released I must have a home to bring him to, and I must tend him and care for him. Ah, now he wants me more than ever.

Alec

You're very proud.

Lucy

[*Giving him her hand.*] Dear friend, don't think hardly of me. I think I love you as much as it's possible for a woman to love a man.

Alec

Lucy!

Lucy

[*With a smile.*] Did you want me to tell you that in so many words? I admire you, and I trust you. I should be very happy if George could grow into so brave and honest a man as you.

Alec

They're very modest crumbs with which you want me to be satisfied.

Lucy

I know in your heart you think I'm right. You would never seek to dissuade me from what I'm convinced is my duty.

Alec

Can't I do anything for you at all?

[She looks at him for a moment intently. She rings the bell.]

Lucy

Yes, you can do me the greatest possible service.

Alec

I'm so glad. What is it you mean?

Lucy

Wait, and I'll tell you. *[The Butler enters.]* Ask Mr. George to come here, please.

Butler

Very well, Miss.

[He goes out.]

Lucy

I want you to help me.

[George comes in.]

George

Yes, Lucy?

Lucy

I want to give into your charge what I love most in the world... George, have you thought at all what you're going to do now? I'm afraid you can't go back to Oxford.

George

No, I don't know what's to become of me. I wish I were dead.

Lucy

An idea has just come to me. I'm going to ask Mr. Mackenzie to take you with him to Africa. Will you go?

George

Yes, yes! I'd do anything to get away from England. I daren't face my friends – I'm too ashamed.

Lucy

Ah, but it's not to hide yourself that I want you to go. Mr. Mackenzie, I daresay you know that we've always been very proud of our name. And now it's hopelessly dishonoured.

George

Lucy, for God's sake ...

Lucy

[*Turning to him.*] Now our only hope is in you. You have the opportunity of achieving a great thing. You can bring back the

old name to its old honour. Oh, I wish I were a man. I can do nothing but wait and watch. If I could only fill you with my courage and with my ambition! Mr. Mackenzie, you asked if you could do anything for me. You can give George the chance of wiping out the shame of our family.

Alec

Do you know that he will have to suffer every sort of danger and privation, that often he will be parched by the heat, and often soaked to the skin for days together? Sometimes he'll not have enough to eat, and he'll have to work harder than a navy.

Lucy

Do you hear, George? Are you willing to go?

George

I'll do anything you want me to, Lucy.

Alec

And you know that he may get killed. There may be a good deal of fighting.

Lucy

If he dies a brave man's death, I have nothing more to ask.

Alec

[*To George.*] Very well. Come with me, and I'll do my best for you.

Lucy

Ah, thanks. You are really my friend.

Alec

And when I come back?

Lucy

Then, if you still care, ask your question again.

Alec

And the answer?

Lucy

[*With a little smile.*] The answer, perhaps, will be different.

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

Scene: Alec Mackenzie's tent in North-East Africa. It is night. The place is dimly lighted. There is a little camp bed in one corner with a mosquito net over it. There are two or three folding chairs, some tin cases, and a table. On this a gun is lying.

Dick is seated with his head on his hands, leaning on the table, fast asleep. Dr. Adamson, the surgeon of the expedition, comes in. He is a large-boned brawny fellow with a Scotch accent. He looks at Dick and smiles.

Doctor

Hulloa, there! [Dick starts up and seizes the gun. The Doctor laughs.] All right. Don't shoot. It's only me.

Dick

[With a laugh.] Why the dickens did you wake me up? I was dreaming – dreaming of a high-heeled boot and a neat ankle, and the swish of a white lace petticoat.

Doctor

I thought I'd just have a look at your arm.

Dick

It's one of the most æsthetic sights I know.

Doctor

Your arm?

Dick

A pretty woman crossing Piccadilly at Swan and Edgar's. You are a savage, my good doctor, and a barbarian. You don't know the care and forethought, the hours of anxious meditation, it has needed for her to hold up that well-made skirt with the elegant grace which enchants you.

Doctor

I'm afraid you're a very immoral man, Lomas.

Dick

Ah, my dear fellow, at my time of life I have to content myself with condemning the behaviour of the younger generation. Even a camp bed in a stuffy tent with mosquitoes buzzing all around me has allurements greater than those of youth and beauty. And I declare for all women to hear that I am proof against their wiles. Give me a comfortable bed to sleep in, plenty to eat, tobacco to smoke, and Amaryllis may go hang.

Doctor

Well, let's look at this wound of yours. Has it been throbbing at all?

Dick

Oh, it's not worth bothering about. It'll be all right to-morrow.

Doctor

I'll put a clean dressing on all the same.

Dick

All right. [*He takes off his coat and rolls up his sleeve. His arm is bandaged, and during the next speeches the Doctor puts on a dressing and a clean bandage.*] You must be pretty well done up, aren't you?

Doctor

Just about dropping. But I've got a deuce of a lot more work before I turn in.

Dick

The thing that amuses me is to remember that I came to Africa thinking I was going to have a rattling good time.

Doctor

You couldn't exactly describe it as a picnic, could you? But I don't suppose any of us knew it would be such a tough job as it's turned out.

Dick

My friend, if ever I return to my native land, I will never be such a crass and blithering idiot as to give way again to a spirit of adventure.

Doctor

[*With a laugh.*] You're not the sort of chap whom one would expect to take to African work. Why the blazes did you come?

Dick

That's precisely what I've been asking myself ever since we landed in this God-forsaken swamp.

Doctor

The wound looks healthy enough. It'll hardly even leave a scar.

Dick

I'm glad that my fatal beauty won't be injured... You see, Alec's about the oldest friend I have. And then there's young

Allerton, I've known him ever since he was a kid.

Doctor

That's an acquaintance that most of us wouldn't boast about.

Dick

I had an idea I'd like Bond Street all the better when I got back. I never knew that I should be eaten alive by every kind of disgusting animal by night and day. I say, Doctor, do you ever think of a rump steak?

Doctor

When?

Dick

[*With a wave of the hand.*] Sometimes, when we're marching under a sun that just about takes the roof of your head off, and we've had the scantiest and most uncomfortable breakfast possible, I have a vision.

Doctor

D'you mind only gesticulating with one arm?

Dick

I see the dining-room of my club and myself sitting at a little table by the window looking out on Piccadilly, and there's a spotless tablecloth, and all the accessories are spick and span. An obsequious servant brings me a rump steak, grilled to perfection, and so tender that it melts in the mouth. And he puts by my side a plate of crisp, fried potatoes. Can't you smell them?

Doctor

[*Laughing.*] Shut up!

Dick

And then another obsequious servant brings me a pewter tankard, and into it he pours a bottle, a large bottle, mind you, of foaming ale.

Doctor

You've certainly added considerably to our cheerfulness.

Dick

[*With a shrug of the shoulders.*] I've often been driven to appease the pangs of raging hunger with a careless epigram, and by the laborious composition of a limerick I have sought to deceive a most unholy thirst.

Doctor

Well, last night I thought you'd made your last joke, old man, and that I had given my last dose of quinine.

Dick

We were in rather a tight corner, weren't we?

Doctor

This is the third expedition I've gone with Mackenzie against the slave-raiders, and I promise you I've never been so certain

that all was over with us.

Dick

Funny thing death is, you know. When you think of it beforehand, it makes you squirm in your shoes, but when you've just got it face to face, it seems so obvious that you forget to be afraid. It's one of my principles never to be impressed by a platitude.

Doctor

It's only by a miracle we escaped. If those Arabs hadn't hesitated to attack us just those ten minutes we should have been wiped out.

Dick

Alec was splendid, wasn't he?

Doctor

Yes, by Jove! He thought we were done for.

Dick

What makes you think that?

Doctor

Well, you see, I know him pretty well. He's been a pal of yours for twenty years in England, but I've been with him out here three times, and I tell you there's not much about a man that you don't know then.

Dick

Well?

Doctor

Well, when things are going smoothly and everything's flourishing, he's apt to be a bit irritable. He keeps rather to himself, and he doesn't say much unless you do something he doesn't approve of.

Dick

And then, by Jove, he comes down on one like a thousand of bricks. It's not for nothing the natives call him Thunder and Lightning.

Doctor

But when things begin to look black, his spirits go up like one o'clock. And the worse they are, the more cheerful he is.

Dick

It's one of his most irritating characteristics.

Doctor

When every one is starving with hunger, and dead tired, and soaked to the skin, Mackenzie fairly bubbles over with good-humour.

Dick

When I'm in a bad temper, I much prefer every one else to be

in a bad temper too.

Doctor

These last few days, he's been positively hilarious. Yesterday he was cracking jokes with the natives.

Dick

[*Dryly.*] Scotch jokes. I daresay they sound funny in an African dialect.

Doctor

I've never seen him more cheerful. I said to myself: By the Lord Harry, the chief thinks we're in a devil of a bad way.

Dick

Thank Heaven, it's all over now. We've none of us had any sleep for three days, and when I once get off, I don't mean to wake up for a week.

Doctor

I must go and see the rest of my patients. Perkins has got a bad dose of fever this time. He was quite delirious a while ago.

Dick

By Jove, I'd almost forgotten. How one changes out here! Here am I feeling happy and comfortable and inclined to make a little jest or two, and I've forgotten already that poor Richardson is dead and Lord knows how many natives.

Doctor

Poor chap, we could ill spare him. The fates never choose the right man.

Dick

What do you mean by that?

Doctor

If we had to lose some one, it would have been a damned

sight better if that young cub had got the bullet which killed poor Richardson.

Dick

George Allerton?

Doctor

He wouldn't have been much loss, would he?

Dick

No, I'm afraid he wouldn't.

Doctor

Mackenzie has been very patient with him. I wonder he didn't send him back to the coast months ago, when he sacked Macinnery.

Dick

Poor George, everything has been against him.

Doctor

Some men have got natures so crooked that with every chance in the world to go straight they can't manage it. The only thing is to let them go to the devil as best they may.

Dick

Alec was bound to give him another chance. [Alec Mackenzie *comes in.*] Hulloo, Alec! Where have you been?

Alec

I've been going the round of the outlying sentries.

Dick

All serene?

Alec

Yes. I've just seen a native messenger that Mindabi sent to me.

Doctor

Anything important?

Alec

[*Curtly.*] Yes. How's the arm, Dick?

Dick

Oh, that's nothing. It's only a scratch.

Alec

You'd better not make too light of it. The smallest wound has a way of being troublesome in this country.

Doctor

He'll be all right in a day or two.

Alec

How are the others?

Doctor

They're going on pretty well on the whole. Perkins, of course, will be down for some days longer. And some of the natives are rather badly hurt. Those devils have got explosive bullets.

Alec

Any one in great danger?

Doctor

No, I don't think so. There are two men who are in rather a bad way, but all they want is rest.

Alec

I see.

Dick

I say, have you had anything to eat lately?

Alec

[*With a laugh.*] Good Lord! I quite forgot. I wonder when the dickens I had some food last.

Dick

[*Smiling.*] You've had nothing to-day, have you?

Alec

No, I don't think so. Those Arabs kept us so confoundedly busy.

Dick

You must be devilish hungry.

Alec

Now you mention it, I think I am. And thirsty, by Jove! I wouldn't give my thirst for an elephant tusk.

Dick

And to think there's nothing but tepid water to drink!

Doctor

I'll go and tell the boy to bring you some food. It's a rotten game to play tricks with your digestion like that.

Alec

[*Gaily.*] Stern man, the doctor, isn't he? It won't hurt me once in a way. And I shall enjoy it all the more now.

Doctor

[*Calling.*] Selim!

Alec

No, don't trouble. The poor chap's just turned in, dropping with sleep. I told him he might till I called him. I don't want much, and I can easily get it myself. [*He goes to a case and takes out a tin of meat and some ship's biscuits.*] It's rather a nuisance that we've not been able to get any game lately.

[He sets the food down before him, sits down, and begins to eat.]

Dick

[*Ironically.*] Appetising, isn't it?

Alec

Splendid!

Dick

You have all the instincts of the primeval savage, Alec. It enrages and disgusts me.

Alec

[*With a laugh.*] Why?

Dick

You take food for the gross and bestial purpose of appeasing your hunger. You have no appreciation for the delicacies of eating as a fine art.

Alec

The meat's getting rather mouldy, isn't it?

Dick

Damnably! It's been a source of great anxiety to me in England.

Alec

What is he talking about now?

Dick

I was going on with the thread of my observations, which you interrupted with the entirely obvious remark that the tinned meat was getting mouldy.

Alec

I apologise profusely. Pray go on!

Dick

I was about to observe that even in England you will eat the most carefully ordered meal with an indifference which is an outrage to decency. Indeed, you pay less attention to it than here, because at all events you do notice that the meat is mouldy. But if any one gives you a good dinner, you notice nothing. I've given him priceless port, Doctor, and he drank it as though it were cooking sherry.

Doctor

I confess it is lamentable. But why is it a source of anxiety to you?

Dick

What on earth is to happen to him in his old age?

Alec

Explain yourself, my friend. Clearly but with as much brevity as possible.

Dick

The pleasure of eating is the only pleasure that remains to the old. Love – what is love when you lose your figure, and your hair grows thin? Knowledge – one can never know everything, and the desire passes with the fire of youth. Even ambition fails you in the end. But to those who have lived wisely and well, there remain three pleasures every day of their lives: their breakfast, their luncheon, and their dinner.

Alec

[*With a laugh.*] I wouldn't worry about my old age if I were you, Dick.

Dick

Why?

Alec

Because I think it's ten to one that we shall all be dead tomorrow morning.

Doctor

What?

[There is a slight pause while both men stare at him.]

Dick

Is this one of your little jokes, Alec?

Alec

You have often observed that I joke with difficulty.

Doctor

But what's wrong now?

Alec

You'll neither of you sleep in your beds to-night. Another sell for the mosquitoes, isn't it? I propose to break up the camp and start marching as soon as the moon goes down.

Dick

I say, it's a bit thick after a day like this. We're all so done up that we shan't be able to go a mile.

Alec

Nonsense, you will have had two hours' rest.

Doctor

But some of those fellows who are wounded can't possibly be moved.

Alec

They must!

Doctor

I won't answer for their lives.

Alec

We must take the risk. Our only chance is to make a bold dash for it, and we can't leave the wounded here.

Dick

I suppose there's going to be a deuce of a row?

Alec

[*Grimly.*] There is.

Dick

Your companions seldom have a chance to complain of the monotony of their existence, Alec. What are you going to do now?

Alec

At this moment, I'm going to fill my pipe.

[There is a pause while Alec fills and lights his pipe.]

Dick

I gather from the general amiability of your demeanour that we're in a rather tight place?

Alec

Tighter than any of your patent-leather boots, my friend.

Dick

[Gravely.] Have we any chance of getting through, old man?

Alec

[*Lightly.*] Oh, I don't know. There's always a chance.

Dick

Don't grin at me in that irritating fashion.

Alec

You must wish you were treading the light fantastic toe in a London ball-room, Dick.

Dick

Frankly I do... I suppose we're going to fight again?

Alec

Like Kilkenny cats.

Dick

[*Briskly.*] Well, at all events that's some comfort. If I am going to be done out of my night's rest, I should like to take it out of some one.

Alec

If things turn out all right, we shall have come near finishing the job, and there won't be much more slave-raiding in this part of Africa.

Dick

And if things don't turn out all right?

Alec

Why, then I'm afraid the tea-tables of Mayfair will be deprived of your scintillating repartee forever.

Dick

Well, I've had a very good time in my life. I've loved a little,

I've looked at some good pictures, read some thundering fine books, and I've worked and played. If I can only account for a few more of those damned scoundrels before I die, I shouldn't think I had much to complain of.

Alec

[*Smiling.*] You're a philosopher, Dick.

Dick

Doesn't the possibility of an extremely unpleasant demise tempt you to a few appropriate reflections?

Alec

I don't know that it does. I'm a bit of a fatalist, and my theory is that when my time comes nothing can help me, but at the bottom of my heart I can't resist the conviction that I shan't die till I let myself.

Doctor

Well, I must go and put things in order. I'll bandage those fellows up, and I hope they'll stand the jolting.

Alec

What about Perkins?

Doctor

Lord knows! I'll try and keep him quiet with chloral.

Alec

You needn't say anything about striking camp. I don't propose that any one should know till a quarter of an hour before we start.

Doctor

But that won't give them time.

Alec

It must. I've trained them often enough to get on the march quickly.

Doctor

Very well.

[George Allerton comes in as the Doctor is on the point of going.]

George

Can I come in?

Alec

Yes ... Doctor!

Doctor

Hulloa!

Alec

You might stay a minute, will you?

Doctor

[*Coming back.*] Certainly.

Alec

Didn't Selim tell you that I wanted to speak to you?

George

That's why I've come.

Alec

You've taken your time about it.

George

I say, could you give me a drink of brandy? I'm awfully done up.

Alec

[*Shortly.*] There's no brandy left.

George

Hasn't the doctor got some?

Alec

No!

[There is a pause. Alec looks at him slowly.]

George

Why are you all looking at me like that? You look as if you were going to try me for something.

Dick

Nonsense! Don't be so nervous.

Alec

[*Abruptly.*] Do you know anything about the death of that Turkana woman?

George

No! How should I?

Alec

Come now, you must know something about it. Last Tuesday you came into camp and told me the Turkana were very excited.

George

[*Unwillingly.*] Oh, yes! I remember something about it. It had slipped my memory.

Alec

Well?

George

I'm not very clear about it. The woman had been shot, hadn't she? One of our station boys had been playing the fool with her, and he seems to have shot her.

Alec

Have you made no inquiries as to who the man was?

George

[*In a surly way.*] I haven't had time. We've all been worked off our legs during these three days.

Alec

Do you suspect no one?

George

I don't think so.

Alec

Think a moment.

George

The only man who might have done it is that big scoundrel whom we got on the coast, the Swahili.

Alec

What makes you think that?

George

He's been making an awful nuisance of himself, and I know he was running after her.

Alec

I understand she complained about him to you?

George

Yes.

Alec

Do you think that would be enough evidence to punish him on?

George

He's a thorough blackguard, and after all, if one does make a mistake, he's only a nigger.

Alec

You'll be surprised to hear that when the woman was found she wasn't dead.

[George gives a movement of consternation.]

Alec

She didn't die for nearly an hour.

George

[*After a short pause.*] Was she able to say anything?

Alec

She accused you of having shot her.

George

Me?

Alec

It appears that *you* were playing the fool with her, and when she got angry you took out a revolver and fired point blank. Presumably that she should tell no tales.

George

It's a stupid lie. You know what they are. It's just like them to tell an absurd lie like that. You wouldn't believe a parcel of niggers rather than me, would you? After all, my word's worth more than theirs.

Alec

[Taking from his pocket an exploded cartridge.] This was found about two yards from the body. As you see, it's a revolver cartridge. It was brought to me this evening.

George

I don't know what that proves.

Alec

You know just as well as I do that none of our natives has a revolver. Besides ourselves only two or three of the servants have them.

[George becomes white with fear, he takes out his handkerchief and wipes his face.]

Alec

[Quietly.] Will you give me your revolver?

George

I haven't got it. I lost it in the skirmish this afternoon. I didn't tell you as I thought you'd be annoyed.

Alec

I saw you cleaning it less than an hour ago.

George

[*With a shrug of the shoulders.*] Perhaps it's in my tent, I'll go and see.

Alec

[*Sharply.*] Stop here.

George

[*Angrily.*] You've no right to talk to me like that. I'm sick to death of being ordered about. You seem to think I'm a dog. I came out here of my own free will, and I won't let you treat me as if I were a servant.

Alec

If you put your hand to your hip pocket, I think you'll find your revolver there.

George

I'm not going to give it to you.

Alec

[*Quietly.*] D'you want me to come and take it from you myself?

[The two men stare at one another for a moment. Then George slowly puts his hand to his pocket. He takes out the revolver and suddenly aims at Alec. Dick beats up his arm as he fires, and the Doctor, springing forward, seizes him round the waist. Alec remains still.]

Dick

[*During the struggle.*] You young blackguard!

George

Let me go, damn you!

Alec

You need not hold him.

[They leave go of George, who sinks cowering into a chair. Dick hands the revolver to Alec. He silently fits into a chamber the cartridge that had been brought to him.]

Alec

You see that it fits. Hadn't you better make a clean breast of it?

George

[Cowed.] Yes, I shot her. She made a row, and the devil got into me. I didn't know I'd done anything till she screamed and I saw the blood... What a fool I was to throw the cartridge away! I wanted to have all the chambers charged.

Alec

Do you remember that two months ago I hanged a man to the nearest tree because he'd outraged a native woman?

George

[*Springing up in terror.*] You wouldn't do that to me, Alec. Oh, God, no, Alec, have mercy on me. You wouldn't hang me. Oh, why did I ever come to this damned place?

Alec

You need not be afraid. I'm not going to do that. In any case I must preserve the native respect for the white man.

George

I was half drunk when I saw that woman. I wasn't responsible for my actions.

Alec

The result is that the whole tribe has turned against us. The

chief is my friend, and he sent a message to tell me he couldn't hold them in. It's from him I got the cartridge. It wouldn't be so serious, only the best fighting part of our forces are the Turkana, and we must expect treachery. They've stirred up the neighbouring tribes against us, and all the work we've been doing for a year is undone. That's the explanation of the Arabs' attack three days ago.

George

[*Sullenly.*] I knew it was all my fault.

Alec

The natives have made up their minds to join the slave-traders, and we shall be attacked on all sides to-morrow. We can't hold out against God knows how many thousands.

George

D'you mean you'll all be killed?

Alec

If we remain here there's no escape.

George

[In a whisper.] What are you going to do to me, Alec?

[Alec walks up and down the tent.]

Alec

[Presently.] I think you might go and see your patients now, doctor.

Doctor

Very well.

Dick

Shall I go too, Alec?

Alec

No, you can stay here. But don't open your mouth till you're spoken to.

[The Doctor goes out.]

George

I'm sorry I did that silly thing just now. I'm glad I didn't hit you.

Alec

It doesn't matter at all. I'd forgotten all about it.

George

I lost my head, I didn't know what I was doing.

Alec

You need not trouble about that. In Africa even the strongest people are apt to get excited and lose their balance.

[Alec re-lights his pipe, and there is a very short pause.]

Alec

Did you ever know that before we came away I asked Lucy to marry me?

George

I knew you cared for her.

Alec

She asked me to bring you here in the hope that you would regain the good name of your family. I think that is the object she has most at heart in the world. It's as great as her love for you. The plan hasn't been much of a success, has it?

George

She ought to have known that I wasn't suited for this kind of life.

Alec

I saw very soon that you were weak and irresolute. But I hoped to make something of you. Your intentions seemed good enough, but you never had the strength to carry them out... I'm sorry if I seem to be preaching to you.

George

[*Bitterly.*] Oh, d'you think I care what any one says to me now?

Alec

[*Gravely, but not unkindly.*] Then I found you were drinking. I told you that no man could stand liquor in this country, and you gave me your word of honour that you wouldn't touch it again.

George

Yes, I broke it. I couldn't help it; the temptation was too strong.

Alec

When we came to the station at Muneas you and Macinnery got blind drunk, and the whole camp saw you. I ought to have sent you back to the coast then, but it would have broken Lucy's heart.

George

It was Macinnery's fault.

Alec

It's because I thought he was to blame that I sent him back alone. I wanted to give you another chance. It struck me that the feeling of authority might have some influence on you, and so when we came to the lake I left you to guard the ferry. I put the chief part of the stores in your care and marched on. I needn't remind you what happened then.

[George *looks down sulkily, and in default of excuses keeps silent.*

Alec

I came to the conclusion that it was hopeless. You seemed to me rotten through and through.

George

[*With a little laugh.*] Like my father before me.

Alec

I couldn't believe a word you said. You did everything you shouldn't have done. The result was that the men mutinied, and

if I hadn't come back in the nick of time they'd have killed you and looted all the stores.

George

You always blame me for everything. A man's not responsible for what he does when he's down with fever.

Alec

It was too late to send you back to the coast then, and I was obliged to take you on. And now the end has come. Your murder of that woman has put us all in deadly peril. Already to your charge lie the deaths of Richardson and almost twenty natives. Tribes that were friendly have joined with the Arabs, and we're as near destruction as we can possibly be.

George

What are you going to do?

Alec

We're far away from the coast, and I must take the law into my own hands.

George

[*With a gasp.*] You're not going to kill me?

Alec

Are you fond of Lucy?

George

[*Brokenly.*] You – you know I am. Why d'you remind me of her now? I've made a rotten mess of everything, and I'm better out of the way. But think of the disgrace of it. It'll kill Lucy... And she was hoping I'd do so much.

Alec

Listen to me. Our only chance of escaping from the confounded fix we're in is to make a sudden attack on the Arabs before the natives join them. We shall be enormously outnumbered, but we may just smash them if we can strike to-night. My plan is to start marching as if I didn't know that the Turkana were going to turn against us. After an hour all the whites but one, and the Swahilis whom I can trust implicitly, will

take a short cut. The Arabs will have had news of our starting, and they'll try to cut us off at the pass. I shall fall on them just as they begin to attack. D'you understand?

George

Yes.

Alec

Now I must have one white man to head the Turkana, and that man will run the greatest possible danger. I'd go myself, only the Swahilis won't fight unless I lead them... Are you willing to take that post?

George

I?

Alec

I could order you, but the job's too dangerous for me to force it on any one. If you refuse, I shall call the others together and ask some one to volunteer. In that case you will have to find your way back alone as best you can to the coast.

George

No, no! Anything rather than the shame of that.

Alec

I won't hide from you that it means almost certain death. But there's no other way of saving ourselves. On the other hand, if you show perfect courage at the moment the Arabs attack and the Turkana find that we've given them the slip, you may escape. If you do, I promise nothing shall be said of all that has happened here.

George

All right. I'll do that. And I thank you with all my heart for giving me the chance.

Alec

I'm glad you've accepted. Whatever happens you'll have done a brave action in your life. [*He holds out his hand to George, who takes it.*] I think there's nothing more to be said. You must be ready to start in half an hour. Here's your revolver. Remember

that one chamber's empty. You'd better put in another cartridge.

George

Yes, I'll do that.

[He goes out.]

Dick

D'you think he has any chance of escaping?

Alec

If he has pluck he may get through.

Dick

Well!

Alec

To-morrow we shall know if he has that last virtue of a blackguard – courage.

Dick

And if he hasn't, it's death you're sending him to?

Alec

Yes. It's death!

END OF THE SECOND ACT

THE THIRD ACT

Scene: *A smoking-room at Lady Kelsey's, leading by an archway into a drawing-room at the back. On the right is a glass door which leads into the garden. On one side is a sofa; on the other a table with cigarettes, matches, whiskey, sodas, etc.*

Lady Kelsey is giving a dance, and the music of the Lancers is heard vaguely from the ball-room as the curtain rises. Mrs. Crowley and Sir Robert Boulger are sitting down. Lady Kelsey comes in with the Rev. James Carbery.

Lady Kelsey

Oh, you wretched people, why aren't you dancing? It's too bad of you to hide yourselves here!

Mrs. Crowley

We thought no one would find us in the smoking-room. But why have you abandoned your guests, Lady Kelsey?

Lady Kelsey

Oh, I've got them all comfortably settled in the Lancers, and

I'm free to rest myself for a quarter of an hour. You don't know what agonies I've been suffering the whole evening.

Mrs. Crowley

Good gracious me! Why?

Lady Kelsey

I'm so afraid Alec Mackenzie will come.

Boulger

You needn't worry about that, Aunt Alice. He'll never venture to show his face.

Lady Kelsey

I didn't know what to do. It was impossible to put the dance off. It's too dreadful that these horrible revelations should...

Carbery

[*Supplying the word.*] Transpire.

Lady Kelsey

Yes, transpire on the very day I've at last persuaded Lucy to come into the world again. I wish Dick would come.

Boulger

Yes, he'll be able to tell us something.

Mrs. Crowley

But will he?

Carbery

Wherever I go people are talking about Mr. Mackenzie, and I'm bound to say I've found nobody who has a good word for him.

Boulger

[*Bitterly.*] Humpty-dumpty's had a great fall.

Carbery

I wonder if I might have a cigarette?

Mrs. Crowley

I'm sure you might. And if you press me dreadfully, I'll have one, too.

Boulger

Don't press her. She's already had far too many.

Mrs. Crowley

Well, I'll forego the pressing, but not the cigarette.

Carbery

[Handing her the box and giving her a light.] It's against all my principles, you know.

Mrs. Crowley

What *is* the use of principles except to give one an agreeable sensation of wickedness when one doesn't act up to them?

[*Dick comes in as she speaks.*

Dick

My dear lady, you're as epigrammatic as a dramatist. Do you say such things from choice or necessity?

Lady Kelsey

Dick!

Boulger

Dick!

Mrs. Crowley

Mr. Lomas!

Carbery

Ah!

[The four exclamations are simultaneous.]

Dick

This enthusiasm at my appearance is no less gratifying than unexpected.

Lady Kelsey

I'm so glad you've come at last. Now we shall get at the truth.

Boulger

[Impatiently.] Well?

Dick

My dear people, what *are* you talking about?

Boulger

Oh, don't be such an ass!

Mrs. Crowley

Good heavens, didn't you read the *Times* this morning?

Dick

I only came back from Paris to-night. Besides, I never read the papers except in August.

Mrs. Crowley

[*Raising her eyebrows.*] When there's nothing in them?

Dick

Pardon me, I'm an eager student of the sea-serpent and the giant gooseberry.

Lady Kelsey

My dear Dick, it's too shocking. I wish I'd had the courage to write and ask Mr. Mackenzie not to come. But since you both came back from Africa a month ago he's been here nearly every day. And he's been so good and kind to us, I couldn't treat him as though there was no doubt the story was true.

Boulger

There can't be the least doubt about it. By George, I should like to kick him.

Dick

[*Dryly.*] My dear chap, Alec is a hardy Scot and bigger than you, so I shouldn't advise you to try.

Boulger

I was engaged to dine with him to-night, but I wired to say I had a headache.

Lady Kelsey

What will he think if he sees you here?

Boulger

He can think what he jolly well likes.

Lady Kelsey

I hope he has the sense to stay away.

Carbery

I think you're pretty safe now, Lady Kelsey. It's growing late.

Dick

Will some one kindly explain?

Mrs. Crowley

D'you mean to say you really don't know – seriously? After

all, you were with him.

Lady Kelsey

My dear Dick, there are two columns of fiery denunciation in this morning's *Times*.

[*Dick is a little startled, but at once collects himself.*]

Dick

Oh, that's only the reaction. That's nothing. Since he arrived in Mombassa, after three years in the heart of Africa, he's made almost a triumphal progress. Of course, it couldn't last. The reaction was bound to come.

Boulger

[*Looking at him steadily.*] The article is signed by a man named Macinnery.

Dick

[*Calmly.*] Alec found Macinnery half starving at Mombassa, and took him solely out of charity. But he was a worthless rascal, and he had to send him back.

Boulger

He gives ample proof for every word he says.

Dick

Whenever an explorer comes home, there's some one to tell nasty stories about him. People forget that kid gloves are not much use in a tropical forest, and grow very indignant when they hear that a man has used a little brute force to make himself respected.

Lady Kelsey

Oh, my dear Dick, it's much worse than that. First poor Lucy's father died...

Dick

You're not going to count that as an overwhelming misfortune? We were unanimous in describing that gentleman's demise as an uncommonly happy release.

Lady Kelsey

But Lucy was heart-broken all the same. And when her life seemed to grow a little more cheerful, came her brother's tragic death.

Dick

[*Abruptly, to Mrs. Crowley.*] What is it exactly?

Mrs. Crowley

The long and short of it is that Mr. Mackenzie was the cause of George Allerton's death.

Dick

Lucy's brother was killed by the slave-traders.

Boulger

Mackenzie sent him into a confounded trap to save his own dirty skin.

Lady Kelsey

And the worst of it is that I think Lucy is in love with Mr. Mackenzie.

[Boulger makes a slight movement, and for a moment there is an uncomfortable pause.]

Carbery

I saw him this evening in Piccadilly, and I almost ran into his arms. It was quite awkward.

Dick

[Frigidly.] Why?

Carbery

I don't think I want to shake the man's hand. He's nothing short of a murderer.

Boulger

[Savagely.] He's worse than that. He's ten times worse.

Lady Kelsey

Well, for heaven's sake be polite to him if he comes to-night.

Carbery

I really couldn't bring myself to shake hands with him.

Dick

[*Dryly.*] Don't you think you'd better wait for evidence before you condemn him?

Boulger

My dear fellow, the letter in the *Times* is absolutely damning. Interviewers went to him from the evening papers, and he refused to see them.

Dick

What does Lucy say of it? After all, she's the person most concerned.

Lady Kelsey

She doesn't know. I took care that she shouldn't see the paper. I wanted to give her this evening's enjoyment unalloyed.

Mrs. Crowley

Take care, here she is.

[*Lucy comes in.*]

Lady Kelsey

[*Smiling and reaching out her hand.*] Well, darling?

Lucy

[*Going to Lady Kelsey.*] Are you growing very tired, my aunt?

Lady Kelsey

I can rest myself for the time. I don't think any one else will come now.

Lucy

[*Gaily.*] You faithless woman, have you forgotten the guest of the evening?

Lady Kelsey

Mr. Mackenzie?

Lucy

[*Bending over her.*] My dear, it was charming of you to hide the paper from me this morning...

Lady Kelsey

[*Startled.*] Did you see the letter? I so wanted you not to till to-morrow.

Lucy

Mr. Mackenzie very rightly thought I should know at once what was said about him and my brother. He sent me the paper himself this evening.

Boulger

Did he write to you?

Lucy

No, he merely scribbled on a card: "I think you should read this."

Boulger

Well, I'm damned!

Lady Kelsey

What did you think of the letter, Lucy?

Lucy

[*Proudly.*] I didn't believe it.

BOULGER

[*Bitterly.*] You must be blinded by your – friendship for Alec Mackenzie. I never read anything more convincing.

Lucy

I could hardly believe him guilty of such an odious crime if he confessed it with his own lips.

Boulger

Of course, he won't do that.

Dick

Did I ever tell you how I made acquaintance with Alec? In the Atlantic – about three hundred miles from land.

Mrs. Crowley

What a perfectly ridiculous place for an introduction.

Dick

I was a silly young fool in those days, and I habitually played the giddy goat. In the course of which, I fell overboard and was proceeding to drown when Alec jumped in after me. It was an incautious thing to do, because he very nearly got drowned himself.

Lucy

That's not the only heroic thing he's done.

Dick

No, it's one of his hobbies to risk his life to save unnecessary and useless people. But the funny thing is that ever since he saved mine, he's been quite absurdly grateful. He seems to think I did him an intentional service and fell into the water on purpose to give him a chance of pulling me out.

Lucy

[*With a long look at Dick.*] It's very kind and good of you to have told that story.

[The Butler comes in and announces Alec Mackenzie.]

Butler

Mr. Mackenzie.

Alec

[Blandly.] Ah, I thought I should find you here, Lady Kelsey.

Lady Kelsey

[Shaking hands with him.] How d'you do? We've just been talking of you.

Alec

Really?

Lady Kelsey

It's so late, we were afraid you wouldn't come. I should have been dreadfully disappointed.

Alec

It's very kind of you to say so. I've been at the Travellers', reading various appreciations of my own character.

Lady Kelsey

[*Somewhat embarrassed.*] Oh, I heard there was something about you in the papers.

Alec

There's a good deal. I really had no idea the world was so interested in me.

Lady Kelsey

It's charming of you to come to-night. I'm sure you hate dances!

Alec

Oh, no, they interest me enormously. I remember, one of the Kings of Uganda gave a dance in my honour. Ten thousand

warriors in war-paint. I assure you it was most impressive.

Dick

My dear fellow, if paint is the attraction you really need not go much farther than Mayfair.

Alec

[*Pretending for the first time to notice Boulger.*] Ah, there's my little friend Bobbie. I thought you had a headache?

Lady Kelsey

[*Quickly.*] I'm afraid Bobby is dreadfully dissipated. He's not looking at all well.

Alec

[*Good-humouredly.*] You shouldn't keep such late hours, Bobbie. At your age one wants one's beauty sleep.

Boulger

It's very kind of you to take an interest in me. My headache

has passed off.

Alec

I'm very glad. What do you use – Phenacetin?

Boulger

It went away of its own accord – after dinner.

Alec

[*Smiling.*] So you resolved to give the girls a treat by coming to Lady Kelsey's dance? How nice of you not to disappoint them! [*He turns to Lucy and holds out his hand. They look into one another's eyes. She takes his hand.*] I sent you a paper this evening.

Lucy

It was very good of you.

[*Carbery comes forward and offers his arm.*]

Carbery

I think this is my dance, Miss Allerton. May I take you in?

Alec

Carbery? I saw you in Piccadilly just now! You were darting about just like a young gazelle. I had no idea you could be so active.

Carbery

I didn't see you.

Alec

I observed that you were deeply interested in the shop windows as I passed. How are you?

[He holds out his hand, and for a moment Carbery hesitates to take it. But Alec's steady gaze compels him.]

Carbery

How d'you do?

Alec

[*With an amused smile.*] So glad to see you again, old man.

[*Dick gives an audible chuckle, and Carbery, reddening, draws his hand away angrily. He goes to Lucy and offers his arm.*

Boulger

[*To Mrs. Crowley.*] Shall I take you back?

Mrs. Crowley

Do!

Lady Kesley

Won't you come, Mr. Mackenzie?

Alec

If you don't mind I'll stay and smoke just one cigarette with Dick Lomas. You know I'm not a dancing man.

Lady Kelsey

Very well.

[*All go out except Alec and Dick.*]

Dick

I suppose you know we were all beseeching Providence you'd have the grace to stay away to-night?

Alec

[*With a smile.*] I suspected it, I confess. I shouldn't have come only I wanted to see Lucy. I've been in the country all day, and I knew nothing about Macinnery's letter till I saw the placards at the station.

Dick

Macinnery proposes to make things rather uncomfortable, I imagine.

Alec

[*With a smile.*] I made a mistake, didn't I? I ought to have dropped him in the river when I had no further use for him.

Dick

What are you going to do?

Alec

It's not easy to clear myself at a dead man's expense. The earth covers his crime and his sins and his weakness.

Dick

D'you mean to say that you are going to sit still and let them throw mud at you?

Alec

When George was dead I wrote to Lucy that he died like a brave man. I can't now publish to the whole world that he was a coward and a rogue. I can't rake up again the story of her father's

crime.

Dick

[*Impatiently.*] Surely, that's absolutely quixotic.

Alec

No, it isn't. I tell you I can't do anything else. I'm bound hand and foot. Lucy has talked to me of George's death, and the only thing that has consoled her is the idea that in a manner he had redeemed his father's good name. How can I rob her of that? She placed all her hopes in George. How could she face the world with the knowledge that her brother was rotten to the core, as rotten as her father.

Dick

It seems awfully hard.

Alec

Besides, when all is said and done, the boy did die game. Don't you think that should count for something? No, I tell you I can't give him away now. I should never cease to reproach myself. I

love Lucy far too much to cause her such bitter pain.

Dick

And if it loses you her love?

Alec

I think she can do without love better than without self-respect.

[*Lucy comes in with Mrs. Crowley.*]

Lucy

I've sent my partner away. I felt I must have a few words alone with you.

Dick

Shall I take Mrs. Crowley into a retired corner?

Lucy

No, we have nothing to say that you can't hear. You and Nellie know that we're engaged to be married. [*To Alec.*] I want you

to dance with me.

Alec

It's very good of you.

Mrs. Crowley

Don't you think that's rather foolish, Lucy?

Lucy

[*To Alec.*] I want to show them all that I don't believe that you're guilty of an odious crime.

Alec

They've said horrible things about me?

Lucy

Not to me. They wanted to hide it from me, but I knew they were talking.

Alec

You'll grow used to hearing shameful things said of me. I suppose I shall grow used to it, too.

Lucy

Oh, I hate them.

Alec

Ah, it's not that I mind. What torments me is that it was so easy to despise their praise, and now I can't despise their blame.

Mrs. Crowley

[*Smiling.*] I believe you have some glimmerings of human nature in you after all.

Lucy

When you came to-night, so calm and self-possessed, I admired you as I'd never admired you before.

Alec

It's easy enough to command one's face. I learnt to do that in Africa when often my life depended on my seeming to have no fear. But in my heart ... I never knew that I could feel so bitter. And yet, after all, it's only your good opinion that I care for.

Lucy

I've trusted you implicitly from the first day I saw you.

Alec

Thank God for that! To-day is the first time I've wanted to be assured that I was trusted. And yet I'm ashamed to want it.

Lucy

Ah, don't be too hard upon yourself. You're so afraid of letting your tenderness appear.

Alec

The only way to be strong is never to surrender to one's

weakness. Strength is merely a habit like everything else. I want you to be strong, too. I want you never to doubt me whatever you may hear said.

Lucy

I gave my brother into your hands, and told you that if he died a brave man's death I could ask for no more.

Alec

I should tell you that I've made up my mind to make no answer to the charges that are made against me.

[There is a very short pause, while he looks at her steadily.]

Mrs. Crowley

But why?

Alec

[To Lucy.] I can give you my word of honour that I've done nothing which I regret. I know that what I did was right with regard to George, and if it were all to come again I would do exactly as I did before.

Lucy

I think I can trust you.

Alec

I thought of you always, and everything I did was for your sake. Every single act of mine during these four years in Africa has been done because I loved you.

Lucy

You must love me always, Alec, for now I have only you. [*He bends down and kisses her hand.*] Come!
[*He gives her his arm and they walk out.*]

Mrs. Crowley

I feel as if I should rather like to cry.

Dick

Do you really? So do I.

Mrs. Crowley

Don't be so silly.

Dick

By the way, you don't want to dance with me, do you?

Mrs. Crowley

Certainly not. You dance abominably.

Dick

It's charming of you to say so. It puts me at my ease at once.

Mrs. Crowley

Come and sit on the sofa and talk seriously.

Dick

Ah, you want to flirt with me, Mrs. Crowley.

Mrs. Crowley

Good heavens, what on earth makes you think that?

Dick

It's what a woman always means when she asks you to talk sensibly.

Mrs. Crowley

I can't bear a man who thinks women are in love with him.

Dick

Bless you, I don't think that. I only think they want to marry me.

Mrs. Crowley

That's equally detestable.

Dick

Not at all. However old, ugly, and generally undesirable a man is, he'll find a heap of charming girls who are willing to marry him. Marriage is still the only decent means of livelihood for a really nice girl.

Mrs. Crowley

But, my dear friend, if a woman really makes up her mind to marry a man, nothing on earth can save him.

Dick

Don't say that, you terrify me.

Mrs. Crowley

You need not be in the least alarmed, because I shall refuse you.

Dick

Thanks, awfully. But all the same I don't think I'll risk a

proposal.

Mrs. Crowley

My dear Mr. Lomas, your only safety is in immediate flight.

Dick

Why?

Mrs. Crowley

It must be obvious to the meanest intelligence that you've been on the verge of proposing to me for the last month.

Dick

Oh, I assure you, you're quite mistaken.

Mrs. Crowley

Then I shan't come to the play with you to-morrow?

Dick

But I've taken the seats, and I've ordered an exquisite dinner at the Carlton.

Mrs. Crowley

What have you ordered?

Dick

Potage Bisque... [*She makes a little face.*]
Sole Normande... [*She shrugs her shoulders.*]
Wild Duck.

Mrs. Crowley

With an orange salad?

Dick

Yes.

Mrs. Crowley

I don't positively dislike that.

Dick

And I've ordered a soufflé with an ice in the middle of it.

Mrs. Crowley

I shan't come.

Dick

I shouldn't have thought you kept very well abreast of dramatic art if you insist on marrying every man who takes you to a theatre.

Mrs. Crowley

[*Demurely.*] I was very nicely brought up.

Dick

Of course, if you're going to make yourself systematically disagreeable unless I marry you, I suppose I shall have to do it in self-defence.

Mrs. Crowley

I don't know if you have the least idea what you're talking about. I'm sure I haven't!

Dick

I was merely asking you in a rather well-turned phrase to name the day. The lamb shall be ready for the slaughter!

Mrs. Crowley

Couldn't you infuse a little romance into it? You might begin by going down on your bended knees.

Dick

I assure you that's quite out of fashion. Lovers, nowadays, are

much too middle-aged, and their joints are creaky. Besides, it ruins the trousers.

Mrs. Crowley

At all events, there can be no excuse for your not saying that you know you're utterly unworthy of me.

Dick

Wild horses wouldn't induce me to make a statement which is so remote from the truth.

Mrs. Crowley

And, of course, you must threaten to commit suicide if I don't consent.

Dick

Women are such sticklers for routine. They have no originality.

Mrs. Crowley

Very well, have it your own way. But I must have a proposal in due form.

Dick

Only four words are needed. [*Counting them on his fingers.*] Will you marry me?

Mrs. Crowley

That is both clear and simple. I reply in one: No!

Dick

[*As though he were not sure that he had heard correctly.*] I beg your pardon?

Mrs. Crowley

The answer is in the negative.

Dick

You're joking. You're certainly joking.

Mrs. Crowley

I will be a sister to you.

Dick

Do you mean to say you deliberately refuse me?

Mrs. Crowley

[*Smiling.*] I promised you I would.

Dick

[*With much seriousness.*] I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Mrs. Crowley

[*Puzzled.*] The man's mad. The man's nothing short of a raving lunatic.

Dick

I wanted to see if you were really attached to me. You have given me a proof of esteem which I promise you I will never forget.

Mrs. Crowley

[*Laughing.*] You're a perfect idiot, Mr. Lomas!

Dick

It's one of my cherished convictions that a really nice woman is never so cruel as to marry a man she cares for.

Mrs. Crowley

You're much too flippant to marry anybody, and you're perfectly odious into the bargain.

[She goes out. Dick, chuckling, lights a cigarette. Alec comes in and lies down lazily on the sofa.]

Alec

Why, Dick, what's the matter? You look as pleased as Punch.

Dick

My dear fellow, I feel like the Terrible Turk. I've been wrestling, and I thought I was going to have a fall. But by the display of considerable agility I've managed to keep my legs.

Alec

What *do* you mean?

Dick

Nothing. It's merely the gaiety of forty-two.

[Boulger comes into the room, followed immediately by Mallins and Carbery. He starts slightly when he sees Alec, but then goes over to the table on which is the whiskey.]

Mallins

May we smoke here, Bobby?

Boulger

Certainly. Dick insisted that this room should be particularly reserved for that purpose.

[The Butler comes in with a small silver salver, and takes up one or two dirty glasses.]

Dick

Lady Kelsey is the most admirable of all hostesses.

Alec

[Taking a cigarette from his case.] Give me a match, Bobby, there's a good boy. *[Boulger, with his back turned to Alec, takes no notice. He pours himself out some whiskey. Alec smiles slightly.]* Bobby, throw me over the matches!

Boulger

[*With his back still turned.*] Miller!

Butler

Yes, sir?

Boulger

Mr. Mackenzie is asking for something.

Butler

Yes, sir!

Alec

You might give me a light, will you?

Butler

Yes, sir!

[The Butler takes the matches to Alec, who lights his cigarette.]

Alec

Thank you. *[Complete silence is preserved till the Butler leaves the room.]* I perceive, Bobbie, that during my absence you have not added good manners to your other accomplishments.

Boulger

If you want things, you can ask the servants for them.

Alec

[Good-humouredly.] Don't be foolish, Bobbie!

Boulger

Would you be so kind as to remember that my name is Boulger?

Alec

[Smiling.] Perhaps you would like me to call you Sir Robert?

Boulger

I should prefer that you would call me nothing at all. I have absolutely no wish to know you.

Alec

Which shows that your taste is as bad as your breeding.

Boulger

[*Angrily, walking up to him.*] By God, I'll knock you down!

Alec

You could hardly do that when I'm already lying on my back.

Boulger

Look here, Mackenzie, I'm not going to let you play the fool with me. I want to know what answer you have to make to all these charges that have been brought against you.

Alec

Might I suggest that only Miss Allerton has the least right to receive answers to her questions? And she hasn't questioned me.

Boulger

I've given up trying to understand her attitude. If I were she, it would make me sick with horror to look at you. Since this morning you've rested under a direct accusation of causing George's death, and you've said nothing in self-defence.

Alec

Nothing.

Boulger

You've been given an opportunity to explain yourself, and you haven't taken it.

Alec

Quite true.

Boulger

Are you not going to deny the charge?

Alec

I'm not.

Boulger

Then I can only draw one conclusion. There appears to be no means of bringing you to justice, but at least I can refuse to know you.

Alec

All is over between us. And shall I return your letters and your photograph?

Boulger

I'm not joking.

Alec

It's singular that though I'm Scotch and you are English I should be able to see how ridiculous you are, while you're quite blind to your own absurdity.

Dick

Come, Alec! Remember he's only a boy.

Boulger

[*To Dick Lomas.*] I'm perfectly able to look after myself, and I'll thank you not to interfere. [*To Alec.*] If Lucy's so indifferent to her brother's death that she's willing to keep up with you, that's her own affair ...

Dick

[*Interrupting.*] Come, Bobbie, don't make a scene.

Boulger

[*Furiously.*] Leave me alone, confound you!

Alec

Do you think this is quite the place for an altercation? Wouldn't you gain more notoriety if you attacked me in my club or at Church parade on Sunday?

Boulger

It's mere shameless impudence that you should come here to-night. You're using these wretched women as a shield, because you know that as long as Lucy sticks to you there are people who won't believe the story.

Alec

I came for the same reason as yourself, dear boy. Because I was invited.

Dick

Now then, Bobbie, shut up!

Boulger

I shan't shut up. The man's got no right to force himself here.

Dick

Remember that you're Lady Kelsey's nephew.

Boulger

I didn't ask him. D'you think I'd have come if I knew he was going to be here? He's acknowledged that he has no defence.

Alec

Pardon me, I acknowledge nothing and deny nothing.

Boulger

That won't do for me. I want the truth, and I'm going to get it. I've got a right to know.

Alec

[*Beginning to lose his temper.*] Don't make an ass of yourself, Bobby.

Boulger

By God, I'll make you answer!

[*As he says this he goes up to Alec furiously, but Alec, with a twist of his arm, hurls him back.*

Alec

I could break your back, you silly boy.

[*With a cry of anger Boulger is about to spring at Alec when Dick gets in the way.*

Dick

Now then, no scenes. And you'll only get the worst of it, Bobby. Alec could just crumple you up. Take him away, Mallins. Don't stand there like a stuffed owl, Carbery.

Boulger

Let me alone, you fool!

Mallins

Come along, old chap.

Boulger

[*To Alec.*] You damned skunk!

Dick

Now then, be off with you. Don't make a silly ass of yourself.
[*Boulger, Mallins and Carbery go out.*]

Dick

Poor Lady Kelsey! To-morrow half London will be saying that you and Bobby had a stand-up fight in her drawing-room.

Alec

[*Furiously.*] The damned cubs!

Dick

The position is growing confoundedly awkward!

Alec

They lick my boots till I loathe them, and then they turn against me like a pack of curs. Oh, I despise them – these silly boys who stay at home wallowing in their ease while men work. Thank God, I've done with them all now. They think one can fight one's way through Africa as easily as one walks down Piccadilly. They think one goes through hardships and dangers, illness and starvation, to be the lion of a dinner-party in Mayfair.

Dick

My dear Alec, keep calm.

Alec

[With a visible effort containing himself completely, with studied nonchalance.] D'you think that I look wildly excited?

Dick

[Ironically.] I don't think butter would melt in your mouth.

[Dick and Alec go out into the garden. In a moment Boulger comes in with Lady Kelsey.]

Boulger

Thank heaven, there's nobody here.

Lady Kelsey

I think you're dreadfully foolish, Bobby. You know how Lucy resents any interference with her actions.

Boulger

Won't you sit down? You must be dreadfully tired.

Lady Kelsey

Why won't you wait till to-morrow?

Boulger

I feel that it ought to be settled at once.

[*Lucy appears.*]

Lucy

Did you send for me, my aunt? Mr. Carbery said you wanted to speak to me here.

Lady Kelsey

Yes, I gave him that message.

Boulger

I asked Aunt Alice to beg you to come here. I was afraid you wouldn't if I asked you.

Lucy

[*Lightly.*] What nonsense! I'm always delighted to see you.

Boulger

I wanted to speak to you about something, and I thought Aunt Alice should be present.

Lucy

Is it so important that it can't wait till to-morrow?

Boulger

I venture to think it's very important.

Lucy

[*Smiling.*] I'm all attention.

[*He hesitates for a moment, then braces himself to the ordeal.*]

Boulger

I've told you often, Lucy, that I've been in love with you for as many years as I can remember.

Lucy

Surely you've not snatched me from the unwilling arm of my partner in order to make me a proposal of marriage?

Boulger

I'm perfectly serious, Lucy.

Lucy

[*Smiling.*] I assure you it doesn't suit you at all.

Boulger

The other day I asked you again to marry me, just before Alec Mackenzie came back.

Lucy

It was very charming of you. You mustn't think that because I laugh at you a little I'm not grateful for your affection.

Boulger

Except for that letter in this morning's *Times*, I should never have dared to say anything to you again. But that changes everything.

Lucy

I don't understand what you mean.

Boulger

[*After a little pause.*] I ask you again if you'll be my wife? When Alec Mackenzie came back I understood why you were so indifferent to me, but you can't marry him now.

Lucy

You have no right to talk to me like this.

Boulger

I'm the only man who's related to you at all, and I love you with my whole soul.

Lady Kelsey

I think you should listen to him, Lucy. I'm growing old, and soon you'll be quite alone in the world.

Boulger

I don't ask you to care for me. I only want to serve you.

Lucy

I can only repeat that I'm very grateful to you. I can never marry you.

Boulger

[*Beginning to lose his temper again.*] Are you going to continue to know Mackenzie? If you'll take the advice of any unprejudiced person about that letter, you'll find that he'll say the same as I.

There can be no shadow of doubt that Mackenzie is guilty of a monstrous crime.

Lucy

I don't care what the evidence is. I know he can't have done a shameful thing.

Boulger

But have you forgotten that it's your own brother he killed? The whole country is up in arms against him, and you are quite indifferent.

Lucy

[*Much moved.*] Oh, Bobbie, how can you be so cruel?

Boulger

If you ever really cared for George at all, you must wish to punish the man who caused his death.

Lucy

Oh, why d'you torment me? I tell you that he isn't guilty. It's because I'm convinced of that ...

Boulger

[*Interrupting.*] But have you asked him?

Lucy

No.

Boulger

He might give you the truth.

Lucy

I couldn't do that.

Boulger

Why not?

Lady Kelsey

It's very strange that he should insist on this silence.

Lucy

Do you believe that story too?

Lady Kelsey

I don't know what to believe. It's so extraordinary. If the man's innocent, why doesn't he speak?

Lucy

He knows I trust him. I couldn't cause him the great pain of asking him questions.

Boulger

Are you afraid he couldn't answer them?

Lucy

No, no, no!

Boulger

Well, just try. After all, you owe as much as that to the memory of George.

Lady Kelsey

I think it's very unreasonable, Lucy. He knows we're his friends. He can count on our discretion.

Lucy

I believe in him implicitly. I believe in him with all the strength I've got.

Boulger

Then, surely it can make no difference if you ask him. There can be no reason for him not to trust you.

Lucy

Oh, why don't you leave me alone?

Boulger

Ask him point blank. If he refuses to answer you ...

Lucy

[*Hastily.*] It would mean nothing. Why should he answer? I believe in him absolutely. I think he's the greatest and most honourable man I've ever known. I care more for his little finger than for the whole world. I love him with all my heart. And that's why he can't be guilty of this horrible crime. Because I've loved him for years, and he's known it. And he loves me. And he's loved me always.

[*Alec and Dick stroll in from the garden.*]

Lucy

Alec, Alec, I want you! Thank God, you've come!

Alec

[*Going to her quickly.*] What is it?

Lucy

Alec, you must tell them now about you and me.

[*Alec looks at Lucy for a moment, and then turns to Lady Kelsey.*]

Alec

I think perhaps we ought to have told you before, Lady Kelsey. But we wanted to enjoy our little secret by ourselves.

Lady Kelsey

I'm afraid to understand.

Alec

I have asked Lucy to be my wife, and she...

Lucy

[Interrupting him.] She said she would be honoured and deeply grateful.

Lady Kelsey

[Greatly embarrassed.] I hardly know what to say... How long have you been engaged?

Lucy

Won't you tell me you're pleased, my aunt? I know you want me to be happy.

Lady Kelsey

Of course, I want you to be happy. But I – I...

[Boulger turns on his heel and walks out.]

Dick

[*Offering his arm to Lady Kelsey.*] Wouldn't you like to go back to the drawing-room?

[She allows herself to be led away, helplessly. Alec and Lucy are left alone.]

Alec

[*With a smile.*] I don't think our announcement has been received with enthusiasm.

Lucy

You're not angry with me, Alec?

Alec

Of course not. Everything you do is right and charming.

Lucy

I shall really think I'm a wonderful person if I've taught you

to pay compliments.

Alec

I'm so glad to be alone with you. Now, at all events, people will have the sense to leave us by ourselves.

Lucy

[Passionately.] I want your love. I want your love so badly.

Alec

[Taking her in his arms.] My darling!

Lucy

[Clinging to him.] The moment I'm with you I feel so confident and happy.

Alec

Only when you're with me? *[Lucy looks at him for an instant. He repeats the question in a caressing voice.]* Only when you're with me, darling?

Lucy

Why d'you think I made you tell them we were engaged?

Alec

You took me by surprise.

Lucy

I had to tell them. I couldn't keep it back. They made me suffer so dreadfully.

Alec

The brutes! Tell me what they did.

Lucy

Oh, they said horrible things about you.

Alec

No more than that?

Lucy

It's nothing to you. But to me... Oh, you don't know what agony I endure. I'm such a coward! I thought I was so much braver.

Alec

I don't understand you.

Lucy

I wanted to burn my ships behind me. I wanted to reassure myself. [Alec *makes a slight movement away from her, but she holds him back anxiously.*] Forgive me, dear. You don't know how terrible it is. I stand so dreadfully alone. Every one is convinced that you caused poor George's death – every one but me. [Alec *looks at her gravely, without speaking.*] I try to put the thoughts out of my head, but I can't – I can't. That letter in the *Times* looks so dreadfully true. Don't you see what I mean? The

uncertainty is more than I can bear. At the first moment I felt so absolutely sure of you.

Alec

And now you don't?

Lucy

I trust you just as much as ever. I know it's impossible that you should have done a shameful thing. But there it stands in black and white, and you have nothing to say in answer.

Alec

I know it's very difficult. That is why I asked you to believe in me.

Lucy

I do, Alec – with all my soul. But have mercy on me. I'm not so strong as I thought. It's easy for you to stand alone. You're iron, but I'm a weak woman.

Alec

Oh, no, you're not like other women. I was proud of your unconquerable spirit.

Lucy

It was easy to be brave where my father was concerned, and George, but you're the man I love, and it's so different. I don't know any more how to stand alone.

[Alec looks at her, thinking, but does not reply for a moment.]

Alec

Do you remember that only an hour ago I told you that I'd done nothing which I wouldn't do again? I gave you my word of honour that I could reproach myself for nothing.

Lucy

Oh, I know. I'm so utterly ashamed of myself. But I can't bear the doubt.

Alec

Doubt! You've said the word at last.

Lucy

I tell every one that I don't believe a word of these horrible charges, and I repeat to myself: I'm certain, I'm certain that he's innocent. And yet at the bottom of my heart there's a doubt, and I can't crush it.

Alec

Is that why you told them we were engaged to be married?

Lucy

I wanted to kill that gnawing pain of suspicion. I thought if I stood up before them and cried out that my trust in you was so great, I was willing to marry you notwithstanding everything, I should at least have peace in my own heart.

[Alec walks up and down. Then he stops in front of Lucy.]

Alec

What is it precisely you want me to do?

Lucy

I want you to have mercy on me because I love you. Don't tell the world if you choose not to, but tell me the truth. I know you're incapable of lying. If I only have it from your own lips I shall believe, I want to be certain, certain!

Alec

Don't you realise that I would never have asked you to marry me if my conscience hadn't been quite clear? Don't you realise that the reasons I have for holding my tongue must be of overwhelming strength?

Lucy

But I am going to be your wife, and I love you, and you love me.

Alec

I implore you not to insist, Lucy. Let us remember only that the past is gone and we love one another. It's impossible for me to tell you anything.

Lucy

Oh, but you must now. If any part of the story is true, you must give me a chance of judging for myself.

Alec

I'm very sorry, I can't.

Lucy

But you'll kill my love for you. The doubt which lurked at the bottom of my soul now fills me. How can you let me suffer such maddening torture?

Alec

I thought you trusted me.

Lucy

I'll be satisfied if you'll only tell me one thing: only tell me that when you sent George on that expedition you didn't know that he'd be killed. [*Alec looks at her steadily.*] Only say that, Alec. Say that's not true, and I'll believe you.

Alec

[*Very quietly.*] But it is true.

[*Lucy does not answer, but stares at him with terrified eyes.*]

Lucy

Oh, I don't understand. Oh, my dearest, don't treat me as a child. Have mercy on me! You must be serious now. It's a matter of life and death to both of us.

Alec

I'm perfectly serious.

Lucy

You knew that you were sending George into a death-trap?
You knew he couldn't escape alive?

Alec

Except by a miracle.

Lucy

And you don't believe in miracles?

Alec

No.

Lucy

Oh, it can't be true. Oh, Alec, Alec, Alec! Oh, what shall I do?

Alec

I tell you that whatever I did was inevitable.

Lucy

Then if that's true, the rest must be true also. Oh, it's awful. I can't realise it. Haven't you anything to say at all?

Alec

[In a low voice.] Only that I've loved you always with all my soul.

Lucy

You knew how much I loved my brother. You knew how much it meant to me that he should live to wipe out my father's dishonour. All the future was centred on him, and you sacrificed him.

Alec

[Hesitatingly.] I think I might tell you this. He had committed

a grave error of judgment. We were entrapped by the Arabs, and our only chance of escape entailed the almost certain death of one of us.

[An inkling of the truth seizes Lucy, and her face is suddenly distorted with horror. She goes up to him impulsively. Her voice trembles with emotion.]

Lucy

Alec, Alec, he didn't do something – unworthy? You're not trying to shield him?

Alec

[Hoarsely.] No, no, no!

Lucy

[With a gasp of relief, almost to herself.] Thank God! I couldn't have borne that. *[To Alec, hopelessly.]* Then I don't understand.

Alec

It was not unjust that he should suffer for the catastrophe which he had brought about.

Lucy

At those times one doesn't think of justice. He was so young, so frank. Wouldn't it have been nobler to give your life for his?

Alec

Oh, my dear, you don't know how easy it is to give one's life. How little you know me! Do you think I should have hesitated if my death had been sufficient to solve the difficulty? I had my work to do. I was bound by solemn treaties to the surrounding tribes. It would have been cowardly for me to die. I tell you, my death would have meant the awful death of every man in my party.

Lucy

I can only see one thing, that you took George, George of all others.

Alec

I knew at the time that what I did might cost me your love, and though you won't believe this, I did it for your sake.

[At this moment Mrs. Crowley enters with Sir Robert Boulger. She has a cloak on.]

Mrs. Crowley

I was just coming to say good-night. Bobby is going to drive me home. *[She suddenly notices Lucy's agitation.]* What on earth's the matter?

[Lady Kelsey and Dick Lomas come in. Lady Kelsey looks at Lucy and then goes up to her impulsively.]

Lady Kelsey

Lucy, Lucy!

Lucy

[Brokenly.] I'm no longer engaged to Mr. Mackenzie. He can't deny that what is said about him is true.

[They look at him in astonishment, but he makes no movement.]

Mrs. Crowley

[To Alec.] Haven't you anything to say at all? You must have

some explanation to offer?

Alec

No, I have none whatever.

Dick

Alec, old man, have you realised all that this means?

Alec

Quite. I see now that it was inevitable.

Lucy

[*With a sudden burst of furious anger.*] You killed him! You killed him as surely as if you'd strangled him with your own hands.

[Robert Boulger goes to the door and flings it open. Alec gives Lucy a look, then slightly shrugs his shoulders. He walks out without a word. The moment he has gone Lucy sinks down and bursts into passionate tears.]

END OF THE THIRD ACT

THE FOURTH ACT

Scene. —*A library in the house of Dick Lomas in Portman Square.*

Dick and his Valet. Dick is putting flowers into a vase.

Dick

Has Mr. Mackenzie come in?

Charles

Yes, sir. He's gone to his room.

Dick

I expect Mrs. Crowley and Miss Allerton to tea. If any one else comes I'm not at home.

Charles

Very well, sir.

Dick

And if a caller should ask at what time I'm expected back, you haven't the least idea.

Charles

Very well, sir.

Dick

We shall want breakfast at eight to-morrow. I'm going down to Southampton to see Mr. Mackenzie off. But I shall be home to dinner. How about those cases in the hall?

Charles

Mr. Mackenzie said they were to be sent for this afternoon. They're only labelled Zanzibar. Is that sufficient, sir?

Dick

Oh, I suppose so. Mr. Mackenzie will have given the shippers all directions. You'd better bring the tea at once. Mrs. Crowley

is coming at four.

Charles

Very well, sir.

[He goes out. Dick continues to arrange the flowers, than goes to the window and looks out. He comes back. The door is opened by Charles, who announces Mrs. Crowley.]

Charles

Mrs. Crowley.

Dick

[Going towards her eagerly and taking both her hands.] Best of women!

Mrs. Crowley

You seem quite glad to see me?

Dick

I am. But where is Lucy?

Mrs. Crowley

She's coming later... I don't know why you should squeeze my hands in this pointed manner.

Dick

What an age it is since I saw you!

Mrs. Crowley

If you bury yourself in Scotland all the summer, you can't expect to see people who go to Homburg and the Italian lakes.

Dick

Heavens, how you cultivate respectability!

Mrs. Crowley

It's a sensitive plant whose vagaries one has to humour.

Dick

Aren't you delighted to be back in town?

Mrs. Crowley

London's the most charming place in the world to get away from and to come back to. Now tell me all you've been doing, if I can hear it without blushing too furiously.

Dick

My behaviour would have done credit to a clergyman's only daughter. I dragged Alec off to Scotland after that horrible scene at Lady Kelsey's, and we played golf.

Mrs. Crowley

Was he very wretched, poor thing?

Dick

He didn't say a word. I wanted to comfort him, but he never gave me a chance. He never mentioned Lucy's name.

Mrs. Crowley

Did he seem unhappy?

Dick

No. He was just the same as ever, impassive and collected.

Mrs. Crowley

Really he's inhuman.

Dick

He's an anomaly in this juvenile century. He's an ancient Roman who buys his clothes in Savile Row. An eagle caged with a colony of canaries.

Mrs. Crowley

Then he's very much in the way in England, and it's much better for him that he should go back to Africa.

Dick

This time to-morrow he'll be half-way down the channel.

Mrs. Crowley

I'm really beginning to think you're a perfect angel, Mr. Lomas.

Dick

Don't say that, it makes me feel so middle-aged. I'd much sooner be a young sinner than an elderly cherub.

Mrs. Crowley

It was sweet of you to look after him through the summer and then insist on his staying here till he went away. How long is he going for this time?

Dick

Heaven knows! Perhaps for ever.

Mrs. Crowley

Have you told him that Lucy is coming?

Dick

No. I thought that was a pleasing piece of information which I'd leave you to impart.

Mrs. Crowley

Thanks!

Dick

She's only coming to indulge a truly feminine passion for making scenes, and she's made Alec quite wretched enough already. Why doesn't she marry Robert Boulger?

Mrs. Crowley

Why should she?

Dick

Half the women I know merely married their husbands to spite somebody else. It appears to be one of the commonest causes of matrimony.

Mrs. Crowley

[*With a quizzical look at him.*] Talking of which, what are you going to do when Mr. Mackenzie is gone?

Dick

Talking of the weather and the crops, I propose to go to Spain.

Mrs. Crowley

[*Opening her eyes wide.*] How very extraordinary! I thought of going there, too.

Dick

Then, without a moment's hesitation, I shall go to Norway.

Mrs. Crowley

It'll be dreadfully cold.

Dick

Dreadfully. But I shall be supported by the consciousness of having done my duty.

Mrs. Crowley

You don't think there would be room for both of us in Spain?

Dick

I'm convinced there wouldn't. We should always be running against one another, and you'd insist on my looking out all your trains in Bradshaw.

Mrs. Crowley

I hope you remember that you asked me to tea to-day?

Dick

Pardon me, you asked yourself. I keep the letter next to my heart and put it under my pillow every night.

Mrs. Crowley

You fibber! Besides, if I did, it was only on Lucy's account.

Dick

That, I venture to think, is neither polite nor accurate.

Mrs. Crowley

I don't think I should so utterly detest you, if you hadn't such a good opinion of yourself.

Dick

You forget that I vowed on the head of my maternal grandmother never to speak to you again.

Mrs. Crowley

Oh, I'm always doing that. I tell my maid that time she does my hair badly.

Dick

You trifled with the tenderest affection of an innocent and unsophisticated old bachelor.

Mrs. Crowley

Is that you by any chance?

Dick

Of course, it's me. D'you think I was talking of the man in the moon?

Mrs. Crowley

[*Looking at him critically.*] With the light behind, you might still pass for thirty-five.

Dick

I've given up youth and its vanities. I no longer pluck out my white hairs.

Mrs. Crowley

Then how on earth do you occupy your leisure?

Dick

For the last three months I've been laboriously piecing together the fragments of a broken heart.

Mrs. Crowley

If you hadn't been so certain that I was going to accept you, I should never have refused. I couldn't resist the temptation of saying "No" just to see how you took it.

Dick

I flatter myself that I took it very well.

Mrs. Crowley

You didn't. You showed an entire lack of humour. You might have known that a nice woman doesn't marry a man the first time he asks her. It's making oneself too cheap. It was very silly of you to go off to Scotland as if you didn't care... How was I to know that you meant to wait three months before asking me again?

Dick

I haven't the least intention of asking you again.

Mrs. Crowley

Then why in heaven's name did you invite me to tea?

Dick

May I respectfully remind you, first, that you invited yourself

...

Mrs. Crowley

[*Interrupting.*] You're so irrelevant.

Dick

And, secondly, that an invitation to tea is not necessarily accompanied by a proposal of marriage.

Mrs. Crowley

I'm afraid you're lamentably ignorant of the usages of good society.

Dick

I assure you it's not done in the best circles.

Mrs. Crowley

[*With a little pout.*] I shall be very cross with you in a minute.

Dick

Why?

Mrs. Crowley

Because you're not behaving at all prettily.

Dick

D'you know what I'd do if I were you? Propose to me.

Mrs. Crowley

Oh, I couldn't do anything so immodest.

Dick

I have registered a vow that I will never offer my hand and heart to any woman again.

Mrs. Crowley

On the head of your maternal grandmother?

Dick

Oh no, far more serious than that. On the grave of my maiden aunt, who left me all my money.

Mrs. Crowley

What will you say if I do?

Dick

That depends entirely on how you do it. I may remind you, however, that first you go down on your bended knees.

Mrs. Crowley

Oh, I waived that with you.

Dick

And then you confess you're unworthy of me.

Mrs. Crowley

Mr. Lomas, I am a widow. I am twenty-nine and extremely eligible. My maid is a treasure. My dressmaker is charming. I am clever enough to laugh at your jokes, and not so learned as to know where they come from.

Dick

Really you're very long-winded. I said it all in four words.

Mrs. Crowley

So could I if I might write it down.

Dick

You must say it.

Mrs. Crowley

But what I'm trying to make you understand is that I don't want to marry you a bit. You're just the sort of man who'll beat his wife regularly every Saturday night... You will say yes if I ask you, won't you?

Dick

I've never been able to refuse a woman anything.

Mrs. Crowley

I have no doubt you will after six months of holy matrimony.

Dick

I never saw any one make such a fuss about so insignificant a detail as a proposal of marriage.

Mrs. Crowley

Dick. [*She stretches out her hands, smiling, and he takes her in his arms.*] You really are a detestable person.

Dick

[*With a smile, taking a ring from his pocket.*] I bought an engagement ring yesterday on the off chance of its being useful.

Mrs. Crowley

Then you meant to ask me all the time?

Dick

Of course I did, you silly.

Mrs. Crowley

Oh, I wish I had known that before. I'd have refused you again.

Dick

You absurd creature.

[He kisses her.]

Mrs. Crowley

[*Trying to release herself.*] There's somebody coming.

Dick

It's only Alec.

[*Alec comes in.*]

Alec

Hulloa!

Dick

Alec, we've made friends, Mrs. Crowley and I.

Alec

It certainly looks very much like it.

Dick

The fact is, I've asked her to marry me, and she...

Mrs. Crowley

[*Interrupting, with a smile.*] After much pressure —

Dick

Has consented.

Alec

I'm so glad. I heartily congratulate you both. I was rather unhappy at leaving Dick, Mrs. Crowley. But now I leave him in your hands, I'm perfectly content. He's the dearest, kindest old chap I've ever known.

Dick

Shut up, Alec! Don't play the heavy father, or we shall burst into tears.

Alec

He'll be an admirable husband because he's an admirable friend.

Mrs. Crowley

I know he will. And I'm only prevented from saying all I think of him and how much I love him, by the fear that he'll become perfectly unmanageable.

Dick

Spare me these chaste blushes which mantle my youthful brow. Will you pour out the tea ... Nellie?

Mrs. Crowley

Yes ... Dick.

[She sits down at the tea-table and Dick makes himself comfortable in an arm-chair by her side.]

Alec

Well, I'm thankful to say that everything's packed and ready.

Mrs. Crowley

I wish you'd stay for our wedding.

Dick

Do. You can go just as well by the next boat.

Alec

I'm afraid that everything is settled now. I've given instructions at Zanzibar to collect bearers, and I must arrive as quickly as I can.

Dick

I wish to goodness you'd give up these horrible explorations.

Alec

But they're the very breath of my life. You don't know the exhilaration of the daily dangers – the joy of treading where only the wild beasts have trodden before. Oh, already I can hardly bear my impatience when I think of the boundless country and the enchanting freedom. Here one grows so small, so despicable, but in Africa everything is built to a nobler standard. There a man is really a man; there one knows what are will and strength and courage. Oh, you don't know what it is to stand on the edge of some great plain and breathe the pure keen air after the terrors of the forest. Then at last you know what freedom is.

Dick

The boundless plain of Hyde Park is enough for me, and the aspect of Piccadilly on a fine day in June gives me quite as many emotions as I want.

Mrs. Crowley

But what will you gain by it all, now that your work in East Africa is over, by all the dangers and the hardships?

Alec

Nothing. I want to gain nothing. Perhaps I shall discover some new species of antelope or some unknown plant. Perhaps I shall find some new waterway. That is all the reward I want. I love the sense of power and mastery. What do you think I care for the tinsel rewards of kings and peoples?

Dick

I always said you were melodramatic. I never heard anything so transpontine.

Mrs. Crowley

And the end of it, what will be the end?

Alec

The end is death in some fever-stricken swamp, obscurely, worn out by exposure and ague and starvation. And the bearers will seize my gun and my clothes and leave me to the jackals.

Mrs. Crowley

Don't. It's too horrible.

Alec

Why, what does it matter? I shall die standing up. I shall go the last journey as I have gone every other.

Mrs. Crowley

Without fear?

Dick

For all the world like the wicked baronet: Once aboard the lugger and the girl is mine!

Mrs. Crowley

Don't you want men to remember you?

Alec

Perhaps they will. Perhaps in a hundred years or so, in some flourishing town where I discovered nothing but wilderness, they will commission a second-rate sculptor to make a fancy statue of me. And I shall stand in front of the Stock Exchange, a convenient perch for birds, to look eternally upon the various shabby deeds of human kind.

[During this speech Mrs. Crowley makes a sign to Dick, who walks slowly away and goes out.]

Mrs. Crowley

And is that really everything? I can't help thinking that at the bottom of your heart is something that you've never told to a living soul.

[He gives her a long look, and then after a moment's thought breaks into a little smile.]

Alec

Why do you want to know so much?

Mrs. Crowley

Tell me.

Alec

I daresay I shall never see you again. Perhaps it doesn't much matter what I say to you. You'll think me very silly, but I'm afraid I'm rather – patriotic. It's only we who live away from England who really love it. I'm so proud of my country, and I wanted so much to do something for it. Often in Africa I've thought of this dear England, and longed not to die till I had done my work. Behind all the soldiers and the statesmen whose fame is imperishable, there is a long line of men who've built up the Empire piece by piece. Their names are forgotten, and only students know their history, but each one of them gave a province to his country. And I, too, have my place among them. For five years I toiled night and day, and at the end of it was able to hand over to the Commissioners a broad tract of land, rich and fertile. After my death England will forget my faults and my mistakes. I care nothing for the flouts and gibes with which she has repaid all my pain, for I have added another fair jewel to her crown. I don't want rewards. I only want the honour of serving this dear land of ours.

Mrs. Crowley

Why is it, when you're so nice really, that you do all you can to make people think you utterly horrid?

Alec

Don't laugh at me because you've found out that at heart I'm nothing more than a sentimental old woman.

Mrs. Crowley

[Putting her hand on his arm.] What would you do if Lucy came here to-day?

[Alec starts, looks at her sharply, then answers with deliberation.]

Alec

I have always lived in polite society. I should never dream of outraging its conventions. If Miss Allerton happened to come, you may be sure I should be scrupulously polite.

Mrs. Crowley

Is that all? Lucy has suffered very much.

Alec

And do you suppose I've not suffered? Because I don't whine my misery to all and sundry, d'you think I don't care? I'm not the man to fall in and out of love with every pretty face I meet. All my life I've kept an ideal before my eyes. Oh, you don't know what it meant to me to fall in love. I felt that I had lived all my life in a prison, and at last Lucy came and took me by the hand and led me out. And for the first time I breathed the free air of heaven. Oh God! how I've suffered for it! Why should it have come to me? Oh, if you knew my agony and the torture!

[He hides his face, trying to master his emotion. Mrs. Crowley goes to him and puts her hand on his shoulder.]

Mrs. Crowley

Mr. Mackenzie.

Alec

[*Springing up.*] Go away. Don't look at me. How can you stand there and watch my weakness? Oh God, give me strength... My love was the last human weakness I had. It was right that I should drink that bitter cup. And I've drunk its very dregs. I should have known that I wasn't meant for happiness and a life of ease. I have other work to do in the world. And now that I have overcome this last temptation, I am ready to do it.

Mrs. Crowley

But haven't you any pity for yourself, haven't you any thought for Lucy?

Alec

Must I tell you, too, that everything I did was for Lucy's sake? And still I love her with all my heart and soul...

Dick comes in

Dick

Here is Lucy!

[Charles comes in and announces Lucy.]

Charles

Miss Allerton!

[She enters, and Dick, anxious that the meeting shall not be more awkward than need be, goes up to her very cordially.]

Dick

Ah, my dear Lucy. So glad you were able to come.

Lucy

[Giving her hand to Dick, but looking at Alec.] How d'you do?

Alec

How d'you do? [*He forces himself to talk.*] How is Lady Kelsey?

Lucy

She's much better, thanks. We've been to Spa, you know, for her health.

Alec

Somebody told me you'd gone abroad. Was it you, Dick? Dick is an admirable person, a sort of gazetteer for polite society.

Dick

Won't you have some tea, Lucy?

Lucy

No, thanks!

Mrs. Crowley

[Trying on her side also to make conversation.] We shall miss you dreadfully when you're gone, Mr. Mackenzie.

Dick

[Cheerfully.] Not a bit of it.

Alec

[Smiling.] London is an excellent place for showing one of how little importance one is in the world. One makes a certain figure, and perhaps is tempted to think oneself of some consequence. Then one goes away, and on returning is surprised to discover that nobody has even noticed one's absence.

Dick

You're over-modest, Alec. If you weren't, you might be a great man. Now, I make a point of telling my friends that I'm indispensable, and they take me at my word.

Alec

You are a leaven of flippancy in the heavy dough of British righteousness.

Dick

The wise man only takes the unimportant quite seriously.

Alec

[*With a smile.*] For it is obvious that it needs more brains to do nothing than to be a cabinet minister.

Dick

You pay me a great compliment, Alec. You repeat to my very face one of my favourite observations.

Lucy

[*Almost in a whisper.*] Haven't I heard you say that only the impossible is worth doing?

Alec

Good heavens, I must have been reading the headings of a copy-book.

Mrs. Crowley

[*To Dick.*] Are you going to Southampton to see Mr. Mackenzie off?

Dick

I shall hide my face on his shoulder and weep salt tears. It'll be most affecting, because in moments of emotion I always burst into epigram.

Alec

I loathe all solemn leave-takings. I prefer to part from people with a nod and a smile, whether I'm going for ever or for a day to Brighton.

Mrs. Crowley

You're very hard.

Alec

Dick has been teaching me to take life flippantly. And I have learnt that things are only serious if you take them seriously, and that is desperately stupid. [*To Lucy.*] Don't you agree with me?

Lucy

No.

[Her tone, almost tragic, makes him pause for an instant; but he is determined that the conversation shall be purely conventional.]

Alec

It's so difficult to be serious without being absurd. That is the chief power of women, that life and death are merely occasions for a change of costume: marriage a creation in white, and the worship of God an opportunity for a Paris bonnet.

[Mrs. Crowley makes up her mind to force a crisis, and she gets up.]

Mrs. Crowley

It's growing late, Dick. Won't you take me round the house?

Alec

I'm afraid my luggage has made everything very disorderly.

Mrs. Crowley

It doesn't matter. Come, Dick!

Dick

[*To Lucy.*] You don't mind if we leave you?

Lucy

Oh, no.

[Mrs. Crowley and Dick go out. There is a moment's silence.]

Alec

Do you know that our friend Dick has offered his hand and heart to Mrs. Crowley this afternoon?

Lucy

I hope they'll be very happy. They're very much in love with one another.

Alec

[*Bitterly.*] And is that a reason for marrying? Surely love is the worst possible foundation for marriage. Love creates illusions, and marriages destroy them. True lovers should never marry.

Lucy

Will you open the window? It seems stifling here.

Alec

Certainly. [*From the window.*] You can't think what a joy it is to look upon London for the last time. I'm so thankful to get

away.

[Lucy gives a little sob and Alec turns to the window. He wants to wound her and yet cannot bear to see her suffer.]

Alec

To-morrow at this time I shall be well started. Oh, I long for that infinite surface of the clean and comfortable sea.

Lucy

Are you very glad to go?

Alec

[Turning to her.] I feel quite boyish at the very thought.

Lucy

And is there no one you regret to leave?

Alec

You see, Dick is going to marry. When a man does that, his

bachelor friends are wise to depart gracefully before he shows them that he needs their company no longer. I have no relations and few friends. I can't flatter myself that any one will be much distressed at my departure.

Lucy

[*In a low voice.*] You must have no heart at all.

Alec

[*Icily.*] If I had, I certainly should not bring it to Portman Square. That sentimental organ would be surely out of place in such a neighbourhood.

Lucy

[*Gets up and goes to him.*] Oh, why do you treat me as if we were strangers? How can you be so cruel?

Alec

[*Gravely.*] Don't you think that flippancy is the best refuge from an uncomfortable position. We should really be much wiser merely to discuss the weather.

Lucy

[*Insisting.*] Are you angry because I came?

Alec

That would be ungracious on my part. Perhaps it wasn't quite necessary that we should meet again.

Lucy

You've been acting all the time I've been here. D'you think I didn't see it was unreal when you talked with such cynical indifference. I know you well enough to tell when you're hiding your real self behind a mask.

Alec

If I'm doing that, the inference is obvious that I wish my real self to be hidden.

Lucy

I would rather you cursed me than treat me with such cold

politeness.

Alec

I'm afraid you're rather difficult to please.

[Lucy goes up to him passionately, but he draws back so that she may not touch him.]

Lucy

Oh, you're of iron. Alec, Alec, I couldn't let you go without seeing you once more. Even you would be satisfied if you knew what bitter anguish I've suffered. Even you would pity me. I don't want you to think too badly of me.

Alec

Does it much matter what I think? We shall be so many thousand miles apart.

Lucy

I suppose that you utterly despise me.

Alec

No. I loved you far too much ever to do that. Believe me, I only wish you well. Now that the bitterness is past, I see that you did the only possible thing. I hope that you'll be very happy.

Lucy

Oh, Alec, don't be utterly pitiless. Don't leave me without a single word of kindness.

Alec

Nothing is changed, Lucy. You sent me away on account of your brother's death.

[There is a long silence, and when she speaks it is hesitatingly, as if the words were painful to utter.]

Lucy

I hated you then, and yet I couldn't crush the love that was in my heart. I used to try and drive you away from my thoughts, but every word you had ever said came back to me. Don't you

remember? You told me that everything you did was for my sake. Those words hammered at my heart as though it were an anvil. I struggled not to believe them. I said to myself that you had sacrificed George coldly, callously, prudently, but in my heart I knew it wasn't true. [*He looks at her, hardly able to believe what she is going to say, but does not speak.*] Your whole life stood on one side and only this hateful story on the other. You couldn't have grown into a different man in one single instant. I came here to-day to tell you that I don't understand the reason of what you did. I don't want to understand. I believe in you now with all my strength. I know that whatever you did was right and just – because you did it.

[He gives a long, deep sigh.]

Alec

Thank God! Oh, I'm so grateful to you for that.

Lucy

Haven't you anything more to say to me than that?

Alec

You see, it comes too late. Nothing much matters now, for to-

morrow I go away.

Lucy

But you'll come back.

Alec

I'm going to a part of Africa from which Europeans seldom return.

Lucy

[*With a sudden outburst of passion.*] Oh, that's too horrible. Don't go, dearest! I can't bear it!

Alec

I must now. Everything is settled, and there can be no drawing back.

Lucy

Don't you care for me any more?

Alec

Care for you? I love you with all my heart and soul.

Lucy

[*Eagerly.*] Then take me with you.

Alec

You!

Lucy

You don't know what I can do. With you to help me I can be brave. Let me come, Alec?

Alec

No, it's impossible. You don't know what you ask.

Lucy

Then let me wait for you? Let me wait till you come back?

Alec

And if I never come back?

Lucy

I will wait for you still.

Alec

Then have no fear. I will come back. My journey was only dangerous because I wanted to die. I want to live now, and I shall live.

Lucy

Oh, Alec, Alec, I'm so glad you love me.

THE END

A MAN OF HONOUR

GENERAL PREFACE

...For Clisthenes, son of Aristonymus, son of Myron, son of Andreas, had a daughter whose name was Agarista: her he resolved to give in marriage to the man whom he should find the most accomplished of all the Greeks. When therefore the Olympian games were being celebrated, Clisthenes, being victorious in them in the chariot race, made a proclamation; "that whoever of the Greeks deemed himself worthy to become the son-in-law of Clisthenes, should come to Sicyon on the sixtieth day, or even before; since Clisthenes had determined on the marriage in a year, reckoning from the sixtieth day." Thereupon such of the Greeks as were puffed up with themselves and their country, came as suitors; and Clisthenes, having made a race-course and palæstra for them, kept it for this very purpose. From Italy, accordingly, came Smindyrides, son of Hippocrates, a Sybarite, who more than any other man reached the highest pitch of luxury, (and Sybaris was at that time in a most flourishing condition;) and Damasus of Siris, son of Amyris called the Wise: these came from Italy. From the Ionian gulf, Amphimnestus, son of Epistrophus, an Epidamnian; he came from the Ionian

gulf. An Ætolian came, Males, brother of that Titormus who surpassed the Greeks in strength, and fled from the society of men to the extremity of the Ætolian territory. And from Peloponnesus, Leocedes, son of Pheidon, tyrant of the Argives, a decendant of that Pheidon, who introduced measures among the Peloponnesians, and was the most insolent of all the Greeks, who having removed the Elean umpires, himself regulated the games at Olympia; his son accordingly came. And Amiantus, son of Lycurgus, an Arcadian from Trapezus; and an Azenian from the city of Pæos, Laphanes, son of Euphorion, who, as the story is told in Arcadia, received the Dioscuri in his house, and after that entertained all men; and an Elean, Onomastus, son of Agæus: these accordingly came from the Peloponnesus itself. From Athens there came Megacles, son of Alcmaeon, the same who had visited Cræsus, and another, Hippoclide, son of Tisander, who surpassed the Athenians in wealth and beauty. From Eretria, which was flourishing at that time, came Lysanias; he was the only one from Eubœa. And from Thessaly there came, of the Scopades, Diactorides a Cranonian; and from the Molossi, Alcon. So many were the suitors. When they had arrived on the appointed day, Clisthenes made inquiries of their country, and the family of each; then detaining them for a year, he made trial of their manly qualities, their dispositions, learning, and morals; holding familiar intercourse with each separately, and with all together, and leading out to the gymnasia such of them as were younger; but most of all he made trial

of them at the banquet; for as long as he detained them, he did this throughout, and at the same time entertained them magnificently. And somehow of all the suitors those that had come from Athens pleased him most, and of these Hippoclidēs, son of Tisander, was preferred both on account of his manly qualities, and because he was distantly related to the Cypselidæ in Corinth. When the day appointed for the consummation of the marriage arrived, and for the declaration of Clisthenes himself, whom he would choose of them all, Clisthenes, having sacrificed a hundred oxen, entertained both the suitors themselves and all the Sicyonians; and when they had concluded the feast, the suitors had a contest about music, and any subject proposed for conversation. As the drinking went on, Hippoclidēs, who much attracted the attention of the rest, ordered the flute-player to play a dance; and when the flute-player obeyed, he began to dance: and he danced, probably so as to please himself; but Clisthenes, seeing it, beheld the whole matter with suspicion. Afterwards, Hippoclidēs, having rested awhile, ordered some one to bring in a table; and when the table came in, he first danced Laconian figures on it, and then Attic ones; and in the third place, having leant his head on the table he gesticulated with his legs. But Clisthenes, when he danced the first and second time, revolted from the thought of having Hippoclidēs for his son-in-law, on account of his dancing and want of decorum, yet restrained himself, not wishing to burst out against him; but when he saw him gesticulating with his legs, he was no longer able to restrain

himself, and said: "Son of Tisander, you have danced away your marriage." But Hippoclydes answered: "Hippoclydes cares not." Hence this answer became a proverb. (Herodotus VI. 126, *Cary's Translation.*)

THIS PLAY WAS FIRST PERFORMED BY THE STAGE SOCIETY
AT THE IMPERIAL THEATRE ON FEBRUARY 22, 1903, WITH
THE FOLLOWING CAST:

BASIL KENT	H. GRANVILLE BARKER
JENNY BUSH	WINIFRED FRASER
JAMES BUSH	O. B. CLARENCE
JOHN HALLIWELL	DENNIS EADIE
Mabel	GERTRUDE BURNETT
HILDA MURRAY	MABEL TERRY-LEWIS
ROBERT BRACKLEY	NIGEL PLAYFAIR
MRS. GRIGGS	HENRIETTA COWEN
FANNY"	GERTRUDE DE BURGH
BUTLER	A. BOWYER

CHARACTERS

Basil Kent

Jenny Bush

James Bush

John Halliwell

Mabel

Hilda Murray

Robert Brackley

Mrs. Griggs

Fanny
Butler

Time: *The Present Day*

Act I —*Basil's lodgings in Bloomsbury.*

Acts II and IV —*The drawing-room of Basil's house at Putney.*

Act III —*Mrs. Murray's house in Charles Street.*

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THE FIRST ACT

Sitting-room of Basil's Lodgings in Bloomsbury.

In the wall facing the auditorium, two windows with little iron balconies, giving a view of London roofs. Between the windows, against the wall, is a writing-desk littered with papers and books. On the right is a door, leading into the passage; on the left a fire-place with arm-chairs on either side; on the chimney-piece various smoking utensils. There are numerous bookshelves filled with books; while on the walls are one or two Delft plates, etchings after Rossetti, autotypes of paintings by Fra Angelico and Botticelli. The furniture is simple and inexpensive, but there is nothing ugly in the room. It is the dwelling-place of a person who reads a great deal and takes pleasure in beautiful things.

Basil Kent is leaning back in his chair, with his feet on the writing-table, smoking a pipe and cutting the pages of a book. He is a very good-looking man of six-and-twenty, clean-shaven, with a delicate face and clear-cut features. He is dressed in a lounge-suit.

[There is a knock at the door.

Basil

Come in.

Mrs. Griggs

Did you ring, sir?

Basil

Yes. I expect a lady to tea. And there's a cake that I bought on my way in.

Mrs. Griggs

Very well, sir.

[She goes out, and immediately comes in with a tray on which are two cups, sugar, milk, &c.]

Basil

Oh, Mrs. Griggs, I want to give up these rooms this day week. I'm going to be married. I'm sorry to leave you. You've made me very comfortable.

Mrs. Griggs

[*With a sigh of resignation.*] Ah, well, sir, that's lodgers all over. If they're gents they get married; and if they're ladies they ain't respectable.

[*A ring is heard.*]

Basil

There's the bell, Mrs. Griggs. I dare say it's the lady I expect. If any one else comes, I'm not at home.

Mrs. Griggs

Very well, sir.

[*She goes out, and Basil occupies himself for a moment in putting things in order. Mrs. Griggs, opening the door, ushers in the newcomers.*]

Mrs. Griggs

If you please, sir.

[*She goes out again, and during the next few speeches brings two*

more cups and the tea.

[Mabel and Hilda enter, followed by John Halliwell. Basil going towards them very cordially, half stops when he notices who they are; and a slight expression of embarrassment passes over his face. But he immediately recovers himself and is extremely gracious. Hilda Murray is a tall, handsome woman, self-possessed and admirably gowned. Mabel Halliwell is smaller, pretty rather than beautiful, younger than her sister, vivacious, very talkative, and somewhat irresponsible. John is of the same age as Basil, good-humoured, neither handsome nor plain blunt of speech and open.

Basil

[Shaking hands.] How d'you do?

Mabel

Look pleased to see us, Mr. Kent.

Basil

I'm perfectly enchanted.

Hilda

You *did* ask us to come and have tea with you, didn't you?

Basil

I've asked you fifty times. Hulloa, John! I didn't see you.

John

I'm the discreet husband, I keep in the background.

Mabel

Why don't you praise me instead of praising yourself? People would think it so much nicer.

John

On the contrary, they'd be convinced that when we were alone I beat you. Besides, I couldn't honestly say that you kept in the background.

Hilda

[*To Basil.*] I feel rather ashamed at taking you unawares.

Basil

I was only slacking. I was cutting a book.

Mabel

That's ever so much more fun than reading it, isn't it? [*She catches sight of the tea things.*] Oh, what a beautiful cake – and two cups! [*She looks at him, questioning.*]

Basil

[*A little awkwardly.*] Oh – I always have an extra cup in case some one turns up, you know.

Mabel

How unselfish! And do you always have such expensive cake?

Hilda

[*With a smile, remonstrating.*] Mabel!

Mabel

Oh, but I know them well, and I love them dearly. They cost two shillings at the Army and Navy Stores, but I can't afford them myself.

John

I wish you'd explain why we've come, or Basil will think I'm responsible.

Mabel

[*Lightly.*] I've been trying to remember ever since we arrived. You say it, Hilda; you invented it.

Hilda

[*With a laugh.*] Mabel, I'll never take you out again. They're perfectly incorrigible, Mr. Kent.

Basil

[*To John and Mabel, smiling.*] I don't know why *you've* come.

Mrs. Murry has promised to come and have tea with me for ages.

Mabel

[*Pretending to feel injured.*] Well, you needn't turn me out the moment we arrive. Besides, I refuse to go till I've had a piece of that cake.

Basil

Well, here's the tea! [Mrs. Griggs *brings it in as he speaks. He turns to Hilda.*] I wish you'd pour it out. I'm so clumsy.

Hilda

[*Smiling at him affectionately.*] I shall be delighted.

[*She proceeds to do so, and the conversation goes on while Basil hands Mabel tea and cake.*]

John

I told them it was improper for more than one woman at a time to call at a bachelor's rooms, Basil.

Basil

If you'd warned me I'd have made the show a bit tidier.

Mabel

Oh, that's just what we didn't want. We wanted to see the Celebrity at Home, without lime-light.

Basil

[Ironically.] You're too flattering.

Mabel

By the way, how is the book?

Basil

Quite well, thanks.

Mabel

I always forget to ask how it's getting on.

Basil

On the contrary, you never let slip an opportunity of making kind inquiries.

Mabel

I don't believe you've written a word of it.

Hilda

Nonsense, Mabel. I've read it.

Mabel

Oh, but you're such a monster of discretion... Now I want to see your medals, Mr. Kent.

Basil

[*Smiling.*] What medals?

Mabel

Don't be coy! You know I mean the medals they gave you for going to the Cape.

Basil

[*Gets them from a drawer, and with a smile hands them to Mabel.*] If you really care to see them, here they are.

Mabel

[*Taking one.*] What's this?

Basil

Oh, that's just the common or garden South African medal.

Mabel

And the other one?

Basil

That's the D.S.M.

Mabel

Why didn't they give you the D.S.O.?

Basil

Oh, I was only a trooper, you know. They only give the D.S.O. to officers.

Mabel

And what did you do to deserve it?

Basil

[*Smiling.*] I really forget.

Hilda

It's given for distinguished service in the field, Mabel.

Mabel

I knew. Only I wanted to see if Mr. Kent was modest or vain.

Basil

[*With a smile, taking the medals from her and putting them away.*] How spiteful of you!

Mabel

John, why didn't you go to the Cape, and do heroic things?

John

I confined my heroism to the British Isles. I married you, my angel.

Mabel

Is that funny or vulgar?

Basil

[*Laughing.*] Are there no more questions you want to ask me, Mrs. Halliwell?

Mabel

Yes, I want to know why you live up six flights of stairs.

Basil

[*Amused.*] For the view, simply and solely.

Mabel

But, good heavens, there is no view. There are only chimney-pots.

Basil

But they're most æsthetic chimney-pots. Do come and look, Mrs. Murray. [*Basil and Hilda approach one of the windows, and he opens it.*] And at night they're so mysterious. They look just like strange goblins playing on the house-tops. And you can't think how gorgeous the sunsets are: sometimes, after the rain, the slate roofs glitter like burnished gold. [*To Hilda.*] Often I think I couldn't have lived without my view, it says such wonderful things to me. [*Turning to Mabel gaily.*] Scoff, Mrs. Halliwell, I'm on the verge of being sentimental.

Mabel

I was wondering if you'd made that up on the spur of the moment, or if you'd fished it out of an old note-book.

Hilda

[*With a look at Basil.*] May I go out?

Basil

Yes, do come.

[Hilda and Basil step out on the balcony, whereupon John goes to Mabel and tries to steal a kiss from her.]

Mabel

[*Springing up.*] Go away, you horror!

John

Don't be silly. I shall kiss you if I want to.

[She laughing, walks round the sofa while he pursues her.]

Mabel

I wish you'd treat life more seriously.

John

I wish you wouldn't wear such prominent hats.

Mabel

[*As he puts his arm round her waist.*] John, some body'll see us.

John

Mabel, I command you to let yourself be kissed.

Mabel

How much will you give me?

John

Sixpence.

Mabel

[*Slipping away from him.*] I can't do it for less than half-a-

crown.

John

[*Laughing.*] I'll give you two shillings.

Mabel

[*Coaxing.*] Make it two-and-three.

[*He kisses her.*]

John

Now come and sit down quietly.

Mabel

[*Sitting down by his side.*] John, you mustn't make love to me. It would look so odd if they came in.

John

After all, I am your husband.

Mabel

That's just it. If you wanted to make love to me you ought to have married somebody else. [*He puts his arm round her waist.*] John, don't, I'm sure they'll come in.

John

I don't care if they do.

Mabel

[*Sighing.*] John, you do love me?

John

Yes.

Mabel

And you won't ever care for anybody else?

John

No.

Mabel

[*In the same tone.*] And you will give me that two-and-threepence, won't you?

John

Mabel, it was only two shillings.

Mabel

Oh, you cheat!

John

[*Getting up.*] I'm going out on the balcony. I'm passionately devoted to chimney-pots.

Mabel

No, John, I want you.

John

Why?

Mabel

Isn't it enough for me to say I want you for you to hurl yourself at my feet immediately?

John

Oh, you poor thing, can't you do without me for two minutes?

Mabel

Now you're taking a mean advantage. It's only this particular two minutes that I want you. Come and sit by me like a nice, dear boy.

John

Now what have you been doing that you shouldn't?

Mabel

[*Laughing.*] Nothing. But I want you to do something for me.

John

Ha, ha! I thought so.

Mabel

It's merely to tie up my shoe. [*She puts out her foot.*]

John

Is that all – honour bright?

Mabel

[*Laughing.*] Yes. [John *kneels down.*]

John

But, my good girl, it's not undone.

Mabel

Then, my good boy, undo it and do it up again.

John

[*Starting up.*] Mabel, are we playing gooseberry – at our time of life?

Mabel

[*Ironically.*] Oh, you are clever! Do you think Hilda would have climbed six flights of stairs unless Love had lent her wings?

John

I wish Love would provide wings for the chaperons as well.

Mabel

Don't be flippant. It's a serious matter.

John

My dear girl, you really can't expect me to play the heavy father when we've only been married six months. It would be almost improper.

Mabel

Don't be horrid, John.

John

It isn't horrid, it's natural history.

Mabel

[*Primly.*] I was never taught it. It's not thought nice for young girls to know.

John

Why didn't you tell me that Hilda was fond of Basil! Does he like her?

Mabel

I don't know. I expect that's precisely what she's asking him.

John

Mabel, do you mean to say you brought me here, an inoffensive, harmless creature, for your sister to propose to a pal of mine? It's an outrage.

Mabel

She's doing nothing of the sort.

John

You needn't look indignant. You can't deny that you proposed to me.

Mabel

I can, indeed. If I had I should never have taken such an unconscionably long time about it.

John

I wonder why Hilda wants to marry poor Basil!

Mabel

Well, Captain Murray left her five thousand a year, and she thinks Basil Kent a genius.

John

There's not a drawing-room in Regent's Park or in Bayswater that hasn't got its tame genius. I don't know if Basil Kent is much more than very clever.

Mabel

Anyhow, I'm sure it's a mistake to marry geniuses. They're horribly bad-tempered, and they invariably make love to other

people's wives.

John

Hilda always has gone in for literary people. That's the worst of marrying a cavalryman, it leads you to attach so much importance to brains.

Mabel

Yes, but she needn't marry them. If she wants to encourage Basil let her do it from a discreet distance. Genius always thrives best on bread and water and platonic attachments. If Hilda marries him he'll only become fat and ugly and bald-headed and stupid.

John

Why, then he'll make an ideal Member of Parliament.

[Basil and Hilda come into the room again.]

Mabel

[Maliciously.] Well, what have you been talking about?

Hilda

[*Acidly.*] The weather and the crops, Shakespeare and the Musical Glasses.

Mabel

[*Raising her eyebrows.*] Oh!

Hilda

It's getting very late, Mabel. We really must be going.

Mabel

[*Getting up.*] And I've got to pay at least twelve calls. I hope every one will be out.

Hilda

People are so stupid, they're always in when you call.

Mabel

[*Holding out her hand to Basil.*] Good-bye.

Hilda

[*Coldly.*] Thanks so much, Mr. Kent. I'm afraid we disturbed you awfully.

Basil

[*Shaking hands with her.*] I've been enchanted to see you. Good-bye.

Mabel

[*Lightly.*] We shall see you again before you go to Italy, shan't we?

Basil

Oh, I'm not going to Italy now, I've changed all my plans.

Mabel

[*Giving John a look.*] Oh! Well, good-bye. Aren't you coming, John.

John

No: I think I'll stay and have a little chat with Basil, while you tread the path of duty.

Mabel

Well, mind you're in early. We've got a lot of disgusting people coming to dinner.

Hilda

[*With a smile.*] Poor things! Who are they?

Mabel

I forget who they are. But I know they're loathsome. That's why I asked them.

[Basil opens the door, and the two women go out.]

John

[Sitting down and stretching himself.] Now that we've got rid of our womankind let's make ourselves comfortable. *[Taking a pipe out of his pocket.]* I think I'll sample your baccy if you'll pass it along.

Basil

[Handing him the jar.] I'm rather glad you stayed, John. I wanted to talk to you.

John

Ha! ha!

[Basil pauses a moment, while John looks at him with amusement. He fills his pipe.]

John

[Lighting his pipe.] Nice gal, Hilda – ain't she?

Basil

[*Enthusiastically.*] Oh, I think she's perfectly charming... But what makes you say that?

John

[*Innocently.*] Oh, I don't know. Passed through my head.

Basil

I say, I've got something to tell you, John.

John

Well, don't be so beastly solemn about it.

Basil

[*Smiling.*] It's a solemn thing.

John

No, it ain't. I've done it myself. It's like a high dive. When you look down at the water it fairly takes your breath away, but after you've done it – it's not so bad as you think. You're going to be married, my boy.

Basil

[*With a smile.*] How the deuce d'you know?

John

[*Gaily.*] Saw it with mine own eyes. I congratulate you, and I give you my blessing. I'll get a new frock-coat to give the lady away in.

Basil

You?.. [*Suddenly understanding.*] You're on the wrong tack, old man. It's not your sister-in-law I'm going to marry.

John

Then why the dickens did you say it was?

Basil

I never mentioned her name.

John

H'm! I've made rather more than an average ass of myself, haven't I?

Basil

What on earth made you think...?

John

[Interrupting.] Oh, it was only some stupid idea of my wife's. Women are such fools, you know. And they think they're so confoundedly sharp.

Basil

[*Disconcerted—looking at him.*] Has Mrs. Murray...?

John

No, of course not! Well, who the deuce are you going to marry?

Basil

[*Flushing.*] I'm going to marry Miss Jenny Bush.

John

Never heard of her. Is it any one I know?

Basil

Yes, you knew her.

John

[*Searching his memory.*] Bush ... Bush... [*With a smile.*] The only Jenny Bush *I've* ever heard of was a rather pretty little barmaid in Fleet Street. Presumably you're not going to marry her.

[*John has said this quite lightly, not guessing for a moment that it can have anything to do with the person Basil proposes to marry. Then, since Basil makes no answer, John looks at him sharply: there is a silence while the two men stare at one another.*

John

Basil, it's not the woman we used to know before you went out to the Cape?

Basil

[*Pale and nervous, but determined.*] I've just told you that you used to know Jenny.

John

Man alive, you're not going to marry the barmaid of the

"Golden Crown"?

Basil

[*Looking at him steadily.*] Jenny was a barmaid at the "Golden Crown."

John

But, good Lord, Basil, what d'you mean? You're not serious?

Basil

Perfectly! We're going to be married this day week.

John

Are you stark, staring mad? Why on earth d'you want to marry Jenny Bush?

Basil

That's rather a delicate question, isn't it? [*With a smile.*] Presumably because I'm in love with her.

John

Well, that's a silly ass of an answer.

Basil

It's quite the most obvious.

John

Nonsense! Why, I've been in love with twenty girls, and I haven't married them all. One can't do that sort of thing in a country where they give you seven years for bigamy. Every public-house along the Thames from Barnes to Taplow is the tombstone of an unrequited passion of my youth. I loved 'em dearly, but I never asked 'em to marry me.

Basil

[*Tightening his lips.*] I'd rather you didn't make jokes about it, John.

John

Are you sure you're not making an ass of yourself? If you've got into a mess, surely we can get you out. Marriage, like hanging, is rather a desperate remedy.

[Basil is sitting down and moodily shrugs his shoulders. John goes up to him, and putting his hands on his friend's shoulders looks into his eyes.]

John

Why are you going to marry her, Basil?

Basil

[Springing up impatiently.] Damn you, why don't you mind your own business?

John

Don't be a fool, Basil.

Basil

Can't I marry any one I choose? It's nothing to you, is it? D'you suppose I care if she's a barmaid?

[He walks up and down excitedly, while John with steady eyes watches him.]

John

Basil, old man, we've known each other a good many years now. Don't you think you'd better trust me?

Basil

[Setting his teeth.] What d'you want to know?

John

Why are you going to marry her?

Basil

[Abruptly, fiercely.] Because I must.

John

[Nodding his head quietly.] I see.

[There is a silence. Then Basil, more calmly turns to John.]

Basil

D'you remember Jenny?

John

Yes, rather. Why, we always lunched there in the old days.

Basil

Well, after I came back from the Cape I began going there again. When I was out there she took it into her head to write me a letter, rather ill-spelt and funny – but I was touched that she thought of me. And she sent some tobacco and some cigarettes.

John

My maiden aunt sent you a woollen comforter, but I'm not aware that in return you ever made her a proposal of marriage.

Basil

And so in one way and another I came to know Jenny rather well. She appeared to get rather fond of me – and I couldn't help seeing it.

John

But she always pretended to be engaged to that scrubby little chap with false teeth who used to hang about the bar and make sheep's eyes at her over innumerable Scotch-and-sodas.

Basil

He made a scene because I took her out on one of her off-nights, and she broke it off. I couldn't help knowing it was on my account.

John

Well, and after that?

Basil

After that I got into the habit of taking her to the play, and so on. And finally...!

John

How long has this been going on?

Basil

Several months.

John

And then?

Basil

Well, the other day she wired for me. I found her in the most awful state. She was simply crying her eyes out, poor thing. She'd been seedy and gone to the doctor's. And he told her ...

John

What you might really have foreseen.

Basil

Yes... She was quite hysterical. She said she didn't know what to do nor where to go. And she was in an awful funk about her people. She said she'd kill herself.

John

[Drily.] Naturally she was very much upset.

Basil

I felt the only thing I could do was to ask her to marry me. And when I saw the joy that came into her poor, tear-stained face I *knew* I'd done the right thing.

[There is a pause. John walks up and down, then stops suddenly and turns to Basil.]

John

Have you thought that you, who've never needed to economise, will have to look at every shilling you spend? You've always been careless with your money, and what you've had you've flung about freely.

Basil

[*Shrugging his shoulders.*] If I have to submit to nothing worse than going without a lot of useless luxuries, I really don't think I need complain.

John

But you can't afford to keep a wife and an increasing family.

Basil

I suppose I can make money as well as other men.

John

By writing books?

Basil

I shall set to work to earn my living at the Bar. Up till now I've never troubled myself.

John

I don't know any man less fit than you for the dreary waiting and the drudgery of the Bar.

Basil

We shall see.

John

And what d'you think your friends will say to your marrying – a barmaid?

Basil

[*Contemptuously.*] I don't care two straws for my friends.

John

That's pleasant for them. You know, men and women without end have snapped their fingers at society and laughed at it, and for a while thought they had the better of it. But all the time society was quietly smiling up its sleeve, and suddenly it put out an iron hand – and scrunched them up.

Basil

[Shrugging his shoulders.] It only means that a few snobs will cut me.

John

Not you – your wife.

Basil

I'm not such a cad as to go to a house where I can't take my wife.

John

But you're the last man in the world to give up these things. There's nothing you enjoy more than going to dinner-parties and staying in country houses. Women's smiles are the very breath of your nostrils.

Basil

You talk of me as if I were a tame cat. I don't want to brag, John, but after all, I've shown that I'm fit for something in this world. I went to the Cape because I thought it was my duty. I intend to marry Jenny for the same reason.

John

[*Seriously.*] Will you answer me one question – on your honour?

Basil

Yes.

John

Are you in love with her?

Basil

[*After a pause.*] No.

John

[*Passionately.*] Then, by God, you have no right to marry her. A man has no right to marry a woman for pity. It's a cruel thing to do. You can only end by making yourself and her entirely wretched.

Basil

I can't break the poor girl's heart.

John

You don't know what marriage is. Even with two people who are devoted to one another, who have the same interests and belong to the same class, it's sometimes almost unbearable.

Marriage is the most terrible thing in the world unless passion makes it absolutely inevitable.

Basil

My marriage is absolutely inevitable – for another reason.

John

You talk as if such things had never happened before.

Basil

Oh, I know, they happen every day. It's no business of the man's. And as for the girl, let her throw herself in the river. Let her go to the deuce, and be hanged to her.

John

Nonsense. She can be provided for. It only needs a little discretion – and no one will be a ha'porth the wiser, nor she a ha'porth the worse.

Basil

But it's not a matter of people knowing. It's a matter of honour.

John

[*Opening his eyes.*] And where precisely did the honour come in when you...?

Basil

Good heavens, I'm a man like any other. I have passions as other men have.

John

[*Gravely.*] My dear Basil, I wouldn't venture to judge you. But I think it's rather late in the day to set up for a moralist.

Basil

D'you think I've not regretted what I did? It's easy enough afterwards to say that I should have resisted. The world would

be a Sunday School if we were all as level-headed at night as we are next morning.

John

[*Shaking his head.*] After all, it's only a very regrettable incident due to your youth and – want of innocence.

Basil

[*With vehement seriousness.*] I may have acted like a cur. I don't know. I acted as I suppose every other man would. But now I have a plain duty before me, and, by God, I mean to do it.

John

Don't you realise that you've only one life and that mistakes are irreparable? People play with life as if it were a game of chess in which they can try this move and that, and when they get into a muddle, sweep the board clear and begin again.

Basil

But life is a game of chess in which one is always beaten. Death sits on the other side of the board, and for every move he

has a counter-move. And for all your deep-laid schemes he has a parry.

John

But if at the end Death always mates you, the fight is surely worth the fighting. Don't handicap yourself at the beginning by foolish quixotry. Life is so full. It has so much to offer, and you're throwing away almost everything that makes it worth the trouble.

Basil

[*Gravely.*] Jenny would kill herself if I didn't marry her.

John

You don't seriously think she'd do that. People don't commit suicide so easily, you know.

Basil

You've thought of a great deal, John – you've not thought of the child. I can't let the child skulk into the world like a thief. Let him come in openly and lawfully. And let him go through the world with an honest name. Good heavens, the world's bad

enough without fettering him all his life with a hideous stigma.

John

Oh, my dear Basil ...

Basil

[*Interrupting.*] You can bring forward a thousand objections, but nothing alters the fact that, under the circumstances, there's only one way open to a man of honour.

John

[*Drily.*] Well, it's a way that may do credit to your heart, but scarcely to your understanding.

Basil

I thought you'd see at once that I was doing the only possible thing.

John

My dear Basil, you talk of pity, and you talk of duty, but

are you sure there's anything more in it than vanity? You've set yourself up on a sort of moral pinnacle. Are you sure you don't admire your own heroism a little too much?

Basil

[*With a good-natured smile.*] Does it look so petty as that in your eyes? After all, it's only common morality.

John

[*Impatiently.*] But, my dear chap, its absurd to act according to an unrealisable ideal in a world that's satisfied with the second-rate. You're tendering bank-notes to African savages, among whom cowrie shells are common coin.

Basil

[*Smiling.*] I don't know what you mean.

John

Society has made its own decalogue, a code that's just fit for middling people who are not very good and not very wicked. But Society punishes you equally if your actions are higher than its

ideal or lower.

Basil

Sometimes it makes a god of you when you're dead.

John

But it takes precious good care to crucify you when you're alive.

[There is a knock at the door, and Mrs. Griggs comes in.]

Mrs. Griggs

Some more visitors, Sir.

Basil

Show 'em in. *[To John]* It's Jenny. She said she was coming to tea.

John

[With a smile.] Oh, the cake was for her, was it? Would you like me to go?

Basil

Not unless you choose. Do you suppose I'm ashamed?

John

I thought, after all you've told me, you might not care for me to see her.

[Jenny Bush and her brother James come in. She is very pretty, with delicate features and a beautiful complexion: her fair hair is abundant and very elaborately arranged. She is dressed smartly, rather showily. It is the usual type of barmaid, or tea-girl, a shade more refined perhaps than the common run. Her manners are unobjectionable, but not those of a gentlewoman. James is a young man with clean-shaven face and a sharp expression. He is over-dressed in a very horsey manner, and is distinctly more vulgar than his sister. He talks English with a cockney accent, not invariably dropping his aitches, but only now and then. He is over cordial and over genial.]

Jenny

[Going up to Basil.] I'm awfully late, I couldn't come before.

James

[*Jocosely.*] Don't mind me. Give 'im a kiss, old tart.

Jenny

Oh, I brought my brother Jimmie to see you.

Basil

[*Shaking hands.*] How d'you do?

James

Nicely, thanks. Pleased to make your acquaintance.

Jenny

[*Looking at John and suddenly recognising him.*]

Well, I never! If that isn't old John Halliwell. I didn't expect to see you. This is a treat.

John

How d'you do?

Jenny

What are you doing here?

John

I've been having a cup of tea with Basil.

Jenny

[*Looking at the tea-things.*] D'you always drink out of three cups at once?

John

My wife has been here – and her sister.

Jenny

Oh, I see. Fancy your being married. How d'you like it?

John

All right, thanks.

[Basil pours out a cup of tea, and during the following speeches gives Jenny milk and sugar and cake.]

James

People say it wants a bit of gettin' used to.

John

Mr. Bush, you're a philosopher.

James

Well, I will say this for myself, you'd want to get up early in the morning to catch me nappin'. I didn't catch your name.

John

Halliwell.

James

'Alliwell?

John

[*Emphasising the H.*] Halliwell.

James

That's what I say – 'Alliwell. I knew a fellow in the meat trade called 'Alliwell. Any relation?

John

I don't think so.

James

Fine business 'e 'ad too. There's a rare lot of money to be made out of meat.

John

I dare say.

Jenny.

[*To John.*] It *is* a long time since I've seen you. I suppose you've quietened down now you're a married man. You were a hot 'un when you was a bachelor.

James

[*Facetiously.*] Don't make 'im blush, Jenny. Accidents will 'appen in the best regulated families. And boys will be boys, as they say in the Bible.

John

I think I must be off, Basil.

James

Well, I'll be toddlin' too. I only come in just to say 'ow d'you do to my future brother-in-law. I'm a fellow as likes to be cordial. There's no 'aughtiness about me.

Basil

[*Politely, but not effusively.*] Oh; won't you stay and have some tea?

James

No, thanks. I'm not much of an 'and at tea; I leave that to females. I like something stronger myself.

Jenny

[*Remonstrating.*] Jimmie!

Basil

I have some whisky, Mr. Bush.

James

Oh, blow the Mister and blow the Bush. Call me Jimmie. I can't stand ceremony. The way I look on it is this. We're both of us gentlemen. Now, mind you, I'm not a fellow to praise myself. But I will say this: I am a gentleman. That's not self-praise, is it?

John

Dear me, no. Mere statement of fact.

James

Well, as I was saying, I know I'm a gentleman. It's a thing you can't 'elp, so what's the good of being proud about it? If I meet a chap in a pub, and he invites me to have a drink, I don't ask him if he's a Lord.

Basil

But you just take it.

James

Well, you'd do the same yourself, wouldn't you?

Basil

I dare say. But will you have a drink now?

James

Oh, bless you, I know what it is to be engaged. I don't want to disturb you canary-birds. Me and 'Alliwell 'll go and have a gargle round the corner. I see you've got a public nice and 'andy. [*To John.*] I suppose you're not above goin' in there now and again, eh?

Jenny

[*With a laugh.*] He came into the "Golden Crown" every day of his life, and chance it!

John

I'm afraid I'm in a great hurry.

James

'Ang it all, one's always got time to have a drop of Scotch in this life.

Basil

[*To James, handing him the box.*] Well, take a cigar with you.

James

[*Taking and examining one.*] If you are so pressing. Villar y Villar... What do they run you in a hundred?

Basil

They were given to me, I really don't know what they cost. [*He lights a match.*] Won't you take the label off?

James

Not if I know it. I don't smoke a Villar y Villar every day, but when I do, I smoke it with the label on.

Jenny

[*Laughing.*] Jimmie, you are a caution!

John

[*Shaking hands with Jenny.*] Good-bye and – my best wishes.

Jenny

Thanks. You didn't expect I'd marry Basil when I used to mix cocktails for you in the "Golden Crown," did you?

James

Come on, 'Alliwell. Don't stop there gassing. You'll only disturb the canary-birds. So long, old tart, see you later. Ta-ta, Basil, old man.

Basil

Good-bye – Jimmie.

[*John Halliwell and James go out, Jenny goes up to Basil impulsively.*]

Jenny

Kiss me. [*He kisses her, smiling.*] There! Now I can sit down quietly and talk. How d'you like my brother?

Basil

Oh – I hardly know him yet. He seems very amiable.

Jenny

He's not a bad sort when you know him. He's just like my mother.

Basil

[*Raising his brows.*] Is he? And – is your father like that too?

Jenny

Well, you know, Pa hasn't had the education that Jimmie's had. Jimmie was at a boarding-school at Margate.

Basil

Was he?

Jenny

You were at a boarding-school, too, weren't you?

Basil

[*Smiling.*] Yes, I was at Harrow.

Jenny

Ah, you don't get the fine air at Harrow that you get at Margate.

Basil

Shall I put down your cup?

Jenny

[*Placing it on a table.*] Oh, thanks, it's all right. Come and sit by me, Basil.

Basil

[*Seating himself on the arm of her chair.*] There.

Jenny

[*Taking his hand.*] I'm so glad we're alone. I should like to be alone with you all my life. You do love me, don't you, Basil?

Basil

Yes.

Jenny

Much?

Basil

[*Smiling.*] Yes.

Jenny

I'm so glad. Oh, I don't know what I should do if you didn't love me. If you hadn't been kind to me I should have thrown myself in the river.

Basil

What nonsense you talk.

Jenny

I mean it.

[*He passes his hand affectionately over her hair.*]

Jenny

Oh, you *are* so good, Basil. I'm so proud of you. I shall be so proud to be your wife.

Basil

[*Gravely.*] Don't think too well of me Jenny.

Jenny

[*With a laugh.*] I'm not afraid of that. You're brave and you're clever and you're a professional man, and you're everything.

Basil

You foolish child.

Jenny

[*Passionately.*] I can't tell you how much I love you.

Basil

I'll try with all my might to be a good husband to you, Jenny.

[*She flings her arms round his neck and they kiss one another.*]

End of the First Act

THE SECOND ACT

An Interval of One Year Elapses Between Acts I. and II

The drawing-room in Basil's house at Putney. In the wall facing the auditorium there is a door leading from the passage. On the right two doors lead into bedrooms, and opposite these is a bay window. The same pictures and plates decorate the walls as in the preceding Scene; the writing-table is between the side doors. Jenny's influence is noticeable in the cushions in the wicker-work arm-chairs, in the window curtains and portières of art serge, and in the huge chrysanthemums of the wall paper.

[Jenny is sewing while James Bush is lounging in one of the arm chairs.]

James

Where's his lordship this afternoon?

Jenny

He's gone out for a walk.

James

[*With a malevolent laugh.*] That's what he tells you, my dear.

Jenny

[*Looking up quickly.*] Have you seen him anywhere?

James

No, I can't say I 'ave. And if I 'ad I wouldn't boast about it.

Jenny

[*Insisting.*] What did you mean then?

James

Well, whenever I come here he's out for a walk... I say, old tart, could you oblige me with a couple of sovereigns till next Saturday?

Jenny

[*Pained to refuse.*] Oh no, Jimmie, I can't manage it. Basil made me promise I wouldn't let you have any more.

James

What! He made you promise that? – Ugh, the mean skinflint.

Jenny

We've lent you so much, Jimmie. And ma's had a lot, too.

James

Well, look here, you can manage a sovereign, can't you? You needn't say anything about it.

Jenny

I can't really, Jimmie. I would if I could. But we've got a rare lot of debts worrying us, and the rent will be coming along next week.

James

[*Sulkily.*] You can't lend it me because you won't. I should just like to know what Basil spends his money on.

Jenny

He's had a bad year – it's not his fault. And I was so ill after the baby died, we had to pay the doctor nearly fifty pounds.

James

[*With a sneer.*] Well, it was a wonderful fine thing you did when you married him, Jenny. And you thought you done precious well for yourself, too.

Jenny

Jimmie, don't!

James

I can't stick 'im at any price, and I don't mind who knows it.

Jenny

[*Impetuously.*] I won't have you say anything against him.

James

All right – keep your shirt in. I'm blowed if I know what you've got to stick up for him about. He don't care much about you.

Jenny

[*Hastily.*] How d'you know?

James

Think I can't see!

Jenny

It's not true. It's not true.

James

You can't get round me, Jenny. I suppose you 'aven't been crying to-day?

Jenny

[*Flushing.*] I had a headache.

James

I know those sort of headaches.

Jenny

We had a little tiff this morning. That's why he went out... Oh, don't say he doesn't care for me. I couldn't live.

James

[*With a laugh.*] Go along with you. Basil Kent ain't the only pebble on the beach.

Jenny

[*Vehemently.*] Oh, Jimmie, Jimmie, sometimes I don't know which way to turn, I'm that unhappy. If the baby had only lived I might have kept my husband – I might have made him love me. [*The sound is heard of a door being closed.*] There's Basil.

James

Good luck to 'im.

Jenny

Oh, Jimmie, take care not to say anything to make him angry.

James

I'd just like to give 'im a piece of my mind.

Jenny

Oh, Jimmie, don't. It was my fault that we quarrelled this morning. I wanted to make him angry, and I nagged at him. Don't let him see that I've said anything to you. I'll see – I'll see if I

can't send you a pound to-morrow, Jimmie.

James

[*Defiantly.*] He'd better not start patronising me, because I won't put up with it. I'm a gentleman, and I'm every bit as good as he is – if not better.

[*Basil comes in, notices James, but does not speak.*]

James

Afternoon, Basil.

Basil

[*Indifferently.*] You here again?

James

Looks like it, don't it.

Basil

[*Quietly.*] I'm afraid it does.

James

[*Becoming more aggressive as the conversation proceeds.*] Are you? I suppose I can come and see my own sister?

Basil

I suppose it's inevitable.

James

Well?

Basil

[*Smiling.*] Only I should be excessively grateful if you'd time your coming with my – with my going. And *vice versa*.

James

That means you want me to get out, I reckon.

Basil

You show unusual perspicacity, dear James.

James

And who are you with your long words, I should like to know?

Basil

[*Blandly.*] I? A person of not the least importance.

James

[*Angrily.*] Well, I wouldn't put on so much side if I was you.

Basil

I observe that you have not acquired the useful art of being uncivil without being impertinent.

James

Look 'ere, I'm not going to stand this. I'm as good as you are any day.

Basil

That is a fact I should never dream of contradicting.

James

[*Indignantly.*] Then what 'ave you got to turn up your nose about, eh? What d'you mean by sneerin' and snarlin' at me when I come here?

Jenny

[*Nervously.*] Jimmie, don't!

Basil

[*With a smile.*] You're very eloquent, James. You should join a debating society.

James

Yes, go on. That's right. You seem to think I'm nobody. I should just like to know why you go on as if I was I don't know what.

Basil

[*Abruptly.*] Because I choose.

James

You can bet anything you like I don't come 'ere to see you.

Basil

[*Smiling acidly.*] Then I have at least something to be thankful for.

James

I've got a right to come here as much as anybody. I come to see my sister.

Basil

Really, that's very thoughtful of you. I was under the impression you generally came to borrow money.

James

Throw that in my face now. I can't 'elp it if I'm out of work.

Basil

Oh, I haven't the least objection to your being out of work. All I protest against – and that very mildly – is that I should be expected to keep you. How much did you want to-day?

James

I don't want your dirty money.

Basil

[*With a laugh.*] Have you already tried to borrow it from Jenny?

James

No, I 'aven't.

Basil

And she refused, I suppose.

James

[*Storming.*] I tell you I don't want your dirty money.

Basil

Well, then, we're both quite satisfied. You seemed to think that because I married Jenny I was bound to keep the whole gang of you for the rest of your lives. I'm sorry I can't afford it. And you will kindly tell the rest of them that I'm sick and tired of forking out.

James

I wonder you don't forbid me your house while you're about it.

Basil

[*Coolly.*] You may come here when I'm not at home – if you behave yourself.

James

I'm not good enough for you, I suppose?

Basil

No, you're not.

James

[*Angrily.*] Ah, you're a pretty specimen, you are. You mean skinflint!

Basil

Don't be abusive, James. It's rude.

James

I shall say what I choose.

Basil

And please don't talk so loud. It annoys me.

James

[*Malevolently.*] I dare say you'd like to get me out of the way.
But I mean to keep my eye on you.

Basil

[*Sharply.*] What d'you mean by that?

James

You know what I mean. Jenny has something to put up with,
I lay.

Basil

[Containing his anger.] You'll have the goodness to leave the relations between Jenny and myself alone – d'you hear?

James

Ha, that's touched you up, has it? You think I don't know what sort of a feller you are. I can just about see through two of you. And I know a good deal more about you than you think.

Basil

[Contemptuously.] Don't be foolish, James.

James

[Sarcastic.] A nice thing Jenny did when she married you.

Basil

[Recovering himself, with a smile.] Has she been telling you my numerous faults? *[To Jenny.]* You must have had plenty to talk about, my love.

Jenny

[*Who has been going on with her sewing, looking up now and then uneasily.*] I haven't said a word against you, Basil.

Basil

[*Turning his back on James.*] Oh, my dear Jenny, if it amuses you, by all means discuss me with your brother and your sister and your father and your mother, and the whole crew of them... I should be so dull if I had no faults.

Jenny

[*Anxiously.*] Tell him I've not said anything against him, Jimmie.

James

It's not for want of something to say, I lay.

Basil

[*Over his shoulder.*] I'm getting rather tired, brother James.

I'd go, if I were you.

James

[*Very aggressively.*] I shan't go till I choose.

Basil

[*Turns round, smiling blandly.*] Of course, we're both Christians, dear James; and there's a good deal of civilisation kicking about the world nowadays. But, notwithstanding, the last word is still with the strongest.

James

What d'you mean by that?

Basil

[*Good-humouredly.*] Merely that discretion is the better part of valour. They say that proverbs are the wealth of nations.

James

[*Indignantly.*] That's just the sort of thing you'd do – to 'it a

feller smaller than yourself.

Basil

Oh, I wouldn't hit you for worlds, brother James. I should merely throw you downstairs.

James

[*Making for the door.*] I should just like to see you try it on.

Basil

Don't be silly, James. You know you wouldn't like it at all.

James

I'm not afraid of you.

Basil

Of course not. But still – you're not very muscular, are you?

James

You coward!

Basil

[*Smiling.*] Your repartees are not brilliant, James.

James

[*Standing at the door for safety's sake.*] I'll pay you out before I've done.

Basil

[*Raising his eyebrows.*] James, I told you to get out five minutes ago.

James

I'm going. D'you think I want to stay 'ere? Good-bye, Jenny, I'm not going to stand being insulted by any one. [*He goes out slamming the door.*]

[Basil, smiling quietly, goes to his writing-table and turns over some papers.]

Basil

The only compensation in brother James is that he sometimes causes one a little mild amusement.

Jenny

You might at least be polite to him, Basil.

Basil

I used up all my politeness six months ago.

Jenny

After all, he is my brother.

Basil

That is a fact I deplore with all my heart, I assure you.

Jenny

I don't know what's wrong with him.

Basil

Don't you? It doesn't matter.

Jenny

I know he isn't a Society man.

Basil

[*With a laugh.*] No, he wouldn't shine at duchesses tea-parties.

Jenny

Well, he's none the worse for that, is he?

Basil

Not at all.

Jenny

Then why d'you treat him as if he was a dog?

Basil

My dear Jenny, I don't... I'm very fond of dogs.

Jenny

Oh, you're always sneering. Isn't he as good as I am? And you condescended to marry me.

Basil

[*Coldly.*] I really can't see that because I married you I must necessarily take your whole family to my bosom.

Jenny

Why don't you like them? They're honest and respectable.

Basil

[*With a little sigh of boredom.*] My dear Jenny, we don't choose our friends because they're honest and respectable any more than we choose them because they change their linen daily.

Jenny

They can't help it if they're poor.

Basil

My dear, I'm willing to acknowledge that they have every grace and every virtue, but they rather bore me.

Jenny

They wouldn't if they were swells.

[Basil gives a short laugh, but does not answer; and Jenny irritated, continues more angrily.]

Jenny

And after all we're not in such a bad position as all that. My mother's father was a gentleman.

Basil

I wish your mother's son were.

Jenny

D'you know what Jimmie says you are?

Basil

I don't vastly care. But if it pleases you very much you may tell me.

Jenny

[*Flushing angrily.*] He says you're a damned snob.

Basil

Is that all? I could have invented far worse things than that to say of myself... [*With a change of tone.*] You know, Jenny, it's not worth while to worry ourselves about such trifles. One can't force oneself to like people. I'm very sorry that I can't stand your relations. Why on earth don't you resign yourself and make the best of it?

Jenny

[*Vindictively.*] You don't think they're good enough for you to associate with because they're not in swell positions.

Basil

My dear Jenny, I don't in the least object to their being grocers and haberdashers. I only wish they'd sell us things at cost price.

Jenny

Jimmie isn't a grocer or a haberdasher. He's an auctioneer's clerk.

Basil

[*Ironically.*] I humbly apologise. I thought he was a grocer, because last time he did us the honour of visiting us he asked how much a pound we paid for our tea and offered to sell us some at the same price... But then he also offered to insure our house against fire and to sell me a gold mine in Australia.

Jenny

Well, it's better to make a bit as best one can than to... [*She stops.*]

Basil

[*Smiling.*] Go on. Pray don't hesitate for fear of hurting my feelings.

Jenny

[*Defiantly.*] Well, then, it's better to do that than moon about like you do.

Basil

[*Shrugging his shoulders.*] Really, even to please you, I'm afraid I can't go about with little samples of tea in my pocket and sell my friends a pound or two when I call on them. Besides, I don't believe they'd ever pay me.

Jenny

[*Scornfully.*] Oh no, you're a gentleman and a barrister and an author, and you couldn't do anything to dirty those white hands that you're so careful about, could you?

Basil

[*Looking at his hands, then up at Jenny.*] And what is it precisely you want me to do?

Jenny

Well, you've been at the Bar for five years. I should have thought you could make something after all that time.

Basil

I can't force the wily solicitor to give me briefs.

Jenny

How do other fellows manage it?

Basil

[*With a laugh.*] The simplest way, I believe, is to marry the wily solicitor's daughter.

Jenny

Instead of a barmaid?

Basil

[*Gravely.*] I didn't say that, Jenny.

Jenny

[*Passionately.*] Oh no. You didn't say it, but you hinted it. You never say anything, but you're always hinting and insinuating – till you drive me out of my senses.

Basil

[*After a moment's pause, gravely.*] I'm very sorry if I hurt your feelings. I promise you I don't mean to. I always try to be kind to you.

[He looks at Jenny, expecting her to say something in forgiveness or in apology. But she, shrugging her shoulders, looks down sullenly at her work, without a word, and begins again to sew. Then Basil, tightening his lips, picks up writing materials and goes towards the door.]

Jenny

[*Looking up quickly.*] Where are you going?

Basil

[*Stopping.*] I have some letters to write.

Jenny

Can't you write them here?

Basil

Certainly – if it pleases you.

Jenny

Don't you want me to see who you're writing to?

Basil

I haven't the least objection to your knowing all about my correspondence... And that's fortunate, since you invariably make yourself acquainted with it.

Jenny

Accuse me of reading your letters now.

Basil

[*With a smile.*] You always leave my papers in such disorder after you've been to my desk.

Jenny

You've got no right to say that.

[*Basil pauses and looks at her steadily.*]

Basil

Are you willing to swear that you don't go to my desk when I'm away to read my letters? Come, Jenny, answer that question.

Jenny

[*Disturbed but forced by his glance to reply.*] Well, I'm your wife, I have a right to know.

Basil

[*Bitterly.*] You have such odd ideas about the duties of a wife,

Jenny. They include reading my letters and following me in the street. But tolerance and charity and forbearance don't seem to come in your scheme of things.

Jenny

[*Sullenly.*] Why d'you want to write your letters elsewhere?

Basil

[*Shrugging his shoulders.*] I thought I should be quieter.

Jenny

I suppose I disturb you?

Basil

It's a little difficult to write when you're talking.

Jenny

Why shouldn't I talk? D'you think I'm not good enough, eh? I should have thought I was more important than your letters.

[Basil does not answer.]

Jenny

[Angrily.] Am I your wife or not?

Basil

[Ironically.] You have your marriage lines carefully locked up to prove it.

Jenny

Then why don't you treat me as your wife? You seem to think I'm only fit to see after the house and order the dinner and mend your clothes. And after that I can go and sit in the kitchen with the servant.

Basil

[Moving again towards the door.] D'you think it's worth while making a scene? We seem to have said all this before so many times.

Jenny

[*Interrupting him.*] I want to have it out.

Basil

[*Bored.*] We've been having it out twice a week for the last six months – and we've never got anywhere yet.

Jenny

I'm not going to be always put upon, I'm your wife and I'm as good as you are.

Basil

[*With a thin smile.*] Oh, my dear, if you're going in for women's rights, you may have my vote by all means. And you can plump for all the candidates at once if you choose.

Jenny

You seem to think it's a joke.

Basil

[*Bitterly.*] Oh no, I promise you I don't do that. It's lasted too long. And God knows where it'll end... They say the first year of marriage is the worst; ours has been bad enough in all conscience.

Jenny

[*Aggressively.*] And I suppose you think it's my fault?

Basil

Don't you think we're both more or less to blame?

Jenny

[*With a laugh.*] Oh, I'm glad you acknowledge that you have something to do with it.

Basil

I tried to make you happy.

Jenny

Well, you haven't succeeded very well. Did you think I was likely to be happy – when you leave me alone all day and half the night for your swell friends that I'm not good enough for?

Basil

That's not true. I hardly ever see any of my old friends.

Jenny

Except Mrs. Murray, eh?

Basil

I've seen Mrs. Murray perhaps a dozen times in the last year.

Jenny

Oh, you needn't tell me that. I know it. She's a lady, isn't she?

Basil

[*Ignoring the charge.*] And my work takes me away from you. I can't always be down here. Think how bored you'd be.

Jenny

A precious lot of good your work does. You can't earn enough money to keep us out of debt.

Basil

[*Good-humouredly.*] We are in debt. But we share that very respectable condition with half the nobility and gentry in the kingdom. We're neither of us good managers, and we've lived a bit beyond our means this year. But in future we'll be more economical.

Jenny

[*Sullenly.*] All the neighbours know that we've got bills with the tradesmen.

Basil

[*Acidly.*] I'm sorry that you shouldn't have made so good a bargain as you expected when you married me.

Jenny

I wonder what you do succeed in? Your book was very successful, wasn't it? You thought you were going to set the Thames on fire, and the book fell flat, flat, flat.

Basil

[*Recovering his good temper.*] That is a fate which has befallen better books than mine.

Jenny

It deserved it.

Basil

Oh, I didn't expect *you* to appreciate it. It isn't given to all of us to write about wicked earls and beautiful duchesses.

Jenny

Well, I wasn't the only one. The papers praised it, didn't they?

Basil

The unanimity of their blame was the only thing that consoled me.

Jenny

And one of them advised you to study an English grammar. And you're the fine gentleman who looks down on poor things like us!

Basil

I often wonder if the reviewer who abuses you for a printer's error realises what pleasure he causes the wife of your bosom.

Jenny

Oh, I've learnt to know you so well this last six months – since the baby died. You've got no cause to set yourself up on

a pedestal.

Basil

[*With a laugh.*] My dear Jenny, I never pretended to be a golden idol.

Jenny

I know what you are now. And I was such a fool as to think you a hero. You're merely a failure. In everything you try you're a miserable failure.

Basil

[*With a slight sigh.*] Perhaps you're right, Jenny.

[Basil walks up and down; and then, stopping, looks at her for a moment meditatively.]

Basil

I sometimes wonder whether we shouldn't be happier – if we lived apart.

Jenny

[*With a start.*] What d'you mean?

Basil

We don't seem able to get on very well. And I see no chance of things going any better.

Jenny

[*With staring eyes.*] D'you mean to say you want to separate?

Basil

I think it might be better for both of us – at least for a time. Perhaps later on we might try again.

Jenny

And what'll *you* do?

Basil

I should go abroad for a while.

Jenny

With Mrs. Murray. Is that it? You want to go away with her.

Basil

[Impatiently.] No. Of course not.

Jenny

I don't believe it. You're in love with her.

Basil

You've got no right to say that.

Jenny

Haven't I? I suppose I must shut my eyes and say nothing.

You're in love with her. D'you think I've not seen it in these months? That's why you want to leave me.

Basil

It's impossible for us to live together. We shall never agree, and we shall never be happy. For God's sake let us separate and have done with it.

Jenny

You're sick of me. You've had all you want out of me, and now I can go. The fine lady comes along, and you send me away like a housemaid. D'you think I can't see that you're in love with her? You'd sacrifice me without a thought to save her a moment's unpleasantness. And because you love her you hate me.

Basil

It's not true.

Jenny

Can you deny that you're in love with her?

Basil

You're simply mad. Good heavens, I've done nothing that could give you the least cause to be jealous.

Jenny

[*Passionately.*] Will you swear that you're not in love with her? Swear it on your honour?

Basil

You're mad.

Jenny

[*With growing excitement.*] Swear it. You can't. You're simply madly in love with her.

Basil

Nonsense.

Jenny

Swear it. Swear it on your honour. Swear you don't care for her.

Basil

[*Shrugging his shoulders.*] I swear it ... on my honour.

Jenny

[*Scornfully.*] It's a lie!.. And she's just as much in love with you as you are with her.

Basil

[*Seizing her wrists.*] What d'you mean?

Jenny

D'you think I haven't got eyes in my head? I saw it that day she came here. D'you suppose she came to see me? She despises me. I'm not a lady. She came here to please *you*. She was polite to me to please *you*. She asked me to go and see her to please *you*.

Basil

[*Trying to compose himself.*] It's absurd. She was an old friend of mine. Of course she came.

Jenny

I know that sort of friend. D'you think I didn't see the way she looked at you, and how she followed you with her eyes? She simply hung on every word you said. When you smiled, she smiled. When you laughed, she laughed. Oh, I should think she was in love with you; I know what love is, and I felt it. And when she looked at me I know she hated me because I'd robbed her of you.

Basil

[*Unable to contain himself.*] Oh, what a dog's life it is we lead! We've been both utterly wretched. It can't go on – and I only see one way out.

Jenny

That's what you've been brooding over this last week, is it?

Separation! I knew there was something, and I couldn't find out what it was.

Basil

I do my best to hold myself in, but sometimes I feel it's impossible. I shall be led to saying things that we shall both regret. For Heaven's sake let us part.

Jenny

No.

Basil

We can't go on having these awful quarrels. It's too degrading. It was a horrible mistake that we ever married.

Jenny

[*Horror-stricken.*] Basil!

Basil

Oh, you must see that as well as I. We're utterly unsuited to

one another. And the baby's death removed the only necessity that held us together.

Jenny

You talk as if we only remained together because it was convenient.

Basil

[*Passionately.*] Let me go, Jenny. I can't stand it any more. I feel as if I shall go mad.

Jenny

[*Full of pain and anguish.*] It's nothing at all to you.

Basil

Jenny, I did my best for you a year ago. I gave you all I had to give. It was little enough in all conscience. Now I ask you to give me back my freedom.

Jenny

[*Distracted.*] You only think of yourself. What is to become of me?

Basil

You'll be much happier. It's the best thing for both of us. I'll do all I can for you, and you can have your mother and sister to live here.

Jenny

[*With a cry of grief and passion.*] But I love you, Basil.

Basil

You!! Why, you've tortured me for six months beyond all endurance. You've made all my days a burden to me. You've made my life a perfect hell.

Jenny

[*Gives a long groan of horror and dismay.*] Oh!

[They stand facing one another, when the housemaid, Fanny, comes in.]

Fanny

Mr. Halliwell.

[John comes in. Jenny, after taking his hand, sinks down on a chair, paying no attention to the following conversation; she stares in front of her, quite distraught. Basil tries with all his might to appear calm and natural.]

Basil

Hulloa, what are you doing in these parts?

John

How d'you do, Mrs. Kent? I've been having an early lunch at Richmond, and I thought I'd just drop in on my way back. As it was Saturday afternoon I thought I might find you.

Basil

I'm sure we're delighted to see you. *[John gives a side-glance*

at Jenny, and slightly raises his eyebrows.] But you've only just come in time, because I've got to go up to town. We might travel up together.

John

Certainly.

Jenny

Where are you going, Basil?

Basil

To Chancery Lane, to see my agent on business.

Jenny

[Suspiciously.] On Saturday afternoon? Why, he won't be there.

Basil

I have an appointment with him.

[Jenny does not answer, but is obviously unconvinced. John, somewhat embarrassed, exerts himself to make conversation.]

John

I was thinking as I came along that one must lead quite an idyllic existence in the suburbs – with the river – and one's little garden.

Basil

[Ironically.] And the spectacle of the fifty little houses opposite all exactly like one another.

John

And the quiet is perfectly enchanting.

Basil

Oh, yes. The only vehicles that disturb the peaceful seclusion are the milk-cart and the barrel-organs. It's quite idyllic.

Jenny

I think it's a very nice neighbourhood. And you get such a superior class of people here.

Basil

I'll just go and change. [*Looking at his watch.* There's a train at 4.15.

John

All right, hurry up.

[Basil goes out of the room. Jenny at once springs to her feet and goes towards John. She is distracted and hardly knows what she says.]

Jenny

Can I trust you?

John

What d'you mean?

[She stares into his eyes, doubting, trying to see whether he will be willing to help her.]

Jenny

You used to be a good sort. You never looked down on me because I was a barmaid. Tell me I can trust you, John. There's no one I can speak to, and I feel if I don't speak I shall go off my head.

John

What is the matter?

Jenny

Will you tell me the truth if I ask you something?

John

Of course.

Jenny

On your oath?

John

On my oath.

Jenny

[*After a momentary pause.*] Is there anything between Basil and Mrs. Murray?

John

[*Aghast.*] No. Certainly not.

Jenny

How d'you know? Are you sure? You wouldn't tell me, if there was. You're all against me because I'm not a lady... Oh, I'm so unhappy.

[She tries to restrain her tears, she is half-hysterical. John stares at her, surprised, at a loss for words.]

Jenny

If you only knew what a life we lead! He calls it a dog's life, and he's right.

John

I thought you got on so well.

Jenny

Oh, before you we've always kept up appearances. He's ashamed to let you know he regrets he ever married me. He wants to separate.

John

What!

Jenny

[*Impatiently.*] Oh, don't look so surprised. You're not an utter fool, are you? He proposed it to-day before you came in. We'd been having one of our rows.

John

But what on earth is it all about?

Jenny

God knows!

John

It's nonsense. It can only be a little passing quarrel. You must expect to have those.

Jenny

No, it isn't. No, it isn't. He doesn't love me. He's in love with your sister-in-law.

John

It's impossible.

Jenny

He's always there. He was there twice last week and twice the week before.

John

How d'you know?

Jenny

I've followed him.

John

You followed him in the street, Jenny?

Jenny

[*Defiantly.*] Yes. If I'm not ladylike enough for him, I needn't play the lady there. You're shocked now, I suppose?

John

I wouldn't presume to judge you, Jenny.

Jenny

And I've read his letters, too – because I wanted to know what he was doing. I steamed one open, and he saw it, and he never said a word.

John

Good heavens, why did you do it?

Jenny

Because I can't live unless I know the truth. I thought it was Mrs. Murray's handwriting.

John

Was it from her?

Jenny

No. It was a receipt from the coal merchant. I could see how he despised me when he looked at the envelope – I didn't stick it down again very well. And I saw him smile when he found it was only a receipt.

John

Upon my word, I don't think you've got much cause to be jealous.

Jenny

Oh, you don't know. Last Tuesday he was dining there, and

you should have seen the state he was in. He was so restless he couldn't sit still. He looked at his watch every minute. His eyes simply glittered with excitement, and I could almost hear his heart beating.

John

It can't be true.

Jenny

He never loved me. He married me because he thought it was his duty. And then when the baby died – he thought I'd entrapped him.

John

He didn't say so.

Jenny

No. He never says anything – but I saw it in his eyes. [*Passionately clasping her hands.*] Oh, you don't know what our life is. For days he doesn't say a word except to answer my questions. And the silence simply drives me mad. I shouldn't

mind if he blackguarded me. I'd rather he hit me than simply look and look. I can see he's keeping himself in. He's said more to-day than he's ever said before. I knew it was getting towards the end.

John

[*With a helpless gesture.*] I'm very sorry.

Jenny

Oh, don't you pity me, too. I've had a great deal too much pity. I don't want it. Basil married me from pity. Oh, I wish he hadn't. I can't stand the unhappiness.

John

[*Gravely.*] You know, Jenny, he's a man of honour.

Jenny

Oh, I know he's a man of honour. I wish he had a little less of it. One doesn't want a lot of fine sentiments in married life. They don't work... Oh, why couldn't I fall in love with a man of my own class? I should have been so much happier. I used to be

so proud that Basil wasn't a clerk, or something in the City. He's right, we shall never be happy.

John

[*Trying to calm her.*] Oh, yes, you will. You mustn't take things too seriously.

Jenny

It isn't a matter of yesterday, or to-day, or to-morrow. I can't alter myself. He knew I wasn't a lady when he married me. My father had to bring up five children on two-ten a week. You can't expect a man to send his daughters to a boarding-school at Brighton on that, and have them finished in Paris... He doesn't say a word when I do something or say something a lady wouldn't – but he purses up his lips, and looks... Then I get so mad that I do things just to aggravate him. Sometimes I try to be vulgar. One learns a good deal in a bar in the City, and I know so well the things to say that'll make Basil curl up. I want to get a bit of revenge out of him sometimes, and I know exactly where he's raw and where I can hurt him. [*With a laugh of scorn.*] You should see the way he looks when I don't eat properly, or when I call a man a Johnny.

John

[*Drily.*] It opens up endless possibilities of domestic unhappiness.

Jenny

Oh, I know it isn't fair to him, but I lose my head. I can't always be refined. Sometimes I can't help breaking out. I feel I must let myself go.

John

Why don't you separate, then?

Jenny

Because I love him. Oh, John, you don't know how I love him. I'd do anything to make him happy. I'd give my life if he wanted it. Oh, I can't say it, but when I think of him my heart burns so that sometimes I can hardly breathe. I can never show him that he's all in the world to me; I try to make him love me, and I only make him hate me. What can I do to show him? Ah, if he only knew, I'm sure he'd not regret that he married me. I feel – I feel

as if my heart was full of music, and yet something prevents me from ever bringing it out.

John

D'you think he means it seriously when he talks of separation?

Jenny

He's been brooding over it. I know him so well, I knew there was something he was thinking over. Oh, John, I couldn't live without him. I'd rather die. If he leaves me, I swear I'll kill myself.

John

[*Walking up and down.*] I wish I could help you. I don't see anything I can do.

Jenny

Oh, yes, there is. Speak to your sister-in-law. Ask her to have mercy on me. Perhaps she doesn't know what she's doing. Tell her I love him... Take care. There's Basil. If he knew what I'd said he'd never speak to me again.

[Basil comes in, dressed in a frock-coat; with a tall hat in his hand.]

Basil

I'm ready. We've just got time to catch the train.

John

All right. Good-bye, Mrs. Kent.

Jenny

[Keeping her eyes fixed on Basil.] Good-bye.

[The two men go out. Jenny runs to the door and calls out.]

Jenny

Basil, I want you a moment, Basil!

[Basil appears at the door.]

Jenny

Are you really going to Chancery Lane?

[Basil makes a movement of impatience and goes out again without answering.]

Jenny

[Alone.] Oh, well, I'm going to see that for myself. *[Calling to the Maid.]* Fanny!.. Bring my hat and my jacket. Quick!

[She runs to the window and looks out at Basil and John going away. Fanny appears with the clothes. Jenny hurriedly puts them on.]

Jenny

[As Fanny is helping her.] What time is it?

Fanny

[Looking up at the clock.] Five minutes past four.

Jenny

I think I can catch it. He said 4.15.

Fanny

Will you be in to tea, mum?

Jenny

I don't know. [*She runs to the door and rushes out.*]

END OF THE SECOND ACT

THE THIRD ACT

The Same Afternoon

[A luxuriously furnished drawing-room at Mrs. Murray's house in Charles Street, Mayfair. Everything in it is beautiful, but suggests in the owner good taste rather than originality.]

[Hilda is seated near a tea-table, elaborately gowned, and with her is Mabel. Mr. Robert Brackley is sitting down, a stout, round-faced man, clean-shaven and very bald; about forty; he is attired in the height of fashion, in a frock-coat, patent-leather boots and an eye-glass. He talks very quickly, in a careless frivolous fashion, and is always much amused at what he says.]

Mabel

What is the time, Mr. Brackley?

Brackley

I shan't tell you again.

Mabel

How brutal of you!

Brackley

There's something unhealthy in your passion for information. I've already told you five times.

Hilda

It's very unflattering to us who've been doing our little best to amuse you.

Mabel

I can't imagine what's happened to John. He promised to fetch me here.

Hilda

He's sure to come if you'll only wait patiently.

Mabel

But I hate waiting patiently.

Hilda

You shouldn't have let him out of your sight.

Mabel

He went to Putney after luncheon to see your friend Mr. Kent.
Have you seen him lately?

Hilda

John? I saw him at the Martins yesterday.

Mabel

[*Slyly.*] I meant Mr. Kent.

Hilda

[*Indifferently.*] Yes. He called the other day. [*To change the conversation.*] You're unusually silent, Mr. Brackley.

Brackley

[*Smiling.*] I have nothing whatever to say.

Mabel

That's usually when clever people talk most.

Hilda

Are you doing anything now?

Brackley

Oh yes, I'm writing a play in blank verse.

Hilda

You brave man. What is it about?

Brackley

Cleopatra.

Hilda

Dear me! Shakespeare wrote a play about Cleopatra, didn't he?

Brackley

I daresay. I haven't read it. Shakespeare bores me. He lived so long ago.

Mabel

Of course there are people who read him.

Brackley

Are there? What do they look like?

Hilda

[*Smiling.*] They bear no distinctive mark of their eccentricity.

Brackley

The English are so original.

Mabel

I think I shall go and ring up the flat. I wonder if John has gone straight home.

Brackley

Do. I'm growing very uneasy about him.

Mabel

[*Laughing.*] You absurd creature.

[*She goes out.*]

Hilda

You talk more nonsense than anyone I ever met.

Brackley

That's my stock in trade. You don't imagine people would read my poems if they knew that I was sober, industrious, and economical. As a matter of fact I lead the virtuous life of a clergyman's daughter, but not a reviewer would notice me if he knew it.

Hilda

And the little things that the indiscreet read of in the papers...

Brackley

Are merely another proof of my passion for duty. The British public wants its poets to lead romantic lives.

Hilda

Are you ever serious?

Brackley

May I come to lunch with you on Thursday?

Hilda

[*A little surprised.*] Certainly. But why on Thursday?

Brackley

Because on that day I intend to ask you to marry me.

Hilda

[*With a smile.*] I'm sorry, I've just remembered that I'm
lunching out.

Brackley

You break my heart.

Hilda

On the contrary, I provide you with the materials for a sonnet.

Brackley

Won't you marry me?

Hilda

No.

Brackley

Why not?

Hilda

[*Amused.*] I'm not in the least in love with you.

Brackley

People who propose to marry should ask themselves if they can look forward with equanimity to breakfasting opposite one another for an indefinite number of years.

Hilda

You're very unromantic.

Brackley

My dear lady, if you want romance I'll send you my complete works bound in vellum. I've ground out ten volumes of romance to Phyllis and Chloe and heaven knows who. The Lord save me from a romantic wife.

Hilda

But I'm afraid I'm hopelessly romantic.

Brackley

Well, six months of marriage with a poet will cure you.

Hilda

I'd rather not be cured.

Brackley

Won't you be in to luncheon on Thursday?

Hilda

No.

[The Butler comes in.]

Butler

Mr. Halliwell, Mr. Kent.

[Basil and John appear, and at the same moment Mabel comes in from the room in which she has been telephoning.]

Mabel

[To John.] Wretched creature! I've been trying to ring you up.

John

Have I kept you waiting? I went down to Chancery Lane with Basil.

[John turns to shake hands with Hilda and Brackley, while Basil, who has said how d'you do to Hilda, comes down to speak to Mabel. The conversation between Mabel and Basil is in an undertone.]

Basil

How d'you do. You must scold me for keeping John so long.

Mabel

I didn't really want him, you know.

Basil

[*Pointing with his head to Brackley.*] I say, who is that?

Mabel

Robert Brackley. Don't you know him?

Basil

The poet?

Mabel

Of course. They say he'd have been given the Laureateship if it hadn't been abolished at Tennyson's death.

Basil

[*Tightening his lips.*] He's rather a low blackguard, isn't he?

Mabel

Heavens, what's the matter with him, poor man? He's Hilda's latest celebrity. He pretends to adore her.

Basil

Don't you remember the Grange case that he was mixed up in?

Mabel

[*In tones of surprise.*] But, my dear Mr. Kent, that was two years ago.

Hilda

Mr. Kent, I want to introduce you to Mr. Brackley.

Basil

[*Going up.*] How d'you do.

[John comes down to his wife.]

Mabel

Wretched creature!

John

I say, Mabel, is Basil often here?

Mabel

I don't know. I met him here last week.

John

Why the Dickens does he come? He's got no business to.

Mabel

You brought him yourself to-day.

John

I didn't. He insisted on coming – when I said I had to fetch you.

Mabel

Perhaps he came to see me.

John

Fiddledidee! I think you ought to speak to Hilda about it.

Mabel

My dear John, are you mad? She'd jump down my throat.

John

Why does she let him hang about her? She must know she's

turning his silly head.

Mabel

I daresay she wants to prove to him that he showed very bad taste a year ago. It is rather annoying when you're attached to a young man that he should go and marry somebody else.

John

Well, I don't think she's playing the game, and I shall tell her so.

Mabel

She'll snub you awfully.

John

I don't care... Look here, you make a diversion so that I can get hold of her.

Mabel

How?

John

[*Dryly.*] I don't know. Exercise your invention.

Mabel

[*Going towards the others.*] Hilda, John is clamouring for some tea.

Hilda

[*Coming down.*] Why on earth can't he help himself?

John

My native modesty prevents.

Hilda

That's quite a new trait in you.

[*Hilda sits down and pours out tea for John. He looks at her silently.*]

Hilda

You've been lunching at Richmond?

John

Yes... Then I went on to Putney.

Hilda

You've been making quite a day of it.

John

[*Taking the cup.*] I say, old gal – you're not going to make a fool of yourself, are you?

Hilda

[*Opening her eyes.*] Oh, I hope not. Why?

John

I thought it might have slipped your memory that Basil was married about a year ago.

Hilda

[*Freezing.*] What on earth d'you mean? [*Calling*] Mabel.

John

One moment... You can give me a little conversation, can't you?

Hilda

I'm afraid you're going to bore me.

John

[*Good-humouredly.*] I assure you I'm not... Isn't Basil here rather often?

Hilda

I wonder you haven't learnt to mind your own business, John.

John

Don't you think it's rather rough on that poor little woman in Putney?

Hilda

[*With a suspicion of contempt.*] I went down to see her. I thought she was vulgar and pretentious. I'm afraid I can't arouse any interest in her.

John

[*Gently.*] She may be vulgar, but she told me her love was like music in her heart. Don't you think she must have suffered awfully to get hold of a thought like that?

Hilda

[*After a pause, changing suddenly both voice and manner.*]

And d'you think I've not suffered, John? I'm so unhappy.

John

Do you really care for him?

Hilda

[*In a low voice hoarse with passion.*] No, I don't care for him. I worship the very ground he treads on.

John

[*Very gravely.*] Then you must do as you think best... You're playing the most dangerous game in the world. You're playing with human hearts... Good-bye.

Hilda

[*Taking his hand.*] Good-bye, John. You're not angry with me because I was horrid... I'm glad you told me about his wife. Now I shall know what to do.

John

Mabel.

Mabel

[*Coming forward.*] Yes, we really must be going. I've not seen my precious baby for two hours.

Hilda

[*Taking both her hands.*] Good-bye, you happy child. You've got a precious baby, and you've got a husband you love. What can you want more?

Mabel

[*Flippantly.*] I want a motor-car.

Hilda

[*Kissing her.*] Good-bye, darling.

[*Mabel and John go out.*]

Brackley

I like this room, Mrs. Murray. It never seems to say to you: now it's really time for you to go away, as some drawing-rooms do.

Hilda

[*Recovering her serenity.*] I suppose it's the furniture. I'm thinking of changing it.

Brackley

[*With a smile.*] Upon my word, that almost suggests that I've outstayed my welcome.

Hilda

[*Gaily.*] I shouldn't have said that if I didn't know that nothing would induce you to go till you wanted to.

Brackley

[*Rising.*] You know me like your glove. But it really is growing

monstrous late.

Hilda

You mustn't go till you've told me who the fair charmer was
I saw you with at the play last night.

Brackley

Ah, the green-eyed monster!

Hilda

[*Laughing.*] Don't be so absurd, but I thought you'd like to
know her yellow hair was dyed.

*[Basil looks over the pages of a book, somewhat annoyed that Hilda
takes no notice of him.]*

Brackley

Of course it was dyed. That was just the charm of it. Any
woman can have yellow hair naturally: there's no more credit in
that than in having it blue or green.

Hilda

I've always wanted to make mine purple.

Brackley

Don't you think women ought to be artificial? It's just as much their duty to rouge their cheeks and powder their noses as it is for them to wear nice frocks.

Hilda

But I know many women who wear horrid frocks.

Brackley

Oh, those are the others. I treat them as non-existent.

Hilda

What do you mean?

Brackley

There are only two sorts of women in the world – the women who powder their noses and the others.

Hilda

And who are they if you please?

Brackley

I haven't examined the matter very carefully, but I understand they are clergymen's daughters by profession.

[He shakes hands with her.]

Hilda

It's so nice of you to have come.

Brackley

[Nodding at Basil.] Good-bye... May I come again soon?

Hilda

[Looking at him quickly.] Were you serious just now, or were you laughing at me?

Brackley

I've never been more serious in my life.

Hilda

Then perhaps I shall be in to luncheon on Thursday after all.

Brackley

A thousand thanks. Good-bye.

[He nods to Basil and goes out. Hilda looks at Basil with a smile.]

Hilda

Is that a very interesting book?

Basil

[*Putting it down.*] I thought that man was never going away.

Hilda

[*Laughing.*] I suspect he thought precisely the same of you.

Basil

[*Ill-temperedly.*] What an ass he is! How *can* you stand him?

Hilda

I'm rather attached to him. I don't take everything he says very seriously. And young men ought to be foolish.

Basil

He didn't strike me as so juvenile as all that.

Hilda

He's only forty, poor thing – and I've never known a coming young man who was less than that.

Basil

He's a young man with a very bald head.

Hilda

[*Amused.*] I wonder why you dislike him!

Basil

[*With a jealous glance, icily.*] I thought he wasn't admitted into decent houses.

Hilda

[*Opening her eyes.*] He comes here, Mr. Kent.

Basil

[*Unable to restrain his ill-temper.*] Don't you know that he's been mixed up in every scandal for the last twenty years?

Hilda

[*Good-humouredly, seeing that Basil is merely jealous.*] There must be people in the world to provide gossip for their neighbours.

Basil

It's no business of mine. I have no right to talk to you like this.

Hilda

I wonder why you do it?

Basil

[*Almost savagely.*] Because I love you.

[*There is a little pause.*]

Hilda

[*With a smile, ironically.*] Won't you have some more tea, Mr. Kent?

Basil

[*Going up to her, speaking with a sort of vehement gravity.*] You don't know what I've suffered. You don't know what a hell my life is... I tried so hard to prevent myself from coming here. When I married I swore I'd break with all my old friends... When I married I found I loved *you*.

Hilda

I can't listen to you if you talk like that.

Basil

D'you want me to go?

[*She does not answer for a moment, but walks up and down in agitation. At last she stops and faces him.*

Hilda

Did you hear me tell Mr. Brackley to come on Thursday?

Basil

Yes.

Hilda

He's asked me to be his wife. And on Thursday I shall give him an answer.

Basil

Hilda!

Hilda

[*Earnestly.*] It's you who've driven me into it.

Basil

Hilda, what are you going to say to him?

Hilda

I don't know – perhaps, yes?

Basil

Oh, Hilda, Hilda, you don't care for him?

Hilda

[*Shrugging her shoulders.*] He amuses me. I dare say we should get on very well together.

Basil

[*Passionately.*] Oh, you can't. You don't know what you're doing. I thought – I thought you loved me.

Hilda

It's because I love you that I shall marry Mr. Brackley.

Basil

Oh, it's absurd. I won't let you. You're making us both utterly wretched. I won't let you sacrifice our happiness. Oh, Hilda, I love you. I can't live without you. At first I tried to resist seeing you. I used to pass your door and look up at your windows; and the door seemed as if it were waiting for me. And at the end of the street I used to look back. Oh, how I used to want to come in and see you once more! I thought if I saw you just once, I should get over it. And at last I couldn't help myself. I'm so weak. Do you despise me?

Hilda

[*Almost in a whisper.*] I don't know.

Basil

And you were so kind I couldn't help coming again. I thought I did no harm.

Hilda

I saw you were unhappy.

Basil

I should think I was unhappy. For months I've dreaded going home. When I saw my house as I walked along I almost turned sick. You don't know how fervently I've wished that I'd got killed in the war. I can't go on.

Hilda

But you must. It's your duty.

Basil

Oh, I think I've had enough of duty and honour. I've used up all my principles in the last year.

Hilda

Don't say that, Basil.

Basil

After all, it's my own fault. I brought it on myself, and I must take the consequences... But I haven't the strength, I don't love her.

Hilda

Then don't let her ever find it out. Be kind to her, and gentle and forbearing.

Basil

I can't be kind and gentle and forbearing day after day, for weeks, and months, and years.

Hilda

I thought you were a brave man. They wouldn't have given you that medal if you'd been a coward.

Basil

Oh, my dearest, it's not hard to risk your life in the midst of

battle. I can do that – but this needs more strength than I've got. I tell you I can't endure it.

Hilda

[*Tenderly.*] But it'll get better. You'll get used to one another, and you'll understand one another better.

Basil

We're too different. It's impossible for it to get better. We can't even go on as we have been. I've felt that the end was coming.

Hilda

But try – try for my sake.

Basil

You don't know what it is. Everything she says, everything she does, jars upon me so frightfully. I try to restrain myself. I clench my teeth to prevent myself from breaking out at her. Sometimes I can't help it, and I say things that I'd give anything to have left unsaid. She's dragging me down. I'm getting as common and vulgar as she is.

Hilda

How can you say that of your wife?

Basil

Don't you think I must have gone through a good deal before I could acknowledge to myself what she was? I'm chained to her for all my life. And when I look into the future – I see her a vulgar, slatternly shrew like her mother, and myself abject, degraded, and despicable. The woman never tires in her conflict with the man, and in the end *he* always succumbs. A man, when he marries a woman like that, thinks he's going to lift her up to his own station. The fool! It's she who drags him down to hers.

Hilda

[*Much disturbed, rising from her seat.*] I wanted you to be so happy.

Basil

[*Going towards her.*] Hilda!

Hilda

No – don't... Please!

Basil

If it weren't for you I couldn't have lived. It was only by seeing you that I gathered courage to go on with it. And each time I came here I loved you more passionately.

Hilda

Oh, why did you come?

Basil

I couldn't help it. I knew it was poison, but I loved the poison. I would give my whole soul for one look of your eyes.

Hilda

If you care for me at all, do your duty like a brave man – and let me respect you.

Basil

Say that you love me, Hilda.

Hilda

[*Distracted.*] You're making our friendship impossible. Don't you see that you're preventing me from ever having you here again?

Basil

I can't help it.

Hilda

I ought never to have seen you again. I thought there was no harm in your coming, and I – I couldn't bear to lose you altogether.

Basil

Even if I never see you again, I must tell you now that I love you. I made you suffer, I was blind. But I love you with all my

heart, Hilda. All day I think of you, and I dream of you in the night. I long to take you in my arms and kiss you, to kiss your lips, and your beautiful hair, and your hands. My whole soul is yours, Hilda.

[He goes towards her again to take her in his arms.]

Hilda

Oh, no, go away. For God's sake, go now. I can't bear it.

Basil

Hilda, I can't live without you.

Hilda

Have mercy on me. Don't you see how weak I am? Oh, God help me!

Basil

You don't love me?

Hilda

[*Vehemently.*] You know I love you. But because of my great love I beseech you to do your duty.

Basil

My duty is to be happy. Let us go where we can love one another – away from England, to a land where love isn't sinful and ugly.

Hilda

Oh, Basil, let us try to walk straight. Think of your wife, who loves you also – as much as I do. You're all the world to her. You can't treat her so shamefully.

[She puts her handkerchief to her eyes, and Basil gently takes away her hand.]

Basil

Don't cry, Hilda. I can't bear it.

Hilda

[*In broken tones.*] Don't you understand that we could never respect ourselves again if we did that poor creature such a fearful wrong? She would be always between us with her tears and her sorrows. I tell you I couldn't bear it. Have mercy on me – if you love me at all.

Basil

[*Wavering.*] Hilda, it's too hard. I can't leave you.

Hilda

You must. I *know* it's better to do our duty. For my sake, dearest, go back to your wife, and don't let her ever know that you love me. It's because we're stronger than she that we must sacrifice ourselves.

[He leans his head on his hands, and sighs deeply. For a while they remain in silence. At last, with another sigh, he gets up.]

Basil

I don't know any longer what's right and what's wrong. It all seems confused. It's very hard.

Hilda

[*Hoarsely.*] It's just as hard for me, Basil.

Basil

[*Broken-hearted.*] Good-bye, then. I dare say you're right. And perhaps I should only make you very unhappy.

Hilda

Good-bye, my dearest.

[He bends down and kisses her hands. She stifles a sob. He goes slowly to the door, with his back turned to her; and then Hilda, unable to endure it, gives a groan.]

Hilda

Basil. Don't go.

Basil

[*With a cry of joy.*] Ah! Hilda.

[*He clasps her passionately in his arms.*]

Hilda

Oh, I can't bear it. I won't lose you. Basil, say you love me.

Basil

[*In a madness of joy.*] Yes. I love you with all my heart.

Hilda

I could have borne it if you'd been happy.

Basil

Now *nothing* can separate us, Hilda. You belong to me for ever.

Hilda

God help me! What have I done?

Basil

If we lose our souls, what does it matter? We gain the whole world.

Hilda

Oh, Basil, I want your love. I want your love so badly.

Basil

Will you come with me, Hilda? I can take you to a land where the whole earth speaks only of love – and where only love and youth and beauty matter.

Hilda

Let us go where we can be together always. We have so short a time; let us snatch all the happiness we can.

Basil

[Kissing her again.] My darling.

Hilda

Oh, Basil, Basil... *[She starts away.]* Take care!

[The Butler comes in.]

Butler

Mrs. Kent.

[Jenny enters hurriedly, as he gives her name. The Butler at once goes out.]

Basil

Jenny!

Jenny

I've caught you.

Basil

[*Trying to be urbane—to Hilda*] I think you know my wife.

Jenny

[*In a loud angry voice.*] Oh, yes, I know her. You needn't introduce me. I've come for my husband.

Basil

Jenny, what are you saying?

Jenny

Oh, I don't want any of your Society shams. I've come here to speak out.

Basil

[*To Hilda.*] Would you mind leaving us alone?

Jenny

[*Also to Hilda, passionately.*] No, I want to speak to you. You're trying to get my husband from me. He's *my* husband.

Basil

Be quiet, Jenny. Are you mad? Mrs. Murray, for God's sake leave us. She'll insult you.

Jenny

You think of her, you don't think of me. You don't care how much I suffer.

Basil

[*Taking her arm.*] Come away, Jenny.

Jenny

[*Shaking him off.*] I won't. You're afraid to let me see her.

Hilda

[*Pale and trembling, conscience-stricken.*] Let her speak.

Jenny

[*Going up to Hilda threateningly.*] You're stealing my husband from me. Oh, you... [*She is at a loss for words violent enough.*]

Hilda

I don't want to make you unhappy, Mrs. Kent.

Jenny

You can't get round me with polite words. I'm sick of all that. I want to speak straight.

Basil

[*To Hilda.*] Please go. You can do no good.

Jenny

[*Still more vehemently.*] You're stealing my husband from me. You're a wicked woman.

Hilda

[*Almost in a whisper.*] If you like I'll promise you never to see your husband again.

Jenny

[*With angry scorn.*] Much good your promises will do me. I wouldn't believe a word you said. I know what Society ladies are. We know all about them in the City.

Basil

[*To Hilda.*] You *must* leave us alone.

[He opens the door, and she goes out, looking away from him.]

Jenny

[Savagely.] She's frightened of me. She daren't stand up to me.

Basil

[As Hilda goes.] I'm so sorry.

Jenny

You're sorry for her.

Basil

[Turning on her.] Yes, I am. What d'you mean by coming here and behaving like this?

Jenny

I've caught you at last... You liar! You dirty liar! You told me you were going to Chancery Lane.

Basil

I have been to Chancery Lane.

Jenny

Oh, I know you have – for five minutes. It was only an excuse. You might just as well have come here straight.

Basil

[*Angrily.*] How dare you follow me?

Jenny

I've got a right to follow you.

Basil

[*Unable to contain himself.*] What d'you want here?

Jenny

I want you. D'you think I didn't guess what was going on? I saw you come in with Halliwell. Then I saw him go out with his wife. Then another man went out, and I knew you were alone with her.

Basil

[Sharply.] How did you know?

Jenny

I gave the butler a sovereign, and he told me.

Basil

[Looking for a word to express his contempt.] Oh, you ... you cad! It's only what I should have expected you to do.

Jenny

And then I waited for you, and you didn't come. And at last I couldn't wait any longer.

Basil

Well, you've finished it now.

[Jenny catches sight of a photograph of Basil, standing on a table.]

Jenny

[Pointing to it.] What's she got your photograph here for?

Basil

I gave it to Mrs. Murray before I was married.

Jenny

She's got no right to keep it there.

[She takes the photograph and flings it violently on the floor.]

Basil

Jenny, what are you doing?

[Jenny digs her heel into it savagely, viciously.]

Jenny

[*Hissing the words.*] Oh, I hate her. I hate her.

Basil

[*Striving to contain himself.*] You drive me perfectly mad. You'll make me say things that I shall regret all my life. For Heaven's sake, go.

Jenny

I shan't go till you come with me.

Basil

[*Beside himself.*] I choose to remain.

Jenny

What d'you mean?

Basil

Look here, until to-day I swear to you before God that I've never done anything or said anything that you couldn't have known. Do you believe me?

Jenny

I don't believe that you're not in love with that woman.

Basil

I don't ask you to.

Jenny

What!

Basil

I said, until to-day I've been absolutely faithful to you. Heaven knows, I've tried to do my duty. I've done all I could to make you happy. And I've struggled with all my might to love you.

Jenny

Say it out if you've got anything to say, I'm not afraid to hear.

Basil

I don't wish to deceive you. It's best that you should know what has happened.

Jenny

[*Scornfully.*] Now for another thumping lie.

Basil

This afternoon I told Hilda I loved her... And she loves me too.

Jenny

[*With a cry of rage.*] Oh!

[She hits at his face with her umbrella, but he wards the blow, and, snatching the umbrella from her, throws it away.]

Basil

You've brought it on yourself. You made me too unhappy.

[Jenny, panting and bewildered, stands helpless, trying to control herself.]

Basil

And now it's the end. The life we led was impossible. I tried to do something that was beyond my power. I'm going away. I can't and I won't live with you any longer.

Jenny

[Frightened at herself and at what he says.] Basil, you don't mean that?

Basil

I've struggled against it for months. And now I'm beaten.

Jenny

You've got me to count with. I won't let you go.

Basil

[*Bitterly.*] What more d'you want? Isn't it enough that you've ruined my whole life?

Jenny

[*Hoarsely.*] You don't love me?

Basil

I never loved you.

Jenny

Why did you marry me?

Basil

Because you made me.

Jenny

[*In a whisper.*] You never loved me – even at the beginning?

Basil

Never.

Jenny

Basil!

Basil

It's too late now to keep it in. I must tell you and have done with it. *You've* been having it out for months – now it's my turn.

Jenny

[Going up to him and trying to put her arm round his neck.]

But I love you, Basil. I'll make you love me.

Basil

[Shrinking from her.] Don't touch me!

Jenny

[With a movement of despair.] I really think you loathe me.

Basil

For Heaven's sake, Jenny, let us finish with it. I'm very sorry. I don't wish to be unkind to you. But you must have seen that – that I didn't care for you. What's the good of going on humbugging, and pretending, and making ourselves utterly wretched?

Jenny

Yes, I've seen it. But I wouldn't believe it. When I've put my hand on your shoulder, I've seen that you could hardly help

shuddering. And sometimes when I've kissed you, I've seen you put out all your strength to prevent yourself from pushing me away.

Basil

Jenny, I can't help it if I don't love you. I can't help it if I – if I love some one else.

Jenny

[*Dazed and cowed.*] What are you going to do?

Basil

I'm going away.

Jenny

Where?

Basil

God knows.

[There is a knock at the door.]

Basil

Come in.

[The Butler enters with a note, which he gives to Basil.]

Butler

Mrs. Murray told me to give you this note, Sir.

Basil

[Taking it.] Thank you.

[He opens and reads it as the Servant goes out of the room, then looks up at Jenny, who is anxiously watching him.]

[Reading.] "You may tell your wife that I've made up my mind to marry Mr. Brackley. I will never see you again."

Jenny

What does she mean?

Basil

[*Bitterly.*] Isn't it clear? Some one has asked her to marry him, and she means to accept.

Jenny

But you said she loved you.

[He shrugs his shoulders without answering. Jenny goes up to him imploringly.]

Jenny

Oh, Basil, if it's true, give me another chance. She doesn't love you as I love you. I've been selfish and quarrelsome and exacting, but I've always loved you. Oh, don't leave me, Basil. Let me try once more if I can't make you care for me.

Basil

[*Looking down, hoarsely.*] I'm very sorry. It's too late.

Jenny

[*Despairingly.*] Oh, God, what shall I do? And even though she's going to marry somebody else, you care for her better than any one else in the world?

Basil

[*In a whisper.*] Yes.

Jenny

And even if she does marry that other man she'll love you still. There's no room for me between you. I can go away like a discharged servant... Oh, God! oh, God! what have I done to deserve it?

Basil

[*Touched by her utter misery.*] I'm very sorry to make you so unhappy.

Jenny

Oh, don't pity me. D'you think I want your pity now?

Basil

You had better come away, Jenny.

Jenny

No. You've told me you don't want me any more. I shall go my own way.

Basil

[Looks at her for a moment, hesitating; then shrugs his shoulders.] Then good-bye.

[He goes out, and Jenny, looking after him, passes her hand wearily over her forehead.]

Jenny

[With a sigh.] He's so glad to go... *[She gives a little sob.]*

They've got no room for me.

[She takes up from the floor the photograph on which she stamped, and looks at it; then sinks down, burying her face in her hands, and bursts into a passion of tears.]

END OF THE THIRD ACT

THE FOURTH ACT

The Next Morning

[The scene is the same as in the Second Act, the drawing-room at Basil's house in Putney. Basil is sitting at the table, with his head in his hands. He looks tired and worn; his face is very white, and there are great black lines under his eyes. His hair is dishevelled. On the table lies a revolver.]

[A knock at the door.]

Basil

[Without looking up.] Come in.

[Fanny enters.]

Fanny

[Subdued and pale.] I came to see if you wanted anything, sir.

Basil

[Looking up at her slowly, his voice is dull and hoarse.] No.

Fanny

Shall I open the windows, Sir? It's a beautiful morning.

Basil

No, I'm cold. Make up the fire.

Fanny

Wouldn't you like a cup of tea? You ought to 'ave something after not going to bed all night.

Basil

I don't want anything... Don't worry, there's a good woman.

[Fanny puts coals on the fire, while BASIL listlessly watches her.]

Basil

How long is it since you sent the telegrams?

Fanny

I took them the moment the office was opened.

Basil

What's the time?

Fanny

Well, sir, it must be 'alf-past nine by now.

Basil

Good Heavens, how slowly the hours go. I thought the night would never end... Oh, God, what shall I do?

Fanny

I'll make you a strong cup of tea. If you don't 'ave something to pull you together – I don't know what'll 'appen to you.

Basil

Yes, make it quickly, I'm thirsty... And I'm so cold.

[A ring at the front door is heard.]

Basil

[Jumping up.] There's some one at the door, Fanny. Hurry up.

[She goes out, and he follows her to the door of the room.]

Basil

Fanny, don't let any one up beside Mr. Halliwell. Say I can see no one. *[He waits for a moment, anxiously.]* Is that you, John?

John

[Outside.] Yes.

Basil

[*To himself.*] Thank God!

[*John comes in.*

Basil

I thought you were never coming. I begged you to come at once.

John

I started immediately I got your wire.

Basil

It seems hours since the girl went to the post-office.

John

What's the matter?

Basil

[*Hoarsely.*] Don't you know? I thought I had said it in my telegram.

John

You simply wired that you were in great trouble.

Basil

I suppose I thought you'd see it in the papers.

John

What on earth d'you mean? I've not seen a paper. Where's your wife?

Basil

[*After a pause, almost in a whisper.*] She's dead.

John

[*Thunderstruck.*] Good God!

Basil

[*Impatiently.*] Don't look at me like that. Isn't it plain enough? Don't you understand?

John

But she was all right yesterday.

Basil

[*Dully.*] Yes. She was all right yesterday.

John

For goodness sake tell me what you mean, Basil.

Basil

She's dead... And she was all right yesterday.

[John does not understand. He is greatly distressed, and does not know what to say.]

Basil

I killed her – as surely as if I'd strangled her with my own hands.

John

What d'you mean? She's not really dead!

Basil

[In agony.] She threw herself into the river last night.

John

How awful!

Basil

Haven't you got something more to say than how awful? I feel as if I were going mad.

John

But I can't understand! Why did she do it?

Basil

Oh – yesterday we had an awful row ... before you came.

John

I know.

Basil

Then she followed me to ... to your sister-in-law's. And she came up and made another scene. Then I lost my head. I was so furious, I don't know what I said. I was mad. I told her I'd have nothing more to do with her... Oh, I can't bear it, I can't bear it.

[He breaks down and hides his face in his hands, sobbing.]

John

Come, Basil – pull yourself together a bit.

Basil

[Looking up despairingly.] I can hear her voice now. I can see the look of her eyes. She asked me to give her another chance, and I refused. It was so pitiful to hear the way she appealed to me, only I was mad, and I couldn't feel it.

[Fanny comes in with the cup of tea, which Basil silently takes and drinks.]

Fanny

[To John.] He ain't slept a wink all night, sir... No more 'ave I, for the matter of that.

[John nods, but does not answer; and Fanny, wiping her eyes with her apron, leaves the room.]

Basil

Oh, I'd give everything not to have said what I did. I'd always held myself in before, but yesterday – I couldn't.

John

Well?

Basil

I didn't get back here till nearly ten, and the maid told me Jenny had just gone out. I thought she'd gone back to her mother's.

John

Yes?

Basil

And soon after a constable came up and asked me to go down to the river. He said there'd been an accident... She was dead. A man had seen her walk along the tow-path and throw herself in.

John

Where is she now?

Basil

[Pointing to one of the doors.] In there.

John

Will you take me in?

Basil

Go in alone, John. I daren't, I'm afraid to look at her. I can't bear the look on her face... I killed her – as surely as if I'd strangled her with my own hands. I've been looking at the door all night, and once I thought I heard a sound. I thought she was coming to reproach me for killing her.

[John goes to the door, and as he opens it, Basil averts his head. When John shuts the door after him, he looks at it with staring, frightened eyes, half mad with agony. He tries to contain himself. After a while John comes back, very quietly.]

Basil

[*Whispering.*] What does she look like?

John

There's nothing to be afraid of, Basil. She might be sleeping.

Basil

[*Clenching his hands.*] But the ghastly pallor...

John

[*Gravely.*] She's happier than she would ever have been if she'd lived.

[*Basil sighs deeply.*]

John

[*Seeing the revolver.*] What's this for?

Basil

[*With a groan of self-contempt.*] I tried to kill myself in the night.

John

H'm!

[*He takes the cartridges out and puts the revolver in his pocket.*]

Basil

[*Bitterly.*] Oh, don't be afraid, I haven't got the pluck... I was afraid to go on living. I thought if I killed myself it would be a reparation for her death. I went down to the river, and I walked along the tow-path to the same spot – but I couldn't do it. The water looked so black and cold and pitiless. And yet she did it so easily. She just walked along and threw herself in. [*A pause.*] Then I came back, and I thought I'd shoot myself.

John

D'you think that would have done any one much good?

Basil

I despised myself. I felt I hadn't the right to live, and I thought it would be easier just to pull a trigger... People say it's cowardly to destroy oneself, they don't know what courage it wants. I couldn't face the pain – and then, I don't know what's on the other side. After all, it may be true that there's a cruel, avenging God, who will punish us to all eternity if we break His unknown laws.

John

I'm very glad you sent for me. You had better come back to London, and stay with me for the present.

Basil

And d'you know what happened in the night? I couldn't go to bed. I felt I could never sleep again – and then, presently, I dozed off quite quietly in my chair. And I slept as comfortably – as if Jenny weren't lying in there, cold and dead. And the maid pities me because she thinks I passed as sleepless a night as she did.

[A sound of voices is heard outside, in altercation. Fanny comes in.]

Fanny

Please, sir, Mr. James.

Basil

[*Angrily.*] I won't see him.

Fanny

He won't go away, I told 'im you was too ill to see anybody.

Basil

I won't see him. I knew he'd be round, curse him!

John

After all, I suppose he has a certain right to come here – under the circumstances. Hadn't you better see what he wants?

Basil

Oh, he'll make a scene. I shall knock him down. I've suffered too much through him already.

John

Let *me* see him. You don't want him to make a fuss at the inquest.

Basil

I've been thinking of that. I know the stories he and his people will make up. And the papers will get hold of it, and every one will blackguard me. They'll say it was my fault.

John

D'you mind if I have a talk to him? I think I can save you from all that.

Basil

[*Shrugging his shoulders, impatiently.*] Do whatever you like.

John

[*To Fanny.*] Show him up, Fanny.

Fanny

Yes, sir.

[She goes out.]

Basil

Then I shall go.

[John nods, and Basil goes out by the door next to that of the room in which Jenny is lying. James Bush appears.]

John

[*Grave and cold.*] Good morning, Mr. Bush.

James

[*Aggressively.*] Where's that man?

John

[*Raising his eyebrows.*] It's usual to take one's hat off in other people's houses.

James

I'm a man of principle, I am; and I keep my 'at on to show it.

John

Ah, well, we won't discuss the point.

James

I want to see that man.

John

May I ask to whom you're referring? There are so many men in the world. In fact, it's very over-crowded.

James

Who are you, I should like to know?

John

[*Politely.*] My name is Halliwell. I had the pleasure of meeting you at Basil's rooms in Bloomsbury.

James

[*Aggressively.*] I know that.

John

I beg your pardon. I thought you were asking for information.

James

I tell you I want to see my brother-in-law.

John

I'm afraid you can't.

James

I tell you I will see 'im. He's murdered my sister. He's a blackguard and a murderer, and I'll tell him so to his face.

John

[*Sarcastic.*] Take care he doesn't hear you.

James

I want him to hear me. I'm not frightened of him. I should just like to see him touch me now. [*He sidles viciously to John.*] H'm, you tried to keep me out, did yer? Said I couldn't come to my sister's 'ouse – and kept me waitin' in the 'all like a tradesman. Oh, I'll make you all pay for this. I'll get my own back now. Measley set of West End curs, that's all you are.

John

Mr. Bush, you'll be so good as to keep a civil tongue in your mouth while you're here – and you'll talk less loudly.

James

[*Scornfully.*] Who says so?

John

[*Looking at him quietly.*] I do.

James

[*Less decisively.*] Don't you try and bully me.

John

[*Pointing to a chair.*] Won't you sit down?

James

No, I won't sit down. This ain't the 'ouse that a gentleman would sit down in. I'll be even with 'im yet. I'll tell the jury a pretty story. He deserves to be strung up, he does.

John

I can't tell you how extremely sorry I am for what has happened.

James

Oh, don't try and get round me.

John

Really, Mr. Bush, you have no reason to be indignant with me.

James

Well, I don't think much of you, any 'ow.

John

I'm very sorry. Last time we met I thought you a very amiable person. Don't you remember, we went and had a drink together?

James

I don't say *you're* not a gentleman.

John

[*Taking out his cigar-case.*] Won't you have a cigar?

James

[*Suspiciously.*] Look here, you're not trying to bluff me, are you?

John

Certainly not. I wouldn't dream of such a thing.

James

[*Taking a cigar.*] Larranaga.

John

[*With an acid smile.*] Nine pounds a hundred.

James

That's one and nine apiece, ain't it?

John

How quickly you reckon!

James

You must be pretty oofy to be able to afford that.

John

[*Drily.*] It does inspire respect, doesn't it?

James

I don't know what you mean by that. But I flatter myself I know a good cigar when I see it.

[John sits down, and James Bush, without thinking, follows his example.]

John

What d'you think you'll get out of making a row at the inquest? Of course, there'll be an inquest.

James

Yes, I know there will. And I'm lookin' forward to it, I can tell you.

John

I wouldn't have said that if I'd been you.

James

[*Quite unconscious of the construction that may be put on his last words – full of his own grievances.*] I've 'ad something to put up with, I 'ave.

John

Really?

James

Oh, he's treated me shockin'! He simply treated me like dirt. I wouldn't 'ave stood it a minute, except for Jenny's sake. *I* wasn't good enough for 'im, if you please. And the way he used to look right through me as if I wasn't there at all – Oh, I'll be even with 'im now.

John

What are you going to do?

James

Never you mind. I'm going to make it hot for 'im.

John

D'you think that'll do you any good?

James

[*Springing up.*] Yes. And I mean to...

John

[*Interrupting.*] Now sit down, there's a good chap, and let's have a little talk about it.

James

[*Angrily.*] You're trying to bamboozle me.

John

Nonsense.

James

Oh, yes, you are. Don't try to deny it. I can see through you as if you was a pane of glass. You people in the West End – you think you know everything.

John

I assure you...

James

[*Interrupting.*] But I've had a City training, and you can lay anything you like there ain't no flies on me.

John

We're both men of the world, Mr. Bush. Will you do me a great favour as a – friend?

James

[*Suspiciously.*] That depends on what it is.

John

It's merely to listen to me quietly for two or three minutes.

James

I don't mind doing that.

John

Well, the fact is – Basil's going away, and he wants to get rid of the furniture and the house. What d'you think it's worth, as an auctioneer?

James

[*Looking round.*] It's a very different business what a thing's worth, and what it'll fetch.

John

Of course, but a clever man like you...

James

Now then, no bluff. I tell you it won't work with me... D'you include plate and linen?

John

Everything.

James

Well, if it was well sold – by a man as knew his business...

John

If you sold it, for instance?

James

It might fetch a hundred pounds – it might fetch a hundred and fifty.

John

That wouldn't be a bad present to make to any one, would it?

James

No. I think I can agree with you there.

John

Well, Basil thought of giving the entire contents of the house to your mother and sister.

James

To tell you the truth, it's no more than he ought to do.

John

The condition is, of course, that nothing is said at the inquest.

James

[*With a sneer.*] You make me laugh. D'you think you can gag me by giving a houseful of furniture to my mother?

John

I had no such exalted opinion of your disinterestedness, Mr. Bush. I come to you now.

James

[*Sharply.*] What d'you mean by that?

John

It appears that you owe Basil a good deal of money. Can you pay it?

James

No.

John

Also it appears that there was some difficulty with your accounts in your last place.

James

That's a lie.

John

Possibly. But altogether I fancy we could make it uncommonly nasty for you if you made a fuss. If dirty linen is going to be washed in public – there's generally a good deal to be done on both sides.

James

I don't care. I mean to get my own back. If I can only get my knife into that man – I'll take the consequences.

John

On the other hand – if you won't make a fuss at the inquest, I'll give you fifty pounds.

James

[*Jumping up indignantly.*] Are you trying to bribe me?

John

[*Calmly.*] Yes.

James

I would 'ave you know that I'm a gentleman, and what's more, I'm an Englishman. And I'm proud of it. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I've never 'ad any one try and bribe me before.

John

[*Indifferently.*] Otherwise you would, doubtless, have accepted.

James

I've got more than half a mind to knock you down.

John

[*With a slight smile.*] Come, come, Mr. Bush, don't be ridiculous. You'd far better keep quiet, you know.

James

[*Scornfully.*] What do you think fifty pounds is to me?

John

[*With a sharp look.*] Who spoke of fifty pounds?

James

You did.

John

You must have mistaken me. A hundred and fifty.

James

Oh! [*At first he is surprised, then, as the amount sinks into his mind, grows doubtful.*] That's a very different pair of shoes.

John

I don't ask you to say anything untrue. After all, it's not worth while for a man of the world like you – a business man – to give way to petty spite. And we don't want to have any scandal. That would be just as unpleasant for you as for us.

James

[*Undecided.*] There's no denying that she was hysterical. If he'd only treated me like a gentleman, I shouldn't have had anything to say.

John

Well?

James

[*With a foxy, keen glance at John.*] Make it two 'undred, and I'll say done.

John

[*Firmly.*] No. You can take a hundred and fifty, or go to the devil.

James

Oh, well, 'and it over.

John

[*Taking a cheque out of his pocket.*] I'll give you fifty now and the rest after the inquest.

James

[*With a certain admiration.*] You're a sharp 'un, you are.

[*John writes out the cheque and gives it to James Bush.*]

James

Shall I give you a receipt? I'm a business man, you know.

John

Yes, I know; but it's not necessary. You'll tell your mother and sister?

James

Don't you fear. I'm a gentleman, and I don't go back on my friends.

John

Now I think I'll say good morning to you. You can understand that Basil isn't fit to see any one.

James

I understand. So long.

[He stretches out his hand, which John shakes gravely.]

John

Good morning.

[Fanny comes in by one door as James Bush goes out by another.]

Fanny

Good riddance to bad rubbish.

John

Ah, Fanny, if there were no rogues in the world, life would really be too difficult for honest men.

[Fanny goes out, and John walks to the door and calls.]

John

Basil – he's gone... Where are you?

[Basil *comes out of the room in which is lying Jenny's body.*]

John

I didn't know you were in there.

Basil

I wonder if she forgives me?

John

I wouldn't worry myself too much if I were you, Basil, old man.

Basil

If you only knew how I despise myself!

John

Come, come, Basil, you must make an effort...

Basil

I've not told you the worst. I feel such a cad. There's one thought that's been with me all night. And I *can't* drive it away. It's worse than anything else. It's too shameful.

John

What *do* you mean?

Basil

Oh, it's so despicable. And yet it's too strong for me... I can't help thinking that I'm – free.

John

Free?

Basil

It's treachery to her memory. But you don't know what it is when your prison door is opened. [*As he speaks he grows more and more excited.*] I don't want to die. I want to live, and I want to take life by both hands and enjoy it. I've got such a desire for happiness. Let's open the windows, and let the sunlight in. [*He goes to the window and flings it open.*] It's so good just to be alive. How can I help thinking that now I can start fresh? The slate is wiped clean, and I can begin again. I *will* be happy. God forgive me, I can't help the thought. I'm free. I made a ghastly mistake, and I suffered for it. Heaven knows how I suffered, and how hard I tried to make the best of it. It wasn't all my fault. In this world we're made to act and think things because other people have thought them good. We never have a chance of going our own way. We're bound down by the prejudices and the morals of everybody else. For God's sake, let us be free. Let us do this and that because we want to and because we must, not because other people think we ought. [*He stops suddenly in front of John.*] Why don't you say something? You stare at me as if you thought me raving mad!

John

I don't know what to say.

Basil

Oh, I suppose you're shocked and scandalised. I ought to go on posing. I ought to act the part decently to the end. *You* would never have had the courage to do what I did, and yet, because I've failed, you think you can look down on me from the height of your moral elevation.

John

[*Gravely.*] I was thinking how far a man may fall when he attempts to climb the stars.

Basil

I gave the world fine gold, and their currency is only cowrie-shells. I held up an ideal, and they sneered at me. In this world you must wallow in the trough with the rest of them... The only moral I can see is that if I'd acted like a blackguard – as ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have done – and let Jenny go to the dogs, I

should have remained happy and contented and prosperous. And she, I dare say, wouldn't have died... It's because I tried to do my duty and act like a gentleman and a man of honour, that all this misery has come about.

John

[*Looking at him quietly.*] I think I should put it in another way. One has to be very strong and very sure of oneself to go against the ordinary view of things. And if one isn't, perhaps it's better not to run any risks, but just to walk along the same secure old road as the common herd. It's not exhilarating, it's not brave, and it's rather dull. But it's eminently safe.

[Basil scarcely hears the last words, but listens intently to other sounds outside.]

Basil

What's that? I thought I heard a carriage.

John

[*A little surprised.*] Do you expect any one?

Basil

I sent a wire to – to Hilda at the same time as to you.

John

Already?

Basil

[*Excited.*] D'you think she'll come?

John

I don't know. [*A ring is heard at the front door.*]

Basil

[*Running to the window.*] There's some one at the door.

John

Perhaps it's occurred to her also that you're free.

Basil

[*With the utmost passion.*] Oh, she loves me, and I – I adore her. God forgive me, I can't help it.

[Fanny comes in.

Fanny

If you please, sir, the Coroner's officer.

THE END