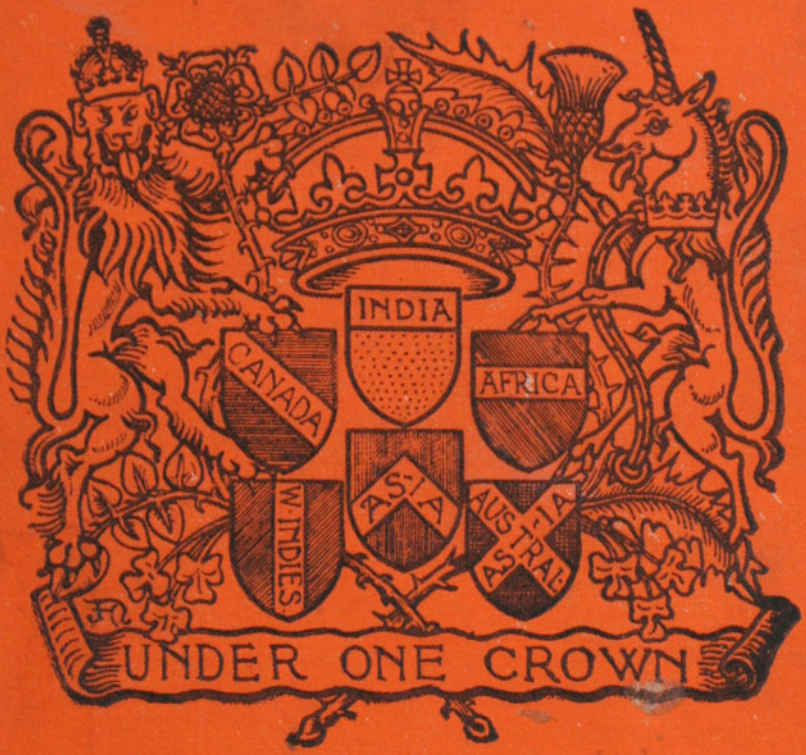
MISS MALEVOLENT



BY THE

AUTHOR OF THE HYPOCRITE.

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MISS MALEVOLENT

SECOND IMPRESSION

LONDON
GREENING & CO. LTD.
1900

First Edition . . *October*, 1899
Second Edition . . *January*, 1900

PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

WHEN that master of fiction, Charles Dickens, gave "Nicholas Nickleby" to the world, the publication of the book had one curious and interesting effect. A number of Yorkshire schoolmasters wrote to Dickens bitter letters in that they had been maligned, insulted, and caricatured in the picture of Mr. Wackford Squeers!

At first glance this appears ludicrous and inexplicable, but it becomes plainer if we look into it.

A small mind cannot travel far. Its horizon is very limited. An insufficient experience invariably mistakes the generic for the particular. The villager with an impediment in his speech cannot realise that others may share his disabilities.

In short, there is a class of folk who consider themselves privileged to fit themselves with any cap and then to seek out the maker and abuse him!

PREFACE

The writer of this book has lately been adding to his store of amusing psychological facts during the last few weeks, as its publication has thrown him into contact with some of these unsatisfied ones.

It is a curious fact that a writer of tales cannot create an "artistic" character without comment. Twenty parsons, a hundred city men, pass unnoticed in his pages. But let him limn a painter, a writer, or an actor, and people mouth to each other: "P. is undoubtedly such and such a one," and, "Of course you have divined the identity of Q."

A good deal of this kind of irresponsible chatter has attended the publication of this book. It will hardly be believed that half a dozen people have loudly proclaimed themselves as sufferers from the libels upon them contained in "Miss Malevolent." Nevertheless, that is an absolute fact.

Because I have drawn certain well-defined types, people who belong to the sets my puppets typify have given themselves away in the most laughable manner. They have asked sympathy from commiserating friends, they have blustered, even, to my friend the publisher! Indeed, I cannot help imagining, so arid of advertisement is the time, that these sufferers have been more than a little pleased.

PREFACE

I must dash that cup from their offended lips. I said in the preface to the first edition of the tale, if you will turn to it, that it contained no portraits. I repeat that now. I have certainly endeavoured to fix upon paper the presentiment of a certain amusing type of people who hang upon the fringes of "artistic" society. People who, without achievement themselves, know, and talk knowingly, about people who have done some accepted work. We all know them, and we are all pleased and amused by them.

But I should not think it worth while to particularise in the fashion of some writers, nor have I done so.

There need be no more fluttering in certain dovecots. There are no pictures of individual doves in these pages.

I am sorry for the neglected ones, but I cannot sacrifice Truth even to make them complacent.

TO

RICHARD LE GALLIENNE

WILLIAM MURRAY GRAYDON

AND

AMY LLWELLYN

IN FRIENDSHIP

PREFACE

HAVING finished my book, I turn with much satisfaction to the writing of a preface.

My "Miss Malevolent" has been presented as a Roman Catholic, and that æsthetic coincidence has been insisted on throughout the story. It is of no importance to the world in general, or to the priests of the Italian Mission in particular, whether I have or have not a dislike to the Roman system.

But on my way through life I have noticed that Roman Catholicism has a surprisingly pernicious effect upon certain temperaments. The fact struck me as interesting and curious, and I made it the motif *for this story. I only wish to be acquitted of a laughable attempt at making an attack upon a colossus, and to disavow any wish to participate in the high jinks of Mr. Walter Walsh or Mr. Samuel Smith.*

I fear I shall never aspire to the transcendental advertisement of THE INDEX!

When my last book, "The Hypocrite," appeared, it was said in various quarters that some of the characters in it were faithful portraits of well-known living people. In order to prevent another such misconception, I beg to say that "Miss Malevolent" contains no portraits whatever, so no one need be offended.

With that, and a request that the reader will find a corner in his heart for my friend Mr. Danger —for whom I have a real and sincere regard—I will leave him to the tale.

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MISS MALEVOLENT.

CHAPTER I.

QUITE AT HOME.

ONE Friday evening towards the end of March, Gilbert Russhe, the young painter, invited his friends and acquaintances to a supper in his studio at Glebe Place, Chelsea. He was but lately married, and, as this was the first time he had thrown open his little house to so large a number of people, both he and his wife were anxious that the evening should go off brightly and well.

Just at first, of course, there had been a little doubt, and a *contre-temps* had occurred which might have been more important than it afterwards proved to be. A Mrs. Policarp,

one of the young man's kindest friends, had picked up Father Sundius, a Roman Catholic priest, and insisted that he should come on with her to the "At Home." This in itself was not an event calculated to produce much uneasiness had it not been for an unfortunate but unavoidable coincidence. Some two or three days before Gilbert had completed his new Academy picture, and this, resting upon an easel at the end of his studio, was for his guests to inspect and to admire.

The picture, which was a commission from a wealthy Protestant society, represented a scene from Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and some of the Roman clergy—more particularly the Papal Legate—were by no means the kind of people one would care to have about the house. At the time an enormous wave of anti-Roman feeling was sweeping over the country, and the picture which stood in the studio would be reproduced in a hundred different ways, and could not fail to add its influence to the

popular agitation. It was a striking piece of work, and the red light of the flames, which gave a holy radiance to the face of the suffering girl, filled the eyes of the priests with a cruel and malignant light.

"My dear Gilbert," Mrs. Policarp said as she shook hands with her host, "I've brought Father Sundius to see the picture now that it's done at last. It's quite a surprise to me, you know," she added turning to the priest. "Gilbert would never let me see it while he was painting it. He always says I am too critical, disturb his ideas, don't you know."

With that the new arrivals had gone incontinent to the picture, and there had been an awkward pause.

"I am but a poor judge of art," Father Sundius said at length, "but the colours seem very bright and natural. No, thank you, no sandwiches."

"They are made of prawns, Mr. Sundius," said Mrs. Policarp, resenting the priest's sneer. Fish, you know! A Friday's dish!

Mrs. Russhe always has such delicious sandwiches, you must really try one!" The poor gentleman took one in some confusion, and not much later in the evening quietly slipped away.

After this little episode everything had gone splendidly, and when about one o'clock only a few intimate friends remained, Constance and Gilbert exchanged a look in which there was no trace of disappointment.

The studio was a large room with a gallery, approached by a wide flight of stairs running down one side. The walls were covered with pictures, or the monotony was occasionally broken by a group of swords or a drum which had been at Waterloo.

There was a grand piano by a large, open fireplace, and upon the piano stood that monstrous thing, a talking machine, which, on turning a handle, would bellow music-hall witticisms through a great brass trumpet. Supper went on in the gallery at various little tables, and laughter, mingled

with the clink and clatter of a meal, floated down to the people below.

Russhe stood by the piano talking to Mrs. Policarp, a tall, middle-aged woman with an immense quantity of hair, rapidly turning white, and an expression of sanguine benevolence.

"My dear lady," he said, "you have sung to us, you have played to us, you insisted on turning the handle of the phonograph for nearly half an hour, and now there is only one thing for it, you must sup. No! A sandwich is *not* enough; it's a mere island in an ocean of hunger."

She laughingly assented, and as she was mounting the stairs he turned back, and, calling to his friend Guy Waye, the well-known poet, bade him join them. Upstairs they found Charles Policarp, the son of the middle-aged lady, supping with Kitty Nugent, his cousin.

Miss Nugent had only arrived from Australia a few months ago to live with her aunt in Kensington, and this was her

first introduction to the Russhes' house, though she had met them at her aunt's. She was a rather short, dark girl, with a pretty and vivacious face, and a mass of beautiful dark hair. One's first impression of her was one of mere prettiness, rather spoilt by an ugly figure, in which the bust was too long, and the legs far too short; but, nevertheless, an impression of distinct charm. Then, as the play of talk and the circumstance of environment interested her, it was that the observer could see an extraordinary quality of expression in her eyes. Her eyes were a greenish grey, restless and alert, and lit with an abnormal consciousness.

"Won't you all come and sit at our table?" she said as the group came up into the gallery. "Charlie has been boring me with grisly stories of his Oxford debts."

"In the midst of life we are in debt," said Mrs. Policarp, who was a wit and always in debt. "Gilbert, sit by me, and Mr. Waye shall talk to Constance."

They settled themselves as she proposed.

"Quite a happy party," said Gilbert, "I'm so glad Uncle has gone home. He's a dreadful bore."

"Soldiers always are," said Waye. "'Caviare to the general' is the only proverb that fits military society. General Russhe would bore an artesian well."

"That's unkind," said young Mrs. Russhe, "General Russhe is a most distinguished soldier. He practically saved Egypt once."

"I have heard," said Guy Waye, "that the Arabs objected to his manna in the wilderness. But I'm out of tune with soldiers to-day. I've had to review a humorous book all about 'The Captain.' It was by Moro de Minter, and one of the jocose wretch's chapters began: 'Suicide may be considered in two lights, but no one who has committed it can be called a liver."

"Shades of *fois gras*," he continued, helping himself to some of that dainty, "that such literary farthing dips should prosper exceedingly, and have houses in

Lancaster Gate! Imagine laboriously toiling at that sort of thing, sweating one's brain to do it! The book was as innocent of plot as Guy Fawkes' effigy, and simply full of atrocious jokes."

"Well, you're an artist," said Mrs. Policarp, "and naturally you object to that sort of thing. But Minter is regarded as a social force by many people."

"Well, I regard him as a social *tour de force*."

"By the way," said Charles Policarp, "it was awfully awkward about the parson, wasn't it?"

"I'm *so* sorry," said Mrs. Policarp; "of course, if I'd known about the picture I should never have brought him. He's a friend of Kitty's, not of mine, but I thought he would look picturesque."

"Poor Father Sundius," said Miss Nugent, taking a cigarette, "he's my confessor and a great personal friend also. I shall hear of this again."

"He had the awful expression of a man

who is going to Weston-super-Mare," said Mrs. Policarp, also taking a cigarette, and with the little titter with which she always heralded a good thing. "I suppose he *is* going. There is no mistaking the look. It can mean nothing else. I have seen it frequently at Paddington."

"What," said Waye, catching her humour, "what is Weston-super-Mare?"

"It 's a little place," she answered, "where two-thirds of the people belong to the Salvation Army, and the rest dredge for oysters."

"I hate the Salvation Army," said Mrs. Russhe, "but surely it 's better to be godly through the medium of a trombone than never to pray at all."

"The Salvation Army do not pray, dear, they bray," said Gilbert; "but, Mrs. Policarp, you 've given me an idea. We 've got to leave home for a fortnight—the roof is to be repaired, and there 's a lot of painting to be done. Weston-super-Mare would be a good place to go to."

"Not at all," said Mrs. Policarp with decision, "not at all. You must both come to me. Charlie is going over to Ghent for a fortnight, and you can have his room to paint in. It's a north light, and you would not be disturbed. You know it's an enormous flat."

Kitty Nugent looked at the young man as he hesitated for a moment. Her eyes were wide open and very bright, while her lips were parted as if in anticipation of his answer. Her eye caught his, and, a little flattered at the implied appeal, he promised to come, especially as Constance also seemed to think it an excellent plan.

"It's awfully good of you," he said. "I'm sure we shall both be very glad indeed to come."

"Well, then that is settled, and we shall expect you to-morrow in time for dinner."

There was the pleasantest ring in the good lady's voice. She loved the society of young people, and found them far more congenial to her turn of mind than friends of

her own age. It was always her ambition to move in artistic society, where her strong personality was a recommendation rather than otherwise. In the staid society of Kensington she was looked upon with suspicion. Her cigarettes, her elaborate epigrams, and her pronounced faculty for interesting men, all produced in the minds of other middle-aged ladies living round her an impression that she was "eccentric." "She has no right," they thought, "to have such an excellent figure at eight-and-forty!" So Mrs. Policarp sought and found her friends among young actors, painters, and writers, who benefited by her ready kindness, and found No. 7, Belvedere Mansions a very pleasant place. There was real exultation in her voice as she planned little comforts for Constance and Gilbert.

"The gooseberry fool hath said in his heart, 'there is no Pod,'" said Mr. Waye, helping himself to some with great gusto and a small spoon. "Allow me to give you some, Miss Nugent."

"No thank you," she said, "I think things out of season are decadent. Gooseberries on the 25th of March are unnatural."

"A woman should never mention dates, even in her palmiest days," said Mrs. Policarp.

"Lambent creature," said Waye, "I shall insist on dining with you to-morrow night if you're so brilliant. Your wit is a glancing dagger to-night."

"I wish I thought you could prove it."

"I could prove it up to the hilt."

"Ah, but you could never prove the point! But come, Kitty dear, it is very late."

And with that Mrs. Policarp, who loved to leave the room on the wings of an epigram, disappeared into the house with her niece, only to reappear again in a moment muffled in the furs proper to a well-dressed lady on an evening in March.

When she had gone, with Charles and Kitty in attendance, Guy Waye was left alone with Constance and Gilbert.

"I don't want sleep yet," he said. "How do you feel, Gilbert?"

"Much the same. I'm roused to talk. Don't go yet. You are very tired, Connie, I can see. Go to bed while Guy and I have a chat. We will go into the study."

He kissed his wife, and then turning out the great lights of the studio by a handle near the door, preceded Guy down a carpeted passage which led to his own particular little room.

The room was panelled in oak, and furnished with discrimination. The pictures were few, but they were of a high standard of excellence, and were framed in harmony with their environment. At this hour a bright fire upon the hearth and two or three electric lamps filled it with a soft, comfortable light, and the sober draperies and dark greens and reds were thoroughly refreshing in their subdued richness.

Nor was there wanting a more modern note, a bachelor bric-a-brac note, in the arrangements. Shelves full of signed

photographs, a door leading into the hall bearing a white shelf with some books bound in cinnamon, a little smoking table of unpainted deal with a faint stencil pattern of black and orange, all betrayed a man of culture who understood the posing of his furniture, and a mind which had no tendency to slur the proper expression of itself.

A spirit case, which caught the firelight at a thousand points, held comfortable state upon the table; and there were some cigarettes in a silver box. Waye sank into a chair and let his eye rest with pleasure on these things. As he leant back, with a sigh of satisfaction at this moment of intense physical ease, he looked a very striking person indeed. He had a long thin face, in which sensuality struggled with intellect, and it was crowned with an enormous mass of crinkled black hair. He was of middle height, with a lithe and slender figure, and he wore a very small neat moustache. His small lips, straight nose, and deep grey eyes produced a curiously Greek effect, which

was enhanced by a long neck rising from a low collar. He wore the loose, floppy black tie which, for some reason or other, is supposed to be "artistic," and falling over the expanse of white shirt it produced a certain appearance of slovenliness. Although his unconventional appearance was in strict keeping with the conventional idea of a poet, one saw at once that he was no mere dilettante, and an indefinable air of manner and pose told you instinctively that he was successful and a man who had "arrived."

When Waye spoke it was in one of the most perfectly modulated and exactly musical voices that one could possibly hear. Unfortunately, the rare and exquisite effect of this voice was spoilt to the critical ear by a suspicion of a north-country accent mingled with the suspicion of an American accent, the joint improprieties producing a singularly unpleasing combination. He was a well-known figure in modern literature, and in many cases a well-hated figure also. At his present age, thirty, he had succeeded

in publishing some fourteen or fifteen books of verse and essays, no single one of which had failed. There is an idea that success in literature makes enemies; but even if the idea is true, it was not merely his success that had made many important people enemies of this man. He had offended certain sections of society by his extreme outspokenness on questions of sex, which he spoke of and wrote of in an open and possibly sometimes in an inopportune manner. Then again, he had been to no public school or university, and his origin was purely provincial, and lost in clouds of north-country smoke. He had, so to speak, come into literature in an underhand way, and after he had climbed over a wall, which did not exist for many people, they resented his large share of the cherries.

As he sat smoking he presented a great contrast to his friend and companion, Gilbert Russhe. The painter was short, fair, and chubby, with a clever, gentlemanly face. A heavy moustache hid a weak mouth, which

was balanced by a high and intellectual forehead; and though he had no such distinction as the poet, he also was a man who would be noticed in a crowd. He had a small income of his own, and came of a good family, who did not altogether approve of his painting. In his work he was becoming known as a clever and rising young man, who would shortly become very prominent. In fact, he was just beginning to succeed; and the generation who were awaking to spectatorship had already definitely marked his work. There was something new in it, and yet restrained. The most beautiful was always the greatest thing, and his occasional lapses into certain impressionistic methods delighted their insistent sense of form.

"How pretty Kitty Nugent looked to-night," said Gilbert, after a pause.

"Yes; didn't she? Little beast!"

"Don't you like her, then?"

"Oh, yes, I like her because she's pretty and fascinating, and I like sweets. But she's a treacherous little devil; a thorough bad lot."

"What a queer fellow you are," said Gilbert; "you always seem to me to be on such good terms with her at the Policarps. She was always bragging that you sent her a poem every morning."

"She loves to be admired. But I always send poems to everyone. There's nothing in that. I used to like her very much once, till I found out what a liar she is."

"My dear boy," said Russhe, with the assurance of a married man of thirty, "all young girls are deceitful."

"Oh, she's not so young as she looks; she knows the world pretty well. But she's not ordinarily deceitful either. She lies with intention to make mischief and do harm. She is unscrupulous and malevolent. Oh, yes, she's clever enough, I know; plays well, and all that; but a base-minded little thing. She'd make a set of dice out of her aunt's knuckle bones, and toss you with them for her own soul!"

"My dear Guy, why I saw you flirting with her to-night!"

"Well, and why not? I know exactly what she is and all about her, but she's pretty and amusing, and when you don't respect a woman you only treat her from one single standpoint. Kitty is amusing enough to kiss, and be with at a theatre; but, of course, one wouldn't marry a woman like that."

"Seems to me rather a brutal point of view."

"Doubtless. Kitty Nugent is a brutal sort of young woman."

"Well, I confess I hardly ever looked at her before to-night. But she seemed to be strangely attractive to-night; quite charming."

"Ah! Now you're trying to key another temperament up to your own flash-point, to mix a metaphor happily. It won't do, my dear boy. You're married to a sweet girl, with hair like black violets, and a face like frozen wind. Keep clear of that vulgar-minded little creature."

Gilbert winced a little at the allusion to his wife. He could not help a swift re-

flection that, allowing for a poetic licence and personal friendship, Waye occasionally said rather too much. These things were not done after all, and in the moment of thought he pitied his friend, who never cared to acquire that practice of what is *convenable* which a conventional breeding narrowly insists upon. Gilbert was very little of a snob, but at times what he called the provincial note certainly did jar. As a matter of fact, he was absolutely wrong, because between such friends as they, and with a man like Waye, who was an artist, it was quite permissible. All he said was, "Oh, a miss is as good as her smile"—which was a dastardly crib from Mrs. Policarp.

"Dear boy, please don't attempt epigram in words, give us epigrams in paint, words aren't your *métier*. But, seriously, Kitty Nugent won't do."

"Well, I'm not likely to test her possibility in any way, but it's difficult to believe. Charlie Policarp says she's a devoted Roman

Catholic, always at mass or confession, or something."

Waye got up, and, pushing his hands deep into his pockets, began to walk about the room. His brow furrowed up and his lips tightened, till, despite his long hair and fantastic tie, he looked almost puritanical, and very stern. What his face lost in refinement it gained at once in strength. This poet of dainty measures and delicate imaginings changed into the unmistakable north-country Nonconformist with startling rapidity.

"Yes," he said, "and that probably accounts for half of it. Now this is my idea of Kitty Nugent: A clever girl, very conscious of her own sex, with generous impulses *au fond.* That's to begin with. She was brought up in a convent-school, and if you don't know about what that is, well, don't inquire, because it's not nice at all. At any rate, for years the girl was enveloped in the great hysteria cloud which surrounds all women who live under the

direction of a celibate priesthood. She comes out into society and receives an overwhelming lot of attention. Her type of girl always does. You'll see no one will ever marry her, because of her eyes and conscious laugh, but everyone will flirt with her for that very reason. All the time that she is going about making herself cheap to half a dozen men — disgusting the decent ones, because she is risky in her talk and behaviour; and eventually disgusting the fast ones, because she is at bottom perfectly virtuous—she is finding a hysterical excitement in confessing to that emasculate idiot who came here to-night. Her religious exercises have become a sort of dram-drinking, and make her worse instead of better."

"Heavens!" said Gilbert. "Listen to the literary gent! Poor Kitty Nugent! Really, Guy, I should put her into a book, you know such a lot about her. But your virtuous indignation against the poor, dear Papists is rather a paradox. You, of all

people; as if questions of that sort mattered to you."

"Paradox is only truth standing on its head to attract attention."

"Have some whisky, will you? You said that in Paris."

"Then it's certainly good enough for London. No, I won't drink, thanks."

He rose to go, and Gilbert helped him into a heavy fur coat and watched his figure grow less down the quiet little street.

There was a driving wind which sent drifts and battalions of fleecy green and silver clouds rushing across the lamp of the full moon, which was globed high in heaven. But it was a warm wind and with some feeling of spring in it, and it half tempted him out for a turn on the Embankment.

However, the clock in the hall told him that day was almost at hand, so he turned out the lights and went to bed, treading very quietly that sweet Constance might lie undisturbed.

CHAPTER II.

QUIPS THAT PASS IN THE NIGHT

ABOUT seven the next day, on a warm and placid spring evening, Gilbert set out to go to Mrs. Policarp's, very pleasant with himself. Constance had gone in the morning, leaving him to make arrangements with a caretaker, and as Mrs. Policarp did not dine until nine, he resolved to walk part of the way. His bag had been sent off some time before.

The evening was very lovely by the river, with soft airs whispering along the Embankment. A bird with graceful, pointed wings hung poised a moment over the water, and then, rejoicing in its long flight and the joy of movement, swung away into the lilac twilight. It was a sweet hour in which to take leave of home.

A little group of Italian musicians were performing in one of the embrasures of the Embankment, though there were not, at the moment, many passers-by to hear them. One of them was singing the farewell to Naples, music instinct with the sadness of parting and with a message from the contadine of the beautiful city in its notes. "*Addio bella Napoli! Addio!*" thridded the harps, accompanied by a voice as sweet and passionate as they.

The wonder of London, as seen through the eyes of the artist, struck on Gilbert so strangely, that he was almost glad to get into a cab and finish his journey among the busy streets.

Although Gilbert knew Mrs. Policarp very well, he had never stayed with her before, and he anticipated a lively and amusing week. His thoughts kept turning towards Kitty Nugent, remembering the little details of her appearance—a bunch of violets she had worn at her breast, a curious old iron ring upon one of her

plump little hands—till, with a half smile at his foolishness, he wrenched the current of his ideas away from her, and began to think of his wife.

He was very much in love with Constance. Three months of her sweet and gracious companionship had taken him out of his earlier self, and shown him clear and definite duties waiting to be done. He was in every way tightened up and stronger. As her tall slim figure and grave grace rose before him, he laughed to think of Kitty Nugent. That this pretty little Miss Anybody, with the green eyes and vivacious manner, should ever come into his thoughts, even for a moment, amused him.

He arrived at the flat about half-past eight, and was met in the hall by his wife.

"They're all dressing, sweetheart," she said, with her cool arms round his neck. "Come and let me show you our room. Oh, I'm *so* glad you've come! I hate being away from you for a single minute. Everyone but you bores me so horribly."

Smiling and blushing with pleasure she led him away, and all the time he was dressing he thought how sweet and dear she had looked, wondering at his own high fortune in being loved so well.

Dinner itself was rather dull, because Mrs. Policarp had no audience; or, at least, her audience was not large enough. Kitty Nugent was not there, and Gilbert was alone with his wife and hostess. Constance asked if Miss Nugent was out.

"Yes," said Mrs. Policarp, who was always alternating between confidential affection and extreme dislike for her niece. "Kitty is always going out. She has two mysterious Australian friends—Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Browning—one of whom she is constantly visiting. Charlie saw her one evening when she was visiting Mrs. Brown. It was in the supper-room at the Savoy, and Mrs. Brown had a big black moustache. I always call them Mrs. Harris and Mrs. Fitz Harris."

Gilbert laughed with amusement, mingled

with an odd little twinge of regret at the girl's absence.

Dinner was certainly not festive. Mrs. Policarp was a woman of moods, and required the stimulus of youthful society to, as she would have said, "buck her up." She was vaguely annoyed by Constance, who was very fresh and fragrant in her evening gown. Constance refused to be very responsive to merry, frivolous talk, and so she just a little resented her husband and Mrs. Policarp's intimate terms of wit. Mrs. Policarp, for her part, liked Constance away from Gilbert better than Constance with Gilbert.

The lady was mournful at soup, and bewailed the present state of English literature. "Where," she asked, "are our great, our heroic figures? Where are our grand old men? We have none. There are hardly any survivals of a finer literary age. Indeed, except Max Beerbohm and the Pope—whose Latin verses, I am told, are excellent—there is no one, no one!"

Tears almost stood in the good lady's eyes, and her voice was as hollow as a stone dropping down a well.

Mild melancholy, tinged with the first dawn of hope, played over her features at turbot time. "It is really very sad," she said, toying with the stem of her sherry glass; "but our modern writers, also, are very ephemeral. At one time I had hopes of the decadents, but Mr. Clement Scott had them all brushed up some months ago. However, there is, I know, one still preserved in spirits in Paris, and it is rumoured, with what truth I can't say, that two have been seen lurking in the underground railway. Ah, I have few hopes! Mr. Gosse is so severe! He is always tying up some well-known author in a sack and throwing him into the *Fortnightly Review*."

"Yet we must not give up all hopes," she murmured at the arrival of the mutton. "Hall Caine is, of course, immortal. He is rich, and has bought a castle, so they can never get at him. No one is allowed

access but Mr. Heinneman, disguised as a "London type," or Mr. Sherrard—the paid-of-all-work—painted to resemble Dreyfus. Then, again, among our other great writers, Mr. Richard Le Gallienne is safe. While there is a girls' school in Liverpool or a *coiffeur* in Regent Street he will never be forgotten. I see no one else with the exception of Dan Leno, yet even his works may not live for more than three hundred years."

Even this pleasant fooling did not do much to lighten the oppression of the meal. Constance did not understand it, and Gilbert knew the trick. It was only when coffee came to cap the meal, and the genial after-dinner hour fell upon him like an embracing cloud, that he felt at ease.

"Have a cigar?" said Mrs. Policarp, producing a box from the sideboard. "They are Charlie's, and I hope they're good. I'm sure I don't know." She peered at the box, which bore the legend "*Villar y Villar.*" Mrs. Policarp saw her chance. "Ah!" she remarked, pointing to the label, "obviously

a suburban cigar; from Balham, I should say!"

"There is only one suburb," said Gilbert, laughing, "and that is Bedford Park. I lived there once in full enjoyment of its wild freedom."

"I have heard it is improper," said Mrs. Policarp. "Who lives there?"

"Actors, painters, and members of the fourth estate."

"Why are journalists always called members of the fourth estate?" asked Constance.

"Because, my dear," said Mrs. Policarp, "they are always on all fours to anyone with a regular income. But tell me more of Bedford Park."

"Well," said Gilbert, "the strangest thing about it is, that there is only one pub there, and even that is disguised as an old English inn; it is most respectable, and is called 'The Tabard.'"

"That is no 'Criterion,'" said Mrs. Policarp; "but let us go upstairs, very possibly some people may drop in this evening."

Mrs. Policarp's flat was arranged in two floors, basement and ground, and it was lined throughout with blue china. There was an innocent fiction that Mrs. Policarp had "picked up" the plates and punch bowls one by one for mere ditties, out of simple cottage homes in Wales, and the good lady would often relate her reminiscences of the hunt. Her intimates, however, more than suspected that she paid heavily for them to curiosity merchants in the West End of town, and more than once—so Guy Waye asserted—she had been seen hurriedly leaving Wardour Street with a large flat parcel.

In the hall, which was in effect a room in itself, stood a grand piano, and sitting at this Mrs. Policarp began to play, at the same time smoking a cigarette of her own brand—a brand which she was always careful to explain she smoked because it was the best imitation of tobacco she knew.

The music was in quick time—a thing she had made herself—and it was, curiously enough, a complete expression of her own

personality. One could fancy it to be a dance measure of the eighteenth century, which, though it was gaily artificial, had yet retained a note of freakish sadness. One could see the courtliness of it, the flambeaux on the walls, a picture of patch, powder, and peruke, and ladies with wonderful hair escorted by stately gentlemen in coats of peach colour and yellow, or silver and maroon.

It made one smile at times, it was so politely humorous, and yet, though the dominant sevenths and after-ripples of the treble keys brought, or seemed to bring, with them all the aroma of a florid artificial time, a time of candle-light and curtains, there was still a weary modern note, which, if well considered, was possibly not true art, nevertheless seemed to lend the music an additional distinction.

It was, in fact, Mrs. Policarp expressed in tone.

A very few minutes after she had made an end of playing the front door bell rang,

and, looking out of the drawing-room window, Mrs. Policarp saw several cabs drawn up in the courtyard. "Ah," she said, "some of my young men. I suppose they have come on from the 'Café Royal.'"

The Policarpathians, as they were called, were a little group of people who in one or other of the arts were employed in becoming famous. Some of them were already well known. Mrs. Policarp had gathered them together under her epigrammatic wing, and they would sit in her flat with cigarettes and hock and seltzers when they would go nowhere else, where there was a danger of meeting real ladies. In fact, out of all the group only Mr. Philip World could be said to be in Society.

Mr. World was four feet high and sixty years old. He had a beautifully clear-cut face, remarkable for its refinement and grace, crowned with a curly grey wig which he affectionately called "Toupet," and was, indeed, rather inclined to brag about. In his elderly-youthful heart it filled the place

of some pet canary or faithful dog. His conversation was sparkling, like Mrs. Policarp's; but it showed a finer sense of the importance of life and a greater understanding of its depths. He moved in the most exalted circles, "*My monde*," and to come to Mrs. Policarp's was to him a refreshing little glimpse into low life.

Mr. World entered the room first, attended by Mr. Danger, his tame journalist. Mr. Danger was a chubby person, of uncertain age, who was said to be very young. In Fleet Street he had the reputation of being a brilliant talker. He was in constant attendance on Mr. World in all places of public resort, and carried a little red book, in which he noted down his friend's epigrams. He afterwards retailed these as his own, by kind permission of Mr. World, and eventually published them in newspapers.

"I call Danger the agriculturist," Mr. World once said, "because while I *mot*, he reaps."

The first two were followed by James

Crosse, a young journalist fresh from Oxford, and very good-looking; George Ravillion, who played the piano; and a Mr. Fluid, who was old and stupid, but gave away tickets for the theatre and paid for dinners.

Most of Mrs. Policarp's friends could be catalogued like this. They were nearly all clever, and one or two were even distinguished, but few of them were either trustworthy or happy. Among them all there was one common belief—that all they did and said was very important, and that the public was always waiting with open eyes saying, "Tell us, what shall we think now?"

Only Russhe and Waye, who were rather more important than the others and quite the cream of Mrs. Policarp's set, realised that the big men were all outside. The millions of strong, unemotional men, doing their duty and their work, and the three or four great artists who, at the head of the world, live clear, sane lives in the sunlight.

These men always said and did whatever occurred to them, and their every night was more unhealthy and sapping to the brain than inexpressible orgies; for they were like those Parisian looking-glasses you can buy in the toy-shops, distorting all they reflect in quaint and fantastic parodies of the truth.

None of these people would have mattered very much had they lived their amusing and fantastic lives without spectatorship. That they were immoral and had no sense of duty mattered to themselves alone. Unfortunately many an apple-cheeked boy from the University or the provinces were attracted to and finally absorbed by them. All they wrote, acted, painted, played had a subtle influence for evil, and they had an astonishingly bad effect upon a far larger circle than their achievements ever warranted.

"Art" was the Circe who made them what they were, and Mrs. Policarp was their stage-manager, and so adroit was she that many a young painter and writer looked

forward to the day when some happy chance should bring him to Mrs. Policarp's "salon" —for the word "salon" is still in use among the very young.

"Dear lady," said Mr. World, "what a hot evening for March! I can't bearr it! O temperature! O morease! Do you know I've just met a man with gamboge hair, who has fallen madly in love with a pair of pincers!"

"Then," said Mrs. Policarp, "you must have some supper at once. I've ordered a large lobster. I hope it will be quick."

"Oh, no," said Mr. World, "I couldn't bearr that. I hope it will be dead!"

"I don't doubt but that it will be both," said Mrs. Policarp, "though my maids are fearfully overworked, poor dears. Mr. Waye says that he has been here at all hours of the day, but never without finding someone having sandwiches and whisky-and-soda in the drawing-room. While we're waiting, won't you play something, Mr. Ravillion? One of your own special little fantasias, with a story, you know."

Mr. Ravillion, a tall, hungry-looking youth, consented with alacrity, and went to the piano. In the cadaverous light of the candles, which were shaded green, he looked hungrier than ever, and one understood Mr. World's remark that "George never got nearer a meal than gnawing his moustache."

"Now, you know," he said, with evident pleasure at the business he was about, "I 'm not going to be a musician so much as a showman, and before I begin I must go through my traditional patter. I 'm going to attempt to play a few movements illustrating the death of Villon.

"This is the story. François Villon, the rascally mediæval poet, who haunts low taverns and is a thief, sets out with two friends, Malachi and Beaugerac, to rob an ancient gentleman, Gervais. This gentleman has a daughter called Helene, a simple girl, who presides over all the pleasant household business, visits the dairy in the mornings, and stands beside the farm girls as they work.

"It is a wild night of snow, and all Paris is abed, and the people are saying that the wolves will venture into the streets to-night. François is to knock for food and shelter, and then stab his entertainers and admit lean Beaugerac and sinister Malachi.

"The old man and his lovely daughter are at supper when a knocking is heard, and poor François is admitted, and as the door opens the wind blows a shower of snow into the room, while the tapestry flaps and the candles flutter.

"He is fed, and then announces himself as Villon.

"'Villon!' says the old man, 'the cut-throat!'

"'Villon!' whispers Helene, 'ah, the poet!'

"Earlier in the evening Master Villon has poured a little sleeping-draught in the old man's cup, and in a few more moments he falls incontinent to sleep. Helene lectures Villon then, in a sweet, prim way, for his sin, and says that he is too great an artist

to live in such evil case—you shall hear her lecturing him. She is standing by the window, and looking out over the shining white, when she sees the dark figures passing to and fro, and they seem, she says, like the angels of Death waiting for a soul.

"Then Villon confesses that he came to murder, but remains to love. He kisses her hand, and asks her to love him as she has so long loved his poetry. But Helene, though she is most beautiful and desirable, is an awful little humbug, and not a bit artistic really; and besides, she is in love with one Antoine de Baif, and so poor Master Villon gets left out in the cold. Well, pretty Helene won't kiss him, so he pulls his poor tattered old cloak round him, and, with never so much as a silver goblet for his trouble, limps out into the snow.

"But Malachi and Beaugerac have grown angry and fear treachery, so, as the poet stands in the lintel way, they rush at him and stab him, and he staggers back into the room to die.

"The prudent Helene bars the door, and then, seeing that François is very near his end, gives him a little peck of a kiss on the forehead, makes the sign of the cross, and no doubt vows she'll tell Antonie de Baif all about it next morning.

"So that's the end of my story, which I think has been made into a play, and it's a sort of comment on modern life, I think."

He stopped smiling, perfectly at his ease, and everyone clapped and laughed, for he had put them in a good humour. Mr. World let fall an epigram which was at once entered by Mr. Danger, Mr. Fluid looked at Constance with a pleased smile as who should say, "I also am one of them," while from the open door of the drawing-room the gurgle of a syphon proclaimed that Mr. James Crosse was intent upon the mixing of a peg.

The music began, and either the listeners had been well prepared by the little story, or possibly Ravillion's undeniable power and the conviction of his thoughts exercised a

strong psychic influence on them; but certainly they could see the three cloaked figures moving silently over the snow in a sad light as the sun went down.

It was as though they were standing away from the scene, and, untroubled, could watch the masked men, and know from afar that they were Villon, Beaugerac, and Malachi stealing out to murder and to rob.

And now the strange music changed, and, like the sudden closing of a shutter, the picture disappeared, and instead the mind of the poet, with all its painful brooding, was revealed to them. Villon was in a bitter mood as he trudged through the snow. They would not let him live by poetry, and the grisly shadow of Montfauçon lay across his path. To live he must rob with men like Malachi and Beaugerac, or rifle the stocking of a dead prostitute for a copper halfpenny.

Suddenly the sullen, revengeful music stopped with great abruptness. There was a pause, and, while one could have counted

ten, Ravillion's hands, raised a little above the keys, remained without movement. Then they saw Master Gervais at supper with his daughter, in their tapestry-hung room, and all the time Villon was drawing nearer and nearer, till at last they could hear his footsteps crunching on the snow outside.

How the young man did it, by what means he produced this impression, not one of them could have said; but it was there —they heard Villon's feet crunching on the snow outside—and Gilbert raised his head with that slight bending movement which we associate with one who listens, waiting for the knocking at the gate.

It came at last, and Helene opened to the lean, ill-clad figure craving food and shelter, and the sorrowful voice of the wind piped mournfully as the door stood open for a moment.

Then for a time they lost his meaning, and soon he felt this, and as they curiously watched him—he seemed as he played too

grotesque and strange to fit into life—they saw him gather his forces together, and the music rang out true to his purpose again.

Villon was going, Helene would none of him; so he gathered his cloak, his tattered cloak, an ill protection from the snow, round him, and moved towards the door.

It was very pathetic. He smiled as his hand rested on the latchpiece, "Should not a poet have a warm cloak?"

Then there was a pause, the rattle of the latch, and finally the snarl of Beaugerac and Malachi, the shout of Villon, his heavy fall, and then silence, while Helene bent over him and kissed him. "God speed you, Master Villon," they could almost hear her say.

When Ravillion had finished there was a silence, and then a torrent of congratulations on this remarkable musical-mesmeric feat. The young man looked very tired and worn after it, and a maid announcing that the lobster was ready to put all Mr. World's doubt at rest, Mrs. Policarp laid

violent hands upon the musician and took him away to recruit his strength, followed by the rest of her friends. Constance, who did not much care for human curiosities, went to bed. The evening was too typical to interest her much.

About one the Policarpathians left for some less reputable haunt of pleasure, and Mrs. Policarp and Gilbert were left alone.

"I 'm dreadfully drowsy," said the good lady, "and I shall go sleepy-bye at once. I suppose Kitty will be back soon, but don't bother about waiting unless you like. She has a latch-key. She 's probably been to a dance or a supper, or something. I never inquire much about her movements; it 's no good simply inviting lies. Good-night, dear boy," and with a yawn and a rustle she was gone.

Gilbert sat by a bright fire alone, smoking a last pipe. He thought over the events of the evening, and found that, on the whole, he had been bored. Ravillion had certainly been clever, but he had not much

taste for the bizarre. So many people in London talked and behaved in the same way. It seemed very shallow after the first time or two, though, of course, it was clever.

He recalled an old idea of taking a house in the country, not too far away, where he could get out of it all and work quietly. Constance would be happier, he knew. He got up to go to bed when his eye fell on a Tantalus and a little cedar box of Russian cigarettes. It occurred to him to have a cigarette and a little whisky. Then he decided not to, and at last, as a tired man does, again decided to stay up another few minutes.

The little brown cigarette was very fragrant, and he had no suspicion as he struck the match that the tragedy of his life had simultaneously begun.

When he was about half-way through the cigarette he heard a horse's feet coming nearer and nearer, till, with a break in the regularity of the beat, they sounded, echoing loudly, in the flagged courtyard outside. He

heard the cab turn round the ornamental fountain in the centre and drive away; and then, in the deep silence, the sound of a key being inserted into the front door, a slight creaking as the door opened, and the soft sound of its closing again.

The door of the room he was in was ajar, and in a moment it swung open wider and Kitty Nugent came in. She was *en grande tenue*, though dressed very simply in white Bengaline and chiffon, and wrapped in a white silk opera cloak with an ermine collar.

Her eyes were bright and smiling, and she greeted him with an air of confidential pleasure—as if his presence were a little private thing between them—though in a low voice.

In front of the fire was a low stool of tapestry work, and she sat down upon it, holding her white arms to the blaze, and looking up at him as she talked.

"The night has fallen very shrewd," she said, "and I 'm cold. Yes, you may get me

a whisky-and-soda, and a cigarette too. Oh, and a biscuit; are there any biscuits?"

He found some rusks, and then lit her cigarette for her. As he was taking the match away, she gave his hand a little pat. "Good boy," she said.

He entered into the spirit of the thing, dropping a slightly formal manner at that open invitation, and drawing up a low chair to the fire.

"Had a jolly evening?" he said.

"Oh no! Horrid. This is the only time I've felt comfortable for hours."

"*I* feel rather happy," he remarked.

"You ought to be in bed," she said; "you'll get into trouble for staying up so late."

He winced ever so little at her tone.

"Good heavens!" he replied. "Surely you don't think that a man isn't allowed to stay up late if he wants to, just because he happens to be married? Besides, Con went to bed about eleven or so, she's been asleep hours."

"Didn't anyone come then?"

"Oh yes, some of the Policarpathians; but Connie doesn't care for them much."

"I've noticed Mrs. Russhe doesn't seem to care much for artistic people. It's a pity, I think, especially as you've got to live so much among them."

He said nothing to this, but continued to gaze into the fire.

"You don't seem the sort of boy who ought to marry," she said, looking up at him. He saw her throat, a white, firm column, and the delicate white shoulders, and bosom rising and falling steadily like live velvet. She was very close to him, and rapidly her personality began to be merged in her sex. She seemed a concrete personification of all that a man desired.

"How beautiful you look to-night," he said suddenly. She laughed a little low, curious laugh, like water falling into water.

"Do I?" she said. "How strange! It's taken you a long time to find out I was worth even more than a casual word. Why,

you never even looked at me before. So you like me at last! I knew you'd have to."

"I think you are wonderful, Kitty." She put her hand on his, and at that contact his body suddenly grew hot and a flood of physical strength and exhilaration seemed to wake his blood to an intensity of sensation he had never known before.

She still smiled up at him curiously with half-closed eyes and parted lips. He grasped her soft wrist and drew her towards him. She resisted. "No, you mustn't," she said, still smiling; "think of Constance," and even as she mentioned the name of his wife she smiled again.

He said nothing in answer, but held her close to him and kissed her with long delighted kisses.

She sat in the same chair with him and toyed with his hair. "I knew you would have to care for me," she said. "I knew I would make you. When I first saw you a week before you were married I wanted you

to care for me. But, Gilbert"—she cooed his name with a little extra pressure of her hand—"it's very wrong, it's so hard on Constance. I shall never be able to look her in the face again."

"Oh, nonsense," he replied, and to the surprise of his subconscious brain there was no shame in his voice, "she need never know."

At that she broke away from his embraces and said, "No, Gilbert, we have been very wrong. It shall never happen again. I am sorry and ashamed. If things had been otherwise—but I will never share you with anyone — good-night, dear!" She stole noiselessly out of the room, and as she went from it leaned her head back and smiled at him as if to belie her words.

He walked up and down, throbbing with the event, still feeling her lips on his. Then, as the influence of her presence faded, he smiled at the humour of the occurrence.

He was tremendously flattered. As he opened the door of his room many pleasant

thoughts of gallant adventure simmered in his brain.

All his tenets of duty, his general idea of form in life, seemed broken and dissolved by warm arms and soft lips.

"Why not have a little fling?" he thought. "There's no real harm. Con need never know. After all, I could never *love* anyone but Connie."

He felt a fine manly fellow in good humour with the world. Had anyone—at that moment—told him what a pitiable scamp he had been, how he was endangering the one priceless treasure of his life, he would have rallied him genially for a precisian.

CHAPTER III.

MISS MISREPRESENTS

THE morning of the next day, a bright dawn full of shifting gold and shadow and a masterful March wind, Guy Waye sat down to breakfast in his chambers in King's Bench Walk, Inner Temple.

As he opened his letters and glanced at the literary page of the *Chronicle*, he was trying to recall some memory of the night before. It is curious to wake up after long, dreamless hours, when sleep, nature's soft nurse, has been very gracious to us. All night long the brain has been away at other places, and hardly has it time to adjust itself to a new day before we remember some hope or anticipation of yesterday which will not immediately blossom into consciousness.

Suddenly his eye fell upon a little envelope

covered with large irregular writing, which lay upon the top of a revolving bookcase hard by. His face cleared from its momentary look of perplexity.

"Of course," he said aloud, "Kitty said she'd look in after breakfast. I knew there was something."

With that he fell once more to the business of his correspondence.

It was very varied. The secretary of a literary club at Sheffield wrote to ask him if he would be the honorary president for the ensuing year. Two girls, strangers, obviously in a state of semi-hysteria after the reading of his latest book, which was proudly feminine, and full of details that the male mind does not generally see fit to dwell on, sent their photographs. He looked at the pictures, handsome girls enough, and the laudatory inscription below, with appreciable pleasure. Had there been anyone else in the room he would have thrown them into the waste-paper basket with a laugh, but we all have our little

weaknesses, and Waye would give anything for admiration in the eyes of a girl.

There was a bundle of press-cuttings from Romeike, which he went through with great care and several manifestations of annoyance. They were principally reviews of his new book, *The Maid Mysterious.* All the better-class papers paid due toll to his refined delicacy of style, a delicacy which was never "precious," because it had some of the rugged nervousness of his Northern blood; but nearly one and all sneered at his rather elaborate affectation of feminine sympathies.

The *Saturday Review* was especially flippant, and yet in a way which told and hurt him bitterly. It was not his fault, he thought, that he had not been able to make experience of certain advantages. After all, whatever the papers might say of him, his bank-book was cheering, and a constant evidence of success. It was far more annoying to read in a New York paper that he reserved Wednesdays for the reception

of his lady admirers, and that he entertained them with tea and poems, attired in a tea-gown of white satin.

Poor Waye had certainly much to bear from the gay and irresponsible press. Mr. Danger's paragraph, evolved one evening in the café, saying that he always took a policeman's arm at a crossing, had enjoyed an enormous vogue, and few romantic school-girls disbelieved the widely-circulated rumour that he embroidered beautifully upon silk.

It was not difficult to understand why he had such a rich reputation for effeminacy. His manner with women was certainly much too soft and caressing, and, moreover, he was exceedingly handsome in a rare and refined style. With the few men he knew intimately he was very much like other people, and his *air des femmes* departed completely. He smoked a dirty old briar pipe, sometimes drank more beer than was good for him, and was never behindhand in the telling of a Rabelaisian jest. He was

very strong, and had his cold tub in the morning like anyone else.

Apart from his qualities of brain, his knowledge, his cleverness, and his achievements, his friends were fond of him because of his extreme and unfailing kindness. He was continually doing something for somebody, and doing it in the most charming way.

When he had finished the letters a withered beldame—true type of the Temple laundress, who never alters—brought in his breakfast. In the middle of the meal there came a tap at the door, which opened at once, and Kitty Nugent came in.

In a neat tailor-made coat and skirt, with a simple toque, and a bunch of daffodils in one hand, she made a pretty picture as she entered the big sunlit room.

Guy was unaffectedly glad to see her. He knew, of course, that it was extremely imprudent of her to come, and that Mrs. Policarp would have been extremely bitter if she had known; but he lived among

people who had long since thrown convention to the winds, and were now only occupied in bellowing the fact to the passers-by. Kitty Nugent always did as she liked, and it amused her to go to call upon her bachelor friends. Although Waye had no illusions about his guest when he was away from her, he was certainly glad to see her this morning. A *tête-à-tête* with a pretty and clever girl is attractive to anyone, whatever her character may be, and Waye would have welcomed Jezebel herself had that lady chosen to pay him a morning call.

The girl did not say much at first, but lay back in a great armchair eating some chocolates he gave her, and watching him at breakfast. She seemed, lying there lazily, not so much a human personality, a brain which he must be in correspondence with, but simply a piece of charming decoration in his old room.

A long path of gold-dust from the world outside cut its way among the shadows. The sense in him of harmony between spirit

and body for a moment, as he looked at her, was delightful and like a beautifully played piece of music.

"You're as fragrant as ever," he said at length.

She settled herself in the chair with a little wriggle, waiting to hear more.

"You always say pretty things, Guy."

"It is one of the privileges of my position."

"Say some more, poet. By the way, you never send me any verses now."

"My dear Kitty, although my output is large, I can't really keep up with all the girls I know."

"Why not have duplicate copies made?"

"There is something in that. Give me a kiss."

"No, Guy. You're too fond of sweets."

"Oh, nonsense," he replied; "you were made to be kissed," and, sitting on the arm of her chair, he embraced her as he would have taken a cigarette or bought an evening paper.

She submitted with a little pretence of shyness which was prettily done, but she liked sweets at least as well as he.

"Do you love me, Kitty," Guy asked in his musical voice. Long practice had made this sentence fall beautifully from his lips at the least possible provocation, and all his friends had come to regard it as his regular formula, as another man might remark on the freshness of the day. Once, in his girlish way, he had said this to Mrs. Russhe. Constance had always lived among military and other short-haired people, and was not accustomed to the fantastic fashion of an artistic humour. She had replied to him with a surprise that made him, fêted as he was by everyone, indifferent for the rest of the evening. He distrusted Constance after this, because she had applied to him the standards of a *monde*—as Mr. World would say—where even his talent and charm were liable to be misunderstood. No doubt it was a silly and prejudiced *monde*, but it certainly existed.

"You do love me, Kitty, don't you?"

"Of course," said Kitty promptly. "Everyone loves you; you're a nice soft old thing."

He smiled at her perfect understanding of him. These two knew each other very well.

"Have any more little girls fallen in love with you?" she asked.

"Lots, dear chocolate-cream. And you, have you any more worshippers?"

"There is a stockbroker at Mrs. Browning's who has got to the sending of flowers, and I think that's all at present. Oh! I forgot someone far more interesting. At least, you'll think so."

"Really! Who?"

"A great friend of yours."

"Then of course I shall cut him at once. But who is it?"

"Guess."

"I haven't an idea. Tell. Who's the victim? Does he mum or scribble, strum or daub?"

"He daubs."

"Gilbert? No!"

"Oh, he's fearfully gone, I assure you."

Waye got up from the chair as the withered woman had come to remove the breakfast.

"Sport the oak, Mrs. Pimmel," he said; "I don't want to be disturbed for an hour or two."

Mrs. Pimmel gathered up the remains of breakfast, and with no surprise, in the manner of use, proceeded to obey. Guy stood on the hearthrug and looked at Kitty, who was coiled up in the chair, one pretty little brown shoe and a glimpse of openwork stocking projecting over the edge.

"Kitty, you're a little liar. I don't believe you. Gilbert's far too much in love with his wife. Why, he's only been married three months. Besides, he's never taken the slightest notice of you. Surely you know me well enough by this time to realise that I see all that goes on. When I've been dining with Mrs. Policarp, I've

seen you desperate sometimes because he wouldn't take any notice of you."

He was a little contemptuous in his tone. The girl irritated him by her placid assurance of her own power. He could not take her very seriously. Although he liked to kiss her, and her cynical acquiescence in his caresses amused him, he did not for a moment take her seriously. Much as his wounded vanity bade him dislike Mrs. Russhe, his finer side, the best part of him, respected and admired her. It annoyed him to hear this girl talk of Gilbert, his own personal friend, as her jumping doll.

Kitty felt at once the little superiority in his tone. She was as sensitive and quick to grasp the *va et vient* of a conversation as anyone could possibly be. Relying, as she did, upon her charm of sex for all her conquests, forcing men to take her for her wit and beauty with no question of character, she was abnormally awake for rebuffs of this sort.

As he finished speaking a curious change

came over her face and attitude. Her head went down and her shoulders hunched. Her face was a little thrust forward. Both nostrils were curiously caught up, and her lips curled away from her teeth.

Her eyes contracted, and her face grew, it appeared, much broader. As Waye watched her he thought that he had rarely seen a face of such unpleasant ugliness. Once or twice, very rarely, he had seen the same thing happen, and it was the most astonishing transformation in his experience.

Spite and malice suddenly gleamed out upon her face, and the whole impression was dangerous and horrible. He was seized with the curious impression that her tongue was vibrating with some lie or slander hot upon it.

He regarded her curiously for the second of the change, and there was little liking in his eyes.

Kitty felt this immediately. The whole event was very swift, and her face became rapidly composed again. When she spoke,

however, she was unable to conceal the sneer in her voice.

"I daresay you think I'm romancing," she said, "but I'm not in the least. I dislike the man intensely, but it amuses me to see how far he will go. I'm going to make him show his whole self to me, and then I shall drop him."

She was not very convincing in her tone, and then it occurred to her that Gilbert was a very great friend of Guy's, and that she had possibly gone a little too far.

"It's only a little flirtation, after all," she added with a smile.

"Why do you dislike Gilbert so?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't really dislike him. He doesn't interest me enough for that. I think he's much like other men. You are all a bad lot. There seems to be no true love anywhere," she sighed sentimentally.

Guy laughed aloud. "Poor little girl, did she want a true knight then? But tell me, is Gilbert quite transfixed?"

"Oh, yes, wriggling on the end of the spear." She said it with indescribable unction.

"Are you going to let him kiss you? He wouldn't go as far as that perhaps."

"Well, considering Mr. Russhe is a friend of yours, you really seem to know very little about him."

"How do you mean? Do you mean you have already given him that joy?"

"My dear boy, you quite mistake the situation. Listen. Last night I came home late from a dance. I went into the drawing-room to get a book, and I found Mr. Russhe sitting there smoking. Aunt and Mrs. Russhe had gone to bed. I was just going out, when he begged me to stay and chat. I said of course I couldn't, and then he told me that he 'd been waiting up for me so that he could see me alone. I thought it was rather fun, so I stayed."

"Well, what happened then?" asked Guy, thoroughly enjoying the story.

"He began to be amorous at once. Made

me come and sit by him, and told me that he was madly in love with me. He said he had made the great mistake of his life in marrying Constance, and bewailed the fact that he hadn't met me first."

Guy whistled in surprise.

"I thought it awfully horrid of him," the girl went on, "and I told him I loathed him for it. He simply didn't take any notice, and caught hold of me and kissed me. I couldn't do anything. He begged me to run away with him even! I felt awfully sorry for his poor wife, married to such a bounder."

"How did it all end up?"

"Oh, I got away at last, and I stopped at the door and told him what a low cad I thought he was. I think I hurt him rather."

There was a pause, while Guy kicked angrily at the fender. He had been so interested in his friend's love for his young wife, the two had seemed so happy together, that he was full of pain at this hearing. He could have readily understood that Gilbert

might have flirted with Kitty, and even embraced her at her invitation, for he knew human nature, and he knew that few young men could resist a pretty girl, late at night, who was seeking an *amourette*. Joseph was a very old-fashioned name in '98. But this story shook him.

He was well aware that Gilbert was no saint, but he was loth to believe him so base and underhand as this. He felt very sorry for Constance, for he recognised her goodness and purity, though he was not in sympathy with her.

So there was silence in the room save for his uneasy foot tapping against the fender. He raised his eyes and, in the looking-glass on the mantelshelf, he saw that Kitty was watching him with a mischievous smile through the delicate spirals of smoke from a cigarette she had lighted.

A sudden light came to him. He remembered other little incidents in this young lady's career, and very quickly he began to make an excellent guess at the truth.

He did not show her anything of his thought, but turned and said, "Oh, you make too much of nothing, Kitty. Of course he is in love with you,—how could he help it?—everyone is in love with you. It's all rot to say Gilbert's a cad and untrue to his wife. He was only fooling. Why, I've asked you to run away with me heaps of times."

"Oh, this was different," she said, piqued that he should think Gilbert was not utterly enslaved, and she was beginning to recapitulate her story with a few interesting additions, when the entrance of Mrs. Pimmel with a telegram disturbed her.

A few minutes afterwards she went away, suffering him to kiss her again at the door.

After she had gone Guy smoked a pipe and thought over the interview. He knew both Kitty and Gilbert intimately, and, after a dispassionate examination of the girl's story, weighing everything, he arrived at the truth. He smiled to think how speedily his warning to his friend had been justified. He knew

Gilbert was weak where women were concerned, and he saw exactly how the incident had occurred, and how Kitty had twisted it in her own dramatic, lying way. It wasn't the first time she had tried to malign people he liked, he reflected.

He resolved to put Gilbert on his guard at once, to warn him against these dangerous delights, and to chide him for yielding himself in this way—this foolish, boyish way.

Then, the cool smoke of his briar inducing speculation, he began to take a wider and more imperial view of the question. He was a sweet-natured, decent-tongued man himself, and the contemplation of this malevolent, slandering girl filled him with astonishment and a little fear.

It was horrible to think that no man was secure from the secret attacks of a malicious woman, loving slander and evil-speaking for their excitement and the brief importance that a recital conferred.

"From envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness, good Lord deliver us!" he

said aloud, and opening a bottle of beer, he sat down to work, dismissing unsavoury things from his mind.

Kitty Nugent tripped out of the Temple humming a little tune, bought an evening paper which had just been published, and mounted on the top of an omnibus.

She smiled as she thought of Guy's disquietude. The story she had told him had gathered force and vraisemblance as she had talked, and she already half believed in it herself, and felt bitter against Gilbert. Curiously enough, his name met her eyes immediately when she looked at the newspaper among the personal paragraphs. The paper said that the new Protestant picture by Gilbert Russhe, called "The Burning of Anne Askew," was now completed, and that in a few days a reproduction would be in the hands of nearly every elector in England. "A picture calculated," said the paper, "to bring the real character of the Roman Church forcibly before the notice of the working classes. We hear," con-

tinued the paragraph, "that the Catholic Press is preparing a counterblast, showing the burning of Catholics by Protestants in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The Protestant Society is therefore pointing out that Rome has never repudiated or expressed sorrow for the Inquisition or the stake, and, by the constitution of the Church, even the present Pope is absolutely bound to uphold and defend the actions of his predecessors."

She sneered as she read this paragraph, and instinctively her hand stole to a little gold cross which hung from her watch-chain. She touched this mechanically.

When the Kensington omnibus had conveyed her a good part of the way she alighted, and, turning down a quiet street, passed a church, and rang at the door of a red-brick house next to it.

She inquired for Father Sundius, and, finding he was in, was shown into the drawing-room. The priest came almost at once, and greeted her with pleasure.

"How are you?" he said. "So glad you've looked in. I've been feeling depressed this morning. Really things are getting dreadful. I have had no fewer than four books on the Confessional sent me anonymously this morning, each more obscene than the last. Moreover, one of my best girls, a very earnest worker and Sunday-school teacher, has gone and married a Dissenting shopkeeper in the High Road, who threatens me with personal violence if I speak to his wife, and absolutely forbids her to make any confession."

Kitty sympathised with her friend, and was easily persuaded to lunch with him. After the meal she showed him the paragraph about the picture.

"It was a most unfortunate affair the other night," he said, "though, of course, it could not be helped. What sort of a man is this Mr. Russhe?"

Kitty sighed. "Oh, I think the less said about him the better."

"Really! You astonish me," said Father

Sundius, composing his cassock, and leaning back in his chair agog for a little news.

"He is unfortunately staying with aunt now, and I am forced to see him every day. He persecutes me."

"Dear, dear," said the priest. "Poor child. I always feared this artistic society for you. There was that man Waye, who was much the same. I remember you telling me of him. You must try to be as much within yourself as you can. Remember that though you must perforce live among these men and women, who exalt their own lusts and handiwork into the place reserved for our Holy Church, yet you are not of them. You need not appear priggish, but I cannot allow you to join in worldly amusements and to listen to worldly talk."

Kitty turned an innocent, earnest face on him. She felt very sad at her own cruel lot as she listened to him.

"God has given you the gift of beauty," continued Father Sundius, "and I know

that this makes your path more difficult, but remember that Holy Church is with you, and take heart of that great grace."

After some half-hour of further conversation Kitty left the presbytery, and turned her steps homewards.

It was very pleasant to have so much interest taken in one. Kitty felt she was the pivot of many interesting situations.

CHAPTER IV.

"DOMINO DIRIGE NOS"—BEING THE CHAUNT ROYAL OF THE CAFÉ ROYALISTS.

THE morning after his adventure with Kitty found Gilbert in a state of amused expectation. He was no longer in the state of passionate excitement which he had been in the night before. The girl had no hold over him, as she had when she had struck so poignantly on his senses. Forgetting how his future had for a moment rested in the very hollow of her hand, he only remembered that she was in love with him.

The superior, condescending attitude was eminently pleasant. As he rose he looked forward to a continuation of the flirtation at some period of the day.

He came out into the hall before break-

fast, almost expecting her to be waiting there for him. But the hall was absolutely empty, though full of moving sunshine, and delightful to look at.

Mrs. Policarp was very proud of her hall, and it was indeed a beautiful room. The floor was tesselated in pale red and white, while from a shallow pool in the centre rose a little fountain, which was now all limpid gold and crystal. All round the place the doors and archways were hung with crimson curtains. Crimson lounges stood round the wall, and monstrous foreign ferns with broad green leaves—seeming as if they had been cunningly japanned—made hedges and quiet alcoves for coffee and flirtations. The wide stairway which led to the lower floor was carpeted in crimson.

Gilbert resolved that when he was rich enough he also would have a place like this. He noticed that Kitty had left her gloves and a fan upon one of the lounges, and that they had not yet been removed. He was about to take one of the gloves, when it

occurred to him that it was a boyish thing to do, and also incautious; besides, it was silly to attempt romance. There could be no romance in the affair.

Mrs. Policarp came down to breakfast in a bad temper. The morning was always her worst time. She never ate anything, but smoked a cigarette and insulted a cup of tea with a bad grace. Her brilliance, like her complexion, was rather pasty, and her early reading was painfully in evidence. She had been heard to quote *Paradise Lost* on these occasions, while the wisdom of Lord Verulam seemed to her very suitable for breakfast-time. In fact, when she was not speaking rudely about Weston-super-Mare, or saying unpleasant things about her niece, she was always quoting long passages that led to nowhere.

Constance was occupied in soothing Mrs. Policarp, and Kitty Nugent did not appear at all.

"Kitty is very wise," said her aunt; "she never appears at breakfast when there's a

man here. No woman ought to be seen before lunch. Kitty looks fifty after a late night." She began to open her letters. "Dear me," she said, "overdrawn again! Really, it's dreadful. I'm supposed to be well off, but I never have a penny. Well, I must go to Rogers again. He's my solicitor, and lends me five hundred pounds whenever I want it. Dear, dear! it's a sad life. Here to-day and gone to borrow!"

All the morning Gilbert worked steadily at some black-and-white drawings, illustrations for a magazine. Just before lunch he heard a little chirpy noise in the hall, and at the meal found, as he had conjectured, that it proceeded from Mr. World, who, attended by Mr. Danger, had come to bid Mrs. Policarp and Constance to an entertaining afternoon at the Egyptian Hall.

"I have been reading Zola," he said, "in bed this morning, while my man was looking after Toupet; and I am crrushed—crrushed by mere materialism. I want a little mystery in my life, so you must come with me to

the Egyptian Hall. I am always supported by ladies, the performance is so harrowing. When they cut off the witch's head I always think of Mr. Rider Haggard, and weep. Danger has to run and fetch me a liqueur of real water. The Egyptian Hall fascinates me; it enters into my life. Ever since I first went there I have had two servants — one Masculine and the other Cook."

It was marvellous to see with what rapidity Mr. Danger entered the witticisms of his chief. Like a portly but active trout swallowing a fly, his red note-book snapped up an epigram, memorialised a *mot*, or preserved a pun.

"Will Miss Nugent come too?" asked Mr. World.

"She is lunching out somewhere, obviously," said Mrs. Policarp, "and I'm afraid she won't be back."

"I am sorry," said Mr. World; "with three ladies I should have felt so safe from the disappearing egg!"

"She *may* come back, of course," Mrs. Policarp said; "but I haven't an idea where she is gone. As you know, Kitty always does exactly as she likes. I detest the Apocrypha; there shall be no Belle and the Dragon in my flat!"

"Excellent!" said Mr. World. "Danger, I should advise you to enter that if Mrs. Policarp will allow you. Initial it with a P. I have the tickets," said Mr. World, "for all of us except Danger. However, he is known to the police at the door as an habitual journalist, and will receive a pass."

"Many journalists," said Mr. Danger, "are pioneers of thought, Philip," and relapsed into his usual silence.

"The pen," said Mrs. Policarp with the air of one stating a little-known fact, "is mightier than the sword."

"I have never thought so," said Constance. "History has been made by soldiers."

"Please don't talk about swords," said

Mr. World, "I can't bearr it. Dreadful things! 'To point a quarrel or adorn a male.'" And after Mr. Danger had entered this on the page marked "misquotations" they all left the table and, with the exception of Gilbert, who had to work, sought the Egyptian Hall in cabs.

The flat was very quiet after they had gone, and Gilbert sat down with enjoyment to his work. He was illustrating a love story, a country idyll, a tale of moors, of wind-swept heather and deep, west-country lanes.

Constance had posed for the figure of the heroine, and he worked lovingly at the picture, thinking tenderly of her.

He always found that when he was working his brain turned to worthier things, he took a finer view of life and its obligations than he did in hours of idleness or pleasure. There was, he found, certainly something ennobling in creation and stimulating in endeavour.

His weak temperament continually re-

quired some tonic. While he kept soberly to work he always lived a far more decent and reputable life. As his brush swept over the paper, giving tone and shadow to a long stretch of moorland, upon which a girl was standing, he remembered his own courtship of Constance with singular vividness.

It was in Wales that he first had told her of his love, on a great hill, and something in the work he was doing brought it back to him with a rush of memory.

One afternoon they had gone for a walk together, and, after climbing a green valley, had come to the high table-lands, great undulating moors of brown-purple heather and bog, with a lake in the distance. The principal peak of the mountain rose right in front—a vast pile of black rock shrouded in mist—and they had known that when they had mounted it, and gained the cairn en-isled in middle air, there alone, between earth and sky, with the gay, thin mountain wind as witness, they would plight their troth.

He could see it so well, and his brush moved quickly over the picture in unison with the swing of his impetuous recollection.

They had stumbled on up through the rocks, and with straining eyes sought to pierce the swaying mists that held them; for, indeed, it had seemed that the whole fair world was made a world of shadowy vapour. Ghastly wreaths of cloud rack sped hurrying by, strange masses of mist, seeming like embodied spirits of the mountain, leapt upon them and passed. To each the other seemed like a phantom in a phantom world.

Then the wind had blown Constance's hat from her hair, and he had only kept it from whirling away into space by a sudden movement. Her hair, already loosened by the long climb, suddenly shook loose and streamed out behind her. Then the wind seemed to freshen in a sudden moment, and to bring with it the salt of the far-off sea; and leaning her slender body to the wind, the girl had climbed up the cairn, and stood

there like Dierdré, the mountain princess in the legend. He had thought of Dierdré as he looked up at her, thought of a picture in the New Gallery which was singularly like, and then in two steps he had mounted by her side and kissed her.

At that sacred moment, while, with tears in her eyes, she looked up at him and promised to be his wife—quite sweetly and simply as befits a mountain princess—the sun, by some chance, had sent a thousand warm, light hands to tear the veil of mist asunder. Away and away went the phantoms and shadows, the mystery and gloom, with a clatter and shout of the merry sea wind, and they had seen the radiant, love-lit world, no phantom, but a broad and smiling vision of fair coasts and shimmering seas.

A boy and a girl who loved one another. It was a fine memory to have. His face changed, and grew brighter and better as he thought that Constance was even now his for ever.

The thought of the hot room the night

before with the girl in his arms seemed exotic, horrible, and unreal.

He put the drawing-board down on the table and sat back in his chair thinking over the occurrence. He fancied he heard something stirring in the room behind him, and he was just about to turn and see what it was, when his sight was suddenly obscured by two hands pressed firmly over his eyes. He gave a great start, and then, putting up his arms, caught hold of two plump wrists. He pulled them away from his head, and Kitty Nugent fell over the side of the chair into his arms.

She got up struggling and laughing. "Heavens, how strong you are!" she cried. "Were you frightened? You jumped like anything!"

"You did startle me a little," he said, without any great appearance of welcome.

She noticed his manner seemed a little constrained, and put it down to shyness. He wanted a good deal of encouragement, she thought.

"I suppose you 'd rather it had been your wife?" she said with a pretty little pout.

He looked at her with a rather curious smile. Then he said deliberately, "Naturally."

The girl was not quite sure how he meant it. She changed the subject.

"Have you recovered from last night yet?" she said.

"Entirely," he answered, without any appearance of interest.

She did not mistake his meaning now, and she felt utterly at a loss. Her position was, she felt, quite impossible treated in this commonplace way. Her victory last night had elated her, and she did not mean that he should forget it so easily. Heroic measures were the only thing.

She looked at him with wide-open eyes. "Gilbert!" she said, in a low, faltering voice.

He moved uneasily in his chair. "Look here, Kitty," he said, "I was very foolish last night, and I 'm not going to be so any

more. You know perfectly well the whole thing meant nothing at all."

"So you were amusing yourself!"

"Well, yes; and so were you."

She came close up to him and took his hand. "Am I so very dreadful?"

His eye caught the drawing of the moor, and his ear told him that she was not sincere. He smiled contemptuously.

She turned round as if to go away, stood irresolute for a moment, and then faced him again. "All right," she said in low tones, "I'm not going to be played with by a thing like you. Wait!"

At that moment they heard voices in the hall. Kitty moved quickly away to the fireside, and as she did so Constance came in. For a moment there was a slight pause, and Constance looked at the girl rather curiously. Then she said that tea was waiting in the drawing-room, and that they had better come and have some.

At ten o'clock that evening Gilbert found himself in a state of great depression. Mrs.

Policarp had a headache, Kitty was sulky, and Constance strangely silent.

He resolved, and the idea pleased him enormously when it came, to take a little header into the waters of bachelordom. For a few hours at least he could get away from depression and boredom into an atmosphere of lights, laughter, and amusing talk. He would meet many old friends who would welcome him gladly and make much of him. When a man in Bohemian circles marries and settles down to work, these rare excursions into the old careless, irresponsible world are very fascinating.

It is good to sit once more in the old place, to sip the same drink, to hear the old talk, and to listen to all the news of *les coulisses* once more.

The bachelors welcome the errant Benedick with acclamation. They fill the goblet for him, the choicest incidents of the month are told him, the newest story and the latest jest. Responsibility drops from him for an hour or two, and once more he is gay and young.

Often there is an added zest in the knowledge that the wife at home, though she would never say anything, is just a little uneasy at her husband's absence. She knows so little of the old haunts, and imagines so much. All that she has heard is bad, and she cannot appreciate the refreshment that a peep into the old life has for the newly-domesticated soul.

Gilbert hailed a hansom, and told the man to drive to the Café Royal. Directly he was in the cab his spirits rose in the most extraordinary way. Swiftly he sped towards pleasure without a care in the world, and as he was borne swiftly through the lighted streets, every well-known landmark had a new and joyous significance for him.

It was a fine night, and the streets of the West End were full of people. As he neared Piccadilly Circus, he saw with a pleasurable excitement that London was in full swing. The Criterion, the Pavilion, the Monico were all blazing with light; it was entirely homelike and delightful.

At length his cab stopped at the door of the café. He walked up the broad passage slowly, letting all the old influence come back. Hundreds of times he had traversed that slip of matting with his friends. He stopped at the little window on the right, where the continental newspapers are sold, and from mere habit bought *La Libre Parole*. The staring black type of the heading, the leaded lines of Drumont's latest piece of anti-Semitic bitterness, all had their share in his sensations.

He stood for a moment looking through the glass door, and then with a deep sigh of contentment pushed it open and entered.

Once more the welcome and well-loved sounds of the place struck upon his ear. The deep hum of innumerable conversations, the continuous rattle of the dominoes, the whole joyous noise was exactly the same. He could not realise that it was three months since he had been there.

Emile and Gustave, two of his favourite

waiters, passed him, laden with absinthe, and bowed and smiled a welcome.

In the seat at the left, as he went down the room, he saw the enormous Frenchman with the gold-topped stick. The little group of well-dressed scoundrels, who always sat by themselves in the middle of the room discussing some villainy, were there as of yore. The fat, genial gentleman with the pretty girl in the red blouse, who spent all his days in the café, was in his appointed place, and, as his eyes turned towards the seats along the wall where his own particular set were always to be found, he saw with an uplifting of the heart that they were all there.

He went slowly down the room towards them.

Suddenly Ravillion saw him. "Hallo!" he said in great surprise, "you here, Gilbert? This is ripping!" and, turning round to the others, he announced the fact.

There was a general movement of welcome, and room was made for him on one

of the seats against the wall, between Mr. World and a tall, clean-shaven young man called Reginald.

Mr. Fluid summoned the waiter.

"Buvons!" he said. "Maintenant buvons, et que Dieu nous donne bon appétit."

Gilbert was assailed with questions from all quarters. Was marriage really a good egg after all? How did he get off? Did the missus know? and what would he have to drink?

Everyone was there—Mr. World, Ravillion, Danger, Cochonott, the writer of light verse and a barrister, Valentine Halla, the editor of a Society paper, generally called Valhalla, Mr. Reginald, a young gentleman of immaculate appearance, and, as he was wont to say with sorrow, "a bad man, a bad man," and several others, each engaged in one of the arts.

Gilbert was told all the news of the circle.

"Have you heard of Reginald's bereavement?" asked Halla. "It is very sad."

A sudden gloom fell over them all. Mr.

Reginald drew a black-edged handkerchief from his coat-sleeve and wiped away a tear.

Gilbert sipped his absinthe happily. It was exactly like old times; he saw another of the little set's delightful jokes, half pose, half farce, was to be made manifest to him.

Mr. World heaved a deep sigh. "Soon after your death," he said to Gilbert, "I went to Reginald's flat for some tea. I had been lunching in my *monde* with the Duchess of Marble Arch, and I wanted Reggie to come and dine *en garçon* at the little French place in Soho. I found him sitting by the fire gazing earnestly at a photograph. He was singularly happy in a quiet, unostentatious way. He had found a new friend, he said, who had a good influence on him, and who would, he thought, help him to a better life."

Mr. Reginald looked gloomily at his *crême de menthe*, and his pleasant, boyish face looked haggard and worn by dissipation and grief.

"It seems," continued Mr. World, "that the day before I called he had been seized

with a sudden and unaccountable desire to visit the Zoological Gardens at Regent's Park. Acting upon the impulse, an electric cab soon deposited him at the gate. The week before his visit had been a heavy one, and it was with great relief at his pastoral surroundings, far from club and café, that he turned into the reptile house. There it was that he first made the acquaintance of the Barking Frog. This unique and lovable reptile possessed the power of barking loudly at will, and it soon began to take a firm hold on Reggie's affections."

Mr. World's voice faltered as he spoke these last words, and a glass of *eau frappé* was administered to him without affording him any relief.

"I can't bearr it!" he said at length. "Reggie, dear boy, control your grief, and tell Gilbert of your own tragedy."

Thus adjured, Mr. Reginald himself took up the gloomy story.

"There is little more to tell," he said in a voice choking with emotion. "We became

fast friends, and for a fortnight were like brothers. Every morning a porter from Covent Garden brought a few choice worms to my flat, and, hailing a swift cab, I drove to the Zoo with them as a present for Harold—his name was Harold. I was already finding my life under Harold's influence becoming a better and a nobler thing, when a sharp and a sudden frost put an end to my happiness. Harold was attacked with pneumonia, and on New Year's morning barked his last bark and expired. Everyone has been most kind, and Danger has written the most touching and beautiful poem. It has consoled me very much. Read it, Danger, read it to Gilbert."

Mr. Danger looked round the circle, and seeing that they were all of one mind, though they had heard the poem many times before, assented. He took out the red pocket-book, and took a folded piece of paper from between its leaves. Then, screwing a single eyeglass into his eye, he read the following beautiful lines :—

"LINES ON THE DEATH OF HAROLD, THE BARKING FROG.

"Tread softly," the Ichneumon said,
"Harold, the barking frog, is dead.
Long trouble and great pain he bore,
The barking reptile is no more!"

"No more with resolution firm
Will Harold gulp the wriggling worm.
Come, shed a tear for Harold's sake,"
Said Abraham, the spotted snake.

"It was the damned keeper's fault,"
Said Peter, weeping tears of salt.
"Come, join me in rebellion!"
Said Peter, the Chameleon.

"But no," the adder, Jane, remarked,
"Dishonour not the frog that barked.
I loved him once, observe my pain,
A melancholy snake is Jane."

"The humblest folk would always find
Harold so affable and kind.
He often came to my abode,
Poor dear!" said Tewksbury, the toad.

"Tread softly," the Ichneumon said.
"Harold, the barking frog, is dead.
Long trouble and great pain he bore,
The barking reptile is no more!"

There was a deep silence when he finished, and Mr. Reginald's youthful face was agitated with many tender memories.

"Come, come!" said Mr. Fluid at length, "we must not be sad. Who is for a game of dominoes with me? *Garçon, les verres.*"

Once more the glasses were replenished, and under the genial influence of the fresh drinks mirth was restored, and most of them fell to playing dominoes.

Gilbert, who was intensely amused, did not join in the game, but sat talking to Mr. World. The little man for once dropped his cap and bells, and it was astonishing how interesting and sane his conversation became. He had lived a butterfly life for sixty years, but he had observed men and things, and when he chose to show his shrewd mind and ripe judgment it was impossible not to respect him. Mr. World had outlived his friends, his ideals, and his morals, but he was still a kindly, sweet-natured little man, and when

he went the Café Royalists would lose the brightest youngster of them all.

At twelve o'clock Guy Waye came in and sat down with them. "I have been to see *The Three Musketeers*," he said.

"Ah!" said Mr. World, "Athos, Pathos, and Bathos, the three dusky dears. What will you have to drink?"

"It's lucky I turned up to-night," Guy said to Gilbert; "I most particularly wanted to see you. I'd no idea you were going to be here. Come round to my club when this closes; I want to speak to you about something important."

"Very well," answered Gilbert, wondering what the business could be.

Mr. World picked up an evening paper which was lying, in two senses, on the table.

"Dear, dear!" he said, "here's poor dear Lord Ravenscourt gone broke. Bankruptcy is getting very fashionable."

"Half *Debrett* have passed through the courts," said Mr. Halla, who edited the Society paper.

"True," said Mr. World. "I am compiling a book to be called *Burke's Stranded Gentry*. It will be an instructive work."

Mr. Danger, who had dined well and drunk deep, was roused from a placid sleep to enter this, and as the waiters were covering the vacant seats with brown holland and the lights were going out one by one, the friends went out into the keen, invigorating night air.

Mr. Reginald was giving a supper party in his flat hard by, and both Guy and Gilbert were invited; but they begged to be excused, pleading business, and elbowing their way through the disreputable midnight crowd that was surging at the corner, walked briskly down Piccadilly towards Guy's club.

"I want to talk to you about Kitty Nugent," said Waye, when they were seated at supper. "I want to tell you something I've heard, and to warn you more seriously than I did before."

Gilbert looked at his friend in a good

deal of surprise. He felt rather foolish. There was a good deal of meaning in Guy's voice.

"Now look here, old man," said Guy, "I want you to be quite straight with me, as I am going to be with you. I think this is more or less what happened last night, and I want you to tell me frankly if I'm mistaken. Kitty Nugent and you were left alone late last night. She flirted with you, encouraged you; you were flattered, and—small blame to you—you got spoony and kissed her. Is that so?"

"How the devil do you know that?" said Gilbert, putting down his knife and fork and staring at Guy uneasily.

"Why, from Kitty, naturally," he answered. "I'm not a magician."

"Little beast!"

"Oh, so you've found that out already, have you?"

"Look here," said Gilbert, "I was a damned fool, I'll own, the very damnedest kind of ass; but she came in late from a

dance, middle of the night, while I was having a last peg. Honestly, old man, I 'd no thought whatever of her—never knew she was a girl at all—until she began making eyes and catching hold of my hand and all that. Well, then, naturally one took as much as was offered. Anyhow, I realised to-day that I 'd been a cad and a fool, so I put a stop to it. To tell you the truth, old man, when I got up this morning I was rather looking forward to some more fooling round; but she didn't show up either at breakfast or lunch, and I got working, and I 'd time to think a bit and get sensible. In the middle of the afternoon in comes my lady in a sort of confidential way, as if we were both guarding a delightful and guilty secret. I was rather cold, and showed her that I wasn't keen. Then she tells me she loves me, or some rot, and I laughed at her, and there was a row. She left threatening. That 's all, damn it! I wish I 'd never gone near Mrs. Policarp's beastly flat."

"I saw Kitty Nugent this morning about eleven," said Guy; "she came to the Temple and talked about you. She told me—this was in the morning, remember—that you 'd asked her to run away with you, said you hated your wife, and all sorts of jolly things. She told me she had repudiated and scorned all your kind offers."

"Good heavens!" said Gilbert; "little devil! Why she was all over me two or three hours later. I knew she was a little flirting, nasty-minded thing, but she seems to be a good deal worse than ever I imagined."

"Well, I warned you, old chap. Now in a few hours you 've done yourself a lot of harm. That foul-minded, bitter-tongued little beast will spread scandal and lies about you wherever you go."

"Oh, she can't hurt me."

"Don't be sure. You must remember you are dealing with the very worst kind of girl. She is *demi-mondaine* in mind, but not in action. She is pleasure-loving, and

cares for nothing but amusement, her religion is a sort of music-hall to her. Don't you see, the combination makes her unscrupulous to the last degree? Besides, she's always slandering and lying about her friends, and she's always being found out. No one really likes her who knows her, and she is perfectly well aware of that. She is getting bitter and more bitter. Her brain's full of venom and nastiness. I honestly believe I'm the only man she can't fool. She hates me really, but she daren't absolutely offend me. I know too much about her. Well, this is another fact. But be careful."

Gilbert felt uneasy and also depressed. The merry hours at the café left no influence to cheer his thoughts. Over and over again, when he had left Guy and was driving home, he was assailed with forebodings, and an evil, mocking face was constantly present before him—malevolent, like some carven gargoyle on an old cathedral or ancient priory.

CHAPTER V.

MISS MALEVOLENT

FOUR or five days after her repulse Kitty Nugent awoke early one morning in a miserable and sullen state of mind.

Her position, she felt, as she reviewed the situation, was growing unpleasant, and the thought of it had been her ghost through the night. As she lay unquiet in her big, grey bedroom she could hear the little, low sounds of life murmuring in the warm silence of the spring morning, emphasising the solitude of her comfortable room.

Through an opening in the blind a brilliant sunbeam streamed in, hitting the scarlet edge of a hanging bath towel, and she lay staring at it till it danced out of reach and her brain refused to understand the colour, which grew faint and shadowy.

An enormous blue-bottle fly droned round the ceiling in measured circles. In the middle of the room was a bath, and the water was full of tremulous green lights.

She felt dimly all the joy of the morning rushing up the sky with bird music and the scent of the flowers in the window boxes. A lively street catch reached her ears from the courtyard below, and she could hear a maidservant laughing with one of the hall porters out in the light.

She heard the "clank" of a stable bucket on the tiles, and the sound of plashing water mingled with the cheery voices of the men as they moved about in the heat. All round her a happy life was surging and singing, and it only served to accentuate the bitterness of her own thoughts. Regarding herself as the pivot of the whole world, and bringing to life nothing but her own wild and undisciplined temperament, the situation in which she found herself filled her with unreasoning anger.

She set herself to think out the circum-

stances one by one, and to determine upon some definite course of action.

Since the afternoon when Gilbert had repulsed her she had loathed him more deeply than she could ever have imagined.

Almost hourly the sight of his happiness with Constance had filled her heart with envy and malice. He was working hard, and seemed perfectly at rest and content.

His manner towards her had become markedly indifferent. He hardly ever spoke to her at meals, and when she joined in a conversation he immediately dropped out of it.

Mrs. Policarp was beginning to take her tone from her guest, and treat her niece with scarcely veiled dislike.

The worthy lady could see as much of what went on as most people, and Kitty felt certain that she had more than an inkling of what had occurred. She felt, with perfect truth, that her aunt discussed her with Gilbert. Little things she had noticed on finding them together, indefinite

tricks of manner, a slight uneasiness, told her that she was often the subject of their conversations.

That such confidential talks between her aunt and the painter did not forbode ill to her she was not foolish enough to imagine. It was patent and obvious.

Waye had called one night when she had been at a theatre, and she felt sure that many of her little gibes at Mrs. Policarp, the little spiteful witticisms of an unpleasant mind, had been repeated. She could not afford to quarrel with her aunt. She had about a hundred a year of her own, which her father had left her, and she was not the person to live upon that.

Mrs. Policarp was only an aunt by marriage, and had invited her to live with her out of pure benevolence and kindness of heart. Kitty's claim on her generosity was small, and she feared that she was already stretching it too far. If her aunt were to give her up — and that impulsive person might very conceivably do so with a scath-

ing epigram — then good-bye to pretty clothes, a carriage, and the soft luxuries which she loved.

Life would mean work and little society. Flirtations and chocolate from Carbonel would drop out of it. She could imagine how much less interest Father Sundius would take in her doings. She was intensely idle, and fond of a fat, full-blooded life. The idea was horrible.

Nevertheless, the facts had to be faced. Under Gilbert's influence her aunt was becoming estranged.

As she thought of him, and recalled his calm contempt, the absolute indifference of his attitude, she hated him with an almost deadly hatred. The maid who brought her in a cup of tea and some toast noted the haggard lines on her face and the baleful light in her eyes, remarking upon it to the cook downstairs.

The tonic of tea roused her from a mere surveyal of her troubles into a state of active thought. She had no mean brain

when once she began to scheme, and under the influence of the hot liquid the last trace of sleep vanished, and she began to be busy with plans.

She sat up in bed to plot the better, devoting all her faculties to a solution of the difficulty.

It was obvious that Gilbert must be got rid of somehow, and, if possible, he must also be made to pay dearly for the slight he had put upon her.

How should she strike at him?

At once she thought of Constance. During the last few days Kitty had contrived more than one petty annoyance for Gilbert's wife. When she had been discovered in the painting-room Constance had seemed anything but pleased, and since that time Kitty had managed, by various petty innuendoes and small lies, to make it appear that Gilbert and she had some sort of confidence together.

It had been very difficult, owing to his coldness of manner, but Kitty was extraordinarily skilful in a little intrigue.

She could not satisfy herself if she had been entirely successful, but it was at least probable that Constance was uneasy, and that her mind was ripe for some kind of a disclosure. Possibly Constance might even think that Gilbert's coldness of manner in public might only be assumed to kill any suspicion of an understanding in private. She hoped that Constance thought so.

Although Kitty did not know it, nothing was further from Constance's thoughts. A mind so base and treacherous as this girl's could not understand or appreciate a nature full of sweetness. Constance was a lady, and the dignity of her blameless life would never have allowed her such low suspicions.

Kitty thought deeply. Suddenly an idea came to her which filled her face with triumph for a moment. Then she trembled a little and put it away. Bad as she was, unscrupulous as she might be, she hesitated and shrank before the malign thing engendered by her own brain. She felt that she could never do such a thing, that such a

revenge would be too complete and utter. At the same time, the mere details of her plan became rapidly clear to her. She saw the whole thing in its simple completeness. Good and evil were fighting a tremendous battle in her heart.

She thought of her religion. If she were to carry out this thing, could she ever go to mass again? Would not it be too horrible and dreadful to confess? She thought of her director, and his horror at such a deed.

She was sullenly rejecting the idea when a compromise suggested itself to her. Would it not be possible to, in some way, obtain the sanction of religion for what she purposed? That would make everything safe, and shift the responsibility on to other shoulders.

Like most Roman Catholics who are in constant touch and contact with the machinery of their Church, she was a devout believer in its mysterious and inexplicable powers. Sin was to her a mere question of arrangement. Were a priest

to pronounce her guiltless by some simple words, were she assured by a magic formula that she was acting in the Church's interests, then her conscience would no longer prick her, and she would have a complete immunity from it.

Her attitude, her ethical attitude, was limited, and her perceptions clouded and dark. Clever as she was in worldly affairs, shrewd as was her estimate of life, in things spiritual she was as narrow and uneducated as a little child. She had never questioned or inquired into what was told her. The whole thing was like a conjuring trick, and did not concern her. All she knew was that Father Sundius could certainly give her the power to sin without sinning. Even if she were to murder Gilbert, with her director's absolution, and under his influence, she would have felt no concern as to her guilt. The voice of God would have spoken to her from the priest's mouth. The deed, she would have thought, rested with God, not with her.

Father Sundius, she thought, must, somehow or other, be brought to connive at what she wished. She resolved that she would see him that very afternoon. Immediately that she had settled upon this her spirits rose, and all the morning her eagerness and excitement stayed with her.

About four o'clock she knocked at the gate of the presbytery. She was in a state of great tension, though outwardly calm enough. While her hatred boiled and simmered like a kettle within her, her manner was as soft and purring as a drinking snake.

The priest was in his study spending an hour with a cigar, a novel, and some tea. His mantelshelf was as full of feminine photographs as Waye's itself, and the slippers on his feet were no mere slippers from a shop.

To tell the truth, Holy Church in its hour of ease did not look so impressing as Holy Church alert and endowed with mystery. There was a certain feminine suggestion

about this fat gentleman against which his smooth face and small mouth did not militate.

His hands were soft and plump like the hands of some matron—some affable, jolly dame—and one almost expected to hear the click of knitting needles as they were busy upon a comforter or sock.

Kitty was exceedingly glad to find her friend in this cosy attitude of brain amid these genial surroundings. She was always more intimate with him at such a time. When he was fresh from some stupendous miracle of transubstantiation, absolution, or benediction, the good man was more unapproachable. The exercise of his remarkable powers always left him strung up and exalted. He was inclined to be a little arrogant, and, indeed, when a man can open the august door of heaven and hell he may pardonably be excused a little jingling of the keys.

But if Father Sundius, when fresh from church, affected a twang of the apostle with

a flavour of the angel at home, when he put on his slippers he put off pretension. What he lost in dignity he gained in humanity, and give him a little scandal with his cup of tea, and his welcome was as expansive as it was kind.

Kitty arrived at an opportune moment. The novel was dull, and his little friend was seldom that, so that it was with quite a sense of well-being that he saw her settle down in a chair opposite, sipping her cup of tea.

They began to chat of little, merry, unimportant things, and the burble of such talk was an anodyne to the girl's unrest. In a peculiarly feminine way the strong current of her purpose became weak under the influence of twilight, tea, and a soft armchair. The hour and place were too comfortable for any bother or trouble. She wondered at herself in a lazy kind of way for being so foolish and weak, and, indeed, her passionate resolves of the morning seemed very far away.

It is certainly a curious reflection, and one which everyone, at some time or other, has made, that mere physical comfort is nearly always strong enough to destroy strenuous mental action for a time. The æsthetic idea of a beautiful body gratifying all its lusts is, of course, wrong. The belief that the highest life, the wisest life, is a life of physical sensation duly ordered and skilfully arranged is, when followed out to its logical end, devilish, cruel, and obscene. Yet, at the same time, it is idle to deny that Sir Brain is at least suzerain to Duke Stomach.

During the conversation, however, Father Sundius mentioned Gilbert's picture, "The Burning of Anne Askew," and then, at the mention of the painter's name, hate, sudden as the fall of a curtain, bitter and black, fell before her mind.

She gathered her brain together, and bent all her attention to the business she had come to do.

"Ah," she said, "Mr. Russhe was boasting

the other day at dinner of the harm the picture would do the Church. He seemed to gloat over it."

"I fear it will, I fear it will," said Father Sundius. "It is precisely the kind of thing that appeals most forcibly to the basest passions of the ignorant. There will be more stone-throwing in Lancashire, I fear."

He shivered at the thought, and poured out another cup of tea.

"Yes, I think you are right," Kitty said. "It is painful to think that it is in the power of so vile a man as that to do the Church harm."

"I hope, dear child, he has not been annoying you lately. You remember you mentioned something of it the other day."

Kitty spread out her hands with a hopeless gesture.

"I can do nothing," she said, "nothing while he is there. Day by day he finds opportunities of seeing me alone, and makes the most dreadful proposals to me. I am sorry for his poor wife."

"Is she a nice woman?"

"She is charming, Father, and a great personal friend of mine. She is good in every way, and were it not for her ribald husband, I feel certain she would become a good Catholic. She is hovering on the brink of conversion; we have had many talks about it, and she is already longing for the peace and safety of the Church."

"Poor girl! poor girl!" said Father Sundius. "Would her husband object very much?"

"Object is not the word. The man is violent and passionate and reckless in his ways. He would be dreadful."

She saw some slight change of expression in the priest's face. Womanlike, she admired deeply all personal strength and prowess, and an ineradicable instinct filled her with respect for a strong arm. As she watched the man before her she could not resist the temptation of a little dig at his femininity.

"He would be quite capable," she said, watching the effect of her words with en-

joyment, "of personal violence upon her confessor."

"God forbid!" said Father Sundius, involuntarily crossing himself; "we must have no scandals at a time like this."

"It would be fatal," said the girl with decision. "The only possible way would be if they were separated."

"It would be far better for the poor woman," was the reply.

"It would indeed," said Kitty emphatically.

There was a silence, while Kitty hoped, as she had hoped for few things before, that the suggestion of her own idea should come from him.

When Father Sundius opened his mouth to speak she saw that she was not going to be disappointed.

"Does Mrs. Russhe know of her husband's unfaithfulness?" he asked with a slow, deliberate utterance.

"Oh, no. If she did she would leave him at once. She is of a very proud and

rather jealous temperament. She would never stand the slightest thing of the kind."

"She ought to be told. It would be a worthy action, and far better for her happiness if she were to be told."

"Perhaps, but who is to tell her?"

"Why should you not do so yourself?"

"Oh, no, no!" Kitty said with a vehemence that startled and somewhat displeased him. The girl had always been so docile and ready to fall in with any suggestion of his, that he vaguely resented this sudden self-assertion. "It would be very wrong of me to do so," she said. "I 'm sure it would be very wrong."

"My dear Miss Nugent," he replied to that, "surely I am the best judge of what is right or wrong for you. You will see, I am sure, that if I, your director, say to you that you will be doing a good action, you need have no fear."

She protested again more feebly. He urged her again more strenuously.

Kitty had played her cards so well, that he was determined that she should do what he wished. All his life his great effort was to obtain dominion over the souls in his charge. Like most priests, he revenged himself for his enforced lack of a virile and manly life by obtaining mental power over his parishioners.

All round him, on the platform, in the press, and in private life, he found people jeering at his class for half men, and, to put himself right with his instincts, he was continually endeavouring to direct the lives of his flock absolutely.

Father Sundius honestly believed and taught that he was the supreme human ruler of the congregation who attended his church. His favourite devotional reading was St. Francis of Assisi, and his favourite passage the one beginning:

"If I saw an angel and a priest, I would bend my knee, first to the priest and then to the angel."

Or St. Alphonsus Liguori:

"Who is it that has an arm like the arm of God, and thunders with a voice like the thundering voice of God? It is the priest, who, in giving absolution, exerts the arm and voice of God, by which he rescues souls from hell."

Thus he was not in the least inclined to allow Kitty any freedom of action, and, a fat diplomatist, he argued skilfully with her upon the point, entirely ignorant of the fact that he was being played with and fooled by an intelligence superior to his own.

At last Kitty agreed to tell Constance that Gilbert was unfaithful to her, and to endeavour to part husband and wife. Before promising to do so she made the priest distinctly assure her that she was acting in the Church's interests and doing a good and worthy thing. The responsibility, it was agreed, rested entirely with him.

Although she had lied and tricked her director into this, although the whole thing was false from beginning to end, yet she

felt absolutely free and untroubled. He had spoken a few magic words, and she firmly believed that there would be no retribution.

It was a curious state of mind for an educated person in the nineteenth century.

Members of the Roman Church have a poor opinion of the shrewdness of the Almighty.

As for Father Sundius, left alone with the muffins, he was mildly complacent. It would be a capital thing to convert a young, pretty, and well-known woman. It was a splendid answer to the "Anne Askew" picture. He sat there full of his own astuteness. Marriage was nothing to him, he knew nothing of the sacred relations of husband and wife. Had anyone told him he was doing a fearfully wicked thing, that he was an ignorant knave, he would have rattled the keys.

CHAPTER VI.

KITTY WAVERS

KITTY left the presbytery considerably excited by the conversation. She wanted to be alone, to think it over, to plan out a precise and definite mode of action in her brain.

The environment of home would rather prevent that. She imagined that to settle details upon the very theatre of her tragedy would be difficult. She was a girl with so much real power of concentration, and, moreover, with such a thorough understanding of the psychology of moods, that she always preferred to "arrange" her hours of thought. Deciding that she would not find home pleasant at the moment, she turned into Kensington Palace Gardens to think over the whole thing in a broad place, at leisure under the sky.

She sat musing with half-closed eyes, and now and again, by some trick of the air, the birds in the middle distance seemed to swoop towards her and as suddenly recede again.

A vast old gentleman, very drunk, came rolling along the pathway; an actor, one might have thought him. He came opposite to where Kitty was sitting, and made as though he would turn down a narrow walk between two hedges of shrubs. He raised his arm, and, looking at the girl, chanted in a deep resonant voice—

"Behold! I have looked upon the sacred barley; I have eaten out of the drum; I have drunk and was well pleased; I have said 'konx ompax' and it is finished!"

With that he turned down the path and disappeared, to vomit out other reminiscences of his stage-life to other unoffending loiterers. A soldier with a tight-fitting jacket and clanking spurs, a fine young man, passed with an appreciative glance at Kitty, and once more the place was deserted and left

her to the undisturbed enjoyment of her thoughts.

She had got what she wanted from Father Sundius, and revenge—the most poignant and bitter revenge it would be—was lying, a weapon, in her hands.

But she was not happy, there was no exultation in the thought. Indeed, as she sat lonely there she was filled with an absolute sickness and disgust of life and all its appeals. The whole thing was tiring, weary, and unprofitable.

She began to ask herself if it were after all worth while. Did anything matter enough?

Evening came falling over the town and crept into the palace gardens. That distracted her for a little, for it was a pathetic moment.

> "*She has passed me by with a rustle and sweep*
> *Of her robe (as she passed I heard it sweeping),*
> *And all my red roses have fallen asleep,*
> *And all my white roses are sleeping.*"

She remembered the sweet verses with

pleasure in their melody. But again, as she looked over the gloomy gardens, which were too dusky now to show that the delicate fingers of spring had been busy there, she fell into gloom again. It was chilly also, and with no other determination she walked home.

Mrs. Policarp, Constance, and Gilbert were all out, and to her disgust she found old Mr. Fluid waiting in the drawing-room.

That gentleman produced from his pocket a little red silk box, which came, so it appeared, from China; opening this he discovered some bizarre silver buckles, wrapped in rice paper. Grinning faces in arabesque were beaten upon the buckles, which had been made by a moon-faced, silent, yellow man on the banks of a great mud river in the East.

"Something quaint for a charming young lady," said Mr. Fluid, as with tremulous hands he handed the buckles to Kitty.

She thanked him kindly, though she could have thrown the things at his head in her

boredom. It seemed necessary to offer him some refreshment.

"Will you let me ring for some tea?" she said, "or perhaps as it is rather late you would prefer a gin-and-bitters?"

"Thank you," said he; "I must be going now that I have paid my little tribute to beauty."

He got up and peered for his hat, a silly, foolish old man. She watched him with an enormous contempt. His presence put the very last touch to her misery. At last he tottered out and left her alone. She was so miserable and low-spirited that she rang for whisky-and-soda, and had two glasses in rapid succession. She was a very temperate person as a rule, and the spirit sent a glow through her. She was in much better spirits, and about to go to her bedroom to dress for dinner, when the door opened and Mr. Danger was shown in.

Kitty hardly knew whether she was pleased or not to see the fat, nice little man; at any rate he was better than the old fool

who had been lately gone. She did not know him very well, though she had always been at one with the rest of the world in liking him. She resolved to try him, to see if he were really amusing.

"Hallo!" she said, "I 'm so glad you 're come. Mr. Fluid has been here and I 've been bored to death. Amuse me, Mr. Danger. Mr. Fluid has brought me some buckles, what have you brought me?"

"Buckles!" said Mr. Danger, "I have no buckles for you. But I have brought you my new novel, *Tartuffe up to date.*"

"That 's nicer than buckles."

"It is the history of my civilisation," said the little man with a grin.

He helped himself to some whisky with great content, and then lay back in an arm-chair, regarding her with shrewd, merry eyes.

"I should like to know," said Kitty, "if your Chubbiness is really very young, or is he middle-aged?"

"If I told you that I should be giving myself away," said he.

"Won't you give yourself away to me?" Kitty answered.

"I am too fat to be an acceptable present," he said with a little sigh.

"Not a bit," she replied, "I am very much in love with you."

"You are the only girl who has ever said that," he said. "Come and sit in this chair and pet me. It has been my one ambition to be petted by a nice girl."

Kitty was intensely amused. She liked this plump little philosopher, and felt quite an affection for him. She went across the room and sat down by him and put her arm round his neck. Mr. Danger cuddled up to her with a deep sigh of content.

"Stroke my hair," said he.

"I will kiss you if you like," she said.

He put up his face and she kissed him on the lips. "I am only twenty-three," he said.

She burst into laughter.

"Good heavens! only twenty-three! why, you behave as a man of forty."

"That is my secret," he answered. "I

get fat on purpose and wear an eyeglass; I am regarded as something of an oracle; I am the confidential friend of all my set, and privy to their fears and hopes. I am thought to be very wise, but believe me, in reality I am a silly little creature. I would," he went on with great conviction, "I would rather sit here with your arms round me and give up all my reputation. Were it possible I would for that break up my monocle, bant, and destroy my personality."

"You would get horribly tired of being cuddled."

"I am afraid you are right," he said, thrusting a chubby, ink-stained little paw into the masses of her hair. "It is a new joy to me, and therefore doubly attractive. Yes, perhaps you are right, and perhaps I am not a fool after all. Upon reflection I am sure I am not a fool. I watch the world without saying much, and though I am untidy in my appearance, it is condoned because I smoke pipes and drink a vast quantity of beer. I think I will go now.

I want to think this all over in a public-house. It is only there that I can think. What a splendid memory to have. A pretty girl all black hair and lavender water has embraced me, and without repulsion! Oh, believe me, I am the merriest little man in London with my secret!"

Kitty kissed him once more, and he trotted away far more pleased than Punch. She watched him go through the courtyard. Once he turned round and kissed his hand to her with a cherubic smile.

Kitty felt pleased with the episode; so, indeed, did Mr. Danger. That little gentleman got him straightway to a public-house, and over the simple drink of beer fell into deep laughter. Indeed, his fat merriment amazed the barmaid, who inquired, with a sneer, upon its cause.

"My dear," said Mr. Danger, "I have been drinking Morat. It is a sweet beverage invented many hundred years ago in Normandy, and is composed of mulberry juice and honey. It has made me merry."

"Wot O!" said the barmaid.

"Watteau!" returned Mr. Danger, "was wonderful, and Conder is more wonderful still. They are great artists."

"Well done, Condor," said the barmaid. "Lord Charles B. Wot O!"

"You admire Lord Charles Beresford?" said Mr. Danger politely, though it must be confessed that he took but little interest in the Navy.

"Wot do you think?" inquired the barmaid. "I saw a representation of the bombardment of Alexandria at Earl's Court!"

"Another bitter, please, my dear," said Mr. Danger, and fell to thinking of black hair, warm lips, and eyes that could fire even his sluggish blood.

"As for me," said the barmaid, who resented Mr. Danger's reverie, "I 'll have a glass of port with you."

He gave her the sixpence.

"What 'll I have?" said she. "Crusted old or Fine rich?"

"Oh, any port in a storm," said Mr.

Danger, for he heard the wind howling with a certain melancholy in the outside world. She poured out the liquid and put the sixpence in a horrible machine with a bell, which seemed to have something in common with a typewriter, a Punch and Judy show, and a machine gun.

Mr. Danger asked for, and was provided with, another glass of beer.

"Well, you do seem worried," said the barmaid, sipping the port.

"I have been kissing a girl," said Mr. Danger. "It has unsettled me."

"Oh, lord," she said, "surely *that's* nothing very extraordinary."

"It is for me, my dear," he rejoined; "kisses don't come much in my way."

"Oh, every girl must like you," said the barmaid. "I'm sure of it. You look so contented and jolly."

"It is a new thought to me," said Mr. Danger, rather disturbed, and yet not displeased.

Now the bar was empty of guests, and

the barmaid came out of her bar and sat down by Mr. Danger by the side of the fire. She had a fine opulent figure and naughty eyes. Her skirts hung straight round her hips, and broadened out into an apron below.

"A damned fine girl, egad," said Mr. Danger, who felt that it was how Boswell might have put it.

"Go hon," said the barmaid.

Mr. Danger picked up his glass and emptied it with huge satisfaction. Then he drew his chair closer to the barmaid. "Lil," he said with an unerring instinct, "Lil, I love you."

The barmaid put her arm round his neck, and held Mr. Danger's chubby head close to her own.

"Straight?" said she.

"As the road to hell," said Mr. Danger, and fell for the second time.

During this amorous business of Mr. Danger's Kitty had been dressing for dinner. Just before the gong sounded a telegram was brought in to her, saying that her aunt

and Constance were dining out, and that she must be alone for the meal.

She was annoyed, for she wanted companionship. She wished that she had asked little Mr. Danger to stay with her. If she had known she concluded that she would certainly have done so.

She took a book to the meal, but found it dull, and gave up attempting to read it after a time.

The places round the dinner table were spread for other comers, although she was alone at it. She began to picture people sitting in the empty chairs.

A high chair of black carved wood from Germany, showing a sweep of smooth grass sward, a kind of park one might suppose, with a lady walking there, was where Mrs. Policarp would be enthroned.

Kitty's thoughts fell upon her aunt. She did not appreciate the character of the woman. Kitty's brain was active and vivid, there were few cleverer girls ; but she lacked the greatest and most charming of gifts in

man or woman—tenderness. Mr. World even was far more tender than she. Men who knew him, and in times of trouble felt the pressure of his little hand, or heard the sympathy in his voice, could bear witness. And this was a veteran man about town!

As Kitty had no real tenderness she could not appreciate her aunt. Mrs. Policarp was so consistently kind that Kitty forgot her great kindness of heart and behaviour, and only remembered, with something of a sneer, Mrs. Policarp's rather exaggerated manner. Indeed, it takes a fine nature to appreciate another.

A green wooden chair, which Mr. William Morris was thought to have carved out of his own head, generally accommodated Gilbert. She turned to that. "Do I hate him?" she said to herself. She concluded that she did not know. There was not much in Gilbert Russhe, except an excellent eye for colour, and a somewhat feeble wish to do well. He was a nice, clean, gentlemanly young man, with, perhaps, just a touch of

the Philistine, and he meant to be as good as he could. Really, she could hardly hate the man! Did she love him? That was, of course, absurd, yet he was a nice boy to look at. He was a "gentleman," and that was so much when a man's arm was round one—more than the other men could understand, or ever would understand.

Mrs. Policarp's immediate set were all gentlemen, Kitty reflected, but, with the exception of Reginald, not like Gilbert. Mr. Danger was an Eton boy, and his father was a service man of excellent family. Yet Mr. Danger was a freak. Mr. Ravillion was even more of the great world than Mr. Danger, but he too was a freak.

Mr. Halla and Mr. Cochonott were gentlemen, but too clever. They were not the usual type of Englishman. Guy Waye, of course, stood by himself, but even he was not so fascinating as a man like Russhe.

To have Waye's arms round her, so ran her reflections, was very delightful; but let him press ever so tightly, and poise his head

never so well, a man like Russhe was the best. "I suppose something in the blood teaches a man to make love," she thought. "These clever people are so horribly conscious about it. And yet they wonder why women prefer what they call a 'good-looking fool.' Heavens, if they only knew! Guy Waye is quite uneasy if there 's a soldier in the room; he resents that manner. Well, it 's the best manner after all. A clever man thinks his brain attracts a clever woman more than his manliness! I wish I was a *vivandière!*"

As she thought idly like this she began to lose her venom, and her purpose waxed very weak within her. Was it after all worth while? She could not at the moment say it was.

Glimmerings of quite another course of action began to come to her.

But in considering her thoughts, and in noticing how they affected her towards decency, it must not be forgotten that these appeals—although they tended towards good—were merely *material* appeals. They

were of this world, and earthy, prompted by nothing more imperial than that. She was a very worthless woman—an exact type of the clever, interesting creature of to-day, who lives entirely and absolutely for this life. Her kindness, for she was often kind, came merely from some physical cause, and it was so with all her virtues. To say that she had no soul would be untrue—the whole statistics of ethics show the thing impossible. But in a sense it would be true. Her body was, at any rate, all she knew. For her temperament nothing more deadly than the Roman system could be devised. A great spiritual intellect can find good in the abegnation it requires from the brain, and comfort in the wonderful and ever-present mysteries the system constantly insists on. But for a person who lives for this world, and the things in it, Roman Catholicism too often means spiritual death.

So this wavering of Kitty's, this hesitation on the brink of final dishonour, meant nothing in reality. It was simply an accident of time and place.

Later on in the evening, when some other people came in, her resolution changed once more, and she became resolved to do this thing. It would not be interesting to follow her speculations any further. They in themselves are not interesting, except as they explain this shallow, sensual brain.

CHAPTER VII.

CHEZ REGINALD

UPON five o'clock the next afternoon Mr. Reginald sat alone in his flat in Jermyn Street, regarding a photograph of Harold, the barking frog, with a subdued melancholy. He was very depressed indeed. In the morning Mr. Danger had called with a copy of his new novel, and with a request for what he called "a spot," which, done into English, meant a tumbler containing as much whisky as a generous idea of propriety would allow.

The new novel was short, but had grip and cohesion, while upon every page the quips of Mr. Philip World scintillated and glowed.

Mr. Reginald, who had never done anything but "be a bad man," felt, on the

perusal of this work, that he also should bestir himself.

All his friends were workers, and each could put his name upon a picture, a book, a theatre programme, or a song. Mr. Reginald alone could boast of no single achievement. He was simply a rich and bad young man.

Mr. Danger's book fired him with emulation. He would, he thought, attempt some great, some noble work. He cast about in his brain for something to do, some memorable, epoch-making thing.

After a long contemplation of Harold's picture and more than one brandy-and-soda, a sudden inspiration came to him, and precisely at midday he sat down to dramatise the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

It would be a glorious achievement, he said to himself, and as he opened a drawer and took from it some sheets of virgin paper, the full-handed thunders of applause from stalls and pit and gallery in some great theatre, made merry music in his ears.

For several hours he had wrestled with the bulky volumes of the *Times* reprint, but with scant success, and now, at five, he was moody and depressed. The sweet melancholy induced by the contemplation of Harold's photograph alone enabled him to bear up.

There came a knock at the door, and Harry, his valet, entered in a confidential manner.

"The optician, sir," said Harry the valet.

Mr. Reginald's eye brightened. "Come in, Balian," he said, "come in, I have waited for you these two hours."

Mr. Balian, the spectacle-maker from Piccadilly, entered with a black bag. He was a short, fattish man, who was well known to all the Café Royalists. He would cash a crossed cheque, lend five pounds at reasonable interest, and had always some beautiful, untrue story about the Prince of Wales. His monocles of plain glass were worn by everyone connected with the arts, and when he spoke of Mr. World it was

with sincere regard and real feeling in his voice. To Mr. Reginald he had always been a true, though humble friend.

"I think, sir," he said, "that I have been able to suit you, and I hope you will be pleased. Mr. World and Mr. Danger looked in this morning and told me a few details of your sad loss, sir." Mr. Balian never pretended, even to himself, that he understood the vagaries of his customers. He took them for granted, doubted nothing whatever, and always made up for ignorance by an access of respectful sympathy.

"Yes, yes, Balian," said Mr. Reginald in a pained voice, "it has indeed been a trying time. Let me see the glasses."

With that Mr. Balian opened his bag, and took from it a number of single eyeglasses with black rims.

"I think these will do nicely, sir," he remarked. "I have followed your suggestions. Here is one in very heavy mourning — the rim is of double thickness — for use when you visit the Zoo; and the others, I

imagine, will just express a proper degree of grief."

"Thank you, Balian," said Mr. Reginald, trying on the glass for use in the Zoo. "Thank you, they will prove very useful. It was incumbent on me to show my grief for Harold's loss in some marked manner; but when it came to the wearing of black cravats, I confess I found myself a little difficult. Good afternoon, Balian, Harry will give you a glass of wine in his room."

Once more Mr. Reginald sat alone, as the evening shadows began to lengthen, and the glow of the fire to become more insistent in the place.

He felt tired of posing, and could not for the life of him know what to do. Once he had been able to be happy with a book or a pipe, but no quiet delights could interest him now. There must be noise, excitement, and the clash of vinous wits. His clever turn for paradox and topsy-turvey views of life, begun at the University for a joke, was, he found, quite a passport to "artistic"

society in town, so he had kept it up, until it became part of him, and he had shed real tears when Harold died. To be "Mr. Reginald" abroad was an inspiriting exercise; to be Mr. Reginald at home was as dull as a November Sunday in Bloomsbury.

Mr. Reginald was not a person of any importance in the world, but he was of a well-defined type which exists in larger numbers than people suppose. For a year or two people like him go upon a brilliant and fascinating road. Then dissipation of the mind and body has its result, and they become fat, old-young men, still flitting about the ancient haunts, pouring the jests of ten years back into the ears of boys. Every man who knows London knows these men, with no friends, little money, no credit, and no wish to do well.

Mr. Reginald was dull, so he rang for Harry. "To-night, Harry," said he, "I shall give another supper. You will arrange the dining-room as nicely as possible, and

see that everything is complete. Don't forget that Mr. Danger drinks beer at supper, and that Mr. Halla takes a liqueur of Condy's Fluid with coffee. I have not invited anyone as yet, but I will write the notes now, and you will ring up three messenger boys. The boy that takes Mr. Danger's note will find him in "The George" public-house, opposite the Law Courts, and Mr. Cochonott will be at Romano's. The other envelopes I shall address myself. You had better have four boys, on second thoughts. I want to ask Mr. Russhe, who is staying in Kensington. The boy who takes Mr. Danger's note can also go on to Mr. Waye's rooms in the Temple."

The man went out and Reginald wrote the notes, feeling that he had secured a merry revel for that night. It was a heavy price to pay, and he constantly found that he was looked upon by his set as a man with a bottomless purse; but it didn't matter. Everything was damnably dull, and he simply *must* be amused. There was still

a long time to be got through before he could sit at the head of his table dispensing luxuries to his friends. He canvassed ideas.

A music-hall was always exactly the same. He would meet the same men and women, who would say and do exactly the same things. A theatre was certainly no place for a gentleman to sleep in. At Barnum's there was a gentleman who had achieved a bubble reputation by allowing himself to be fired nightly from the mouth of a cannon; but Barnum's was some distance away, and also too noisy.

He thought of a rich and carefully chosen dinner at some restaurant, until he remembered that only a hearty supper would enable him to support the fatigue of a late sitting with his friends.

He had so persistently neglected respectable social duties that he could call to mind no quiet house where he might dine. His beautiful rooms, with their pictures, books, and calculated comfort, seemed full of a tangible depression.

Suddenly a bright idea came to this lonely young man, to whom all London offered no appeal. Summoning Harry, he undressed and went to bed, desiring that he might be called at eleven.

Far away in an old manor-house in Devon his mother sat by a great wood fire knitting, waiting for dinner to be served, and thinking of her son. By a long stretch of lonely coast, on a green table-land close to the sea, stood the old stone house of the Reginalds. The sea was always grey and sad there, and the sound stirred the hearer like music. Behind were great hedges which in summer-time were full of flame-coloured fuchsia and sweet honeysuckle, where the bees made long diapasons all day among the flowers. And in this place, when the eye is tired of the long grey and amethyst, faint with the rich flowers and herbage, it is caught up to a great purple moor, which towers into the sky, and seems to hang right over the little purple village at its foot.

Into the sleep of the young man strange old memories, old smells, old sights, old sounds began to creep. His fantastic bedroom—the walls painted in a flat tint, with goats and dragons painted upon it fighting for pictured meats—faded into home as it was looking at that very hour. In his dream the sun had sunk and the sky was copper-green, and from the quarry on the moor came the faint sweet notes of a bugle warning the miners that a blast was in progress.

It grew darker, and he seemed alone on the dusky moor. The mild west wind, laden with sweet smells, wept on the moor like a soul sick for love, and swept among the rocks unceasingly upon its weary wings.

He sat down upon the moor and kept vigil over the dying day. The sadness of decay and death, the death of day, was in the air, and it seemed that all the flowers and creatures of the hill knew that evening had come. High above him a plover wailed sadly, "'Tis dark and late," and further

still his mate answered him down the wind, "'Tis late and dark."

As he slept uneasily and saw these things, his mother in the old house was thinking of him with great tenderness, and wondering why he never cared to visit home.

At eleven o'clock Harry entered with his master's dress clothes. Reginald woke and dressed with a grave face, which seemed to smooth away the many wrinkles that mechanical merriment had painted upon it. He felt better for his sleep, and his dream of home made him wish to see it once more. The noise of London outside only accentuated his sudden longing for that well-known peace.

It was with an unaccustomed air of contemplation and analysis that he went towards the Café Royal, where he expected to meet most of his friends. He made a resolve that he would not let this new thing drop, that to-night, after his guests were gone, he would make some attempt to examine his life and to discuss with himself the

question of a change. Meanwhile, here was the café, and he must put it from him for a while.

That strange creature, Mr. Danger, was sitting alone in the café when Reginald went in.

"I got your note," he said, "in the 'George.' Thanks."

"Where are the others?" asked Reginald.

"Well, Philip is at the Duchess of Marble Arch. I should have liked to have gone also, but my dress suit is in pawn. Philip suggested that I should sit in the hall and say I was a reporter from the *Morning Post*, and he promised to bring me out a drink as often as he could. But I thought it wiser not, so I have been at the Alhambra on the nod."

"Have you seen Cochonott?"

"Yes; he's coaching a lot of pups for the Bar exam. You know it's quite near. He'll come presently. Valhalla and Ravillion are somewhere in the Strand, and Fluid is there too, I think. Some barmaid they've

gone to see. Thank Heaven," concluded Mr. Danger mendaciously, "that I have never been fascinated by a barmaid."

"You are a cynic, Danger."

"No, Reggie, I am not. I am a man of simple tastes who is contented to observe, not to experience. One of Philip's wonderfully brilliant remarks is the only thing that moves me in any way. I am not like most men. It is now spring. Young men's fancies are turning to thoughts of love till they are giddy, and hundreds of wanton lapwings have got themselves a whole Heralds' College full of newer crests, but I care nothing at all. Give me enough beer, sufficient tobacco, and an hour a day with Philip, and I ask no more. I have committed no youthful follies, and I look forward to a quiet and reputable old age."

"Well, old man, I'm glad you're contented and happy. Your nerves are better than mine, I suppose. I'm neither. I'm dead sick of London and Paris, of wine and women, of smart talk and bright lights. I

want sea and moor, heather, winds, and mountains."

"You would tire. The only life is to sit contemplative in the middle of things. To watch quietly and keenly the follies and mistakes of others, that is the only way to understand the human soul. I could never write in the country."

"Oh! for you it's all right, but I can't write. Oh! and by the way, I think your novel is splendid. No, I think I shall go away to-morrow to some quiet place and never see town again. I am moody, depressed, and unhappy."

"Then," said Mr. Danger with an air of great wisdom, "you must have a large absinthe at once."

"As you will. You are foolish, though, a drink does not lighten the heart."

"Wait and see," said Mr. Danger, as he mixed the absinthe for his friend, skilfully directing the *eau frappé* in a little stream with a practised hand. And indeed the shrewd fat little man was right. The liquor

on an empty stomach induced a pleasing view of things. Once more the gilded arabesques of the domino-room became interesting and decorative, again the humming of the place made music for the young man.

"Damn the afternoon!" he said to himself. "Afternoon is such a silly, depressing time. In the future I will spend all my afternoons in a Turkish bath."

Guy Waye was the next arrival. He was in a dreamy mood, and fell to talking of Hamlet in a pretty but rather affected way. His deep, mellow voice resounded with conscious periods, and every dactyl had its full significance. That the words he used would be polished and enshrined in his next article mattered to none of them. They were very pleasant to hear. Spontaneity did not matter in the least. He went right through the play for them, and concluded with a little prose poem about the lady, a well-known actress, who had been Ophelia. As he began the last words he saw Mr. World, with Ravillion and Halla,

enter the room, and he hurried over the sentences a little so that he might finish before their arrival could create a diversion.

With one eye on the table and another glancing towards the door, he said, "So I thought how wonderful it must be to have known what that woman has known. For her passionate Romeo had scaled the wall in the moonlight, and her loveliness had startled him from the latticed balcony. She had stood beside the seat of judgment serenely grave while the Jew had torn his gabardine before her. White and still, with her golden hair streaming to kiss the grass, the old king had held her in his arms, calling on her in the very article of death. She had been dear to Hamlet also. He had loved her once, and the wind had breathed softly over her drowned face as it rustled among the hollow trunks of the willows."

"How are you?" said Mr. World, pat on the full stop. "Here I am, come straight from the society of old frumps to the club of odd fellows. Oh, the nasty, naughty

things I've been hearing about everyone! How the angels do gossip. I can't bearr it."

Mr. Danger's red book was at once placed upon the table, and conversation became general.

"How's the *Stranded Gentry* book?" said Mr. Halla.

"Going very strong," said Mr. World; "in fact, nearly completed. I have spent all the afternoon praying to St. François de Sales, the patron saint of the poor author."

"Let me have a look at it," said the editor. "We might print it in instalments in 'Social Notes.'"

"When, like Harvey, you have discovered a circulation, I shall be most pleased."

Mr. Danger was entering this when Mr. World said, "Well, Danger, how are my little things going in Fleet Street?"

"Fairly well," said the chronicler. "Only fairly well just now. I see some few little things that I dropped in the 'Cheshire Cheese' have appeared in 'Without Restraint.'"

"So Philip slowly broadens down from decadent to decadent," quoted Guy Waye.

"Dear, dear," said the little gentleman, "I must be more careful. Fleet Street is such an excellent test. It would never do to go off. I don't want *sic transit gloria mundi* to come true in my case. Keep a careful watch, Danger, a very careful watch."

"I shall call Danger the repeating watch," said Reginald. "But come along, supper will be ready now. The others will come straight on to the flat."

In a few minutes the friends were sitting round Reginald's hospitable table, and save for the clatter of knives and forks and the regular popping of corks there were few sounds.

Reginald, who, like all young men, prided himself on his knowledge of wine and viands, always fed his guests well and in a thoroughly considered manner.

His oysters were no larger than half-crowns, his *paté* was no cheap concoction from a German Delecatessen shop, and a

teaspoon of Kümmel was always present in his salads.

"I think," said Mr. World, "that personality is often so beautifully expressed by food. Butterfly's roe on toast is a dish which all London would at once know to be my own."

"An excellent idea," said Waye. "What would I be?"

"Oh, stephanotis and oil-cake," said Mr. World promptly. Everyone except Waye laughed loudly. The description was too exact.

"*Nihil tangit quid non ornat*," murmured Mr. Fluid, who had little Latin.

"Thank you for the compliment," said Mr. World, "but your quotation is not quite right. You should be more careful, Fluid. For misappropriating quids the penalty is quod!"

There was a general laugh at the best thing Mr. World had said that night, and it moved Mr. Danger to a new departure. With a look at Mr. World, in which affec-

tion was mingled with regard, he read aloud—

"Oh, Fluid, thine agnomen bids
Thee not, like Homer, nod.
Wits misappropriating quids
Will find themselves in quod!"

Soon the friends were all seated in the other and larger room, each with a long glass before him, and supper was but a pleasant memory.

Mr. Ravillion had just finished a little set of *leit motifs* for the various well-known bars in London—very clever and informing, when hurried steps were heard without upon the stair.

"Hallo!" said Reginald, "I expect that is Russhe."

It was indeed Gilbert; but when the door opened and he staggered into the room, everyone saw at once that there was something very serious the matter.

Gilbert's face was white and drawn, and there were cavernous blue hollows underneath his eyes, which glowed with excitement.

A sudden thought that he was not sober crossed the minds of some of them, but his first words showed the supposition was incorrect.

"Waye," he said, "can you come into the next room for a minute? Reggie, will you come too? I'm in trouble at home. I want to consult you. Excuse me, you fellows; sorry, but it's damned serious." He clutched at his throat as he was jerking out the words, and leant back against the wall.

Wondering greatly, their faces full of sympathy, Reginald and Guy led him to the dining-room, where the ruins of supper still lay unremoved.

There was a silence in the drawing-room as the three men went out, and a dull murmur of voices came to the revellers.

"*Cherchez la femme*," said Mr. World at last, with the manner of Vidocq at home.

CHAPTER VIII.

COUP DE MAITRE.

"WHAT'S the matter, old man?" said Waye, when they had gone into the other room and closed the door. "Here, sit down, and have some brandy. You look awfully done."

Gilbert dropped into a chair and took the glass, and they could hear the rim rattle against his teeth as he drank.

"I'm in dreadful trouble," he answered. "Constance has left me."

Both men turned eager, startled faces towards him. "My dear boy!" was all that Guy could find to say.

"It is killing me," Gilbert said. "I feel absolutely dead."

"Tell us all about it," said Reginald.

"It's Kitty Nugent," answered the

stricken young man. "She's been lying about me to my wife, and Con has gone away to her aunt's in Scotland."

"Why, what has Miss Nugent said, and why?" shouted Reginald.

"She has told Connie that I asked her to run away with me, and tried to seduce her."

Waye swore a great full-blooded oath. "I knew it," he said; "I knew it directly you came in. I said she would harm you. I didn't think even Kitty would do that though."

"But why did Mrs. Russhe believe the girl?" said Reginald. "I mean to say, it's pretty general knowledge what she is. Everybody knows her."

"Con knew nothing about her," said Gilbert. "Why should she? Kitty was all sweetness to her at the Policarps'. Look here."

He pulled a letter from his pocket, wincing at the sight of the well-beloved writing.

Guy took it, and he and Reginald read it together. The letter ran :—

"DEAR GILBERT,—I have to-day heard about your awful wickedness. Miss Nugent, for my own happiness, has told me of your horrible proposals to her. I can say only very little to you. The blow is so sudden and unexpected that I have no power to think. If all men are like this, then God help poor girls who give their lives to them.

"I am going away at once to Aunt Macdonell's, where I shall think what to do. I will write to you.

"Oh, my husband! my husband!

"Your broken

"CONSTANCE."

The three men looked at each other in silence. Reginald turned away to the table, where, by the place he had occupied at supper, lay a little heap of cigarettes. He lit one, and as he did so a sudden thought struck him.

"Look here, Gilbert," he said, "Guy and I will get you out of this all right, but I must know a little more before I can suggest anything. I know how you love your wife, and I always have felt better for seeing it; but tell me frankly—I know men—how far did

you go with this girl? Was there ever anything between you that you are ashamed of?"

Gilbert told him exactly what he had told Guy, in almost the same words.

"Now I understand," said Reginald; "I see perfectly. 'Hell has no fury,' don't you know, and so on. I've met some pretty bad ones in my time, but this beats everything. Cheer up, old cock; now I know the thing's a lie I feel certain that it can be made right. Have a spot."

"That's it," said Waye, "don't you lose your heart, old chap. We will see you through somehow."

Gilbert was a little cheered by their sympathy and encouragement. As he allowed Waye to hand him another drink his eyes became calmer, and lost the wild agitation which had shone from them at the beginning. He took a cigarette.

"Well," he said, "you've heard the whole thing. You see my position. Without my wife I am absolutely lost and done for.

Every hour adds to the torture. Mind, I 'm not hopeless by any means, things can't be all over; I simply can't bring myself to think that. No doubt that devil was very convincing. She is very clever, but things can be put right. Meanwhile, I am in dreadful agony, and my wife must be even worse."

He got up and walked up and down the room in tremendous agitation. They saw that the hysteria was mastering him again. Reginald took his arm and made him sit down. Then he began a string of bitter curses against the girl who had done him this wrong. Brutal, fierce words came bursting from him. The others sat perplexed. They did not know what to do, and neither said anything to break in upon his blasphemies. The great idea eventually came from Waye.

They saw him rise from his place with a curious grin. He finished the liquor in his glass with a gulp, and then threw the tumbler into the fire, where it crashed and broke into pieces.

"I've got it," he cried exultingly, "I've got it altogether. It's damned neat too! Listen to this."

Gilbert looked at him eagerly.

"To-morrow morning," said Waye, "I'll send a note up to Kitty Nugent, asking her to dine in the Temple with me. I'll say my sister's coming, though I don't suppose it's necessary. She likes to do anything that she thinks is a little dangerous; besides, she will come, she often comes to see me alone. To make quite sure I'll tell her that you are coming, Reginald. You know how she has flirted with you. It's your oof, you know, not your personal attractions. She'll come, and then I'll leave her alone with you, Gilbert. You must make her sign a paper absolutely denying the truth of what she told your wife. It's an exceptional case; I should use force if necessary."

"I would hit her in the face," said Reginald with an ugly snarl. He was very much moved by this black story. Indeed, it was curious to see how instantly

brutal the faces of all three men became at that suggestion.

The anger in Reginald's voice had stirred some strange forgotten barbarism in their blood, and their faces became brutal and savage.

"Yes," Gilbert said, "that will do. That daughter of lies shall hear a few things about herself that will startle her. Poor Constance! It is horrible to know how she must be now. I hate that woman," he hissed, and then quite suddenly he lost all control, and burst into tears and deep sobs low down in the throat.

His face worked convulsively, he screamed curses between his tears, and his lower lip could be seen swollen and protruding beneath his moustache.

In the armchair in which he sat he was quivering in a strangely unpleasant way. Both Guy and Reginald were seriously alarmed.

His strong emotions seemed to have come upon him like a powerful drug, and to have

left him not quite human. Had he been a stronger man with a firmer grip on life he could never have become the abject thing they saw before them.

Had Kitty Nugent been there to watch she would have tasted revenge more poignantly than ever she could have imagined possible.

They got him to bed before long in a spare bedroom, and then went back to their friends.

"Well," said Mr. World, "and what's the matter?"

They told him in a reserved way that Gilbert had quarrelled with his wife, but that it was nothing very serious.

The aspect of the room had changed since they had been away in a curiously definite manner.

Not only had the place lost neatness, but it wore a rakish air, and did not look quite proper.

The tumblers scattered all over the room, on tables, mantelshelf, and floor, seemed at

once excrescences and centres of interest. Someone had been pulling some books out of a shelf, and they lay in disorder by the fireplace. The stinging smell of Egyptian tobacco, narcotic and foul, floated heavily in the air, and ash from innumerable cigarettes made little leprous spots upon the carpet.

There was something repellent about the guests. The two men who had just come among them were still under the influence of a real emotion, and had missed the gradation of events which had brought the others logically to their present state.

Mr. World's handsome face was no longer handsome. He looked very old and his face was tinged with blue, while the silver stubble on his chin and cheeks was very apparent.

His features lost a little of their pride of bearing, the soul of the face, such as it was, was no longer there. Reginald regarded him with a tremor of something like fear, seeing lines come out in his face that told of strange, unlovely things.

The little old gentleman was celebrated in his way. Known everywhere, popular in all society, so ran the analysis in Reginald's brain. Here were marks of drink, of coarse passions of the blood, of remorse even, that came out and betrayed the secrets of the man's life while he nodded half asleep.

No one was talking much; the hour for brilliancy had passed long ago, and dawn was near. Reginald was disgusted with the life that had hitherto satisfied him so well. Something in Gilbert's pain had moved him and turned his thoughts to his Devon home again.

A potent, visible thing like the lines on Mr. World's face brought him with startling and unmistakable clearness to his own position. He felt a great cad and a fool. Cochonott was drunk and noisy. Never at any times a quiet man, though always clever and amusing, some noisy blood in him came out when his brains were excited by drink.

The dawn began to be a trembling tenant of the room, filling the place with the stir of its soft passage.

Waye and Reginald went to the window and threw it open, and as they did so they saw that night had passed like a flying bird.

How fresh it was, and how purely the fine morning air fell upon their faces. The long street was absolutely still—not a single sound or sight of life broke its long monotony.

There was something so virginal and pure in this strange half-light and the gentle breezes of dawn, that the room behind seemed to them horrible. From his coign it took Reginald with sudden and heavy disgust.

As the first lovely heralds of the sun quivered up the sky and day began to grow with colour in the streets, a certain thought began to pop in and out of Reginald's mind.

Waye was watching the phenomena of dawn with great intentness, and Reginald looked back into the room. Mr. Danger

had out his note-book and was writing rapidly. He looked a fat, dirty, impossible little person. Mr. World's head was in oblique across the light, but it was sunk in his shoulders like an old man's.

Cochonott, Ravillion, and Halla were playing some game of chance with cards.

The dawn seemed to have no message for any of them there.

He turned to Guy, his brain chilled to an extremity of indecision, and his eyes were beggars for a little sympathy.

"Sick of it?" said Waye.

"Oh, yes, it's made about its last appeal to me."

"Then chuck it," said Guy Waye.

Reginald hesitated, when a loud oath from one of his familiars at the table came over the room. It was a foul word of the streets, and would not have been used by any of them at a time which imposed any restraint.

At the immediate moment of his indecision the word came across to him, and he took his resolve. His mind converged

full upon peace, and he felt he would take any fence upon the road to that. There could be nothing more ultimate than peace, and already the longing for the heather and the lonely coasts blazed in his blood.

In a few emotional words he put the case to his older friend, and told him that he was going to give up that life for ever.

It was with Waye's kind hand clasping his, and his fine face all alight with pleasure, that he finally resolved.

"To tell them as the dawn comes," he said, "that were worthy of the situation."

His speech and the sudden ceremony which followed were long remembered among the Café Royalists, and Mr. World and Mr. Danger for months after would talk sorrowfully of the event and recall its every incident.

After that memorable morning he was never seen by any of them again. They were rather mocking about it privily among themselves, saying that Reggie would come back to drink and the old life; but he never

reappeared, and they rather resented his power to break the chains which held them all so firm.

"To tell them as the dawn comes," said Reginald again with a little chuckle, "that were worthy of the situation. Guy, old man, I will go as I have lived among them—in a merry and a public way."

With that he left the room. Soon after his valet, in dressing-gown and slippers, followed him back with several bottles of champagne. Presently Gilbert appeared in pyjamas, and sat down by Reginald. Mr. World was wakened, and the players at cards were warned that something was afoot.

There was a peculiar silence of expectation, broken only by the popping of corks from the table where Harry, the valet, was employed with the champagne.

The first real sun-rays of the day came streaming into the room, and Ravillion, with an uneasy air, went round putting out the pallid lights which in that strong light

seemed as if they had burned all their souls away in the revelries of night.

"Now, *mes amis*," said Reginald, "fill your glasses fuller than ever they have been before, for to-day I leave you all, and you will see me no more."

They drank wonderingly with some constraint, and of them possibly only Mr. World understood that here was a soul going back to honour, albeit with a grimace. He caught it at once. It seemed a reproach to his own presence among them. His lips twitched a little, and a distinct pallor was visible spreading itself upon the features of that serviceable veteran.

"As you know," the young man went on, "I have lately suffered a bereavement, but, heavy as the blow has been, I have not been influenced by that alone."

He saw that their faces had taken on the half grin of men who wait for a joke. They expected that he was preparing for them some new jest.

He noticed this, and changed his tone

somewhat. As he did so he saw comprehension run from one to another round the circle like a thread of fire shining out on a piece of half-charred paper, the glow spreading swiftly round the edge.

"Oh, yes," he went on, "I am itching to be off. I have drunk deep enough, I have wasted enough time. I have never had what you have, a work to do, something artistic, so I'm tired, and I'm going to disappear for ever and a day. I'm going to inspect the world from a different corner."

"Well, when you come back you can entertain us with fine tales of rural life," said Mr. Danger with genial scepticism.

"How you posed, illustrious, as a squire," said Valhalla.

"Oh, he will never come back," said Mr. World, and he got up stiffly. "Well, well, Reggie, we've all amused one another, haven't we?"

They pressed round him sorrowfully, saying good-bye. Each one's face was like a part of his life. With each he had revelled.

There was a good deal of pain in all this. Probably if he had had even then the encouragement of a hearty laugh or a brilliant *mot* he would have relented. But they were all too tired and exhausted to provide either.

"You must all take something from the room to remind you of me sometimes," said Reginald.

So they exercised their fancy in selection. Ravillion had a cigarette case, Valhalla a stylographic pen, Mr. World asked for a walking-stick, and it was touching to see how happy Mr. Danger was made by the present of a silver-mounted pocket-book.

Then with great gloom, which even another bottle of champagne could not dispel, they made last adieux and went down into the street.

It was now very early on a fine spring morning. The birds were singing their morning hymn to the sun in the trees which surrounded the church opposite. The gallant chirrup filled all the warm air, and

punctuated the farewells which the weary guests shouted up from the street.

When the clatter of their departure had faded, Reginald withdrew from the open window and turned to Gilbert and Guy, who were still there.

The room was in a terrible state of uncomely disorder; everything was stained with marks from the glasses, and covered with ash from the cigarettes and cigars. The fresh oxygen which flowed into the vitiated air only accentuated the foul, stale smell of the room, which was almost unbreathable.

Reginald was looking rather sadly at the remains of that last revel.

"Come, come," said Guy, "take heart; it's not so very dreadful. Good God, man," he cried, with a fine gesture of disgust, "look at this! They're gone now; and upon my soul, I don't think they're much loss. Now, it's not you, it's Gilbert we ought to consider. Go and dress, Gilbert, old man, it will be all right, you'll

see. You can catch the midnight train to-night, with the retractation in your pocket. I will write the note to that girl now."

Russhe went to his room to dress, and, sitting at the writing-table, Waye wrote :—

"King's Bench Walk, Inner Temple.

"Dear Sugarplum,—Will you come and dine with me here to-night? Charlie Reginald is coming, and there will be another girl besides you; so if, which I doubt, you have any scruples, consider them removed. Come at nine, and for heaven's sake don't bring your aunt! I 've written you a new poem, which awaits your arrival.

"Your own boy,

"The Only Waye."

Despite the insincerity of the note and the gravity of the occasion, it was amusing to see what care he spent on the well-known signature "The Only Waye." He could not bear to be anything but decorative to any girl.

The note was posted; it would arrive by midday, and they went to shave and bathe after their long vigil.

When they came again into the sitting-

room they found it transformed. They were to breakfast there, not in the dining-room, and the meal was prepared upon a round table placed by the window.

The room was swept, tidy, and sweet. The daffodils had been changed by one of those trim maids who are to be found among the *entourage* of expensive chambers in Jermyn Street, and Harry, a dexterous rascal, had prepared various peppered delicacies proper to the occasion of young gentlemen who had been up all night.

The morning papers were neatly folded upon a small table; the correspondence lay, serried, upon a tray. "Good gracious, Reggie!" said Waye, "coming suddenly into all this order, you might be a Junior Lord of the Treasury by the respectability of your rooms."

All three men looked fresh and well. The glorious chill of the bath, the sweep of the razor, the comfort of clean linen, seemed to pull them together in a marvellous way.

"Harry," said Reginald to the man, "I leave town to-day for the country. Pack up everything I shall need this morning. You will stay on here and pack the heavy things in cases, and then join me in Devonshire. I am giving up life in town for a time. Now," he continued, turning to his friends, "you 'll stay with me till about four, won't you, and come and see me off? I hope you 'll be all right, Russhe. Oh, I 'm sure you 'll be all right."

"Oh, Gilbert will be all right," said Waye, with a pretty movement of the hands. "Surely he will be all right. Constance will be all tremulous to receive him, and he can explain everything with the paper. I shall write a prose poem, I think, about the reconciliation — a little winged thing. I am a great temperament, a sort of stringed instrument upon which the sorrows of others strike, and their pain gives music to the world."

"Damn temperament!" said Reginald, who, in view of rural life, was already

becoming a little brutal. "Pass me a bottle of Bass."

Then the three of them became very gay. Now and again during the morning Russhe reflected with a sudden shame that this joyousness, induced by new and bright surroundings, proved that his love and grief were, after all, mere transient emotions which fled before a bright morning and a comfortable room. Even as he stretched out his plate for another fish-cake, with a noticeable sensual satisfaction with his environment, he smiled bitterly at his own weakness.

His remorse and pain, all his wild feelings, were really alive enough, only he did not know it. This anæsthesia of his trouble was but the natural effect of intense change upon his tired and peculiarly impressionable mind. It was the definite sequence of events, and psychologically was only another phenomenon which illustrated his character.

His mind then took to itself all the associated significance which moved uncon-

sciously in his brain by the peculiar suggestion of his surroundings.

Indeed, the morning was very fascinating. The room presented such a gay blend of colour and pleasant faces, there was so much careless pleasure in every sunbeam, and the merry growl of London below, that the dullest temperament would have been affected by it.

After they had seen Reginald off in the afternoon his spirits sank again, and he began to be fearful that the project would go wrong. As the sun was declining he became very gloomy, and to be influenced by that curious relative sadness we often feel when the beams of the sun strike the ground horizontally.

"My love, my love," he murmured to himself as he left Paddington with Waye and hailed a cab.

So once more, with all the well-known symptoms, the thoughts which mere transient enjoyments could but hold at bay for an hour filled his brain with bitterness and grief and pain.

After they had ordered dinner to be sent into the Temple from a neighbouring restaurant, they spent the time of waiting feverishly in the Strand.

Waye and Russhe at ordinary times rarely went into a bar. They were too well known, and both men of position. It would not do. The Café Royal alone had been their rendezvous.

But to kill time, and not to be too far away from the Temple, they went in and out of one or two of the well-known drinking places in the Strand.

The Strand is the one street in London where the very froth and scum of rascaldom is rampant. The low actor out of an engagement is there in scores, swindling for his daily bread. The blackmailer, the harlot, the thief, fill all the bars, and the public who pass along the seemly thoroughfare know nothing of the sordid wretches lying in wait close by.

The two men, by this time in a nervous, irritated temper, met Mr. Danger, who was

familiar to the place, and under his guidance visited various haunts where the little man seemed to be well known.

At eight o'clock they took a cab to the Temple.

As they passed Saint Clement Danes Gilbert was laughing bitterly. His nostrils were caught up with contempt, his lower teeth set hard in his upper lip. There was a blood-red reflection in the sky from the sunset, and the air was thunderous. Ever and again a great drop of warm rain fell upon the horse's back.

Thunder always brings some untoward and electric influence into life. There is the sense of the "unnatural," and that sense of fear which the cultured mind rejects and puts away has, nevertheless, its corporeal effect upon the brain.

"Oh, this will be a damned important night for someone!" Gilbert said thickly as with clenched hands he followed Guy past the Temple Church.

Their footsteps echoed strangely in the

hot dusk, the rain began to plash heavily, and the muttering of the coming storm could be heard far away over the Surrey hills.

As they passed under the old door in King's Bench Walk, a reporter, who was taking this short cut from the Strand to the offices of his paper in Tallis Street, saw them stop for a moment as if arranging some plan of action.

Some short time afterwards the reporter again passed that way, going to an "assignment" in the Holborn Town Hall. It was beginning to rain heavily.

A soft, warm light from some windows on the first floor shone out into the gloom, and the wayfarer could see the white gleam of a woman's shoulder.

It would be pleasant, he thought, to join some little party in those chambers. Obviously the owner was entertaining some actresses.

CHAPTER IX.

"FAR DOWN, FAUSTINE!"

KITTY NUGENT had spent most of the morning playing over some French music and eating Elvira plums, when she got Guy's invitation.

It suited her very well to accept it. There was a first night at the Lyceum, and Mrs. Policarp was going with one of her friends, a Major Mort, who was familiar with all the great of the stage, and would not be back till late at night.

To go to Guy's *en garçon* like this would pass the evening very pleasantly. A little party like that, which was just a trifle more than informal, was exactly the sort of thing she liked. She knew that on such occasions she shone. All the *cocote* in her blood came out, though in a discreet and proper

way, and she knew the power she had in her eyes when she could allow her real self to look through them.

As she toyed with Waye's little note, and watched with unseeing eyes his pretty writing and the great margins he had left upon the paper, she felt distinctly pleased at the prospect it opened up. The evening was now satisfactorily arranged for. She had purposed either to stay at home or to spend the time with Mrs. Pryde, the wife of a hard-working novelist who was always taking himself *au grande* serial, but this invitation was the best of all.

She laughed as she saw Guy's adjuration that she should not bring Mrs. Policarp, for her relations with that lady were very strained.

Kitty had extracted a promise from Constance that she would say nothing to Mrs. Policarp about the cause of her departure. Constance had accordingly protested as a reason that Mrs. Macdonell, the harbouring aunt, was ill and desired

that she should nurse her. At the same time, plausible as this sounded, Mrs. Policarp was widely aware that there was much more behind. Constance had suddenly grown limp and white. All the blood had gone out of her voice and the suppleness from her carriage, and Mrs. Policarp was too experienced in the affairs of this world to believe that all this followed immediately upon the indisposition of an aunt.

Constance gone with only a note for Gilbert was strange behaviour in a bride; but Gilbert shaken by the note like a water-eaten leaf in a wind was sure sign that something untoward was afoot. Then Gilbert's absence, with nothing to explain it but a hasty note scribbled late at night, proved with some conclusiveness that more than a little was wrong.

Again, something in Kitty's manner was strange. A sort of frightened exultation was in her eyes, and from her manner it was not difficult to conclude that she knew more about the circumstance than she chose to say.

Mrs. Policarp, with a little ingenuity, began to make an excellent guess at the truth, or at something nearly approaching it. Her manner became very cold and pregnant with meaning. Indeed, she had determined that if, on investigation, when there was an opportunity for that, she found her suspicions were true, Kitty should straightway spend her last night under the roof of Belvedere Mansions.

Mrs. Policarp, though a kind creature enough, had a great aptitude for the small war of private life, and Kitty Nugent had been very bitterly made to feel that her aunt doubted nothing there was something wrong. Kitty began to be sure that a woman of such nice perceptions as her aunt had not failed to connect the Russhe affair with her, and she became a little frightened and uneasily alert for possibilities.

After lunch she sat in her room letting down the hem round the skirt of an evening dress, which she proposed to wear that night, in conformity with some sudden jigging of

the fashion, which had said skirts were to be worn much longer.

She sat in a low chair by her dressing-table reviewing the situation. The light from the window, which looked into the courtyard, fell upon the looking-glass in the first instance, and it was reflected from that on to her face.

The strong, yet rather leaden and lifeless light, was most favourable to an absolute revelation of temperament as seen in the face. In solitude like this, with thoughts rippling over the surface, unposed for the inspection of others, it was an eloquent, haggard, earthly countenance, with an unpleasant watchfulness which her cogitations lent it to wear.

The charm of her vivacity had gone. Her eyes, which in moments of animation had a light in them like the light on wet blossoms when the sun comes out after a shower in spring, were like quivering jellies now.

Her complexion was dull and untransparent, for her powder-puff had been undis-

turbed that day; her lips were pale and a little puffy.

She bent down to a work-basket for some lace which she was going to sew in a flounce round the skirt to hide the mark of the hem. As she did so her hair, loosely tied in a slovenly washing knot, came in the deflected rays of light which passed through a cut scent-bottle of ruby glass.

Her hair was stabbed with little crimson spears, and beneath this snapping aureole her white face lowered heavy and grim.

She forgot her pleasant anticipations of a gay evening full of conquest in a consideration of the immediate past.

The knell of Gilbert's happiness had sounded, she thought; and standing in imagination on the last verge of the hill—the closing scene of the episode, as it were—she looked back on the valley she had left behind.

Did she regret? She resolved she neither repented nor regretted, and that she would be a fool and a weakling if she did.

The thought of Gilbert and his contempt for her that afternoon gave her exquisite satisfaction. She grinned and sneered to herself, as she thought of that comfortable young man white and hopeless.

She would like, she thought, to make him come back to her now, suppliant, a mere body slave to her, to follow her like some dog, to brush her skirts, to take her letters to the post.

When she thought of Constance her triumph was more empty, bitter, and dusty, like a rotting nut in the mouth. The girl's simple naturalness, the slight and pure joys which sufficed for her, her dignity of mind, all made revenge imperfect, and it seemed to recoil upon herself.

When she had crushed this lady with her lying words, there was so sweet a perfume from the broken flower, that it made Kitty feel inferior and base in every fibre.

Side by side she had stood with Constance, robed for the journey, and seen their twin reflection in a tall mirror which stood in the

hall. While with soft, false words of sorrow she had bid her graceful victim farewell, she had seen in the glass the strange difference between them both.

Constance was like a beautiful drawing, full of feeling and expression, while Kitty had seemed like a coloured photograph.

So disturbing was the memory, that Kitty stopped her work and got up uneasily, strolling about the room.

She stopped in front of a pastel which hung on the wall. This had been given to her by a young idealistic painter called Backhouse. She had met him on the boat which brought her to England, and he had found her sweet and, as he thought, innocent. Something he overheard one night had changed his opinion, and she had never seen him again.

The pastel was called "The Sands of Dee," and was a picture full of red light and wind. The sands were wet and shining, and all the great estuary, away to the sea in the middle, looked angry and cruel.

One thought, as one looked at it, that on just such a night as this the fisher maiden had gone over the sands to call the cattle from the low salt pastures, and the sea had rushed to make her his own. The thing was so well done, that its flawless beauty had the power to suggest an infinite pathos to the imagination.

In this life we have all a great many chances. In some mysterious way the human soul, even when sunk in evil, or when about to contemplate some sin, is for ever being influenced for good. Every now and then the hardest heart is touched a little. For one moment the evil in possession of the brain dissolves, and a chance for reparation or repentance is offered.

In the most unexpected way these solemn promptings come. At the sight of the picture, Kitty was given another chance.

She remembered the evenings on deck, when the painter had talked quietly and hopefully of things worth doing in life.

She remembered his ideals. The beauti-

ful painting itself had a sad appeal to her quick brain. She thought of Constance far from her husband, alone and uncherished.

"What have I done?" she murmured to herself. It was curious how, at a moment when better thoughts were swaying her, she was dragged back into sin by the very emblem of salvation itself.

She hesitated a moment, and her eye fell upon her rosary and crucifix, which lay heaped up between a bottle of liquid rouge and the gaudy box of Elvira plums.

The fat voice of Father Sundius suddenly filled the room, distinctly assuring her that she was without blame.

Instantly egotism banished sentiment, and Constance and Gilbert—bereaved of each other—faded away. She thought that after all her momentary tenderness was foolish. Gilbert, she said to herself, was a bad man, and it was right that he should be punished. It was far better that it should be so.

In fact there could be no doubt that Holy Church had chosen her to be its instrument.

She was stainless, she was absolved. She put away from herself quickly the least hintings of memory which told her of her own initial responsibility.

The episode over, she sat down again and took up the dress.

The maid brought her a cup of tea and some sandwiches, and when she had smoked a cigarette and looked at an evening paper she felt as hard and callous as ever.

She began to gloat over Gilbert. "I suppose the fool is drinking," she said to herself, with a bitter smile; "they generally do." She wondered if she should see him again; it would certainly be delightful to have him degradedly dangling after her.

Once her shoelace had come undone, and he had knelt down and fastened it for her. She had a vision of him doing this again.

About half-past six, as she was preparing to dress, Mrs. Policarp sailed in from paying calls.

That dear lady was in a state of spluttering animation, and had been coruscating in

Lancaster Gate with enormous success. Indeed, she had said something so impertinent about the Albert Memorial, that she was seriously contemplating the establishment and endowment of a private Mr. Danger.

Kitty offered her an Elvira plum, and confidently volunteered that she was going to dine with her familiar Mrs. Browning, and the two parted upon terms of superficial goodwill.

Mrs. Policarp went first, as she was dining at Prince's with a party, and about half an hour afterwards Kitty sent for a cab and was soon being driven eastwards towards the Temple.

Never had she felt more irresponsible and light of heart. The sky was already a deep purple, and the air was very hot. The rapid movement of the cab threw warm waves of heat against her face, and as the hansom moved down the Strand, a deep rumbling of thunder occasionally mingled with the growling of the traffic.

As she paid the man and hurried through the ancient, dusky courts towards King's Bench Walk, a drop of hot rain fell upon her bare arm, just above the wrist which was holding up her skirt.

Guy Waye met her in the largest of his two rooms, the room where he kept his books.

Neither Reginald nor his sister could come, he explained, a little ill at ease she thought, and so she must fain put up with him.

Her spirits fell a little at this, for she had come prepared for an audience, but she smiled sweetly and said something about her "Only Waye" with a side glance.

After a little banter, the man from the restaurant said that dinner was served, and they went into the other room, which opened out of the library.

"It's so hot," said Guy, "that we'll leave the communicating door open, but I'll draw the curtain to prevent any draught." He did so, and they sat down together.

Guy's manner was curious this evening. His light badinage and flow of talk was gone; he was shy, and seemed to be a little afraid of her.

"My dear boy," she said at length, "you *are* dull this evening."

He looked at her very straightly when she said this, and she in her turn felt uneasy at his face.

"What's the matter?" she said, putting down her soup spoon.

He did not answer her, but drummed with his fingers upon the table. They heard the heavy rain splashing, splashing on the flags below.

An ominous and low roar of distant thunder hung in the air, and the brilliantly-lit room was very strange and still.

The room was extraordinarily still.

Guy raised his head and stared at her again with great gloom and meaning.

There was something fearful in the steady falling of the rain outside, heard with great distinctness through the open window.

Quite suddenly fear took hold of the girl, and she felt something, she knew not what, immediately impending.

Struggling with the terror that was falling round her, she made some impudent remark upon her host.

She had hardly finished speaking when Gilbert came quietly out of the other room and shut the door behind him.

She started back, pushing her chair against the wall with a low, bubbling scream, like some great night-bird in pain.

Waye went to the window and closed it, and immediately the noise of the rain became a distant murmur.

Then, without saying a word, he went out by the passage door, and she heard the key turn in the lock.

"Good-evening," Gilbert said in a cool, even voice.

The sound of his words broke the tension. Though she was still horribly frightened, it was better than the ghastly silence of the two men.

But the change upon her was shocking. As Gilbert greeted her, the very lees of hate rose to the surface in her face, and everything which spoke of soul flickered out of it like smoke.

She lolled her head forward at him in terror-stricken mockery.

He turned from her with a little shudder, which she saw, and going to a side table, took from it some ink and a pen with a pad of paper.

"You know why I'm here, I suppose?" he said, as a man might speak to a dog. She saw waves of anger coming and going over him, and marvelled at his self-control.

"No," she answered with an effort.

"Constance has left me," he said, gripping a chair-back to steady himself, and despite his greatest effort he could not keep the pain from his voice.

She heard it with a thrill of malice, and it gave her courage.

"Indeed!" she said. "And who with?"

He had been standing oblique to her, so

that she saw his profile, but her words seemed to catch him up and twist him round in one movement.

The chair went spinning and falling to the other side of the room.

His face, as he turned it upon her, was convulsed and purple. He could not speak, but retched and swallowed with passion, while with monotonous persistency the rain splashed outside.

She shrank from his terrible wrath as a puppy from a lifted whip.

He seemed afraid to trust himself to speak. After a minute he turned away, and when he showed her his face again it was set and cold. The passion had gone, but his eyes stabbed like steel, and there was a contempt in the lines of his mouth that burnt like living fire.

"Oh," he said, in a coarse, strident voice, "I'll not waste words with a harlot like you. I'll come very quickly to the point with you. Look you here. You'll write on this paper a full and complete retracta-

tion of your lies, your foul, dirty lies about me. Take up the pen!"

Her face became so malignant that it lost all human likeness.

But he heeded nothing. "Write!" he cried, "Write! Write!"

She made no motion to touch the pen, and in two long strides he came round the table to her side.

He caught her wrist, shivering with repugnance at the touch, and ground his long fingers into the soft flesh.

At his close presence towering above her physical fear awoke and became clamant within her. She took up the pen.

Then, standing close by her, he dictated what she should put down, and slowly and painfully she wrote it word for word.

"I own that I lied to Constance Russhe in order to produce an estrangement between her and her husband. Everything I have said about Gilbert Russhe, implying that he has in any way behaved to me as a gentleman should not behave, is absolutely untrue.

"Kitty Nugent."

She sank back in the chair with a bowed head, and he folded the document and put it away.

Then he turned to her gravely. "I will say a few words more to you," he said with great sternness. "You are powerless to hurt me now, even with the weapon of your sex. I wonder if you realise how bad a thing you have almost done? But it's useless, of course, to speak to a woman like you. You are bad through and through, full of evil-speaking and lust. Oh, I can't say anything to you to show you what I mean! But just listen, and I am saying something so powerfully true that some day every word I say will come back to you; you have few friends now, and you will end dishonoured and alone. I have no right to say to you, 'Go and be good,' but I have a right to warn you. Now, if you will go, the man will call a cab for you; and God grant," he cried with great fervour, "God grant that I may never see your malign face again."

In his last words his dislike burst through the level monotone of his speech, and caught up his voice high in the palate. It was then that one could hear the touch of falsetto which betrayed a man with not much force of will.

His voice could not bear all the emotions of his brain. It was overloaded.

The thunder had come much nearer, and ever and again the room was full of flickering violet fires, cracking and snapping in the rain.

Gilbert stood on one side of the table, and Kitty opposite to him. They stood in silence, staring at each other while the rain and tempest sang a loud accompaniment to their thoughts.

In the girl's mind a riot of emotions raced and swirled. Curiously enough, her hatred for the man who had outwitted her was the least of them.

His words had hurt her as no other thing had ever hurt her, and resentment was numbed by the pain. As she looked at

Gilbert she almost wanted to take his hand and ask for his forgiveness. She noticed how white and painworn he was, and how his lips and eyes twitched involuntarily.

The weird aspect of the room, the dramatic comfort of it, invaded by passions of the human heart, and the mysterious fires and powers of nature, made all hate and malice shrivel up and seem like a little vapour that had passed away.

There was an unseen influence hovering over everything, and moment by moment she was filled with an immeasurable awe.

So her second chance of reparation came to her, as it were, from the very Spirit of God itself, brooding over that house in the storm.

Gilbert's attitude of mind as he watched Kitty was singularly different.

The paper, close to his heart—he could feel it there—filled him with elation. He had won the difficult game he had set himself to play, and he knew that he had been opposed to no mean antagonist.

He saw the girl's eyes change in expression, he saw the malice and hardness begin to pass away from her face and leave only the shadows of what had been. It increased his triumph. He imagined that he had broken her, that she was still in fear of him.

It was right enough that she should be punished for her action, but he was a man with little perspicuity, and he carried it too far. Of course, he did not know the better thoughts which were animating her, but he was, perhaps, unnecessarily brutal.

"If you are afraid of the thunder," he said with a twist of the lip, as if he were doubly anxious for her to be gone, "the man will see you to the gate."

His cold voice came suddenly upon her like a hammer, and crushed her momentary change of attitude. She thought in a flash that he wanted to gloat over her discomfiture with Waye.

Her eyes glanced up at him with a sudden flash, and they were cruel, like the

eyes of a hooded snake. Her face became rigid to the lips, and yet illumined with a sudden purpose. Her head drooped forward, poised towards him.

"Well, good-bye," she said, with a smile of the lips alone. "You've won. Good-bye. Thanks, I can arrange for myself."

He saw her out of the flat, and heard her footsteps echoing on the stone staircase far below. He leant over the banister looking down the well of the stairs, the hot vapours of the gas beating upon his face. At one landing he caught a flash of white opera cloak, and a foreshortened view of her. Then, with a long breath, he went back into the chambers.

"Guy," he shouted, and his voice was full and sweet again. "Guy, I've got it! Where are you?"

Waye came into the dining-room, which seemed quite normal again.

He had seen nothing of the strain and terror of the last half-hour, and he was gleeful as a schoolboy.

The whole thing, now that it was over, began to seem unimportant. It appeared as a trivial incident, though an unpleasant one. A *faux pas* in a drawing-room, a quarrel with an acquaintance upon a point of etiquette, as they pledged each other with laughing eyes of relief, it really seemed no more than that.

"Your train goes at one," said Guy. "This feed is all cold. We'll go to the 'Criterion' and have something, and look in at the Empire afterwards. Here's luck, old chap!"

He turned to the window. They could hear the sound of the rain no longer.

"It's clearing up," Gilbert said. "That's a good thing."

"Good," said Guy; "we'll walk, shall we? Here's luck again, old man, and my love to you."

CHAPTER X.

MALEVOLENTISSIMA

SHE got home to the flat to find it very silent.

Some of the servants had gone out, and the habitable rooms were all empty and still.

Drawing aside a heavy curtain which fell over the window of the drawing-room, she saw that a swaggering wind had followed hot on the heels of the storm and had swept the clouds away. The stars were white and shining.

The outside night was chill and lone, but the room itself was full of presences. Strange antagonists, felt but unseen, shook her soul, and had their way of fear with her soul's house, her body of passion and of dust. Horrible thoughts pulled at her brows, and were rejected as they came. For some time

she was continually agitated, but as each bubble of passion and excitement burst, it left her calmer, and in half an hour her brain was her own again.

Gradually, as her senses came back, her hate and malice rose round her like a wall. Slowly the effort to forget and to forgive ceased and died.

In another half-hour she was perfectly self-possessed and calm. The clock in the hall showed that it was half-past eleven, and as the stroke beat out upon a silver tube, with a note as of silver kissing glass, Kitty sat down at the piano. She was very white, though her eyes shone. Her fingers twinkled over the keys in doubt as to the music they should bring forth, and then, nimbly mechanical, began upon the score of a light French opera.

The gay, sensual noises rippled and laughed through the hall with a painful merriment. Never had she given such complete expression to any music. Uncontrollable mirth rang in every note of it.

Pierrot, big, white, and noiseless, seemed dancing with his own shadow in strange and fantastic delight.

Although she played so well and with so wonderful an understanding of the music, her face was white, rigid, and expressionless.

In the merriment of the music, ever and again there recurred a few bars which seemed to express sadness, old memories, and regrets —like the sound of forgotten fingers on the latch to a lonely fireside watcher, when the wind wails round the house with a wilder inner note than before.

At these few hintings of pathos the rigid face at the piano was occasionally agitated and convulsed, but when the music sparkled again it sank into immobility. The girl played the pieces following the more sober melodies with a feverish brilliance and correctness.

A young lady beautifully dressed, in a beautiful room, lit by brilliant electric lights. A young lady at a grand piano, playing gay music to amuse herself in the

evening, that was the picture. Yet a glance at the girl's face would have instantly dispelled all the ordered comfort and repose of the surroundings. Her face was absolutely expressionless, and she seemed like some great white doll, but half endowed with life, set to the piano to make music. Twelve o'clock struck from the silver chiming clock in the hall. Before the sound had died away a cuckoo clock in a distant passage fluted a muffled message of midnight, and in the dining-room a big gong clock, with a voice like an old man, knelled away the dying day.

Kitty stopped playing and shut the piano. Then she blew out the candles, watching the flame turn into vapour and pass away. She moved quickly across the hall, skirting the fountain, and went down the passage towards Mrs. Policarp's room. Her whole actions were informed by purpose, and her face was alive and working with resolve.

Mrs. Policarp's room was large and luxurious. It was hung with heavy tapestry;

a red fire of logs glowed in an open fireplace. The bed was a great shallow box of carved oak, and at its head stood two tall candlesticks, some five feet high, which had once burnt before the Host in an ancient church in Arques.

Not far from the fire was an ebony writing-table covered with papers and books. Kitty searched among the litter on the table, but could not find what she sought.

The books which stood in a little portable stand upon the desk were a curious jumble. The *Dolly Dialogues* was next to a cheap green and gold edition of Emerson's better-known essays. A very curious paper copy from Germany of Fouquè's *Sintram and His Companions* stood side by side with a concordance of Shakespeare, and *Intentions* cuddled Bohn's *Handbook of Proverbs.*

These were the rough material of Mrs. Policarp's wit, the incipient warp and woof of the finished product. That worthy woman would lie late of nights with the candles burning at the head of her mediæval

bed, reading her little collection and letting her brain gather information here and there. She carried the pollen of her cogitations from one book to another till, as she fell upon sleep, her gleanings made a sort of paste in her misty brain, cerebrating, while the world was asleep, to ripple forth — *scintilla noctis*—in a flow of merry chatter the next day. Kitty turned from the writing-table and passed swiftly behind a screen which stood in front of the toilette table. She gave a little ejaculation as her eye fell upon the object of her search. Among the crowd of brushes, ivory boxes, and silver trays stood a large shallow bowl, which had been made by mounting the shell of an enormous crab in silver, and fixing it upon an oaken stand.

This was Mrs. Policarp's receptacle for Turkish tobacco, and she called it "Hans Andersen, the crab," "because it had big claus and little claus."

Kitty put her fingers on the heap of golden brown herb, and found it damp and

sticky. Her fingers, when she took them away, were stained brown at the tips. Her face was instantly relieved. Mrs. Policarp had found, upon entering into "artistic" society, that she had really no vice. All her friends had some vice of which they made a companion and pet, and which, when conversation flagged, they were proudly wont to flaunt.

"You must have a vice, dear lady," Reginald had said to her, and more than one evening had been spent in anxious discussion among the Café Royalists as to what Mrs. Policarp's vice should be. Mr. Ravillion had solved the difficulty by proposing opium cigarettes. It was a vice that would wear well, was harmless and picturesque. Mrs. Policarp accordingly smoked opium-tainted cigarettes. She made them herself by steeping several ounces of tobacco in laudanum, and when the spirit had evaporated she made up the impregnated herb into cigarettes. It was this hell-brew which Kitty was searching

for, and she found it, as she had expected, reeking in the mounted crab-shell.

Close to the mess stood a large blue bottle of laudanum, three parts full, which Mrs. Policarp, who was untidy in her habits, had forgotten to put away. Kitty took the bottle swiftly to her own room.

Then she sat down at her writing-table and began a letter. As she wrote line by line her eyes blazed with triumph and her lips wore a continual smile.

There was something very devilish in her silent glee.

"*Dear Aunt*," ran the letter,

"*I can bear my shame no longer, and long to be away from a world in which I am hourly reminded of it. No girl was ever punished for yielding to a mad and hopeless passion as I have been. I cannot face the dishonour of the future. Had Mr. Russhe been unmarried things might have been different. I am the more punished for my sin. I do not think he cares for me now.*

"*Good-bye.* "*Your unhappy niece,*

"*Kitty.*"

She put the letter in an envelope, smiling to herself, and placed it on a chair by the bedside.

Her revenge was almost complete. The one last step remained to be taken. A great gloom and despair fell upon her, and on the very threshold of death she already felt its chills stealing over her; and there was a cold breath, as from some great wings, upon her cheek. And yet she was bitterly resolute, and did not falter.

"Ah," she said, with a hard little laugh, "I 've won, my friend! *à la guerre, comme à la guerre!*" She had thrown out her hand with a little gesture, and she saw her wrist with the red marks of his fingers sinking into the flesh.

At the sight she bent almost double with rage. "Damn you! damn you! damn you!" she cried; and then again, rather lamely, she repeated the oath.

She went to the dressing-table and poured out most of the laudanum into a tumbler. There were some dregs of tooth-powder in the glass, and she washed it clean before pouring out the drug.

She saw that her hair was disordered and

her face was pale. Hastily she lit a little spirit lamp, and, heating some tongs in the blue flame, began to curl her hair into little tendrils on her forehead. She did it nervously and hurriedly, as if anxious to be gone. No fear assailed her, no regrets or hopes came to her. She went about the business of dying in as hard, callous, and shallow a way as she had lived.

Her rosary and prayer-book lay before her, but her eye met them without any feeling. They were done with, as everything else was done with. Why should a formula trouble her now?

Two thoughts filled her brain—the ruin she was plotting for her enemy, and the trivial details of her appearance.

She painted her lips with a tiny stick of scented crimson grease, and then drank off the laudanum.

After she had done this, she put away the things she had been using into a drawer of the looking-glass, and feeling sick and dizzy, tottered to the bed and lay down upon it.

In a few minutes her thoughts began to slip away, and she got very cold. Just before she lost consciousness she stretched out a hand towards the letter on the chair.

It may have been a last effort to undo the evil she had prepared, or possibly it was a mere muscular contraction. In charity she should be given the benefit of the doubt.

At two o'clock her painted face, under the full light of the electric pendants, presented an unpleasant contrast to the rigid body and stiffened hands.

So she slipped stealthily out of life with hate in her heart and paint upon her face —a little vapour that had passed away.

* * * * *

Glass kissed silver in the hall in one light caress, and then came a sound of a key in the latch, a noise of many laughing voices, and the tread of feet. Mrs. Policarp had returned.

Attendant upon her were Mr. World, Mr. Danger, and Mr. Halla, who had been at

the *première*. Ravillion was there also, and the rear was brought up by Guy Waye, who had just seen Gilbert off, and, feeling pretty sure that Mrs. Policarp would be up, had come with the intention of enlightening her upon certain points.

"Now I know you're all hungry, my dear boys," said Mrs. Policarp, "and there are sandwiches and things in the drawing-room. Come along."

They all trooped into the room after her.

"I agree with poor Reggie," said Mr. World, "that a theatre is no place for a gentleman to sleep in. Besides, poor dear Irving is so classical. The Lyceum is like church on Ash Wednesday. Give me a melodrama."

"Oh, plays which the gods love die young in the West End," said Mrs. Policarp.

"Then give me the eastward position," cried Mr. World with some fervour.

"The Temple of the Drama," said Halla.

"Should be a chapel-of-ease," broke in

Mr. World. "No, I have come to the stage when I can no longer bearr it."

"Nor even grin," said Halla.

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Policarp, "there is always the supper afterwards, don't you know."

The talk became general, and the play received equal attendance with the people who had been present at its representation. Everyone was wide awake and very merry, except that curious creature Ravillion, who was pale and perturbed.

They rallied him upon his preoccupation and the sudden change that had fallen on his mood.

"Can't help it," he said, and his voice was curiously ill at ease. "I really don't know what has come over me at all. I feel fearfully depressed, almost frightened, and for no reason. I was feeling quite jolly half an hour ago."

"Poor boy," said Mrs. Policarp, "you're tired, perhaps. Play us something, that will cheer you up."

He protested that he was not in any state of mind for music, that to play was the last thing he felt inclined to do; but they all protested, and soon he was at the piano in the hall, while they sat round to listen.

They certainly saw he looked anything but well. His eyes, never quite the same as other men's eyes, seemed larger and more spectral than ever. Strangely clairvoyant his eyes were, and full of startled inquiry.

When his hands touched the keys he started and trembled all over, pushing the music-stool back from the piano with a quick, instinctive movement.

"Good God, how cold the keys are!" he said loudly, as if the others had not been there.

Then, seeming conscious of them, he begged their pardon for the word.

They regarded him with great interest. Everyone knew that there was something uncanny about the man, and they had all heard him play his strange music. None

of them were surprised at him to-night, though they were all tremendously interested.

To their great wonder he began, with obvious reluctance, to play the funeral march of Chopin with great intensity of expression and solemnity of manner, as if someone were really lying dead in the house.

About half-way through he slipped from his seat with a little moan and fainted dead away.

His seizure produced an unpleasant impression on them all. While they were bringing him round, they caught themselves turning suddenly to each other for no apparent reason. There was a general disinclination to go near any of the closed doors which led into the hall.

When Ravillion was well again they all went away very quietly, except Guy Waye, who begged a few words with Mrs. Policarp in private.

"Good heavens!" said the lady when the two were alone in the drawing-room,

"I declare that boy has made me feel quite uneasy. There is something unpleasant in the air to-night."

"I feel like that too," Waye answered. "Excuse me, but there is something horrid about your house to-night."

They drew their chairs closer to each other for companionship. Then, in a few terse sentences, Waye told her of the events of that night and what had led up to them.

Mrs. Policarp was profoundly moved and genuinely grieved. They discussed the matter for a few minutes in whispers, and every moment they found themselves looking behind them at the door.

Suddenly Mrs. Policarp jumped up. "Good gracious," she said in an agitated voice, "I wonder if the girl has come in. Excuse me for a moment."

She went quickly out of the room, leaving the door open, and he could hear her footsteps down the passage in the dead silence of the night.

Some strange premonition told him instantly that something was wrong, and when Mrs. Policarp staggered shrieking into the room, he was almost relieved to hear the truth.

* * * * *

"I suppose I had better read the letter," said Mrs. Policarp half an hour afterwards, holding the envelope in her trembling hand.

"Yes, read it," said he.

She read it and passed it to him.

He read it in turn, and gave it back to her.

Mrs. Policarp looked at him with mute inquiry, and he nodded at her.

She took the letter and thrust it into the dying fire. It grew brown, charred round the edges, and then suddenly burst into flame, passing away in a little vapour.

"*A la guerre, comme à la guerre,*" said Mrs. Policarp.

THE END.

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