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MR. BOTTLEBY DOES SOMETHING

BY

E. TEMPLE THURSTON

IN ONE VOLUME

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OF

BRITISH AUTHORS

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TO

MY DAUGHTER, GEORGINA MARY

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

All the places and characters in this story are pure fiction

MR. BOTTLEBY DOES SOMETHING

CHAPTER I

The meetings of the Council of the Thurnham Museum were arranged for the first day of every quarter. On these occasions the Curator's report was read. It contained statements of the work that had been done in the previous period. It advised upon specimens offered as gifts for the various collections. There were many such. The cases in the Museum were full of little cards upon which the name of some local donor was plainly written. To these, the building was like a cemetery. From time to time they came to look at their donations as people visit a graveyard to contemplate their dead.

No special archæological, geological or botanical study brought them there. They came to see that the object of their interest was being well cared for. They came to see with what justifiable conspicuousness it was placed in the Museum. They came to see their names written on those little pieces of pasteboard and, with scarcely a glance at what others had given, they went away.

There is too little of this public spirit, this communal generosity. A man lives in an old house of historical value and shuts the door lest any should intrude upon his privacy. Another makes for himself a beautiful garden and builds a high wall round it lest any should see him amongst his flowers. A few nobler spirits give up their treasured possessions for the public to enjoy. The little white cards in the numerous cases and on the various objects in the Thurnham Museum testified to the number of these in the neighbourhood. At the quarterly meetings of the Council, the Curator always had some kind of local donation to announce to the members. These gifts, however, were not always regarded in the spirit in which they were meant to be accepted.

When Mr. Wincklebotham, the draper, not long set up in the High Street, presented a collection of lace bobbins to the Museum, the Council was inclined to regard them with suspicion. Mr. Charrington, having retired with a comfortable income from a business of the same nature, asked Mr. Bottleby, the Curator, whether they were of sufficient interest to warrant their being included as exhibits in the Museum.

"We must not forget," he had said, "that there is no institution equal to this in any of the smaller towns throughout the whole of England. The fact that we are open to accept donations does not necessitate our filling the Museum with any trash that is brought along. We are not a source of advertisement for enterprising tradesmen."

Mr. Purch, Thurnham's sharpest solicitor, who, to conceal his sharpness, modelled himself on Cruickshank's illustrations of Dickens, was ready to agree with Mr. Charrington.

"My wife has some lace bobbins at home," he said, "that belonged to her grandmother. But I've never thought of giving them to the Museum."

"I rather fancy," said Mr. Overend, solicitor for the county families, "that a lot of these donations are made by people who merely want to see their names in a public place. We're all acquainted with that vanity which persuades people to carve their names where everyone can read them." Whenever possible, Mr. Overend agreed with his rival, Mr. Purch, in public. It eased the way for much that he did behind Mr. Purch's back.

Mr. Overend had made many valuable donations in the form of manuscripts, autographs and old prints. Mostly they had drifted into his possession after the death of clients who had forgotten to arrange for their disposal. It is difficult to find a profession without its perquisites. He could not properly have called them his own and it was with the greatest difficulty he had been persuaded to allow his name to appear as the donor. No one with impunity could accuse him of the vanity of which he spoke.

He did not smile at the caustic wit of his own remarks. He left it to Mr. Charrington, to Mr. Mercer, the bookseller, and to others to approve his comment. It was not to be expected of Mr. Purch that he would show any approval. He had the police-court solicitor's taste for the last word and was usually too pre-occupied in waiting to say it.

"I hope," Mr. Overend had added, "that you carefully determine the intrinsic historical value of a donation before you accept it."

Mr. Bottleby was about to assure them that so far as his work was concerned, he had no respect of persons. Seeing that he was concerned with nothing but his work, this would have been true of him in general. Indeed it might have been said of him that his respect of humanity began with the Palæozoic period and gradually decreasing through the various ages and civilisations, disappeared altogether somewhere during the reign of Queen Victoria. He was preparing to inform them upon a short history of lace bobbins when Mr. Purch said what he had been waiting to say ever since Mr. Overend had begun speaking.

With the resonance of his voice—eminently suitable for the hearing of elderly magistrates—and that habitual attitude acquired by a prolonged consciousness of the public gaze in his autocratic dealings with other people's affairs, he said:—

"I can't see what interest lace bobbins can be to anyone in this town. Lace was never made here, or, so far as I know, anywhere in the County of Kent. In any case, a bobbin is merely a pin stuck in a pillow. People will be bringing us collections of Redditch needles next."

Mr. Purch always, as it were, put up his opinions for auction and continued speaking against all threat of interruption until he received the bids of the company's attention. Having no respect of persons and being deeply concerned in the interest of his work, the Curator was the only man present on the Council who had the force of personality to silence the eminent solicitor.

When on this occasion Mr. Purch had implied there was no interest in this gift of Mr. Wincklebotham's, the Curator commenced with a quiet insistence of voice to tell them about lace bobbins until the mere penetration of his words reduced the astonished solicitor to silence.

"Any object, gentlemen," said Mr. Bottleby, "which combines a quality of antiquity with an insight into the extraordinary measures of nature in her determination to reproduce the species, is of anthropological value."

Here Mr. Purch, after a few broken sentences, had relapsed into silence. He had a strong appreciation for all dignity both of superior knowledge and of superior rank. In ordinary conversation with his inferiors, he would introduce a fact of interest with the same pride as when he would use the name of a peer of the realm. There are many who have not even this respect of knowledge. When the Curator mentioned the determination of nature to reproduce the species, Mr. Purch bowed his head in silence. He could not have been more submissive had Mr. Bottleby been a titled client giving him instructions.

"It is not merely on account of their use in the lace industry that these bobbins are instructive," continued Mr.

Bottleby. "Those which your wife possesses"—he addressed himself without irony to Mr. Purch—"are probably plain pieces of bone, merely constructed for the purpose they were intended. But those which Mr. Wincklebotham has kindly presented to the Museum have a further interest."

He was fairly started. There was an encyclopædic note in his voice. Whether they liked it or no, they had to listen to him then. The inexhaustible fund of scientific knowledge from which he spoke, when he spoke at all, was more arresting than the sound of an effective peroration in Mr. Purch's voice.

"Lace bobbins were frequently used as love tokens," he continued.

They all stirred in their chairs. They were all men with various urban and diocesan responsibilities. They were all past a certain age. The study of love being of more interest than its pursuit to men under these circumstances, they found themselves eager to listen.

Mr. Bottleby had produced a box from which he emptied all the lace bobbins of Mr. Wincklebotham's collection on the table. Then he went on.

"You will see that on every one of these—mostly bone, a few ivory—there is pricked in dots some word of endearment. It is arranged spirally round the stem, so that it cannot be read at first glance, but has to be turned carefully in the fingers. Sometimes it is a brief sentence—as in this one." He had held it up. "'Love can wait.'"

He had looked round at his listeners.

"There is no need for me to dwell," said he, "upon the psychological significance of that, except to say it is characteristic in its simple way of the deception that nature practises through the individual to achieve its purpose of reproduction. I understand," added Mr. Bottleby—whose avoidance of women was notorious in Thurnham, "I understand that love cannot wait."

He raised his eyebrows and looked round the table. There was a general query in his glance. Mr. Overend nodded his head to it. It was an admission in the interests of psychology. Mr. Charrington questioned the delicacy of the subject with a blank look of masculine innocence. Mr. Purch drew in a breath that whistled between his teeth. He had married the daughter of one of his more wealthy clients and was fully aware of the pertinence of the Curator's observation concerning the impatience of love.

"This, however," continued Mr. Bottleby in the even tenor of his voice, "is not an interest we are concerned with in adding these exhibits to the Museum. They are of value on the one hand as showing details of an industry that has largely died out in this country. On the other hand, as love tokens presented by young men to the young women who used them, they are sociologically of peculiar interest. They reveal the attitude of regard and restraint in which women were held by men only a century or so ago."

He paused for a brief moment to consider the best way of expressing himself. Every member of the Council was silent and absorbed.

"The restricting influence of moral restraints," said he, "imposed by women upon men as a check to the exuberant fecundity of nature, are always to be traced in society at a time when the birth-rate is prolifically high. A century ago when young men had to woo their mates by the delicate progression of such attentions as the love messages on these lace bobbins, it was no uncommon thing for a woman to have a family of twelve. Some even went so far as having twenty children."

He raised his eyebrows again and looked with amazement at them all. This, however true, he seemed to feel was an astounding fact.

"I have made no personal study of modern love-making," he continued, "but we all know the birth-rate has fallen considerably."

He looked at Mr. Overend as though in his professional capacity he ought to be able to corroborate that statement and, thus appealed to, Mr. Overend corroborated it with a nod of his head.

"That being the case," said Mr. Bottleby, "it is interesting to note—if one is to judge by books of present-day fiction dealing realistically with modern life—that women no longer insist upon any subtlety of approach in these matters. So we must observe, with even such simple evidence as these lace bobbins, how morals are merely a fluctuating influence. They are not merely governed by climatic conditions, which differentiate the morals of the Christian from the morals of the Turk, but alter, generation by generation, in one people. It is possible in time that we may arrive at a phase in the progress of our civilisation when society will submit itself to the claims of the individual. Whatever progress may be made in that much-to-be-desired direction, it will be observed that in these affairs nature is the ultimate dictator. Before I say any more about these lace bobbins in support of the contention that they are interesting exhibits to anyone studying sociological anthropology, I should like——"

The receptive intelligence of the Council had reached its straining point. Mr. Overend made no concealment of looking at his watch. Mr. Charrington's masculine innocence had become a bewildering ignorance, dazed by the volume of words that poured from the Curator's lips. At first it had revived vague thoughts he had had before his retirement from the drapery business. He had remembered noticing the *négligé* style that was becoming apparent in ladies' night-gowns. He recollected wondering at the time what it had meant. With a vague and rural comprehension, he had put it down to Paris fashions. As Mr. Bottleby had commenced his discourse on the fluctuation of morals, he had recalled these half-realised thoughts and felt there must be some association between those open-worked insertions and the declining birth-rate. But when the Curator had adventured into realms of speculation concerning the sociological evolution of the individual, Mr. Charrington felt his mind staggering beneath the weight of insupportable effort. The sound of words began merely to hypnotise him. He was sitting somewhat collapsed in his chair with his mouth hanging open.

Mr. Purch had been the only member of the Council capable of a prolonged attitude of fixed attention. If his vast respect for Mr. Bottleby's store of knowledge did not enable him to understand everything that was said, it at least provided him with opportunities of picking up scraps of original information. He could use them when the opening occurred, to make one of those sensational statements which characterised his reputation in the police court. He had already calculated how, in defending an impoverished client, he might refer to the ignorance of the poor in the restrictions of their families. It might even be possible to introduce some statement relating to the evolution of morals. That would make the magistrates listen to him. If the verdict were in the balance a little digression of that nature might well give the magistrate furiously to think again. Of all the Curator's discourse he understood very little, but he assimilated more than any of the rest of the Council. Yet even he had been glad when Mr. Overend had looked at his watch.

It had become obvious that the only thing to do to put an end to Mr. Bottleby's volubility was to accept the bobbins as an exhibit in the Museum. Mr. Wincklebotham's name would have to appear on one of those neatly written little cards. He would get the advertisement.

It occurred to Mr. Charrington that Mr. Wincklebotham ought to pay for that. Nevertheless, having made many such donations himself for the same purpose when he was in business, a commendable sense of fairness restrained him from forcing the suggestion.

The lace bobbins were accepted.

This had been a characteristic meeting of the Council of the Thurnham Museum.

CHAPTER II

THE location and endowment of the Thurnham Museum present one of those instances of the way in which man can impose his will upon the affairs of others after his death.

In the early Tudor period the building was one of those characteristic manor houses, built centuries before the enduring sinews of English oak had given way to the superficial strength of iron girders. In every carved beam, in every moulded panel, it revealed the love of man for his work which machinery has embittered. The marks of the adze were on the shoulder-pieces of oak. The carpenter's chisel could be traced on the newel posts.

As Mr. Bottleby had said, when first he took up his duties as Curator:—

"Man is not preserving, he is obliterating the history of man. The products of machinery will not last. They all lead to the self-effacement of the Yellow Press. The paper to which the historians commit their records is machine-made and impermanent. There is even a manufactured substitute for parchment. Supposing that were not so, history has never been preserved by scribes. We only know of man with any certainty in the dim ages by the weapons he made for the fight and the articles he made for his food. The latter end of a civilisation is always marked by the impermanence of its manufactures and the feverish anxiety of its historians to preserve a written record of its doings."

He was talking to Mr. Purch, the solicitor, whose knowledge of Tudor architecture—admitted locally—had entitled him to show the new Curator over the building.

"Even the novelists," Mr. Bottleby had added, "have abandoned fiction and taken to a form of history of their own times. It is the natural fear of the insignificant that they should be forgotten."

He would have stood there on the staircase, plunging the solicitor like a suppliant for total immersion into streams of speculation had not Mr. Purch been one of those who like nothing better than the sound of their own voices on a subject with which they believe themselves to be well informed.

Apart from its exhibits there was history—permanent history—in Thurnham Museum. Lister's "Commentary" informs one of the various owners through whose hands it passed from the reign of Henry VII and hints at an earlier record than this. The catalogue of the Museum, in a preface, continues that history from the death of Lister in 1793 down to the present time.

In 1857 the old Manor House would have been destroyed. It was falling into disrepair. Not many years would have gone by before it would have shared the fate of many another historical building. It would have been pulled down to make way for stucco and plaster and imitation stone. From this tragedy it was saved by a certain Doctor James. Inheriting a comfortable fortune, giving up his profession and having travelled the world for some years, during which time he had made a valuable collection of anthropological interest, he returned to his native town in mature middle age.

It became not only a question of where he was to live, but where he could store this collection he had gathered together in every quarter of the globe. Dillingham Manor was untenanted. It was a spacious place. He loved old places at a time when people, with the advent of machinery, were rushing to build new ones. He loved oak panelling when the middle classes had just discovered wall-paper and paint. He bought Dillingham, restored it and lived in a small portion of it himself. The galleries, the retiring rooms and many of the bedrooms in the south and west wings, he established as a home for his anthropological hobby-horse. This, to the day of his death, he rode with all the dignity of an old squire going to the hunt.

There is an oil painting of Dr. James, painted at about this time. It is one of the treasured properties of the Museum and hangs in the centre of the hall over the old fireplace. It depicts him sitting in that same hall, showing the oak screen dividing off the Tudor staircase with its broad, low oak steps. He is seen surrounded with his books, the typical antiquarian student, who only realised he had never married when, at the approach of death, he suddenly considered he had no heir to whom he could leave his property.

The town of Thurnham has every reason to congratulate itself upon this oversight on his part. When Dr. James's will was read in 1871, it was found that he had left Dillingham Manor and all its contents to the town, together with a large fund providing ample means for the upkeep of the establishment. In addition to this, he left an income of £600 a year for whomsoever a Council—he mentioned certain names—should select as being efficient to carry on the work he had begun.

Fortunately for Thurnham those certain names were of sensible men with genuine public spirit. Dr. James had chosen wisely. They are all dead now. It was not difficult for them to appreciate that what the old doctor had left to the town was the nucleus of a museum. From that time onwards it was decided Dillingham Manor should bear that name. Enthusiasts in those days took it up. The fund left by Dr. James was still further augmented by local subscriptions. There were men of public spirit in Thurnham then, besides those on the Council.

The grounds at the back of the building were converted into public gardens. Thurnham Museum became the most notable example of public benefaction in the country. Bequests were made. Local collections of old china, old furniture, pictures, historical weapons and flint implements found in the neighbourhood were left by benefactors at their death.

Roman remains are frequently discovered round about Thurnham. There is, in one of the galleries, as good an exhibition of these as is to be found anywhere in the country outside the British and South Kensington Museums. In fact, as time went on, Thurnham could show the finest collection of historical interest amongst any of the smaller towns of England.

The selection of a Curator to carry on the work of old Dr. James was carefully considered by the Council. The salary that went with the post enabled them to choose from amongst the recognised and most expert authorities in the country. With the hours of leisure which the duties allowed, that income of £600 a year could easily be supplemented by one who chose to add to it with the work of his pen.

Mr. Nougass, the first Curator, wrote a standard work on the British Potteries which must have brought him in a substantial little income during his lifetime. Mr. Lordon, who married the daughter of one of the Councillors—considered to be an excellent match on both sides—lectured continually on geological subjects.

The position of Curator of the Thurnham Museum was one which many a servant of the British Museum looked upon with envy.

In 1920 Mr. Lorden died. He fell down a chalk pit in the act of extracting a footprint of the ichthyosaurus from the face of the sandstone in Alford drifts.

CHAPTER III

Two months after Mr. Lorden's death, Mr. Bottleby was selected as his successor. There were at least thirty candidates for the post, flattering the Council's sense of its importance. Mr. Bottleby's qualifications were outstandingly the most suitable. Many of the others who applied were specialists in some one subject or another. This gentleman was a botanist, with credentials from the Royal Botanical Society. Another was an ornithologist. Mr. Bottleby, even if he had no letters to grace his name, was well known for his wide knowledge on all those subjects with which the Museum dealt in its various departments.

When asked by Mr. Overend, who had a deep respect for the honours of diploma, whether he had any degree, Mr. Bottleby had replied:—

"I am quite aware, gentlemen, that I have nothing to offer you but my abilities. I was not at any of the Universities. I am not a Fellow of any of the scientific societies in this country or any other. I discovered early in life that education based upon specialisation is a most constricting process to the mind. I know it is no intention of you gentlemen to question my religious views in applying for this post——"

"Certainly not!" interposed Mr. Purch, "religion has nothing to do with it!"

Being a large landowner—for land falls easily and cheaply into an astute country solicitor's hands—and having to pay substantial tithes to the Dean and Chapter of the nearest cathedral town, Mr. Purch had no sympathy with ecclesiasticism. Indeed, to show his disapproval of those tithes in no uncertain manner, he never appeared at divine service, and went so far as to cut the local vicar in the street.

"Then let me say," continued Mr. Bottleby, "that if I have a leaning towards any religion at all, it is that of theosophy. Nature insists upon growth. She does not admit of any standing still. You will observe in all the processes of evolution that when a species arrives at the completion of its development it dies away. It becomes extinct. By this insistence upon growth, nature has achieved the wonder of the evolution of the human animal. So far as we know, the human body is in direct and continuous line of growth, from protoplasm upwards. Man is not an offshoot. He is the main stem of the tree. We can't prove this. It is a condition of our natural optimism that we believe it to be so."

He looked about him for any possible contradiction. There was none. They had not realised his capacity for discourse. What is more, there was not one of them who fully realised what he was saying. He continued:—

"The growth of the mind is subject to the same insistence. If we accept the principles of transmigration, we must realise that the spirit, which is eternal, cannot continue to occupy the dwelling of the mind, which is transitory, if that dwelling-place, instead of increasing its accommodation, is crumbling to pieces. Specialisation I consider to be a direct suppression of these building operations of the mind."

They had to stop him there. Mr. Overend had an appointment with a client. Mr. Charrington had promised he would be home to tea with his wife. There was no doubt he was the man they wanted. It was not a matter of looking after this department or that, as in the State museums. The man they wanted must be capable of looking after them all. Mr. Bottleby's qualifications seemed to be limitless. His knowledge of Natural History extended in every direction. Mr. Charrington wanted his tea. Mr. Overend had to meet his client. It was obvious he was the man they required.

As they came away from the Council Chamber, having engaged Mr. Bottleby without further ado, they began to ask themselves whether they had not been talked into the business.

"He's a younger man than I should have thought suitable for the job," Mr. Charrington had said. He had come to that age of retirement when he no longer believed in youth.

They discussed his age as they walked up the street. They came to the conclusion he was about forty-three, when in reality he was only thirty-nine. They all agreed that what he had said about theosophy was extremely interesting. Each one knew quite well that the others had not the faintest conception of what it had meant. Sooner or later they had all gone home to their wives and told those ladies of the selection of the new Curator. And one and all they had asked:—"How old is he?"

This information, it would appear, explains much to a woman that is hidden from a man. When they inquired if he was clever, each one of those eminent townsmen gave his wife his own version of what Mr. Bottleby had said concerning nature's insistence upon growth.

"He's a theosophist," said Mr. Charrington, blowing on his tea.

"What's that?" asked his good lady. "Do you mean he's not Church of England?"

"I mean," Mr. Charrington had said, "that he believes in the life of the spirit in other forms after death."

"A man like that," said she, "could do a lot of harm."

He was inclined to agree with her. He was inclined to think they should have chosen a member of the Church of England. Old Dr. James had been a very religious man.

"Well, you were expecting me home to tea," said he. "He'd have kept us there the whole afternoon if we'd asked him to explain his views."

He poured his tea with impatience out into the saucer. It was not a correct thing to do. It was very hot. Life was very difficult.

When she heard Mr. Bottleby was a theosophist, Mrs. Overend was inwardly intrigued. She liked to keep abreast intellectually with the times. Mr. Overend always had a copy of the *Evening Standard,* about four copies of which came to Thurnham every day from London by the afternoon train. She frequently at a dinner party told people of things that had happened during the day and their newspapers the next morning confirmed that she was right. A theosophist in Thurnham was something new.

She, too, asked what a theosophist was. She added—"exactly"—because it would have been foolish to suggest that she did not know—more or less.

"A theosophist," said Mr. Overend, who as a solicitor regarded religious sentiment as part of the human psychology for which the law should be profoundly grateful, "a theosophist is one who adds all religions together, divides them by two, takes away the religion he was first taught to believe and accepts the remainder."

Mrs. Overend looked at her husband with conscious pride. There was no one in Thurnham who could have put it so cleverly as that. At the same time neither of them quite knew what it meant.

Mr. Mercer, the bookseller, went straight into the shop directly he got home and, seeking out a book on theosophy, had pored over it for the rest of the evening. His wife could scarcely get a word out of him. He read bewilderingly of Karma and the Upanishads and came to the secret conclusion that Mr. Bottleby was a heathen of the most pronounced type. He did not tell Mrs. Mercer, who had been gently brought up in a chapel family, but he would not have been surprised if he ever saw Mr. Bottleby fall on his knees in the High Street and worship the sun as it set behind Dibley's malt-houses.

Mr. Purch, probably more ignorant about theosophy than any other member of the Council, was yet the shrewdest in his opinion regarding Mr. Bottleby. He was prejudiced in the first place in his favour by the mere fact that he was not Church of England. Mr. Purch directed his life by the compass of his prejudices. He was predisposed to approve of Mr. Bottleby just because he was a theosophist. He was quite sure he approved of him when he had begun to talk of the principles of transmigration. This was above all their heads and, consistently with that elevation, all that was above Mr. Purch's head he looked up to with pride and respect.

He would have Mr. Bottleby in to talk to him of an evening and drink a glass of whisky. There were a select few of the Thurnham intellectuals whom he thus invited.

Mr. Purch was no longer a young man. He liked his winter evenings in his own comfortable chair by the fire, his summer evenings on a seat in his own garden. He had, in fact, a predilection for everything that was his own and liked to realise he had a power of personality greater than his rival to draw the salt of Thurnham to his table. It was not so much that he wanted them to talk as that they made more intelligent listeners to his stories dealing with the affairs of those titled gentry which he attended to despite the recognised practice of Mr. Overend in that quarter.

Mr. Purch went home to his house that evening from the office, well satisfied that the Council had made a wise choice in a matter that deeply concerned the welfare of his town—the town of Thurnham.

The next day Mr. Bottleby had removed his belongings from the hotel where he had been staying and took up his abode in that wing of Dillingham Manor which, since the death of Dr. James, had been given over to the Curators of the Thurnham Museum.

Both Mr. Nougass and Mr. Lorden had been married men. That wing in the building set apart for the Curator provided accommodation for a small family. There was an oak-panelled living-room—a kitchen with, as Mr. Purch might have phrased it, the usual offices. In addition to this, there were three good-sized bedrooms. In all these rooms the Tudor character had been preserved. It was the wish of Dr. James that whoever had the care of that collection he had begun with such loving interest, should live in surroundings compelling respect for the past. So he imposed his will on those who lived after him.

With a salary of £600 a year and occupation of such a home, free from rent, it is not to be wondered at that the position was eagerly sought for.

Introduced to his surroundings for the first time, Mr. Bottleby looked round the panelled living-room and smiled. This expression upon his face was very rare, but when it did occur it lit up every feature. For a plain man with disproportionately high forehead, with eyes that brooded rather than looked, with thin unemotional lips and a nose that seemed to have escaped from the mould for which it was intended, that smile could almost have been said to give him charm.

It came swiftly like light from a hidden place, but its disappearance from his face was a slow process. His cheeks first settled into repose. Slowly the smile left his lips. To the last it remained in his eyes, like a bright light seen beyond through the chink of a door. Then still more slowly the door closed; the last glimmer of light was shut out. Mr. Bottleby's face became as immobile and expressionless as a carved figure which, for its pallor, might have been said to be of ivory, were it not that that substance would have flattered his complexion.

Looking around him in that living-room of what had come to be known as the Curator's wing, Mr. Bottleby smiled on this occasion. Then he rang the bell.

Mrs. Twiss, who had been engaged to look after his wants and keep house for him, appeared at the door.

"Is there anything in the place to eat?" he asked.

She shook her head despairingly. Being one of those women who take life—even the death of a husband—sadly, she was glad of any opportunity to find a tragedy in the most ordinary contretemps.

"They never told me you was comin' to-day, sir," she said. "Just like 'em. How can they expect you to do anything at all properly, if they don't tell you this or that. I can't do what I ought to do, can I, if I don't know what's to be done?"

Mr. Bottleby looked at her, and for the second time that evening he smiled.

The countenance of Mrs. Twiss almost lost its despair. She nearly smiled in response. At least it had the effect of making her suggest what was practically a hopeful alternative.

"We shall have to fall back upon eggs, sir," she said, and could not even then refrain from the tragic way of putting it.

CHAPTER IV

Mr. Bottleby was one of those who could accommodate himself anywhere where his work was congenial and he was conscious of that sense of growth in the soil of his environment. Whether his estimate of his own growth was that which he applied to others is not to be reckoned too closely. To anyone who had known him in his early twenties, it would not have been apparent when he took up the post of Curator at Thurnham that he had grown at all. Externally he was the same mildly-mannered, somewhat distrait individual. In ten years he had not aged at all. Nothing appeared to worry him. He only suffered from bodily discomfort when anything came in his way to interrupt his work. In every respect the position at the Thurnham Museum suited him down to the ground.

He was not aware whether Mrs. Twiss gave him good meals or bad. He ate what was placed in front of him, reading all the time. He could not have said whether his bed in that oak-beamed bedroom was hard or soft. He read till two o'clock every morning and fell asleep the instant he had blown out the candle.

For the first three or four months there was so much work to do in the Museum itself, rearranging the various departments, tabulating many of the exhibits whose descriptions were not to his liking, that he had little time for any original research of his own.

The county, of which Thurnham was at one time capital, was full of opportunities for the geologist and ornithologist. The hoopoe had been found there. Three miles from Thurnham there had been discovered a nest of golden orioles. The entomologist could find his share of interest. Camberwell Beauties had been caught in the woods, and in the collection of butterflies in the Museum was a specimen of a Large Copper, secured by Mr. Nougass in the fields in 1874 down by the River Conway.

Mr. Lipscombe, the Commissioner for Oaths, has related these facts in plain English in his little pamphlet entitled "Thurnham and its Neighbourhood." Everything he says in those few pages—which include advertisements of the local tradesmen—has about it the nature of an oath.

In addition to these interests, there were conspicuous evidences of the Roman occupation of Britain. Tumuli were to be found all through the county. The remains of Roman villas were continually revealing fresh proof of the luxury of that ephemeral civilisation.

A deep sand drift, showing how the River Conway had altered its course long before the Stone Age, had been discovered not far from Thurnham in Mr. Nougass's time. The remains of mammoths and many of the antediluvian reptiles had been brought to light there. The whole county was an open book of natural and archæological history. It only needed the hand of patience to turn its ponderous pages, the seeing eye to read the hieroglyphic letters with which they were inscribed.

Mr. Bottleby was in his element. He had only one complaint. He had not been in Thurnham more than three weeks before it began to dawn upon him that he was expected to be a figure in Thurnham society. Mrs. Charrington had invited him to tea.

Seeing that Mr. Charrington was a member of the Council, and in all innocence believing it to be his duty under these circumstances to accept, Mr. Bottleby had made his appearance at "Ismailia." This was the name of the detached villa residence to which Mr. Charrington had retired with his fortune from the drapery business.

If he expected anything—which was unlikely—Mr.

Bottleby probably imagined this was merely to be an introduction into the Charrington family, a kindly attention on the part of one of those who had been responsible for his nomination. As a matter of fact he almost forgot the hour of the invitation and even then was late.

He had just received that morning the work of an eminent authority on the function of crustaceans in strata formation. With his tie considerably awry and one sock gathered at the top of his boot revealing a display of hairless shin-bone, he had picked up the book from the table where he was reading and carried it with him. He read it all the way through the High Street and along the London Road, running into numerous pedestrians and ultimately finding himself some half a mile beyond his destination.

By a process of what they call "straddling" in gunnery practice, he arrived at "Ismailia."

Had Mr. Bottleby been any judge of human nature, he might have realised by the unctuous note in Mr. Charrington's voice, and the shop-walking attitudes of his body which had never deserted him since the days of the drapery business, that he was a figure in Thurnham society.

But the new Curator had none of those qualities of observation. He could have recognised the footprint of a dinosaurus as soon as anyone, but realised no difference between the feet of a lady elegantly shod and those of Mrs. Twiss in her elastic-sided boots. He knew the prim note of a greenfinch, but could not distinguish that tone of draperied gentility in Mr. Charrington's voice.

He became aware, as he was shown into the drawing-room at "Ismailia," that it was filled with ladies who looked up with a suppression of smiling eagerness when he entered. There was the sound of a subsiding rustle, the sudden pianissimo of conversation as of a whole orchestra of strings putting on the mute.

It was a trap; as much of a trap to him as a poacher's snare for rabbits. For one instant he had looked wildly about him. Mrs. Charrington was quick to read that look. Being a hostess with experience of occasional guests who were inclined to stampede from the sheer terror of boredom, she knew well how to manage Mr. Bottleby. Bearing across the room at once to meet him, she seized his hand and led him to a chair farthest from the door. There she introduced him to Mrs. Spiers, the wife of the successful veterinary surgeon.

Had Mr. Bottleby been at all susceptible to the transitory and inconsequent pleasures of sex, Mrs. Spiers would have been an excellent sedative to quiet any inclination to panic or stampede. She was an attractive-looking woman, attracting men as dolls attract children. As with a doll, it was incumbent upon any man who possessed her to dress her in pretty clothes. There was no permanence in her charm. The most casual examination would have revealed the essential sawdust of her composition. She was not, it might be said, one of those dolls a child pulls to pieces and strips of all the veneer of clothes yet only loves the more in its most battered condition.

Mrs. Charrington was quite aware of this superficial charm in the veterinary surgeon's wife. Assuming Mr. Bottleby to be an ordinary man in what she believed was a more than ordinary world, she bore him across to this farthest end of the room as soon as she saw that look of panic in his face and introduced him to Mrs. Spiers.

He fell into the chair that was offered him as the body of the poacher's rabbit falls into the bottom of his bag.

He was greeted with a charming smile. Even Mrs. Charrington, who had no more lure than she had an instep to her foot and did not approve of a lure in others, would have admitted that Mrs. Spiers had a charming smile. She revealed it for Mr. Bottleby's inspection and approval, as a tradesman sets out his goods upon the counter. The most stolid of men succumbed to that smile. They became almost genial. As a social advantage, increasing her husband's practice, it was invaluable. It gave both men and women the impression that her meeting with them supplied a long-felt want. Yet here it failed. In the swift inconsequence of Mr. Bottleby's glance, she realised that her smile had not the slightest effect upon him.

To be so swiftly reduced to the entertainment of conversation was the greatest tragedy of all Mrs. Spiers' social experiences. It frequently happened after a short acquaintance. She knew the extreme mental strain, like walking on an intellectual tight-rope, of keeping up an intelligent conversation for long. But never had she been made to feel the strain so simultaneously with introduction as this. She had smiled her smile at Mr. Bottleby and all he had done was to look at her with a terrified intelligence.

On this occasion it was a double tragedy. Mrs. Spiers had had one daughter when she was first married. She had had no children since. Indeed it would have seemed that Nature, having witnessed this first effort at reproduction, had suddenly become distracted in her purpose and left Mrs. Spiers alone.

Evadne Spiers was fast approaching the marriageable age. Even her mother was beginning to admit that and the thought of Mr. Bottleby's post of £600 a year, with that fascinating accommodation in the west wing of Dillingham Manor—in this respect she did not think of it as Thurnham Museum—had crossed her mind more than once on her way to "Ismailia" that afternoon.

If that introductory smile had failed in its purpose to induce Mr. Bottleby to make the running while she listened, what was there left but her own conversation? This was the terrifying alternative of an exacting society to which she pleasantly trembled to belong. With a flurried confusion of speech, she plunged into that stream of small talk which struggles turgidly through country drawing-rooms.

"I suppose you know we're all terrified to meet you, Mr. Bottleby?" she said.

So far from allaying his terror, which probably it would have done with one more accustomed to adulation, this only served to increase it. Looking hurriedly about him, Mr. Bottleby received the erroneous impression of a room full of people suffering from the same agonies of panic as himself. He gripped the treatise on crustaceans in their relation to strata formation as though it were the one solid thing in a nebulous and impalpable world.

Feeling his only hope lay in exonerating himself from any charge of a desire to terrify them, Mr. Bottleby stammered:

"But why?"

With a little laugh, which had the sound of a purely automatic function, she told him it was because they had all heard how terribly clever he was.

"And you write too —don't you?" she added.

"Write?" said he. What did she mean—write? Didn't everybody write?

"Write books," she explained.

There was one terrible moment in his mind when he supposed she thought he was a kind of novelist.

"Everybody writes," he said. "You write letters, don't you?—or you keep household accounts. I keep accounts of my work."

"But they're published—aren't they?"

"Well—yes—if you mean printed and in covers."

That was what she did mean—books. There was not one of them there that afternoon who had ever met a man who wrote books. He had already three volumes to his name. He was the author of "Pigmentation in Birds and Butterflies." Everyone interested in theosophy had read his "Critical History of Belief," whilst his "Evolution of Desire" had sold a considerable number of copies owing to its title. It was the cause, however, of much disappointment on the part of many of its readers, owing to the fact that it began with protoplasm in which desire cannot exactly be called picturesque, and never reached the estate of man where many imagine that it is.

There was not a soul in Thurnham who had read any one of these books, unless it were Mr. Mercer, who, having been cajoled by the publisher's traveller, had displayed the "Evolution of Desire" on his counter for a week or two. Finding that many people picked it up, glanced at its contents and then turned to the last chapter or looked for illustrations, he dipped into it himself to find out why they always put it down again. He had not skipped through it for more than half an hour, before the reason was obvious enough.

The desire of the butterfly for the flower, or even the moth for the star, is not as interesting to the public as a more comprehensible divorce court report in the newspapers. After a month or so he sent the book back to the publishers as having no sale for it. But when Mr. Bottleby became an inhabitant of Thurnham itself, that was a different matter. He wrote to the publishers for copies of "Pigmentation in Birds and Butterflies," for the "Critical History of Belief" and the "Evolution of Desire." They stood prominently in his window then. But no one bought them. Even Mr. Spiers and his partner, Mr. Wibley, the only men in Thurnham, apart from Dr. Bream, with anything like a scientific education, had no time for them. In his leisure evenings, to pass away the time while his wife played harmless bridge or went to still more harmless local dances, Mr. Spiers played a game of patience which he had invented himself but had never got out.

Being a young man with an engaging manner, Mr. Wibley had no leisure time at all. There is a fear of having nothing to do in a small country town which, amongst many of the inhabitants, amounts to terror. Being a *persona grata* with all the local families, Mr. Wibley had been swallowed up in this veritable maelstrom of county society.

Assuming Mr. Bottleby's conception of growth in nature to be correct, it might be said of Mr. Wibley that he was socially too busy to grow. He was specialising, as Mr. Bottleby might have put it, in the killing of time when he was not saving the lives of his animal patients, and thereby setting up a direct suppression to those building operations of the mind.

These were the only two men for whom there was an authentic sale for the "Evolution of Desire," and they were more concerned with personal devolution. The copies of Mr. Bottleby's books had become sunbleached in Mr. Mercer's window.

These publications, however, were what Mrs. Spiers alluded to when she spoke to Mr. Bottleby about his books.

"No wonder we're all terrified," she said to him, and then, as he gazed at her blankly and the torture of this social engine of painful conversation was treating her with all the cruelty of the Scavenger's Daughter, she hazarded a timid wonderment that should have flattered the susceptibilities of any author.

"I can't imagine how you think of it all," she said. "Does it just come to you when you take up your pen, or do you have to think it all out beforehand?"

Mr. Bottleby did not know what he replied to that. He felt himself to be in a pandemonium of a world where the acquirement of speech in the survival of the fittest had led to a condition resembling the babbling of lunatics in a madhouse.

Had he been emotional, he might have wanted to scream. But never having had occasion in all his life for his emotions to be aroused, he experienced no more than a dizzy bewilderment. He felt his brain was spinning round. In another few moments, it seemed inevitable that he would be using his powers of speech as they did.

It was as though, having a pair of legs, evolved in him for the purposes of locomotion, he felt that at any moment he might be called upon to employ them in dancing a jig —a Terpsichorean measure which he only knew of in its relation to the breeding season amongst certain birds.

He knew he could bear it no longer. Complete escape was the only solution. He swallowed his cup of tea, hurried up to Mrs. Charrington, explaining that he had to be back in the Museum at five o'clock, and rushed out of "Ismailia" into the fresh air.

CHAPTER V

For the next few weeks, invitations had come to Mr. Bottleby from every quarter. Gentlemen in Thurnham who, in the capacity of vice-presidents, subscribed to the football and the cricket clubs, to the amateur dramatic society and all those local efforts to stimulate an interest in life, came to the Museum especially to cultivate his acquaintance in order that they might ask him to meet their wives.

When upon Mrs. Spiers's report it was learnt that, for a man in his position, he was quite young and that he really seemed more frightened of her than she did of him, all the ladies with marriageable daughters had sent their husbands out—a kind of scouting party—to reconnoitre.

Mr. Bottleby, however, had entrenched himself in the

Curator's wing and would not come out. He was beginning, moreover, to find opportunities afforded for his work of investigation in the country all round Thurnham. The excuse of this was genuine enough. If he was not closeted in the Curator's office next to the Council Chamber, he was out at Alford drifts with a geologist's pick and hammer; or he was somewhere about the countryside in pursuit of his various studies. The husbands who had adventured on behalf of their aspiring wives, returned from the pursuit of Mr. Bottleby with nothing but disappointment. As a man, he was an elusive specimen.

Ladies, however, cherishing these match-making ambitions, are not readily discomfited. There is a persistence about them in which the biologist can plainly trace those reproductive instincts so palpable in the four-legged creatures and all the lower forms of life.

Foremost amongst these—indeed the most daring of them all—was Mrs. Pennyquick. She was a sharp little woman with a twinkle in her eye, too subtle in the fullness of its meaning for Thurnham properly to understand. It was actually known about her that she put money on horses. She admitted it. Twice, with her husband and her daughter Elsie, she had been to Monte Carlo. They went away for holidays every year, not as most people in Thurnham did, to places within reach of a motor-bus, but to the Continent, returning with bright-coloured labels on their luggage and a foreign air about them which Thurnham did its best to dissipate.

People in Thurnham said that Mrs. Pennyquick was trying to get Elsie married. The statement was quite correct, but the inflexion was usually wrong. There was no financial need of it. What is more, Elsie was a good-looking girl and could have married in most places where she chose to rest her eye. Mrs. Pennyquick's difficulty lay in the fact that she had brought one of the new generation into the world whose eye had that prevalent restlessness which is no doubt characteristic of growth, but at the same time is disconcertingly rebellious. Elsie did not want to marry. She held the modern view that youth is the period for having a good time and regarded marriage as a condition of life to which a woman brings what remains of her charms.

Being a woman of no little intelligence, Mrs. Pennyquick was too clever to tell her daughter she was wrong. Every year Elsie was taken away to the Continent. She was given such freedom as no girl in Thurnham had ever experienced before. But all through this period Mrs. Pennyquick was looking sharply and shrewdly for the man who would not need to use argument in convincing her daughter that life is a more exacting thing than time.

Whenever they returned from abroad with Elsie still unattached, there were not a few in Thurnham who expected to find a certain amount of chagrin and chastenment in Mrs. Pennyquick. They looked for it in vain. She still had that twinkle in her eye. If she was disappointed, she did not show it. There was no knowing what Mrs. Pennyquick thought.

The fact of the matter was, Mrs. Pennyquick had a philosophy, a rare possession in any place, and unheard-of in Thurnham. So rare is it, that those who have it, being actuated by clear purpose in all they do, are generally inexplicable to the ordinary individual whose actions are determined by momentary sensations and transient desires.

After twenty-one years of married life and forty-three of individual existence, Mrs. Pennyquick had discovered that life itself was far too serious to be taken seriously. In this philosophy burnt the light which twinkled in her eye and confused the whole of Thurnham whenever they met her.

When Mr. Pennyquick had returned from his encounter with Mr. Bottleby, saying the Curator was more like a mole or a dormouse than a human being, his wife showed no sign of despair. Being a very little woman, there was no physical opportunity for her to shrink into herself, as she might have done had she been more statuesque. She looked her husband straight in the face as he said this, and, had he not known her features as well as he did, he might have believed that she winked.

A week later she had taken matters into her own hands.

Amongst the various objects of transitory and permanent interest a house collects upon its shelves and in its cupboards, the Pennyquicks possessed an old metal mirror frame. It had been dug up near the house when a sunken rose garden was being made. Obviously it was the frame of a hand-mirror of considerable antiquity.

This object had aroused considerable interest at the time of its discovery. Mr. Pennyquick recognised its value, mainly by the amount of verdigris that had collected on its surface. He knew it was a mirror because it was very much the shape of any modern hand-mirror a lady has on her dressing-table. Not knowing that in Saxon times they sought their reflections in polished metal, he supposed the glass had been broken. As an object of interest found in the garden, it reposed for some time on the drawing-room mantelpiece, then, making way for articles of more obvious ornamentation, it drifted into the cupboards of the house, from which Mrs. Pennyquick rescued it after her husband's report upon Mr. Bottleby.

Encountering Ramp, the porter, in the old Elizabethan hall, which very properly had been set aside for the collection of old English weapons, armour and furniture, she had sent him in search of Mr. Bottleby.

So precise and clear had been her instructions, that he had gone half-way up the Elizabethan staircase before he remembered it was his duty as hall porter to ask her name. Notwithstanding a bunion on his left foot which gave him pain in the hot weather, he came back again.

"I didn't catch the name," said Ramp, diplomatically.

"I'm not surprised at that," replied Mrs. Pennyquick. "I hadn't mentioned it. You won't waste my time—will you?" And so much in the tone of her voice did she seem to expect he would not waste it, that Ramp went away again, bewildered into obedience at finding a woman who knew what she wanted.

Mr. Bottleby was beginning his revision of the old catalogue, compiled a long while before by Mr. Lorden. When Ramp informed him there was a lady to see him in the hall, he looked up from his desk and said, "Yes," and went on with his work again.

Mrs. Pennyquick had waited for ten minutes with a patience that astonished even herself. Then she sent Ramp upstairs again. Mr. Bottleby came down, slightly tripping over the mat at the foot of the stairs as he approached her.

From the considerably lower level of her five-foot-one, she looked up at him with her eyes twinkling, as she could twinkle them for men and as it was so seldom worth her while to twinkle them for women. In that glance she had learnt as much about Mr. Bottleby as anyone had learnt in the first two years of his curatorship.

He had looked at that twinkle in her eyes as though it were a peculiar ophthalmological phenomenon.

Without being exactly aware of the determination, then, she made up her mind to the opinion that he was not a marrying man. By the time their interview was over she was not only conscious of this opinion herself; she was prepared to tell it to the whole of Thurnham. What is more, she did.

After that first glance in which the twinkle had so egregiously miscarried, Mrs. Pennyquick had produced her parcel.

"I have brought a little thing here," she had said in that tone of voice which once had intrigued Mr. Pennyquick out of his senses and was still potent with any man whenever she chose to use it—"I have brought a little thing here that was dug up in our garden. I don't know whether it would be of any interest to the Museum; but if it is, I should be only too pleased to present it. I'm afraid it's very verdigreasy."

Her coining of that word and the tone of voice in which she used it, accompanied by the trustful upward glance of her eye, would have captivated any man susceptible to the charm of her sex. Mr. Bottleby merely frowned and undid the parcel.

Had she seen him smile, as sometimes he smiled at Mrs. Twiss, she might have foretold many of the things that happened to Mr. Bottleby and would have set to work from that moment to see that they happened through her Elsie. Women, however, with all their qualities of intuition, are not infallible. Mr. Bottleby frowned, and the opinion she had already subconsciously formed in her mind was reinforced.

Taking the mirror in his hand, he examined it under the light of the window with the detached expression of a man in whom knowledge is wholly inconsistent with emotion. If Mrs. Pennyquick had expected him to show some enthusiasm or gratitude, she was disappointed. Concluding his silent examination, he laid the mirror down on the table.

"We shall be very pleased," he had said distantly, "to accept this for the collection already in the Museum. Of course you know what it is."

"We supposed it was a mirror," said Mrs. Pennyquick. "My husband thought so."

"You don't know its period?"

"No."

"It belongs," began Mr. Bottleby, "to that Saxon period in this country when the influence of civilisation introduced with the Roman invasion was beginning to make itself felt in the domestic life of the native inhabitants."

This was a mere prelude to what followed. In the form of a technical and learned discourse, he harangued Mrs. Pennyquick there in the hall. He gave her a lecture on the nomadic qualities of the civilising factor and of the Roman civilisation in particular in its effect upon the west of Europe.

After ten minutes, shifting her position first from one foot, then to the other, and finally having leant her weight against the Elizabethan table presented in Mr. Lorden's time, Mrs. Pennyquick asked softly if she might sit down.

Mr. Bottleby brought her a Cromwellian chair. Before he allowed her to occupy it, he pointed out a certain feature of design in the carving on the seat. He was just beginning to trace the influence of Roman art to be seen so late as the Commonwealth, when she sat down upon the design and smiled up into his face.

For a moment he was disconcerted. The action taken by Mrs. Pennyquick, in thus physically interposing herself between him and that object upon which his mind was concentrated, had almost made him aware of her presence apart from her purpose. Taking the mirror again from the table, as though to assist himself in recovering a less personal element, he held it up and plunged into a discourse on the part played by vanity in the female sex in the reproduction of the species.

"We have instances," he said, "so far back as the earliest dynasties of the Egyptian civilisation of this desire to see their reflections on the part of women. There is apparently every reason to believe that from the earliest records of man the female sex has always been conscious of what are called its charms. It is interesting, therefore, to trace the degrees of consciousness as they are to be seen in these objects of domestic interest. This mirror, as probably you are aware, had no glass."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Pennyquick, and as far as its virtue as a mirror went she seemed to lose interest.

"It was faced with polished metal," continued Mr. Bottleby. "Ample reflection apparently for the ladies of those days, but quickly superseded as soon as the virtue of glass as a reflector of light was discovered. Yet even glass for some time was little better than a highly polished amalgam of tin and silver. The glass mirror up to the beginning of the nineteenth century was very dark and must have given a distressing effect to any woman who hoped to look her best. What was the result?"

He asked her, but gave her no time to reply.

"Up to the Victorian era," said he, "the use of cosmetics and all those artificial aids to nature were so common in use amongst women that it is scarcely to be wondered at that men regarded them as playthings. They were painted like dolls, and in such manner men were prone to treat them. The modern quicksilvered mirror of highly refined glass presents a woman to herself with such glaring veracity that it is to be easily understood why women have given up those artificialities of powder and cosmetics and in the acquisition of a natural appearance have so far lifted themselves in men's estimation as to be given the franchise."

"Dear man," whispered Mrs. Pennyquick, sympathetically.

She did not feel it necessary to make the remark in the complete silence of her mind. He was talking without pause in the voice of a man who hears little but what he says himself. Nevertheless he had heard her. Automatically he had said, "I beg your pardon," but before she had time to translate her remark for his understanding he was continuing with his discourse.

"There is no need for me to point out to you," he went on, "how considerable a part this factor, together with dress, has played in the evolution of morals."

He was looking directly at her as he said this. But it was palpable to the most unfeminine observation that he saw nothing of the really smart tailor-made costume she had put on specially for that morning. It was a dress which Beeston, the tailor in Thurnham, could never have made in a lifetime. But all that appeared in Mr. Bottleby's eyes as he spoke was a dress parade of the centuries of which the wearers were little more than wicker-work dummies. They did not even possess the cold blood of the professional mannequin.

"All that can be said on the relation of clothes to morals," he resumed, "has been said by Carlyle in 'Sartor Resartus.' There's no need for me to ask you if you've read that."

"Oh no," said Mrs. Pennyquick, "no need at all." She waived the need aside with a short, inconsequent laugh. If there were anything which Mr. Bottleby could have sworn to his Maker with any certainty, it was that Mrs. Pennyquick had read "Sartor Resartus." He would even have been prepared to wager she had read it many times.

"I will only remind you, then," he continued, "of his inimitable picture of the members of the Houses of Parliament without a stitch of clothing on them, and just suggest to your mind what little need there would be for mirrors if you, or any of the ladies in Thurnham, were in like manner dispossessed of their clothes."

There was no doubt in Mrs. Pennyquick's mind by this of his not being a marrying man. Sex—was a word that was not used in Thurnham. There were few who knew what it meant and still fewer who possessed a fraction of it. But this man had none. It required a complete sexlessness, that almost seemed indecent, to conjure up a picture of the ladies in Thurnham so naked that even a mirror could be of no assistance to them. She thought of Mrs. Charrington and she nearly laughed. She thought of Mrs. Purch and a shudder drove the laugh out of her eyes.

But Mr. Bottleby's remarks upon the historical interest of mirrors was by no means finished with this. In some cases his statements became unrepeatable, at any rate in Thurnham society. Mrs. Pennyquick was by no means squeamish. There were some little stories her husband had told her with which she had often extracted a quite hysterical laugh from Mrs. Spiers, who, being a veterinary surgeon's wife, was expected to know something of what Mrs. Pennyquick innocently called the ins and outs of life. But with some of the things Mr. Bottleby had said that morning, she had found it difficult to maintain a complete presence of mind.

Disclosing the design on the Cromwellian chair, she at last rose quickly to her feet.

"I've had a most interesting morning, Mr. Bottleby," she said. "In fact, I feel that I know all about my sex now from the moment they put on petticoats."

What would some of the ladies of Thurnham have said —Mrs. Charrington, for example—if they had heard her say a thing like that to an almost complete stranger? She did not realise it herself, but this—science—had lent a certain abandonment to her conversation. She felt it did not matter what she said to Mr. Bottleby, and for her purpose in coming there that morning, it was not the sort of feeling she had wanted to have at all.

"I'm sorry that I can't stop," she continued. "I know you'll forgive me. My work isn't as interesting as yours. Checking the week's washing. Carlyle didn't say anything about that, did he? I must go."

She had gone.

Mr. Bottleby remained standing there in the hall, fingering the frame of the Saxon mirror and muttering: "Petticoats—petticoats—I wonder if anyone has ever taken the separate and peculiar garments that a woman wears and traced their origin to fundamental moral or immoral purposes?"

He was pursuing this thought to further conclusions while Mrs. Pennyquick was hurrying into the High Street. There, with everyone of both sexes who passed her by, she saw people as naked as when first they came into the world.

She was a married woman, so it did not matter so much.

CHAPTER VI

THE report made by Mrs. Pennyquick to her husband that evening at dinner regarding Mr. Bottleby was town property in a week.

Molly, the parlour-maid, had a sister in service at the Charringtons'. In one of the rooms in Mrs. Charrington's house you could hear everything that was said in the kitchen. Again and again Mrs. Charrington had asked her husband to have the wall of that room rendered sound-proof—sounds from the kitchen were most annoying. So annoyed had she been by them on this occasion of the repetition of Molly's chattering that, determined to hear what they were saying, she had distinguished Mr. Bottleby's name.

The rest was merely a question of time.

"He's a most delightful man," Mrs. Pennyquick had said. "His conversation is absorbing—too absorbing for Thurnham. They wouldn't understand a word he said. The amount of information he has on apparently any subject is bewildering. But he's studied the principles of life so closely up to the age of thirty-eight—what age is he supposed to be?—he's completely forgotten how to live himself. He'll never marry. He doesn't know what a modern woman is. His interest in life begins with one of those wriggly little things you grow in gelatine in a tube, and it ends long before he was born."

There was an amount of shrewdness about this which was searchingly true. The only factor it omitted in Mr. Bottleby's life was that of circumstance. Though there have been many sibylline oracles in history, prophecy has never essentially been a woman's department. She sees most that is hidden from the eye, but time can frequently elude her.

"I don't believe he knows he's alive at all," she concluded. "The marvel is that he doesn't put his clothes on back to front. Certainly a woman could do wonders with him, if she could get near him. But he's simply not get-at-able. There's a man there right enough, I suppose, but he's been scratching away at life so long that he's completely obliterated himself with dust. He's like a hen in a dust bath. You can't see him. He can't see himself."

How this was interpreted by Molly, the parlour-maid, to her sister; how it reached Mrs. Charrington's ears through the jerry-built wall that divided the little room she called her boudoir from the kitchen; how in turn she reconstructed it for the consumption of those in Thurnham whom it most concerned, is a process that defies practical analysis. The ultimate substance of it when passed through these various stages of refinement—which may have removed the impurities of Mrs. Pennyquick's description, but entirely despoiled it of its nourishment of the truth—was that Mr. Bottleby hated women.

Mrs. Spiers for one was quite ready to subscribe to this.

She had given him the benefit of her smile at Mrs. Charrington's party, and all he had done was to look at her with a terrified intelligence. From personal experience, she knew that a man who would do that must be peculiarly unsusceptible to her sex. She was quite relieved to hear that he hated all women without distinction. Poor man! What an affliction! But she was not surprised. From a certain sense of modesty she had not said anything about it. It was, however, characteristic of Mrs. Pennyquick's energy that she should be the first to announce the discovery.

What was it about that woman?

She left it to germinate at that.

Had Mr. Bottleby desired it, he could not have achieved a more satisfactory result. From that time onwards, he was left to himself and his work. Mrs. Twiss, had she been so minded, could have given a very different impression of him. There certainly were times when he did put things on back to front, when, without complaint, he wore socks with enormous holes in them. Frequently he would have gone out into the High Street, where all the gentry did their shopping in best clothes on a Saturday morning, looking like a tramp in the last phase of disreputability. Mrs. Twiss saved him from much of this. Though he was inclined to be impatient when interfered with, she could have said a great deal in favour of that smile he ultimately gave her after she had pulled straight his tie and done up the last five buttons of his waistcoat.

After the first year in her charge, he even occasionally remembered to go into the kitchen just before he went out and say, "Am I all right?"

From the standard of Thurnham's conception of propriety in dress, he was far from right. But it was nothing to what he would have been had Mrs. Twiss not looked after him.

It was not only his smile, however, and his childlike obedience that won the heart of Mrs. Twiss. On one occasion, when he heard about her daughter having an operation in London, he gave her enough money to go up to the Metropolis for three days and buy her daughter all the little delicacies she needed.

Mrs. Twiss never forgot that. She never forgot either the condition of chaos in which she found him when she returned. He had not had a proper meal the whole time she had been away. When she had looked into the kitchen, she gasped and then she said, "As long as I live, I'll never go away to enjoy meself again—not even to a funeral."

And for Mrs. Twiss that was the pure spirit of sacrifice.

With her care and the comparative peace in which he was left by the hopeful ladies of Thurnham, Mr. Bottleby had time to pursue the various interests of his work to his heart's content. The hopeful ladies of Thurnham concentrated all their energies on the youthful Mr. Wibley, who for two whole years had eluded the traps that had been laid for him. Mr. Bottleby practically disappeared out of Thurnham life into the Curator's wing. After a space of two years he was better known for the brilliance of his work throughout the whole of the country than he was by any in the little town of Thurnham where he resided.

It was known at the post office—therefore common knowledge—that he received letters from Germany, Sweden and many other countries in Europe. Being letters and not post-cards, it was not realised that these communications were from some of the highest authorities of well-known scientific societies, requesting him to lecture on those subjects he had made peculiarly his own.

There was no one in Thurnham who read scientific journals, or they might have realised how notable an intellect they were sheltering there. Except for Mrs. Pennyquick, who took a surreptitious delight in the unconscious improprieties of his conversation and occasionally visited the Museum for that purpose, the people of Thurnham left Mr. Bottleby to himself.

Mrs. Charrington had invited him to one or two more of her parties and then given him up as a bad job. Mrs. Overend, the solicitor's wife, who liked to keep abreast of the times, had tried and failed to keep abreast of Mr. Bottleby. Mr. Mercer could not sell his books, and consequently lost all interest in him. Even the pleasure of Mr. Purch, in meeting so well-informed a man, had evaporated. He had asked him to his house after dinner. He had succeeded in telling him the story of the inventory he had made of Lord Gawthorne's collection. He had impressed upon him how much less his lordship had known of his own possessions than Mr. Purch had himself. But that was the only success he had had, and even then he was not sure that the impression he had made was deep enough to last.

Mr. Bottleby had been started by some unfortunate remark of the solicitor's on the subject of religion arising out of a crucifix he had mentioned in the Gawthorne collection. The Curator had talked till the clock struck twelve on the virtues of the religious dogma as a stimulant to the imaginative function of the brain.

"There is no middle course in religion," he began, "between blind faith and honest doubt." And from that he proceeded to expatiate upon the rise and fall of religious ideas through the centuries.

Not one word of it had Mr. Purch understood. Again and again he had tried to introduce some remark that might conceivably have led up to the subject of property, as when he said:

"When you talk about the perpetuation of ideas, I suppose you mean something the same as when a farmer speaks about manurial values?"

Mr. Bottleby brushed this aside.

The solicitor had tried to veer the conversation round to the topic of land purchase, around which were congregated all those little stories which displayed his business acumen to such advantage. Again and again he failed.

Mr. Bottleby had swept on, carrying every interruption away on the stream of his knowledge, till at last, when he rose to his feet, Mr. Purch made no effort to detain him.

"I'll not have that man here again," he had said. "The surest test of good manners is how good a listener you can be. He wouldn't listen to me."

So, without being aware of it, and achieving the seclusion he essentially desired for the pursuit of his work, Mr. Bottleby drifted without difficulty out of Thurnham life. For more than two years, he had been able to work in peace.

Then began the series of events which, within a few months, made Mr. Bottleby the most conspicuous man in Thurnham society.

CHAPTER VII

EARLY in the third year of his occupation of the post of Curator, Mr. Bottleby read the following letter to the members at the quarterly meeting of the Council of the Thurnham Museum:—

DEAR SIR,

There is lying in our warehouses, at the moment of writing, an Egyptian coffin of some early period, probably containing a mummy. It may sound a peculiar statement, but we do not know how it came there. Our line of ships trades with the East, and perhaps you can understand that many things find their way into our warehouses, the existence of which does not appear on our books.

Mr. Lawrence, chairman of the Ackerman Company, who was born in Thurnham and spent most of his youth there, has instructed me to write offering this specimen to your Museum, in which he spent many interesting hours when he was a boy. Mr. Lawrence suggests that, if the Council will accept this donation, the cheapest and safest method of its conveyance would be by barge to Thurnham. Many of the barges on the River Conway moor close to our warehouses at Millwall and it would be a simple matter to transfer it to one of these returning with a cargo to Thurnham.

I shall be obliged to hear from you in reply at your earliest convenience, as risk of injury to the coffin is considerable where it is.

Yours faithfully, ——

Mr. Bottleby read out this letter in the same tone of voice from start to finish. Then he laid it down on the table in front of him.

"I suggest, gentlemen——" he began, when Mr. Mercer, the bookseller, interrupted him.

"I am quite aware," he said, "from the interest displayed by all of you in the reading of this letter, that there will be little question of refusing this donation, and so, before the matter is discussed with a view to acceptance, I should like you gentlemen to consider it in another light. I am not an Egyptologist——"

Mr. Overend coughed to draw attention to the fact that he was smiling.

"I believe, however, you are a member of the Order of Buffaloes," said the solicitor.

"I don't see what that has to do with it," replied Mr.

Mercer affably. He felt far from affable—but, having supplied Mr. Overend with books and his copy of the *Times* for the last fifteen years, he considered affability to be the better part of dignity.

"However, from reading," he continued, "I am sufficiently acquainted with the funeral customs of ancient Egypt to know that the Egyptians were deeply concerned with the life after death. They took the greatest precautions in burying their dead to supply them with everything they considered necessary for their journey in the other world, even to the extent of placing jars of food in the coffin."

He looked to Mr. Bottleby for correction if he was wrong. There was no sign of interruption from the Curator. He went on:

"It seems, therefore, a sacrilege to me to disturb these bodies, just to exhibit them to the vulgar gaze. Mr. Bottleby tells us that, if anything, he is a theosophist, believing in the transmigration of souls, and therefore I am sure he will agree with me that we ought to refuse this donation. If other authorities like to disturb the dead in this way, that is their affair. Anyone interested in seeing bodies exhumed in this fashion can visit the British Museum. But as we have no Egyptian section here, I cannot see it to be necessary, nor should I regard it as dignified of the Council, to accept this donation, grateful though we may be to Mr. Lawrence for its offer."

Mr. Mercer sat down, feeling as he did so that in referring to the dignity of the Council he had touched the very centre of their pride. There was no doubt he had. With a stimulated consciousness of that pride, they all looked at Mr. Bottleby. Mr. Purch, assuming an attitude that gave display to his watch-chain, thrust his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat. Mr. Charrington attended to the length of his cuffs. Mr. Overend rattled some money in his trousers pocket. All felt their pride in different ways. Mr. Bottleby rose to his feet.

"There is a great deal in what Mr. Mercer says," he began, and, so little had they expected him to consider the dignity of the Council before the interests of the Museum, that they lost the virtue of their attitudes. Mr. Purch withdrew his thumbs. Mr. Charrington relapsed into a posture more in keeping with his retirement in life. Mr. Overend abandoned the money in his pockets and occupied his fingers with a pen on the table in front of him.

"I am not a sentimentalist myself," continued the Curator, "but I recognise the essential composition of sentiment in others. This is entirely a matter for you gentlemen to decide. It is an undoubted fact that of all civilisations known to history, the Egyptian was the most elaborate in observing the rites of the dead. What they spent on the perambulator, so to speak, they did not, as in this country, save on the hearse. So convinced was their belief in a future life, as upheld by their religious teachings, that they did do all and more than Mr. Mercer informs us to prepare their dead for the actual existence of their earthly bodies in another world. To disturb those bodies, therefore, in their elaborate conditions of preservation is undoubtedly to treat lightly, if not with contempt, the ideas that were sacred to this people—three, four, five and even six thousand years ago."

Mr. Mercer was extremely pleased. Feeling it to be his duty as a member of the Council to speak at any of their meetings—irrespective of what he said—it was gratifying to find his remarks treated with such respect. With regard to the others, from a sensation of pride in their dignity, they were beginning to regret that one of their members—and he merely a bookseller—should have put them in the way of refusing a donation which would undoubtedly do credit to their care of the public interest. They listened with increasing chagrin as Mr. Bottleby continued.

"If I have any religious views," he went on, "I certainly am, as Mr. Mercer reminded you, a theosophist. I would not presume to be dogmatic about it, but I am inclined to the belief that, just as there is no waste with Nature in the component substance of matter, so it is likely there is no waste in that which, for want of a better name, we term—spirit. It seems to me highly probable that the spirit lives on after death, unconfined by conditions of time and space, until it has acquired human expression for its further development in a living body."

He looked about him and, from the vacant expression on the members' faces, he momentarily felt such a doubt as to the likelihood of this theory as to consider it necessary to qualify it at once.

"We have not arrived at that stage," he said, "when we can accept authority on this subject. I would not credit any of the statements made by individuals or allow myself to be influenced by the reports of societies which lay themselves out to study the occult. If one is going to dogmatise upon anything, the first thing that is essential is the attested fact. No religion that has swayed nations or been the basis of a civilisation has ever possessed such a thing. It is sufficient for me at present that mankind for more than eight thousand years has been convinced of an after-life of the spirit. What is more, I have seen nothing in science as yet which can fundamentally destroy that belief. I do not consider that the hidden purposes which urge the human mind are negligible merely because they are hidden. For the same reason, I would not submit myself unquestioningly to any man's reading of those hidden purposes in preference to my own. Each one of us has his own sight of God. Therefore, gentlemen, I am quite in accord with Mr. Mercer when he says there is an element of sacrilege in disturbing these bodies from their resting-place in order to exhibit them to the vulgar gaze of curious people."

By this time Mr. Mercer was the only member of the Council who felt he had a reason to congratulate himself. The others were distinctly depressed. Undoubtedly they had approved of the bookseller's reference to their dignity as a body, but it became a different matter if they were to allow that composite dignity to rob them of individual *réclame*. To have announced the acquisition of an Egyptian mummy by the Museum in the *Thurnham Advertiser* would have brought each single one of them considerable kudos amongst their friends. To suggest that they should refuse this offer, was like telling a boy he must not accept a three-cornered Cape of Good Hope for his stamp collection, merely because it hurt someone else's feelings. They were annoyed with Mr. Mercer for this sentimental attitude. But they were amazed at Mr. Bottleby. If he could let personal feelings weigh with him to this extent in the pursuit of his duties, was he the sort of man they wanted in the post of Curator?

Mr. Overend was just about to bring a dry, caustic and logical mind to bear upon the subject, when Mr. Bottleby resumed his argument.

"I am assuming that all you gentlemen here," said he, "belong to the Church of England and would be distinctly perturbed if the graves of any of your relatives were broken into, the bodies exhumed and placed in hermetically sealed glass cases for the public to inspect on half-days and holidays."

He looked about him. There was no response to this. Only Mr. Mercer showed any sign of approval. He followed the Curator's glance triumphantly round the room.

"If, however," continued Mr. Bottleby, "there were anything to be gained by it for the benefit of humanity, I feel confident there is not one of you who would not sacrifice his personal feelings for the good of the community. I feel sure that any one of you would allow his own body or the body of a relative to be exhibited in a medical museum in the cause of the advancement of science."

He glanced at the rotund figure of Mr. Purch as he said this, and added—"I do not suggest there is anything sufficiently abnormal to warrant such sacrifice of the conventional burial. With regard to sentiment, then, in this matter, where there will undoubtedly be something in the nature of history to be gained, I feel Mr. Mercer ought to sacrifice his feelings for the Egyptians for the benefit of the public. There is not an exhibit of this kind in the Museum. It is all very well to say, 'Go to the British Museum if you want to study Egyptology,' but it is not everyone who can afford the railway fare for that purpose. I am supposing that the underlying purpose of the collection we have here is the education of the public, and anything which will contribute towards that end must not be ignored."

With a sharp look at Mr. Mercer, Mr. Overend was heard to say, "Hear—hear!" Mr. Purch blew with satisfaction through his teeth. Mr. Charrington murmured something that was inaudible.

With a last effort at gaining his point and to pursue that sense of importance which every man feels, once he has expressed an opinion—however wrong it may be—Mr. Mercer inquired of the Curator how he reconciled this advice with his belief that the spirit lived on after death.

"If as you say," he said, "the spirit is unconfined by conditions of time and space, then to exhume this body—even though it may be some thousands of years old—is as sacrilegious as digging up a body that was only buried yesterday."

"I have not suggested it was not sacrilegious," replied Mr. Bottleby. "I think it is. But aren't we all sacrilegious? Isn't the whole of the Western civilisation a sacrilegious denial of Christ? I would contend that it is cruel to take life—so I have no doubt would you. You would not kill a robin, but you feel a warm sense of pride when a partridge falls to your gun. Man must live and man must learn. Nothing will stop him in these two instincts. If you don't order a joint of beef for Sunday's dinner, someone else will. If you don't accept the offer of this exhibit for the Museum, some other museum will gladly have it. When you discover a process to change human nature from what it is—change it. Until you have discovered that, the only way is for human nature gradually to change itself. I am quite prepared to believe that the spirit of this mummy exists either in the spirit form or expressed again in some other living body. But, wherever it is, I am equally certain it is a more competent guardian of its interests than am I. I am not greater than life. Life is greater than me. But that is not going to crush my instincts to learn something about it. It is the refusal to do that which I should class as sentimentality. Any ideas that a man may have about life, that do not interfere with his curiosity to know more of it, are healthy sentiments—even if he finds them all wrong when he wakes up in the morning. I have these ideas about transmigration, yet unhesitatingly I suggest to you, gentlemen, that we ought to accept this offer of a mummy for the Museum. And I propose that I should go up to London and bring it down by barge as this letter advises. That means of transit will have less vibration than a train, and these things don't want to be shaken about. If you gentlemen agree to this I will go up to London to-morrow."

With the exception of Mr. Mercer, whose silence was tacitly ignored, Mr. Bottleby was requested to do as he proposed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE warehouse foreman of the Ackerman Line was a short, fat Irishman of the name of Walsh. He feared neither God nor man, but stood in considerable awe of the devil. His power of command over the dock labourers when a ship was being loaded or unloaded was like the power of a whirlwind. He swept them along to their work. They dared not resist him. Frequently he had been known to cuff a man over the head who was moving too slowly for his liking. Many were much larger than himself, yet not one had ever retaliated. With a well-directed blow in the pit of his exuberant stomach, they could have finished Mr. Walsh for the rest of time. But none of them ever gave it.

His voice was a tornado—a high tornado; not the low growl of an ominous wind, but the shrill shriek of a gale that tears in pieces all that resists its force. With his cheeks deepening to a livid purple, it seemed sometimes as though it would rend his throat to ribbons. Yet no one had ever heard Mr. Walsh complain of a sore throat. Whatever he may have lost in the way of temper or a sense of dignity, he never lost his voice.

To him Mr. Bottleby was directed from the shipping offices of the Ackerman Line. Confused and confounded by the rush of life about him and continually getting in the way, as one's feet get in the way of ants swarming round an ant-heap, the Curator at length succeeded in finding Mr. Walsh.

He was directing a gang of men unloading a ship just in from Singapore, late in arriving and due to sail before the end of the week. Never in all his life had Mr. Bottleby seen such commotion. It staggered and confused him. He thought of the peace and quiet in the Curator's wing of the Thurnham Museum and he wondered if he were in the same world. Donkey engines were snorting and clanking. Cranes were swinging great bundles of cargo like swords of Damocles over his head. Rows of men were moving up and down the gangways, lost to all semblance of humanity and become like mechanical figures running up and down on a chain that wound them round and under and up again like buckets on a dredger.

He stood for a moment trying to tell himself that these were human beings of the male sex, mated—probably all of them—and with corners in a vast hive of bricks and mortar, where they brought up their young to swell those armies of workers coming in and going out, until the darkness herded them into their homes.

He was just speculating upon how much simpler and more merciful it would be if there were but one female to all those males; if the hive were not broken up into a thousand homes where dirt and misery and sickness were rampant everywhere, but conducted on more orderly lines where this process of reproduction was centralised as Nature with so many insects arranges it in the woods and hedgerows.

"Man," he said aloud, as he stood there on the cobbles watching it all, "Man has set himself a task in this process of spiritual evolution which is wellnigh impossible to perform. How can he rise to thoughts above his material welfare, when the persistent increase of the population makes it necessary for him to live less comfortably and work more strenuously than the beasts in the field? Plough-horses are not driven like this. A farmhouse stable is probably an infinitely cleaner abode than the homes which many of these men possess. The clean air of heaven is brighter than this pall of smoke—the earth is softer than these cobbles—the twitter of finches in the wake of the plough must be better hearing for the ears than the shrieks of these engines and the growl of these cranes. Yet out of this man is expected to evolve such moral principles as will lift him above the beasts whose conditions of life are infinitely more to be desired than his own.

"Something has happened with our civilisation," he was about to continue, when a man with a bale of goods hit him squarely in the back and flung him face forwards on the cobbles.

Recovering himself from this predicament, for which no apologies were offered, Mr. Bottleby collected his wits to discover Mr. Walsh.

"You'll hear him down on the docks," he had been told, and having recalled these instructions to mind, he listened. Above the din of snorting steam and rattling chains, he certainly did hear a voice, raised to a pitch of human effectiveness hard to credit in such surroundings. With a growing regard for his personal safety, he made his way in its direction.

"I want to speak to Mr. Walsh," he said in the fat little man's ear.

With one sharp glance to see who had addressed him, the stevedore returned his attention to his men.

"An' aren't ye speakin' to him!" he shouted in precisely the tone of voice as, at the same moment, he swore by Mary the Mother of God that he would break the bones in the bodies of every man there who did not slip back up those gangways as though there were grease on his feet.

With certain considerations of politeness in regard for a man as busily occupied as Mr. Walsh, the Curator waited a moment in the hope of finding a pause in his language. There was no pause. It was as incessant as the jolting piston-rods of the donkey-engines, as piercing as the hiss of steam whenever the cranes swung round. It was unbelievable that a human throat could continue so persistently with such strenuous effort.

Mr. Bottleby stood listening to him and was beginning to calculate the amount of breath pressure to the square inch to which his voice was exerting itself, when, without looking round, Mr. Walsh shouted, "What the hell d'ye want?"

"Are you referring to me?" inquired Mr. Bottleby.

"D'ye think I'd talk in a genteel way like that to this b—— lot of scruffs?" shouted the stevedore.

"I was instructed to come and find you," said Mr. Bottleby quickly, whose wits were already sharpening to the need of swift application, "and ask you about an Egyptian sarcophagus which is lying here in one of your warehouses."

The effect of this statement upon Mr. Walsh was instantaneous. He turned upon his heel at once and stared into Mr. Bottleby's face.

"An Egyptian what?" said he, and his voice had fallen from the high note of a gale to the whimper of wind through the crack of a door.

"Sarcophagus," repeated Mr. Bottleby. "A coffin—a wooden case——"

"Then why in the name of God didn't ye say so! An' what is it ye want to ask me about it? I dunno annything about it. Hasn't it been lyin' there these last six weeks, an' wouldn't I have thrown it mesself into the water if I hadn't known that worse might happen me an' I not leavin' it alone?"

"I've come from Thurnham Museum to fetch it away," said Mr. Bottleby.

Mr. Walsh looked at him in solid amazement. He seemed astounded to find a man with the gentleness of Mr. Bottleby prepared to do such a thing. To express his mingled astonishment and gratitude, he spat effectively on his hand and offered it to the Curator. Too surprised to comment upon its condition, Mr. Bottleby took it as it was offered and allowed Mr. Walsh to shake his own up and down like a pump handle.

"Come along with me," said the stevedore and led the way through a labyrinth of high, vaulted buildings till they came to a shed at the farther end of the dock.

In a dark corner, away from the mass of packing-cases, lay the coffin. Had Mr. Bottleby been susceptible like Mr. Walsh to the presence of the uncanny, he would have felt at that moment the sense of something inexplicable in the fate which had brought that body, after some thousands of years, from the tombs of Egypt to lie in the corner of a dark warehouse amidst all that conglomeration of a mechanical civilisation. But then, had Mr. Bottleby seen a ghost itself, he would have approached it with a genuine spirit of inquiry. In Mr. Walsh, on the other hand, anything of which, in the nature of his religious beliefs, the Catholic Church had not provided him with a clear explanation, there was a terror of spirit which no bravado on his part could disguise. At a certain distance from the coffin he stopped and would come no nearer. With a growing respect for Mr. Bottleby's intrepidity, he watched the Curator minutely examining it with a small magnifying glass he had taken from his pocket.

"It looks as if these ropes, holding it together, had been untied sometime or other," said Mr. Bottleby. "Have you seen inside the coffin? Do you know if the mummy is there and is it intact with its wrappings?"

"I'd no more look inside that thing," said Mr. Walsh with a deep emphasis, "than I would into the pits of hell. There's been enough trouble in this place since that damned thing came there, without me routling it about and stirrin' it up to more mischief."

"Do you know what ship brought it?"

"I do not. An' there's not wan of 'em'll say for fear it might be the way they'd have to take it back again. Shure, it's been there six weeks, an' that time haven't we lost cases out o' this shed, an' hasn't my old woman contrived a miscarriage with the first child she's had the merest inklin' of, the way the doctor says 'tis unlikely will she ever be able to carry wan now at all? I dunno did misfortune ever settle so hard on a man as it has on me since that damned thing was dropped on us."

"Well, I've made arrangements with a barge," said Mr. Bottleby, "the *Georgina Mary* of Rochester, to take it up the river to Thurnham. Here's the letter which the Museum received from the Company offering them the gift of it."

Mr. Walsh barely glanced at the letter.

"If you'll send me along a couple of men," added Mr. Bottleby, "I'll see that they take it carefully down to the barge. She's moored just outside the dock. Captain Wolhop is in charge. The *Georgina Mary*—Captain Wolhop—if we can get it on a small boat and you let me have a couple of men——"

Mr. Bottleby had almost caught the tone of command from the stevedore's voice. Even Mr. Walsh was conscious of it. He touched his hat. He hurried away with that alacrity he expected from his men.

Mr. Bottleby remained there staring at the coffin in the dark corner of the shed.

CHAPTER IX

Contrary to the suggestive sound of his name, Captain Wolhop was a tall, spare, saturnine-looking man of few words and a meaning glance in his eye. He had no greeting for Mr. Bottleby as the skiff with its burden came alongside the *Georgina Mary.* He made no comment as the coffin was lifted on board. It might have been a bale of linseed cake for all the regard he paid it.

The tide had turned and they were sailing immediately. Mr. Bottleby paid the two men and followed the coffin on board. The skiff put away and the Curator stood watching it as it bounced over the water back to the entrance of the dock. It disappeared through the dock-gates. The mate, Mr. Simes and Captain Wolhop were hauling up the anchor. The *Georgina Mary* was turning round into the tide like an awakening water reptile stirring in its palæozoic mud. The voyage of the mummy had begun.

Mr. Bottleby was about to go below to explore the cabin quarters where he was to be accommodated for the next few days, when he was confronted at the top of the companion ladder by a young, buxom woman whose smile suffused the whole of her face as she said, "Good morning."

In considerable surprise at finding one of the female sex on board, Mr. Bottleby acknowledged the salutation and would have passed on to go below, only that she made no movement to give him room.

"Surprised at meeting a lady on board—aren't you?" said she.

Mr. Bottleby confessed he was.

"I'm Mrs. Wolhop," she explained and certainly conveyed the suggestive sound of the name more accurately than her husband. "Me and the Captain was married last week," she went on with genial confidence. "He couldn't get off from his work, so we had our honeymoon comin' down here on the boat from Thurnham and back again. Little more than a week. Quite enough for a honeymoon, ain't it?"

"I didn't know," said Mr. Bottleby, "that there was any prescribed time for this feast of Hymen. I seem to have heard some people describe the whole of their married life as a honeymoon."

The first part of his sentence might have been Dutch to her, but understanding the second part well enough, she said:

"Oh—go on! There's a time for everything and everything in its place."

No one analysing the character of Mr. Bottleby would have dreamed of declaring him to be without a sense of humour. They might have omitted to say that he had one because, with his dominating conception of life as a process, humour was the last thing that was apparent in him. Nevertheless it was there. Odd things, often those which had a delicate sense of impropriety—so delicate that frequently he was the only person who saw them—tickled the humorous quality of his imagination. He would chuckle inwardly. One could conceive the membrane of some internal and hidden part of his anatomy wrinkling with amusement. Sometimes a smile actually came into his face.

On this occasion, partly because of what Mrs. Wolhop said, partly because of an irresistible jollity that suffused the whole of her temperament, he not only felt amusement internally; it rose within him and ultimately registered itself in a sudden smile.

As has been said elsewhere, Mr. Bottleby's smile lent him an unexpected quality of charm. Though they might forget its exact effect upon his features, no one who had ever seen it could forget his capacity for that expression or the subtle sense of humour it conveyed.

The effect of it upon Mrs. Wolhop was instantaneous. She did not know what it was that had amused him, but she responded with a laugh that rippled all down the narrow deck of the *Georgina Mary* and reached the ears of Captain Wolhop attending with Mr. Simes to the anchor.

He let go of the chain and stood upright looking in her direction. The saturnine expression in his eyes reached her, even from that distance. Instinctively, without any consciousness of comparison, she knew that in the respect of humour Mr. Bottleby was superior to her husband who had none. So little of consciousness was there in that silent comparison that she took no notice of Captain Wolhop's intimidating glance. She knew nothing about the psychology of jealousy in sex. In that respect she was as simple-minded as Mr. Bottleby. He knew nothing of modern analytical psychology at all, but classified human nature in vast periods, glacial and pre-glacial, and almost lost sight of its complexities when man discarded the flint and the bronze and set his psychology in iron.

In this respect, though from very different points of view, there was something in common in their natures. Mr. Bottleby was too busy with the past to take the present as anything but what he found it. Mrs. Wolhop, on the other hand, possessed one of those temperaments which see life as a butterfly sees it, a garden of flowers with honey, some more, some less, in every available oviduct.

Once Mr. Bottleby had smiled at the interpretation which that sense of humour of his had found in her remark, Mrs. Wolhop found as it were a source of honey in their brief relationship. She did not for one moment lose sight of the mated proprietorship which Captain Wolhop in the nature of things exercised over her, but, in a joyous abandonment of spirits, she flitted.

It is sufficiently noteworthy to remark that in the whole course of his thirty-eight years, this was the first time Mr. Bottleby had been attracted by a woman. In the light of succeeding events, dating from that moment when first he came into contact with the coffin containing the embalmed remains of Ta-mai, it is interesting to calculate how rapidly events began to shape themselves in this history.

Without any break in that ripple of her laughter, Mrs. Wolhop told him with an unquestionable charm of coquetry that she didn't know what it was he had to smile at, but she wasn't such a fool as to believe that honeymoons went on all through anybody's married life.

"Give us a chance," she said; at which, for some reason quite unknown to himself, Mr. Bottleby joined in her laughter, with a chuckle that seemed to rise somewhere out of his boots and spend itself in reverberations of his diaphragm.

There was a frank and almost childlike shamelessness about her which was irresistible. There was nothing vulgar about it. She was exuberant with life, like birds in the mating season. This honeymoon of hers was nothing to be ashamed about. Accustomed all his life to the study of nature, Mr. Bottleby saw in her something that he recognised without knowing anything of feminine psychology. She was just the female species, overjoyed at finding an attraction about herself and trying it on all and sundry with a barefaced exultation that betokened the warm spring air in her blood.

There was something intrinsically comprehensible and more worthy of admiration, for instance, in her laughter than in the smile with which Mrs. Spiers had greeted him at Mrs. Charrington's tea party. That had terrified him. He felt himself to be quickened by this. For the moment she was almost making him forget his mental attitude towards the past in her unexpected physical consciousness of the present. He took a certain pleasure, still purely academic, in looking at her. She had white teeth. Her upper lip when she laughed had an attractive way of revealing them. Her eyes had a laughter in them of shameless understanding. She had a dimple at the corner of her mouth.

For a moment Mr. Bottleby had almost forgotten his mission, when Captain Wolhop left the anchor to Mr. Simes and came along the deck to join them.

"I suppose you want to see where you've got to lie in?" said he.

The humourless growl of his voice was disturbing. With a jolt, Mr. Bottleby suddenly remembered why he was there and where he was going.

He said he would first see where they had put the coffin, and, having arranged for it to be carefully covered with a piece of tarpaulin and surrounded by bags of sugar, which was the cargo they were carrying, he accompanied Captain Wolhop to the cabin below the after part of the boat.

It was a small compartment with a bunk let into the walls on either side and cupboards at the back. The whole cabin was somewhat in the shape of a horseshoe. There was a low seat all round about a table in the centre, over which swung a ship's lantern. The stove—for it was kitchen, bedroom and living-room combined—faced the semicircle as one entered. The stove pipe was carried through the ceiling above. At the side of the stove was the companion ladder leading up through a square aperture to the deck. This, when it was open, together with a small skylight in the roof, provided such light as the cabin contained.

It was not without its sense of comfort. Following Captain Wolhop below, Mr. Bottleby, just able to stand erect with comfort, looked about him. There was a bowl of kingcups on the table, which would have looked incongruous had not Mr. Bottleby known of the presence of the feminine influence on board. On the doors of the cupboards at the back were pinned two imitations of Kirchner pictures from the illustrated weeklies.

Seeing Mr. Bottleby's glance at them, and believing it to be more critical than it actually was, Captain Wolhop growled the information that he was not responsible for that trash.

"She likes her little bit of fancy stuff about," said he. "We're just married."

Mr. Bottleby murmured something to the effect that he had heard they were on their honeymoon.

Captain Wolhop guffawed.

"Honeymoon!" said he. "Fond of names, aren't they!"

Mr. Bottleby said nothing.

"Aren't they?" repeated the Captain sharply.

"Yes—yes—very fond," replied Mr. Bottleby, not having realised that an answer had been expected of him. He was aware of a momentary impression that for a newly married man, Captain Wolhop was not overwhelmingly flattering to his wife. He did not try to understand it. He supposed marriage had that effect. Instead of endeavouring to understand Captain Wolhop, he speculated vaguely, as he looked about the cabin, upon whether the emotion of love, as it is called by the poets and romantic writers, was merely a development of the reproductive instinct or a new evolutionary force in spiritual achievement.

Judging by Captain Wolhop's tone of voice as he spoke of his wife, it seemed to Mr. Bottleby to be no other than the common possessive passion of the male for the female which, when once attained, became little more than mere proprietorship.

As a matter of fact, Captain Wolhop was intensely fond of his wife. He was intensely proud of her. If anything, he was much fonder of her than she was of him. He was fully aware of the beauty of those white teeth she had. He had kissed that dimple, without letting her know that that was why he had kissed her on that particular spot. He was proud of those kingcups on the cabin table. He actually liked those suggestive little pictures on the cupboard doors. He was an ardent lover, though he was well over forty. In fact it was the being well over forty that induced him to hide his infatuation from everyone, Mrs. Wolhop included. He made her no pretty speeches. It is doubtful whether, with his saturnine type of mind, pretty speeches would have come naturally to him under the greatest stress of emotion.

But Mrs. Wolhop knew. She knew so well and so surely that, in this sudden discovery of her full powers of attraction, she was prepared to coquet with life itself. If the twelve apostles had come down from heaven to catechise her, her mere answers would have been a flirtation with every one of them.

Realising nothing of this, Mr. Bottleby was at the mercy of whatever pranks her instinct for seduction and Captain Wolhop's jealousy liked to play on him.

"Where do you sleep?" he asked.

"Me and the missis in there," said Captain Wolhop, pointing to the bunk on one side, "and Mr. Simes, the mate, in t'other."

"Haven't you another cabin somewhere, or a bunk or something?"

He was surprised at Mr. Simes sleeping in the same cabin with them, but it was merely a passing arrest of mind. Life did not alarm him.

"No other cabin," said Captain Wolhop, "these boats aren't Cunard liners. They're just built to carry two men—all they want for a crew. You needn't fret yourself. You'll be comfortable enough. I told Mr. Simes this morning to give his bunk a good clean out, soon as I knew you was coming. He can shake up under the sugar bags. He don't mind just for three or four nights. You'll be all right."

"In that bunk?" asked Mr. Bottleby.

"In that bunk," said the Captain.

"But you——" He could get no further. What had seemed possible for the mate, Mr. Simes, appeared to be nothing short of a catastrophe to him. "But you——" he repeated and stood staring at Captain Wolhop.

"Oh, don't you mind about us," said the Captain. "We shan't bother you. Bless you, we shan't know you're there."

"Well—I'd sooner that you did. In fact," exclaimed Mr. Bottleby, "I'd sooner go and sleep out on the sugar bags myself."

"Look here, sir," said Captain Wolhop, "we don't often get passengers on board these barges, and when we do and they pays their passage, same as you've done, we makes them as comfortable as we can. Don't say no more about it. There you lies—and there we lies. There's a couple of curtains between us, and if that don't satisfy you, it's the best we can do."

Saying which, and saying it with a tone of finality, Captain Wolhop mounted the companion ladder. He left Mr. Bottleby staring from one side of the cabin to the other.

CHAPTER X

THERE is scarcely a predicament in life which, when at last one is face to face with it, does not contrive to assume more or less common proportions.

In this somewhat unusual circumstance in which he found himself, Mr. Bottleby made a discovery about the nature of man which had no relation to his history in the past, but was intimately concerned with his immediate present. He discovered that imagination, which he would have described as a late product in the evolution of mankind, had more to do with the formation of a code of morals than any fact necessary to the proper conduct of life.

This was the first time in Mr. Bottleby's personal evolution that he had allowed his mind definitely to consider something which intimately concerned himself. It was, in fact, at thirty-eight years of age, the beginning of a consciousness of the ego in him without which he would undoubtedly have lived out his allotted span in a sublime indifference to the fact that he had ever lived at all. He would have died with one eye regarding the Neandertal man and the other comparing him with the product of the middle ages. He would have been too busy with history to be occupied with life. He would have passed out of this world scarcely knowing that he had ever been in it.

It would have been a very enviable existence, but one which even the Curator himself would have admitted was never intended by Nature for the most insignificant of its creatures.

What influence it was that came into Mr. Bottleby's life at this period of his development it would be impossible to say with any foundation in scientific fact. Undoubtedly, as will be seen, circumstance contrived, however gradually, to make a different man of him. He was aware of no change in himself. This, where change is deep and fundamental, is only to be expected. If a man becomes a vegetarian, everyone notices it. He notices it at first himself. But when, from being an onlooker at life, a man subtly becomes a participator, silently and unobtrusively joining the crowd that is pressing on towards conceptions of fulfilment, however vague, the crowd does not notice his presence. Finding himself one of a mass of people, sharing the warmth of their bodies, giving out the warmth of his own, he is scarcely aware of it himself. His psychology unites with theirs. Individual though he must be to the last, he becomes one in the million who, in some vast combination of purpose, are all struggling to be the one in themselves.

This sharing of a bridal chamber with a newly married couple on their honeymoon was the first circumstance that was brought to bear on Mr. Bottleby's nature. Out of this event, he arrived at that discovery regarding the imagination as a basis of morals which led him to his first actual consideration of the immediate present.

In some panic of mind at the prospect before him, he had gone quietly to the mate, Mr. Simes, and informed him that it was his last wish to turn him out of his usual sleeping quarters.

"I assure you I shall be quite comfortable," he said, "in some corner protected by these sugar bags."

"You won't be as comfortable as me, sir," said Mr. Simes.

With interesting apprehension, Mr. Bottleby asked him what he meant by that.

"Well, all the way comin' down to London," said the mate, "they kept wakin' me up in the middle of the night to tell me stop my snorin'."

"In the middle of the night!" echoed Mr. Bottleby. "Don't they go to sleep at all?"

Mr. Simes raised his eyes and looked wonderingly at the Curator. It appeared as if he were about to say something of a pertinent nature, and then, from some consideration it would have been impossible to trace in his mind, refrained from it. What he did say was obviously spoken on second thoughts.

"Don't let me disturb the thought of a good night's rest for you, sir," he said. "You put your head on the piller—it's a clean one—and you just go to sleep. Bein' a passenger, so to speak, the Captain won't treat you the same as he does me. I'm only the mate. It ain't their fault. I knew he was goin' to marry her when I saw her comin' down to the wharf at Thurnham every trip to see 'im off. Don't you let me worry you by anything I say. With this wind, tackin' and so on, we shall have three nights of it before we get past Rochester, so you just lie down when you turn in and shut your eyes. It's a clean piller."

Evidently Mr. Simes felt he had got the best of it. Nothing would deprive him of his sugar bags.

From supper onwards, at which meal they all four sat round the table and Mrs. Wolhop was the life of the party, Mr. Bottleby found his agitation increasing. Later he walked about on deck, sometimes talking to Mr. Simes, sometimes with his curiosity rousing, taking his magnifying glass and, with the end of a candle, trying to decipher the hieroglyphics on the outside of the coffin.

He had no special knowledge of Egyptology. From a certain amount of study on the Papyrus of Ani with a translation, he had acquainted himself with some of the characters sufficiently to recognise the various gods and goddesses commonly referred to in connexion with the burial of the dead.

The lid of the coffin was shaped in the figure of the body it contained. The head was carved to represent a woman's face, probably a rough portrait of the dead within.

Engaged in this engrossing occupation, Mr. Bottleby completely forgot the uncomfortable prospect in front of him. Only when the mate, passing along the narrow deck above, looked down amongst the sugar bags and said, "They've turned in an hour ago, sir. You slip in quiet now and they won't know you're there—" only then did Mr. Bottleby remember the predicament in which he was placed.

The ridiculous part of it all lay in the fact that it was not a question of staying away to please them. If he were to sleep out with the mate on the sugar bags, he knew that Captain Wolhop would be annoyed, while it had even occurred to him at supper that Mrs. Wolhop would be actually hurt. Being supersensitive with regard to other people's feelings whenever he observed them, he felt there was no alternative but to take Mr. Simes's advice and go below.

With an increasing delicacy of step he went aft, and at the top of the companion ladder he stood a moment and coughed. It might have been the night air. There was a fresh wind. In any case, if they were awake and realised it was on their account, they could not fail to appreciate any little consideration of that nature. He heard nothing. Perhaps they were asleep. Saying something beneath his breath that was as near a prayer as anything he had ever muttered in his life, Mr. Bottleby began his descent.

A remembrance of his school days with the first line of the first book of Virgil was crossing his mind, when his foot slipped on the fifth rung of the ladder and he fell with a clatter in the darkness on to the floor of the cabin below.

If they had been asleep, this had certainly wakened them. Behind their curtain, he heard Mrs. Wolhop exclaim —"He's fallen down and hurt hisself!" The next moment the gruff voice of Captain Wolhop inquired whether he was all right.

"I'm quite all right," replied Mr. Bottleby quickly and apologetically as he picked himself up—"Please don't worry yourselves about me."

"You'll find a candle on the table and a box of matches," said Captain Wolhop.

"Oh, I don't want a light, thank you—really I don't want a light. I can see excellently."

He took off his coat and waistcoat in the darkness and laid them on the locker seat. For the moment he stood debating about the rest of his garments. Then, a newly found quality of imagination picturing difficulties in the daylight of the following morning, he just slipped off his boots, crept into his bunk and pulled the curtain.

Mr. Simes's idea of putting one's head on a pillow and just going off to sleep was characteristic for a quality of optimism. Sleep was out of the question. If the honeymoon couple had been asleep before, they were fully awake now. Every few moments he heard Mrs. Wolhop's voice in an audible whisper.

"If I were to tell this story to anyone," Mr. Bottleby thought to himself, "it would be positively indecent."

He began to imagine the consternation it would have caused in Mrs. Charrington's drawing-room, had he told it to Mrs. Spiers that afternoon. Yet here he was experiencing the actual thing—and was it so indecent after all?

He began to inspect the situation, as he would have made a segment of a flower for botanical examination. Their curtain was pulled. So was his. The occasional whispering of Mrs. Wolhop's voice was quite inarticulate so far as his hearing was concerned. In what respect under these circumstances, except in his mind, did he differ from the deaf mutes or the eunuchs who attended the nuptials of their lords and ladies in civilisations when decency was determined by the proportion of its offence to Nature? He could see no difference.

"The condition of decency or indecency, of morality or immorality," said Mr. Bottleby, and was quite unaware that he said it in an almost audible murmur of his voice, "lies entirely in the minds of those who regard the essential substance of a fact. Man has so alienated himself from Nature," he went on, "that, with this modern civilisation, we have become what Rahel Varnhagen called 'sick Europeans.' We have become so ashamed of the natural instincts of reproduction, that maternity has grown to be a malady with respectably married women, while it is shame to those who are not. This woman, Mrs. Wolhop, is frankly proud of the fact that she is on her honeymoon, while I have no doubt that a woman of the type of Mrs. Spiers would blush to the roots of her hair if anyone had known she was similarly occupied. Women expose their breast and shoulders in public places with just so much cunning and restraint as will aggravate complete strangers to notice them, yet these are the very ones who would think it positively indecent of this bargee's wife to completely conceal herself under naturally intimate conditions behind a curtain."

With the occupation of these thoughts, Mr. Bottleby passed the space of half an hour so engrossed with his speculations that he heard nothing and in that darkness saw nothing.

Before he realised the approach of unconsciousness, he had fallen asleep, completely convinced of the wholesome decency of Nature.

CHAPTER XI

HEAD winds, as Mr. Simes had foretold, necessitating operations of tacking, detained the *Georgina Mary* on her course. According to Mr. Bottleby's narration of the journey they were a good three days at sea. He had never travelled on a boat before in his life, and hearing this flapping of sails, together with the technical remarks that passed between the mate and Captain Wolhop, he felt himself to be engaged in a nautical adventure. He would have received no more definite impression of a sea voyage had he been six months on a wind-jammer across the other side of the world. The fact that they were just passing Greenwich and later in sight of the Nore lightship, then rounding into the mouth of the Conway, meant nothing in terms of fact to him.

But what happened during those three days, which was ultimately brought home to him in an unescapable sense of reality, was the pleasure Mrs. Wolhop seemed to find in his company and conversation.

He had known, if he had not been actually aware, of women laying themselves out to be agreeable to him. Mrs. Charrington, Mrs. Spiers and palpably Mrs. Pennyquick had been notable examples when first he came to Thurnham. But with them, as with others, the laying themselves out had been an isolated effort. After the first encounter they had left him severely alone.

He was not exactly conscious of being left alone. He only knew that, so far as women were concerned, they did not appear to interfere with his work as he had seen women interfere with the lives of some men that he knew. Whether the reason were in him, or merely in the chance of circumstance, he was not sufficiently self-analytical to determine. Indeed there was no quality of self-analysis in Mr. Bottleby's nature at all. He pursued the interest of his studies, as a dog pursues a rabbit to its burrow. If he were conscious of the presence of a woman, likely to interfere with his work, he ignored it as completely as a dog ignores the presence of a thorn in its foot once it is engaged in the excitement of the chase.

But here, on the *Georgina Mary,* with a cabin eight feet by eight, with two narrow decks up and down which the men trudged with the barge poles at their shoulders, and with no other opportunity for accommodation than piles of sugar bags in the hold, Mrs. Wolhop was not to be ignored. If he spent some part of the day in examining with his magnifying glass the hieroglyphics on the outside of the coffin, she accompanied him. She sat by his side on a sugar bag, and, with an expression of admiration on her face—extraordinary in a woman otherwise engaged upon her honeymoon—she declared her wonder at his cleverness in being able to make out the meaning of "them there birds and things."

Unfortunately for him, Mr. Bottleby, in a foolish moment, had allowed her to look through the magnifying glass at the painted figures on the lid of the coffin. Her little gasps of astonishment had been so audible as to attract the attention of Captain Wolhop at the wheel. Handing his job over to the mate, he had come along the deck looking down at them on their sugar bags.

"What's all the excitement about?" he growled; and looking up, Mr. Bottleby had been aware for the first time in his life of that passion of jealousy which the mere sense of possession rouses in the human animal.

With that indifference which the female stag displays in the rutting season, when two stags are fighting to the death for the possession of the hind, Mrs. Walhop returned the suppressed fury of her husband's glance with a smile of childlike enthusiasm.

"Jos," she said—for Captain Wolhop's name had been taken from the prophets—"Jos, he's showin' me these things used to be their gods and goddesses five thousand years ago. Would you ever have believed people could have had such sense as long ago as that?"

"Maybe they'd more sense then than what they have now," said Captain Wolhop, and, with a meaning in the words that lingered after him in Mr. Bottleby's mind, he went aft again to the wheel and practically pushed Mr. Simes on one side as he took the spokes in his hands.

The look on Captain Wolhop's face and the scarcely veiled meaning in his words did not remain in Mr. Bottleby's memory for long. Finding a childlike ignorance combined with a similar enthusiasm of curiosity in Mrs. Wolhop, he began to explain to her the new world that could be revealed to the naked eye beneath the lens of a magnifying glass. He held out the little instrument he always carried with him.

"This is my pocket microscope," said he, "it magnifies things to a hundred times their size. Under the microscope I use in my room in the Museum, I can see things two thousand times as big as they are."

"Lor!" said Mrs. Wolhop and gazed at him in wonder.

But this look was nothing in its frank avowal of admiration as the expression almost of awe in her face when he showed her a crystal of sugar on the palm of her hand underneath the magnifying glass.

First she screwed up both eyes to look. Then she applied the glass at a distance from the object when nothing was visible. It was just like instructing a child. Every moment in a petulant tone of disappointment, she kept saying, "I can't see anything. Oh, I wish I could see it. I'm not clever enough, I suppose."

Then, suddenly, with the assistance of Mr. Bottleby's hands holding her own, the touch of which she was quite conscious of, while to him there was no more sensation than in adjusting the wheel of his microscope, she exclaimed with a suppressed cry of excitement, "I can see it! I can see it! Oh!"

For there, in a moment, beneath her eye, lay a glittering mass, with sharpened facets, catching points of light and flinging them about in all directions.

"Oh, Mr. Bottleby!" she said, "Oh, Mr. Bottleby!" not merely conveying her astonishment, but almost with a note of caress in her voice as though she liked the sound of his name on her tongue.

"What you see there," said the Curator, just as though he were beginning a lecture to a juvenile class, "is the natural substance of a diamond, unaffected by the tremendous heat or vast pressure to which it may be subjected in the earth. In a furnace of such degree of heat as would pass your comprehension, that could be converted into a jewel such as any queen might wear in her crown."

For the sake of Mrs. Wolhop, he was endeavouring to be picturesque. Notwithstanding that it thrilled her, the effort so insulted his intelligence that he quickly discarded it and broke into a discourse upon carbo-hydrates. She listened with a bewildered yet admiring confusion.

This was something that Captain Wolhop was both constitutionally and intellectually unable to give her. What little he said was saturnine and abrupt. It not only discouraged conversation, it crushed it. Here was a man, such as she had never met before, whose power of words overwhelmed and stimulated her with an extraordinary sensation of vitality in the same sort of way as when she watched men playing football, or saw the pictures in the illustrated papers of boxers stripped to the waist and hitting each other through the ropes. Not one word in ten did she understand, but she was listening to him dilating on the combinations of the carbo-hydrates, with her mouth just open, revealing those pretty teeth she had, and her eyes set in a childlike wonder of admiration.

"Lor', Mr. Bottleby!" she exclaimed, when he had said as much as a man can say to a woman on the mysteries of organic chemistry, "what a lot you must know you don't tell anyone anything about."

However true that may have been, there was something he did not know. He did not realise that just as this display of his knowledge was vitalising Mrs. Wolhop, so the bewildered intensity of her interest was vitalising him. He did not pause to ask himself whether she understood what he said. Here was some generous receptacle into which he could pour the energy of his mind. And he poured it.

Having examined the sugar crystal on her hand, he found a red spider crawling over the sugar bags and captured that for her consideration under the magnifying glass.

"Well, would you ever have believed that things you saw lyin' and crawlin' about were like that!" exclaimed Mrs. Wolhop.

"Until you begin to look at life through the microscope," said Mr. Bottleby, "you don't know the world you're living in." And here was the Curator himself, incapable of regarding his own life through the magnifying glass of self-analysis and knowing nothing of his own psychology in its transient relation to this bargee's wife.

"This ignorance," he continued as she sat on a sugar bag listening, with her eyes turned up to his, "This ignorance of the world we live in is one of the most astounding facts of modern education. If all the board-schools had a magnifying glass instead of a blackboard, we should have less of this unbalanced theory of knowledge which only leads to discontent. All it succeeds in doing is just to teach a man how to hate his work. The more we make things by machinery," Mr. Bottleby went on, "the more we're building up a condition of society which cares less for the thing that's made and more for what it'll fetch. Unless some system of education is devised which will more closely associate itself with nature and make man realise his place in the animal world——"

The fact of the matter was, Mr. Bottleby was flirting with Mrs. Wolhop. He certainly did not know it, and even she was scarcely conscious of the fact. But as he talked about systems of education with full meaning and energy in every word he said, and as she listened with parted lips and eyes set in bewilderment on his, they were arriving at a condition of intellectual intimacy—however unequal—which was as conducive to familiarity as if they had been talking romantically about love.

He would have gone on indefinitely, quite liking the sensation, only that suddenly he became aware of the presence of Captain Wolhop standing on the deck above and looking down at them. The impression of his appearance, his sallow face and that strange look in his eyes which Mr. Bottleby had noticed before, had an instantaneous effect upon the Curator. Without exactly knowing why, he realised it was not the moment to continue his remarks about machinery in its relative meaning to education.

"Are you holding a class or somethin'?" asked the Captain.

"Oh, Jos!" said Mrs. Wolhop, "it's somethin' wonderful what he's been showin' me with that little round glass of his. A piece of sugar and a red spider!"

"Well, you can take it from me," said Captain Wolhop without compromise, "that you've had enough of red spiders, and the sooner you go down below and look after the dinner the better it'll be for us all."

There was a tone of authority in his voice which instinctively Mrs. Wolhop obeyed. But even Mr. Bottleby noticed the dinner was not as well cooked as usual. The potatoes were underdone. The piece of steak they had laid in for their stores in London was so red that it bled profusely on their plates. And Captain Wolhop liked his meat well cooked, while Mr. Bottleby, always more inclined to a fruit diet, had to look anywhere than at his plate in order to make a meal at all. Mr. Simes was the only one who ate it with relish.

Captain Wolhop was frankly disgusted. He had no hesitation in saying so before them all.

"Call it a honeymoon!" he exclaimed, thrusting his plate away from him, "when a man can't eat the meat that's put in front of him!"

It was an uncomfortable meal. The persons who suffered least were the mate and Mrs. Wolhop. She was quite aware she had offended her spouse, but lost none of her good spirits on that account.

"That stove doesn't heat well," she said. "The chimney or stove pipe or whatever you call it isn't long enough. Whenever there's an extra puff of wind, the smoke comes back down into the cabin. There ain't no proper draught. You can't get a stove hot if there ain't no proper draught."

If there was one domestic duty which Mr. Bottleby knew how to perform, it was that of lighting a fire. A certain scientific attitude of mind had informed him that a clear up-draught is essential to encourage the passage of flames. He had frequently had to light fires for himself. Impressed therefore by the truth of Mrs. Wolhop's statement he unfortunately agreed with her.

"The gases produced by combustion," he said, "are certainly lighter than air. The tendency of flame with its accompanying gases is upwards. Any down-draught would of course tend to put a fire out and certainly to reduce the heat."

It was not until he had completed this statement, that he looked up and saw Captain Wolhop's face. Even then he only partially realised how unfortunate his support of Mrs. Wolhop had been. But if it was not wholly understandable from the expression on his face, Captain Wolhop made it quite clear in what he said.

"Down-draughts!" he said contemptuously, and standing up, he strode to the companion ladder. "More like red spiders! They'll choke up a fire and spoil a man's dinner on his honeymoon quicker than anything I know of."

There was an undoubted condition of up-draught in the way he left the cabin and went up on deck. Mr. Simes sat staring at Mrs. Wolhop.

"Has the boss gone off his rocker?" he asked. "Red spiders! Choke up a fire! Has he been takin' a bit since we started this trip? Spiders is one of the things you sees—isn't it?"

"He's silly—that's all," said Mrs. Wolhop, and, sweeping the dishes off the table, she prepared to wash up.

This was on their third day out from London. They were expecting to reach Rochester early the following morning, where some cargo was to be taken in before they completed the journey to Thurnham.

There was a heavy silence behind the curtain that night when Mr. Bottleby, obedient to certain considerations such as he had observed on the first occasion, climbed down the companion ladder and crept into his bunk.

In that silence he found it more difficult to get to sleep than before. He sincerely wished he might hear again that quite attractive chuckle in Mrs. Wolhop's voice as of a woman who is getting the best out of life.

He was frankly incapable of understanding Captain Wolhop's attitude, just as much as he was sublimely unconscious of this concatenation of circumstance that had enveloped him from the first moment when he set foot on board the *Georgina Mary*.

That men in love were jealous, he was quite aware, but he had imagined this passion to be only stirred in them by some definite fear of losing the affections of their beloved. And how could Captain Wolhop be afraid of that?

Mr. Bottleby was supremely unpossessed of any self-conceit. Though his conversations with Mrs. Wolhop had certainly vitalised him and quickened the energies of his mind as he talked, he had been totally unaware of any attraction in himself to this newly married and very exuberant female animal. Such attraction as he found in her was frankly that she was nothing more or less than this. She was naïvely honest about it. There was not the faintest sign of hypocrisy in her. She was newly married and she liked being newly married and apparently was quite prepared for anyone to envy both herself and Captain Wolhop under these especial circumstances.

That she had found in the Curator some expression for the outlet of her exuberant vitality, Mr. Bottleby was no more capable of seeing than he could appreciate the change that had come into his own life. He just supposed that her curiosity was tickled by seeing sugar crystals and red spiders under the magnifying glass, and, regretting extremely that this little feminine weakness should have created such misunderstanding, he listened once more for any sound of life behind the other curtain, and in genuine disappointment he fell asleep.

Arriving at Rochester the next morning, Captain Wolhop was in an unapproachable state of mind. He cursed at Mr. Simes. He scarcely spoke to his wife and appeared to be taking infinite trouble to find Mr. Bottleby in the way at every opportunity.

Much to the Curator's distress, he gave orders for the coffin to be removed to make way for the bags of flour they were taking on board to complete their cargo. There was no actual need to move it at all. Mr. Simes ventured to point out that it was quite possible to build the sacks of flour round it. They were in the river with no fear of any motion to disturb them.

"Have I command of this confounded boat?" shouted Captain Wolhop, "and is it a bloomin' pleasure trip or what is it? 'Cos if it's a pleasure trip—let's get out a concertina and sit aft there and sing hymns to each other."

He was in that sort of mood. Mr. Bottleby assisted the mate himself in carrying the coffin to the deck behind the cabin skylight. It was safe enough there, so long as no one in the condition of mind of Captain Wolhop kicked it or went out of his way to do it injury.

Apprehensive of something of that nature, the Curator never left its side, but walked up and down the little strip of deck and round and round it as it lay there while they were bringing the sacks of flour aboard. He was like a dog guarding a bone. Instinctively he felt his charge was in danger from the wrath of Captain Wolhop.

"I've been with the boss ten years," said Mr. Simes, "and I've never seen him goin' on like this before. Splicin' hisself—that's what's done it. Once you let a woman get 'old of you, she can play the deuce and jiminy with your temper."

Whatever the deuce and jiminy might be and whoever had played it on Captain Wolhop's temper, Mr. Bottleby was inwardly convinced it was not advisable to leave the coffin alone unprotected.

He was sitting on a coil of rope by the side of it on the after deck, when Mrs. Wolhop, having washed up the breakfast and set a stew to simmer on the hob, came out of the cabin and joined him.

Something in the airy inconsequence of her approach warned him of impending danger. He would have liked to ask her to keep away as far as possible, but besides not wanting to hurt her feelings, there was something in that inconsequence of hers which had the air of being deliberate. He somehow knew that had he asked her to do so, she would not have complied.

Indeed, what was happening that morning, after whatever had happened the night before, was, if Mr. Bottleby had been able to appreciate it in feminine psychology, a close parallel to the action of certain female species in the mating season, which he must have observed over and over again in natural history.

Finding the instincts of attraction roused in her by Mr. Bottleby's peculiar vitality of mind, while at the same time she had submitted herself to Captain Wolhop's vitality in other directions, the bargee's wife, insensibly, involuntarily, was bringing the two men into conflict to satisfy the momentary doubt in herself as to which of the two appealed to her most.

It was neither a callous nor a calculated action on her part. She did not know she was doing it. She had not intended to be distant to her husband the previous night. She had just felt like that and, under these conditions of psychology which he was as little able to understand as Mr. Bottleby, Captain Wolhop had had to suffer for it.

It had left him in the worst of tempers. Not for a moment did she wish she had not married him then, but all her instincts that morning drew her towards Mr. Bottleby. She knew it would aggravate her husband. But after the things he had said, she felt he deserved to be aggravated. It was in this manner that she contrived all unconsciously and with that charm which was her essential characteristic, to bring about the conflict which would settle once and for all this debatable issue in her mind.

Not from any sense of physical fear, but from an appreciation of the jeopardy in which it placed the treasure of this possession he was guarding, Mr. Bottleby wished her at the other ends of the earth. She would not go even to the other end of the boat. She had found an insect in the core of an apple she had been cutting up for an apple-pie for their dinner and, with the half of the fruit in her hand, had brought it up for the Curator to let her see it under his magnifying glass.

CHAPTER XII

A DEEPLY rooted sense of courtesy in Mr. Bottleby's nature, together with a lively interest in everything that associated his mind with his work, made it impossible for him to ignore Mrs. Wolhop's approach as he would have liked to do. Besides which, with the half of that apple in her hand, she was upon him before he had time to adopt any definite attitude in the matter.

"Oh, Mr. Bottleby," she said, and still with that pleasurable use of his name, "I've found something so queer in this apple. Suppose you'd call it a maggot. But I would like to see it under that glass of yours."

With a faint reluctance, assuming that Captain Wolhop's objection to red spiders would equally extend itself to maggots, Mr. Bottleby took the magnifying glass from his pocket and gave it to her.

She was well acquainted with the use of it now, yet a certain instinct in her, which she obeyed without question, induced her to fumble, holding the glass too far from her eye, then holding the apple too far from the glass.

"Put the glass right up to your eye," said Mr. Bottleby, concerned now only with her ineptitude. "Now—lift the apple slowly in the other hand till you get it into focus."

He took her hand and raised it about the necessary distance. Knowing nothing of those electric impulses of attraction except as he found them manifested in the lower forms of animal life, Mr. Bottleby was not aware of the ecstatic tremors that passed through the whole of Mrs. Wolhop's susceptible body as she felt the touch of his hand. He was also completely ignorant of the fact that, standing down below on the wharf, directing operations, Captain Wolhop had no eye for anyone but them.

"Lor! Mr. Bottleby," exclaimed the bargee's wife when at last she brought the maggot into focus, "doesn't that show you how careful you've got to be with what you eat! Anybody does cookin', it 'ud do them a world of good to see a thing like that."

"Quite a common little beast," said the Curator. "The *cheimatobia bromata*. He breeds on the bark generally of apple trees. Have you ever seen whole fruit orchards washed white in the spring?"

She nodded her head. To anyone other than Mr. Bottleby, the accompanying light in her eyes would have conveyed more than a mere invitation to continue. Seeing nothing else in it than that, he went on.

"That's lime and sulphur," said he. "They spray it on the trees to kill the mother of this little beggar before she lays her eggs."

Again he was endeavouring to be picturesque. Some newly-awakened instinct in him was tempering the wind of his eloquence to the intellectually shorn lamb. He had never considered a woman's powers of receptivity before. One and all, he had treated them, as at first he had treated Mrs. Wolhop, as a receptacle merely, into which he could pour the accumulation of his knowledge. Now for the second time in their conversations, he was adjusting his speech to her understanding. The change that had come over Mr. Bottleby was evident, not only in the circumstances, but in himself.

"Before the fruit-growers used that lime and sulphur wash," he continued, "it was known that the female *cheimatobia* lived on the trunk of the tree. Then when she wanted to lay her eggs, she crawled up into the branches so that they might hatch out near the fruit when it was just about getting ripe. I'm telling you this, because it's an interesting example of the way Nature asserts her determination to reproduce the species."

"Havin' children," said Mrs. Wolhop, who liked certain things expressed in certain ways so that she could properly understand them.

"Yes—having children," he agreed. "If you watch Nature carefully, you'll find she's really more concerned about that than she is in keeping them alive once they are born. When they discovered this habit of the *cheimatobia,* the fruit-growers devised a means of protecting their fruit. They put a band of some sticky substance like a fly-paper round the trunk of the tree just below where the branches begin to shoot out. Later on in the year, when the *cheimatobia* wanted to go up to lay her eggs, she was caught in a trap and died. What was Nature going to do then?"

He asked her. She shook her head. How could she possibly tell? She wasn't as clever as he was. She didn't know there was anything as interesting as this in having children. And he did explain it in such a wonderful way.

"What did Nature do?" she asked.

"The male *cheimatobia* has wings," replied Mr. Bottleby, "the female has none. It's very simple—isn't it? Just before she was going up into the branches to lay her eggs, the male invited her to sit on his back, then up they flew together and laughed at the trap that was laid for her." He almost gave an imitation of the laugh of the *cheimatobia* outwitting a Kentish fruit-grower.

Her lips were slightly parted in wonder as she listened. Never in the whole course of his wooing, or since, had Captain Wolhop been able to make her look at him like that. The bargee saw it from the wharf where the men were going backwards and forwards with the sacks of flour on their backs. He could bear it no longer. That look by all reckoning should be his. He demanded the right to possess it. With an ominous muttering in his beard, he pushed his way past one of the men and strode up the plank on to the barge.

Out of the corner of her eyes, Mrs. Wolhop saw that sudden approach, but in no measure did it quicken a tone in her voice.

"And what do they do now?" she asked. "Now that the farmers put that stuff all over the trees?"

"Man," said Mr. Bottleby, "is not always possessed of a single-minded persistence of purpose."

He was about to remind her how seldom she saw that devastating precaution employed in the fruit plantations round about Thurnham, when Captain Wolhop was on the deck beside them. He just heard Mr. Bottleby's opening sentence and that was enough for him.

Destroying her belief in man, was he! A clever way that of destroying her belief in her own husband. There did not seem in the world to Captain Wolhop at that moment a more Machiavellian character than Mr. Bottleby.

"Oh, isn't he?" the Captain broke in, and there was unmistakable meaning in his voice. "Not persistent of purpose, eh? Well, I know enough about what I want, to tell you straight, I'm not going to have clutter like that blasted coffin lumberin' up my decks. If the hold ain't good enough for that sort of tackle, you can chuck it overboard. We ain't a bloomin' 'earse. We're a tradin' barge carryin' respectable cargo."

Why he had chosen the coffin as the point for his attack, and not what was uppermost in his mind, namely Mr. Bottleby's monopoly of Mrs. Wolhop's interest, was a somewhat perverse direction of the Captain's psychology.

Like all men, where their passions and emotions are concerned, Captain Wolhop was a proud, even a sensitive man. There was nothing to his mind in which a man can appear more ridiculous than in an affair where his affections for a woman are concerned. Up to the age of forty-one he had successfully avoided the grand passion. No woman—he said it himself—had ever succeeded in making a fool of him till he had met Daisy Rumens. During the period of their courting he had liked the sensation. For the first few days of their honeymoon, when they had set out from Thurnham on the *Georgina Mary,* he had been too engrossed with the delights of marriage to consider how much of a fool he did look. In any case, the only person to observe him in that condition was Mr. Simes. And what did the mate matter? He had grown so used to him as to regard him as just a part of the tackle on board. Moreover, he was a married man himself. Captain Wolhop felt there to be a certain Masonic understanding between men thus similarly situated. But here was one, not only a stranger, not only unmarried and therefore holding an unfair advantage, but who was stirring in Captain Wolhop impulses of jealousy which inclined him to behaviour he knew to be ridiculous.

It was the more aggravating because, however ridiculous he knew it to be, he had no power to refrain from showing it. It mastered him. It was like a strong head wind beating against his course. All that was left him was a process of tacking, appearing to go anywhere but in the direction he wanted to pursue. It was Mr. Bottleby he wanted to chuck overboard. Mrs. Wolhop was fully aware of that when she heard the tone in his voice. The coffin meant nothing. She stood by with a simplicity of expression in her eyes, looking first at Mr. Bottleby and then at her husband, just waiting for the issue with an equanimity which, notwithstanding all his knowledge of the habits of animals in the mating season, would have astonished Mr. Bottleby had he understood its significance.

The unfortunate part of the whole affair was Captain Wolhop's line of attack. Had he accused Mr. Bottleby of tampering with Mrs. Wolhop's affections, there would have been no one more ready than the Curator himself to withdraw from the possibility of any recurrence of that charge. Little though he might have been able to understand them, he would have appreciated the Captain's sufferings. It would have been difficult to meet a kinder-hearted man than Mr. Bottleby in a day's walk. He was gentleness itself in his treatment of all those insects and birds and animals with which he had to deal in the course of his work. The pursuit of natural history had not made him insensitive to suffering. Captain Wolhop, in the throes of jealousy, would have been much the same to him as a rabbit caught in a snarer's trap. Without an instant's hesitation he would have set him free.

But the line of Captain Wolhop's attack being upon that which he held sacredly in charge, and, in his simplicity, seeing it in that light and no other, Mr. Bottleby was at once in arms and ready to defend his title to its safe-keeping.

"I have made arrangements with the barge-owners," he declared, "to carry this coffin to Thurnham, and if that is not done without injury, I can warn you that you'll be held responsible. I tell you plainly," he said, "it's as much as your job's worth to do any damage to that coffin, so it's no good talking this nonsense about throwing it in the river, because you wouldn't dare to do it."

Notwithstanding that a lock of hair had drooped into Mr. Bottleby's eyes and that his voice in its emotion was inclined to rise to an ineffective note, Mrs. Wolhop was interested to see that he stood up to her husband with no apparent fear of consequences. He had a tone of command. The loss of his job was a threat she knew her husband could not take lightly. It was not only the barge owners, but herself he would have to meet if he did. She looked with some respect from Mr. Bottleby to her husband, awaiting developments. If Captain Wolhop knuckled under to that threat and walked away, she knew she would have as much contempt for him as if he defied it and, throwing the coffin into the river, thereby lost his job.

The bargee was not aware of it, but he was in a precarious position with regard to his wife's favour. From her point of view there was apparently no way out of it to his advantage. He was not blind to the truth of what the Curator had said. It was as much as his job was worth wilfully to damage cargo, the freightage of which had been duly paid for. But there were certain animal instincts quickening in him then, of more service than any subtle escape of argument.

If any man had so threatened to injure his property, Captain Wolhop's sole reply would have been to take him by the scruff of the neck and fling him into the river. It was the only answer he could conceive occurring to any man of spirit. This talk about his losing his job, however true it might be, was just the hot air to be expected from a man who was afraid of physical consequences. With a broad knowledge of one certain class of human nature, he believed he recognised in Mr. Bottleby one of those it was general to call a funk. The contempt he felt for him only stimulated his anger. That his wife, for one moment, should give that look in her eyes to such a pitiable object was intolerable. If she did not realise the kind of man he was, then the sooner he opened her eyes to that fact the better. What was more, once opened, he intended them to have a very different look in them from that which he had seen a few moments ago.

Instead of turning on his heel, as Mrs. Wolhop was afraid he might have done, the bargee squared himself up to Mr. Bottleby. He thrust his chin into the Curator's face in that aggressive manner intended either to provoke retaliation or to silence an opponent once for all. Mr. Bottleby felt the discomfort of Captain Wolhop's breath on his face, which, with the bargee's habit of chewing strong tobacco, was, to say the least of it, unpleasant. But with no movement of a step did he retire. If Captain Wolhop had expected that, he was disappointed. If he had hoped that this aggressive action on his part was going to reveal Mr. Bottleby in his true colours, he found that a mere show of brute force was not sufficient. With a certain amount of indulgence, he gave the Curator one more chance of an ignominious retreat.

"It may be my duty," he said dangerously, "to see that there coffin is safely delivered on the wharf at Thurnham, but that don't hold me to what I'm expected to do with you."

This was a type of conversation which Mr. Bottleby had never indulged in in his life. He was slow at understanding it. What could the bargee do with him? He asked that of himself, and receiving no satisfactory answer, he inquired of Captain Wolhop.

"I am not aware that you could be expected to do anything with me," said he.

"There might be some things I could do," replied the Captain, "which could be said to be as between you and me. It 'ud do no damage to your bloomin' coffin and might put you in a fair way of orderin' another for yourself."

Even when this was accompanied by another thrust of Captain Wolhop's chin into his face, the insinuation was too subtle for Mr. Bottleby. He realised that the bargee's temper was not at its best, but, not understanding yet what had aroused it, it was impossible to believe he was on the point of violence. He assumed that when men came to blows, they had some comprehensible reason for such a waste of energy.

"Quite frankly," he said quietly, "I don't know what you're talking about."

It was his quietness that was the more exasperating. With an involuntary glance at his wife, Captain Wolhop perceived she was not without admiration for his coolness. She had seen Jos Wolhop have a fight once before, and his opponent, though he made a faint show of courage in the beginning, had never kept as cool as this. He had blustered. He had made vain boasts about blacking Jos's eyes which he had never fulfilled. This imperturbable self-possession on the part of Mr. Bottleby was quite impressive to her. She awaited the next development of his attitude with interest.

But to Captain Wolhop that look of expectant approval on his wife's face was the final exasperation. He seized Mr. Bottleby's arms with a grip in which the Curator realised a man of prodigious strength. He shook him, much as a terrier shakes a rat. Another lock of hair fell down over Mr. Bottleby's eyes. He felt his teeth chatter in his head.

"Don't know what I'm talking about, don't you?" he exclaimed. "Well—perhaps when you find your mouth full of river water and us a-liftin' you out with a boat hook by the seat of yer trousers, you'll begin to think what's being said to you in plain English."

"You mean you're going to throw me in the river?" said Mr. Bottleby. His surprise was so considerable as he realised these were Captain Wolhop's intentions that he had no time to consider the discomfort. As for the possibility of being drowned and needing, as Captain Wolhop had suggested, another coffin, it did not occur to him. He felt no fear. The whole proposal was so ridiculous. With that grip on his arm, he realised that no resistance on his part would prevent Captain Wolhop from doing anything he wanted to.

"Is that what you mean?" he repeated imperturbably.

"That's what I mean," repeated Captain Wolhop, "and in the crack of a nut that's where you'll be if you get messin' about here any longer."

Here Mr. Bottleby made a movement not only to free himself from the pain of the bargee's grip on his arm, but also to relieve himself of the discomfort of that odour of nicotine in his nostrils. It was the first sign of action he had conveyed and Captain Wolhop was sharp to construe it into the intention of a blow. With a quick step he followed him.

"Don't you try no tricks on with me!" he shouted. "If you think you're going to put one across me when I'm not expectin' it, you're bloomin' well mistaken."

"There was no such intention in my mind," said Mr. Bottleby. "I'm not oblivious to the fact that any physical strength I may have would be of no use to me against yours. Nothing I could do would prevent your being able to throw me in the river as many times as you wanted to. You would only prove yourself a stronger animal by doing so."

A stronger animal! Captain Wolhop turned to his wife and demanded her evidence of the fact that Mr. Bottleby had called him an animal. It did not matter what sort of an animal it was. The term in itself, comprising all the derogatory creatures that Captain Wolhop could think of, was quite sufficient for any man of spirit to resent with violence.

"Did you hear that?" he shouted.

Mrs. Wolhop admitted that she did.

"An animal, am I!" he exclaimed; and all that Mr. Bottleby could remember was the blow as of a crowbar that fell upon his chest and flung him backwards. The next instant, his mouth, as Captain Wolhop had said, was full of river water. He was floundering out of his depth and was just conscious of someone running along the deck, he supposed for the boat-hook, before the oily water of the Conway submerged him.

CHAPTER XIII

If not actually by the seat of his trousers, then by some garment equally ridiculous, Mr. Simes succeeded with the boat-hook in hauling Mr. Bottleby within reach of a helping hand. As a matter of fact he secured the point of the hook in that part of the Curator's shirt just between the last button of the waistcoat and the top button of his trousers.

A large portion of the garment was displaced in the effort to bring him alongside the barge. It pulled out like the skin of a deflated balloon.

No man could have looked more ludicrous than Mr. Bottleby being dragged along the surface of the water on his back, his legs kicking feebly, his hands snatching at the air, and this tam-o-shantered piece of shirting attached to the boat-hook constituting the sole means of his salvation.

Mr. Bottleby could not swim. That fact became apparent to everyone on board the moment they saw him in the water. With a sickening terror at the thought that he might have committed murder, Captain Wolhop had shouted for'ard to the mate to get out the boat-hook and catch Mr. Bottleby as the tide bore him by. Mrs. Wolhop, who had shown little more interest than if her husband had thrown a dog into the river, became quite perturbed.

"Can't you swim?" she cried out.

Mr. Bottleby's answer was swallowed with a mouthful of river water. But no answer was necessary. It was quite obvious he could not. The tide was carrying him down past the barge. He had sunk once before he reached the bows where Mr. Simes was ready with the boat-hook. Then, when Mrs. Wolhop saw him safe on the point of the hook, with that piece of shirting protruding from the centre of his garments, the cup of her contempt was full.

All that knowledge which, with such vitality, Mr. Bottleby had poured into her ears, had not in the end made a man of him in her estimation. For those first three days of their trip back from London, she had certainly thought there was something more alive in him than in the saturnine lugubriousness of her husband. She had understood very little of all he had said to her. But that had not mattered. Some quality of energy there had been, some generosity of spirit in his personality, which, while she knew nothing whatever of psychology or spirit values, had created a current of attraction. All that was dissipated now. It had become as flabby as that portion of Mr. Bottleby's shirt by which, with the end of the boat-hook, Mr. Simes was bringing him to safety. A man who could allow himself thus ignominiously, without one effort at self-defence, to be knocked head over heels into the river by another was no man at all. She went to an extent of unbelievable inhumanity when she said she did not care whether he had been drowned. This certainly was only when she knew he was quite safe. But it was plainly indicative of her state of mind.

Yet it must not be supposed from this that Mrs. Wolhop was anything but the genial, kindly-minded creature that her pleasant appearance suggested. So far as her mentality in its judgment of human nature was concerned, she had made a mistake. That was all. For the space of two or three days she had thought Mr. Bottleby was an exceptional man. When, without even the pretence of resistance, she had seen her husband knock him with one blow into the river, she was of the confident opinion he was no man at all. Physically, he might not perhaps have been as strong as her Jos, but had there been any spunk in him whatever he would have struck back, he would have shown some spirit of resentment.

Seeing him coming along the deck to the cabin with the water streaming out of the ends of his trousers and from the ends of his sleeves, with his hair plastered on his forehead and that portion of his shirt still sticking out below his waistcoat, she wondered how she could ever have listened to his talking for five minutes. Beside her stood Captain Wolhop, intensely silent. He was considering all he knew about the law regarding assault and battery. There was some speculation in his mind as to what extent he had involved himself in legal proceedings.

For this, he told himself, was the type of man who would take matters of this kind into court. This was a man who, unable to fight for himself, would get lawyers and such-like to fight for him. Captain Wolhop was by no means comfortable. He had thrown into the water a man who was quite unable to swim. He might be convicted of attempted murder. There was no knowing what might not be the end of it.

When, with a burning glance of admiration, Mrs. Wolhop looked up at him and said, "Lor, Jos, I'd feel safe goin' anywhere with you——" he glared at her and growled —"Shut up!" She did shut up, but it was more than she could understand why it was necessary for her to do so.

"I'm just going down into the cabin to change my things," said Mr. Bottleby as he passed them. "Fortunately I brought some other clothes."

There was no resentment in his voice. They detected a mild surprise, but could not construe its meaning. So quiet was he, that Captain Wolhop's apprehension only increased the more. Here was just the sort of man who would appeal to the law over a thing like this. He had heard solicitors in the police courts and knew well their tone of voice. Watching Mr. Bottleby descend the companion ladder, he turned to Mr. Simes and muttered, "Well, I've bloomin' well gone and done it."

For Captain Wolhop had a nameless terror of anything which he could not understand, and the law was of that nature to him. Leaving Mr. Simes to conduct the remainder of the landing operations, he sat on the coil of rope which Mr. Bottleby had occupied beside the coffin, and to all that his wife said in admiration of his behaviour he only said, "Shut up!" It was not encouraging. It did not open up vistas of conversation as Mr. Bottleby had done. But she was quite satisfied. Any doubt she had entertained as to the excellent qualities of Jos as a husband were entirely set at rest. She knew she had married the right man.

In Captain Wolhop's mind, however, there was no such ease as this. Hearing the caressing note in his wife's voice, he was beginning to wonder whether there had been any cause for jealousy at all. He knew as little about the psychology of women as Mr. Bottleby did. When with various insinuations—delicate from her standard of delicacy—Mrs. Wolhop implied that the state of her affections was not to be judged by the distance of her behaviour the night before, he knew his fears of Mr. Bottleby as a rival had been groundless.

"Then what was he sayin' to you about men," he asked, "when I come up, just before I knocked him in?"

"Sayin' to me? Somethin' about farmers, I think it was, washin' the fruit trees with that white stuff, you know, like what they do in the orchards round about at home."

It was becoming obvious to the bargee that he had made a fool of himself. Every moment he grew more apprehensive of the consequences. There was only one thing to do, only one course of action that came readily to his mind. If Mr. Bottleby tried putting across that talk of the law-proceedings or whatever they called it, he would threaten to throw him in again. Having once tested the water of the River Conway, that would soon stop him.

Forcing himself to a courage that was somewhat of despair, Captain Wolhop gave his orders for them to put away from the wharf. They were out in mid-stream and on their way towards Thurnham when Mr. Bottleby came out of the cabin in a dry suit of clothes.

With no air of timidity, he went straight down the barge to Captain Wolhop who was standing on the fore deck. From the door of the cabin, Mrs. Wolhop could hear all they said.

It was Mr. Bottleby who opened the conversation.

"I did not have time just now," said he, "to ask you your object in knocking me into the river. Your action was too precipitate. By the time I had realised what you were about to do, you had done it. However, now that I'm in a dry suit of clothes, I should be much obliged if you'd tell me."

This was just the kind of talk Captain Wolhop had heard from lawyers in the police courts. Listening to that sort of gag, and believing there was not so much harm in what he had done after all, many a man had found himself unceremoniously shoved into quod for various terms of imprisonment. The bargee straightened himself up. He did not actually thrust his chin into the Curator's face again, but he assumed an attitude which, seeing what had happened only a few moments ago, was quite menacing.

"If you think you're going to come that sort of gas over me," said he, "you'll find yourself in the river again and with no bloomin' boat-hook to catch hold of yer shirt for yer."

This was the sort of talk that was more comprehensible and virile to Mrs. Wolhop than a thousand illustrated discourses on the carbo-hydrates. Hearing her husband's reply, she felt a thrill run through her blood at the thought that she was his woman. A man like that could do what he liked with her. Why didn't he talk more often to her like that?

"I can't see the force of that as argument," replied Mr. Bottleby without retiring. "What is more, it doesn't answer my question. You might throw me in the water a hundred times. It's little more difficult to you than it would be to me if I threw in my hat. But I should still be interested to know why you had done it. Surely a man doesn't follow an extreme course of action like that without some comprehensible purpose in his mind. Unless, of course, he has lost control of his reason, in which case there are suitable places of confinement supported by the Government to meet his particular case."

That word, confinement, fell sharply on Captain Wolhop's ear.

"Are you threatening me with the law?" said he, "because you'll pay for it with another ducking if you are."

"I'm coming to the conclusion, Captain Wolhop," said Mr. Bottleby, "that you're a man of very limited intelligence. I allude to you as a stronger animal, and you immediately suppose that I am calling you a beast. I speak of confinement, and you directly assume that I mean imprisonment for assault. I find it difficult to arrive at a definite conception of your mentality. I doubt at moments whether you have any mentality at all. And yet, assuming that man is the most highly evolved creature, whose power of speech is supposed to have developed reason in him to a degree incomparable with the lower forms of life, I must suppose that somewhere hidden behind the extraordinary lucidity of your actions there is a purpose prompted by pure reason. I am only inquiring as to what it is. Knocking me into the river again will not enlighten me. If I talked to you in French, which, with a certain peculiarity of pronunciation, I could do, you probably wouldn't understand a word I said. If you asked me what I meant and I answered you again in French, where would be the sense of it? I hope you follow me. I trust my arguments are not too subtle for your powers of comprehension."

In a sullen voice, Captain Wolhop asked him what he was getting at.

"If you want to be a man and stand up square to me," he said, "stand up square and try and throw me in if that'll satisfy you. I don't want none of this lawyer's talk. Try and throw me in and you'll see what you gets for it."

What man could say fairer than that? Mrs. Wolhop's heart swelled with pride as she heard it. Now, if there were any grit in him, her Jos had given him an opportunity to show it. She would have some respect for him, notwithstanding that he were flung in the water again, if he stood up square, as Jos said, and showed what he was worth.

But he did nothing of the kind.

Taking a step closer to Captain Wolhop, when even the mate thought for a moment he was going to tackle the proposition, Mr. Bottleby said:

"I observe your principles are all in accord with those of modern warfare. You believe in inviting combat when and only when you are in numerical superiority. The proportion of your strength to mine is, shall we say, as ten to one. Having discovered that for yourself a few moments ago, you are prepared to invite resistance on my part. Before you had discovered it, you delivered your blow before it could reasonably be expected. All this our highest authorities on the art of making war would call essentially strategic. The only strange part about it is that it is not comparable with the courage exhibited in much lower forms of life. A small dog, for instance, in defence of its possession of a bone, will attack another dog considerably bigger than itself."

"Animals again!" muttered Captain Wolhop.

"Ah, I forgot," said Mr. Bottleby, "I forgot your sensitiveness on that subject. Very well, we will leave that with just the comment that your principles are praise-worthily modern and would be approved of by any strategist at the War Office or the Admiralty. I can only point out to you that mine, in refusing to oppose myself to a force ten times my superior, are equally sound. The one thing of which I am still ignorant—perversely, no doubt—is your reason for wanting to throw me in at all. Curiosity is a fault of mine, Captain Wolhop. I am unfortunately possessed of an insatiate desire to know the reason for everything. Can't you tell me what it was?"

"Do you mean you aren't going to take this affair into the courts?" asked the bargee.

"Certainly not," said the Curator. "What satisfaction should I get out of that? It would be merely the superior force exerting itself upon the weaker over again. With one blow of your fist you can throw me into the river. That makes you feel proud of your strength. But should I have any reason to feel proud of myself just because the law entitled me to summon two constables, a magistrate on the bench, and one or two clerks of the court, to thrust you into a cell and lock the door on you? It might be punishment, but I see no satisfaction in that. The only satisfaction I have is that at the moment, as you stand there listening to me, you look a considerable fool. You don't understand one-half of what I'm saying and yet, in your own language, by which you are supposed to have become a creature of reason above the lower animals, I am just talking ordinary commonsense."

It might have been less than the truth to say that Captain Wolhop did not understand one word of what he was saying. It was certainly no exaggeration to describe him as looking a considerable fool. He was standing on the fore deck in front of Mr. Bottleby with a pendulous droop of his lower lip and a fatuous look of bewilderment in his eyes as he listened to the volume of words that poured out of the Curator's lips. There was dimly being borne upon his consciousness an uncomfortable sense of his own unalterable inferiority. He was beginning to realise that Mr. Bottleby was not afraid of him; that, however often he might throw him in the river, there was something in this man with his pale face and muscularly fragile exterior which was undismayed by the offensiveness of brute force or the demoralising effect of cold water.

The Curator had told him he looked a considerable fool in the mate's hearing, and all spirit had gone out of him to deny it. Fortunately for him, Mrs. Wolhop from the top of the cabin steps did not catch the remark, but, fearing she might have done so, Captain Wolhop felt the only course left open to him was to explain his actions.

"If you want to know why I did it," he said sulkily, "it was because I couldn't put up no more with the way you was goin' on with my missis. All that talk about sugar and red spiders and muckin' about with that little bit o' glass, I wasn't goin' to stand no more of it and I tell you that straight. Anybody's got anythin' to say to my missis, barrin' good-day and such-like, I can say it for 'em. We've got our lines straight and square an' she's mine for keeps—what's more I won't 'ave no one else a-messin' about with her. An' whether that's the upper animals or the lower animals or whatever you like to call it, there it is. If yer can't understand that, now I've told yer, well, you're as much of a fool about words as what I am."

How much it had cost Captain Wolhop to say all this, Mr. Bottleby could never appreciate. The basis of a true knowledge of psychology is a certain power of self-analysis. It has been said the Curator had none. He did not realise this was an admission on the bargee's part that a woman had the power to make a fool of him.

He nevertheless welcomed Captain Wolhop's statement with as much gratitude as though he were fully aware of the sacrifice the bargee had made to his pride. In this confession he recognised the male species true to fundamental instincts. But the knowledge that a man, product of the latest civilisation, could so respond to the uncultured impulses of nature, astounded him.

He held out his hand to Captain Wolhop with the same kind of respect as he would have shown in taking hold of a rare specimen in the Museum.

"This is extraordinary," he said as they shook hands. "I didn't know that men had those feelings about women. Civilisation has done very little in seven thousand years when you come to think of it. That coffin over there"—he pointed to the after deck, when Mrs. Wolhop thought he must be pointing at her and tossed her head—"that coffin there contains a body possibly three thousand years old, and I can assure you that the spirit once inhabiting that body was probably far more advanced in mental control than you have proved yourself to be this morning. I don't say that in any derogatory sense. It's no fault of yours. The fault lies with this mechanical civilisation which we persuade ourselves to believe is so far in advance of any civilisation that has gone before. It is one of the abounding fallacies common to human nature, that we think everything associated with ourselves is permanent, and therefore far in advance of anything that has ever been before. It is, for instance, inconceivable to anyone in Western Europe to suppose that the name of Christ should ever lose its transcendent meaning to the human mind. Yet how transcendent do you imagine was the meaning of Osiris or Isis to the spirit which inhabited the body in that coffin only three thousand years ago? Just picture to yourself, I ask you," he held up a forefinger in front of Captain Wolhop's eyes, "just picture to yourself the thankless search that spirit must have to find a body and mind in which it can secure profitable reincarnation."

Captain Wolhop looked at the Curator's forefinger sticking in front of his eyes—then he turned to the mate:

"Go up aft there and take the wheel," said he. "The tide's shiftin' her. I don't know what the b—— hell he's talkin' about."

CHAPTER XIV

If there were rumours in Thurnham as to what had happened to Mr. Bottleby in Rochester, they were very vague. Captain Wolhop said nothing. Amongst her own circle of friends about the wharfside, through whom there were but slight means of communication with the upper world of the Overends or the Charringtons, Mrs. Wolhop may probably have boasted of conquest. However she may be persuaded to the contrary, a woman will not willingly give up her belief that a man is intrigued when he talks to her as vigorously as Mr. Bottleby had done, even though it be about the carbo-hydrates.

Captain Wolhop told her he had made "a fair bloomer" in knocking Mr. Bottleby into the river. He could not explain it. He was only dimly conscious that, when all was said and done, he had looked the bigger fool of the two. But this chastenment of spirit did not convince his wife. If she alluded to it no more with Captain Wolhop, she had a version of it to tell her women friends. Through one of the men in his office, Mr. Purch heard a garbled story which, by way of Mrs. Purch, spread even as far as the refined environment of "Ismailia." No one really believed it, though many, such as Mrs. Spiers and Mrs. Charrington, may have tried.

It was all too unlikely. Their Mr. Bottleby! Mrs. Spiers had only to remember how he had greeted her smile and, with reluctance, she was compelled to give up all credence of the story.

Mrs. Overend had certainly wanted her husband to question the Curator about it.

"You're so clever at that sort of thing," she said. "You could put it in that sort of way that he'd never realise you were trying to find out anything. Look at the way you got it out of the parlour-maid that she'd stolen that sixpence off my dressing-table."

She often flattered him into the belief that he could cross-examine as well as any barrister who had taken silk, but she could not dissuade him from the essential pawkiness of a country solicitor. He said nothing to Mr. Bottleby. The rumour fluttered over Thurnham and then flew away.

Other matters concerning the Curator more deeply occupied the mind of the Council. Apart from proposing that they should secure the services of an Egyptologist from the British Museum to make a translation of the hieroglyphics on the coffin he had brought safely back, Mr. Bottleby advocated that the mummy should be left as it was in its wrappings.

To the first suggestion they readily agreed. It was no good having a mummy in the Museum and knowing nothing about it. On the same principle they argued it was no good having a mummy in the Museum and not seeing all there was to be seen.

They did not admit it even to themselves, but they were morbidly curious. They felt they were not getting the full benefit of the donation if they did not see the mummy stripped of its bandages. Against all Mr. Bottleby's assurances that they would discover nothing there but a body in the partial decay of death, that all there was of interest would be found in the hieroglyphic writing on the lid of the coffin, they persisted in their virtue as a Council in demanding that the body should be exposed.

To clinch the affair, Mr. Overend had suggested that probably it was Mr. Bottleby's theosophical views relating to transmigration which were influencing his opinions on the matter.

"Possibly," said he in that tone of voice in which occasionally he conducted a case in the Town Hall before the local magistrates, "possibly he feels that this removal of the bandages would be in the nature of a—disturbance."

Completely oblivious of any intended satire, Mr. Bottleby had replied that he was a theosophist mainly because he could not confess to being a Roman Catholic, a Protestant or an avowed atheist.

"If I found a religious belief interfering with my curiosity about life," said he, "I should give it up. Religion is merely a substitute for our knowledge of those things we cannot hope to know about. It grows, it is not made. It is compounded of all the fables, superstitions, folklore, legends and magical practices that have welded men together since first they came out of darkness into the light of reason. *Religare*—to bind. Religion binds people together and in some sense keeps them from stumbling when they cannot see their way in the dark. I am not in the dark about this. I know that all you will discover when you unwrap those bandages is death. If you gentlemen are curious about that, by all means let us have the bandages off. If, as a theosophist, I happen to believe there is a spirit associated with every body in death, then, as a man I certainly know that, however I disturb that body, I cannot alter its devachan."

"Its—what?" said Mr. Overend.

"Devachan—that is a term in common use in theosophy," replied Mr. Bottleby. "It means that period of time, long or short according to the plane to which the personality has ascended, during which the spirit remains at rest until it is ready for its next incarnation."

"Extraordinary," said Mr. Mercer. "I didn't know there were people who believed such things."

Apparently Mr. Bottleby did not hear this remark. He continued as though there had been no interruption.

"It is not the sight of death I resent," he said, "so much as the sight of those who will gloat over it as they do over a horror in the street. We have our newspapers. I should have thought they were destructive education enough to those whose religion had not taught them to believe that death is a very beautiful thing."

"A what!" said Mr. Purch, who, in his own home, always pulled down the blinds during a thunderstorm.

"I said, a very beautiful thing," repeated Mr. Bottleby.

"I should like to know how you make that out," retorted the solicitor.

"Well, it's not exactly to be made out," replied Mr. Bottleby. "It is not an argument or an exercise in logic. It mainly depends on how you see yourself. Some people think they look their best when alive, and it would be difficult to persuade them that the only dignity they will ever achieve is when dead."

His glance, in a supreme unconsciousness, included them all as he looked round the table, and, with a supreme unconsciousness of any act of self-criticism, they all said they could not see of what interest a mummy could be unless the wrappings were taken off and the body exposed to view.

The next day Mr. Bottleby wrote to Mr. Roebuck, an Egyptologist associated with research work in the British Museum. He could only come on the following Monday. That day was fixed for the unwrapping to take place in the Council Chamber. Mr. Overend postponed an important engagement with a client. Mr. Purch gave up his fortnightly visit to London, which he had never missed for twenty-eight years. Mr. Charrington marked the date with a ring of blue pencil on his calendar at home. In leaving his shop to the mercy of his assistants for the day, Mr. Mercer might have put up his shutters for all the business he was likely to do.

The wives of all these gentlemen stayed at home that evening, refusing all invitations arising out of the social amenities of Thurnham.

CHAPTER XV

Mr. Roebuck came down by the early morning train. Mr. Bottleby met him at the station. The coffin was ready on the table and all the members of the Council were waiting in the Council Chamber for half an hour before these two gentlemen arrived.

On their walk from the station, Mr. Roebuck had happened to allude to the origin of the Aryan language as developing that type of thought of which Western civilisation was an inevitable result.

"Thought!" he said, as they were passing the Thurnham branch of the Westminster Bank, "thought is the habitual channelling of words upon the brain. The cries of fear or of joy—though they may only have been shapeless sounds—were the first words man uttered. They arose out of emotion which is sensation but not thought. The repetition of these made channels in the brain down which thought followed as soon as these sounds acquired definite and formulated shape."

This was more than mere encouragement to Mr. Bottleby. He stopped Mr. Roebuck outside Willis's ham and beef shop in West Street, and said:

"I can't agree with that at all. Nature had found its voice long before it came to be human. Even thought is not the special prerogative of man. The first quality of mind that developed man's brain beyond that of his fellow animals was not just thought alone, but the coordination of it. The first superior act of the human mind was to relate one thought with another. Man has made his own civilisations, they have not been made for him."

They walked together, though out of step, for Mr. Roebuck was a short, fat man, till they came to the Museum. There, sitting on two Cromwellian chairs in the hall, they continued their argument till Ramp, the hall porter, came down to inform them that the Council had been waiting upstairs for more than half an hour. They were still talking as they entered the room.

"Would you gentlemen prefer that I exposed the body of the mummy first, or gave my attention to the hieroglyphic writing?" asked Mr. Roebuck.

"Well, I've given up my fortnightly visit to London," said Mr. Purch. "First time in twenty-eight years——"

"I had an important meeting with a client, myself," said Mr. Overend.

Mr. Charrington murmured something to the effect that he had looked forward to this day more than he had done to any day for a long time. Mr. Mercer shuffled his feet.

"You'll excuse me," said Mr. Roebuck, "if I point out that these remarks do not constitute an answer to my question."

"The body, of course," said Mr. Purch.

"That was what I intended to convey," said Mr. Overend.

Mr. Charrington and Mr. Mercer said nothing, but they wore the suppressed expression of morbid curiosity so frequently to be seen on the faces of jurymen at a coroner's inquest.

The removal of the bandages all transpired as Mr. Bottleby had predicted.

Outside the latticed and mullioned windows of what was once one of the bed-chambers in Dillingham Manor, the plane trees were rustling their leaves to a summer breeze in the public gardens. A thrush was singing on the top branch of a may-tree. Now and again the sound of children playing came in bright notes of laughter into the room. The sense of burgeoning life was everywhere, while on that table in the Council Chamber, surrounded by men in clothes all made —with the exception of those of Mr. Purch—by Beeston the local tailor, Mr. Roebuck gently removed one bandage after another until there, in the coffin beneath them, lay the shrivelled brown body and grotesquely human face of that creature whose skin the last hands had touched when it was soft and white, more than two thousand years before.

Peering at the body, Mr. Charrington, who read *Lloyd's Weekly News* on Sundays, said: "Must have been murdered. Look at that gash in the head."

"That," said Mr. Roebuck, "is the incision made by the embalmers to extract the brain. In cases where the relatives went to great expense in the preservation of their dead, this incision was dispensed with; the brain was drawn out through the nostrils. This, together with the intestines, was placed in what were known as the canopic jars that stood beside the bier in the tomb. It is obvious from that incision in the head that this was not a royal personage."

"Looks like a woman," said Mr. Overend, who, after the first shock of seeing the sightless eyes, the smile upon lips from which the peace of death had departed, the wisps of discoloured hair still clinging to the skull, had set a stoical expression upon his face. He felt he was man enough to let it be seen that death had no horrors for him.

Mr. Purch would have liked to assume that same stoicism, but found it impossible. His lower lip involuntarily dropped with the disgust he felt for death. Some day he knew he would look like that himself. He, Mr. Purch!—the astute solicitor, who with the mere power of his voice and personality could make the ordinary local magistrate refer in confusion to the clerk of the court. It was ghastly to think of. He felt a surge of resentment in himself as the thought came to him. It was like suddenly finding the hands of two policemen laid firmly on his shoulder. Every moment, as the hands of the clock ticked round, life was thus marching him away. In some peculiar process of thought, it came as a relief to him to hear Mr. Overend say it was like a woman.

His lip was still slightly dropping as he hastened to confirm this.

"Very like my sister Agatha," said he.

He turned away and looked out of the window. The swallows were flying high. A bee bumped against the window-pane. Was it possible to believe that in another twenty years the swallows would still be flying high, the bees still bumping against that window-pane, while he, Mr. Purch, would be lying in earth, with the skin rotting from his cheeks? At least there would be no incision in his head.

Suddenly he shifted his position. There was a hawk chasing the swallows. With notes of terror they were swooping and diving out of its reach. Life was an odd and a terrible business. He wished he had gone to London. He looked at his watch. It was a quarter to one. There was a train at one-thirty. He reached for his hat.

"Well, gentlemen," said he, "it's been very interesting. I must get back to my work."

And he went.

Almost simultaneously Mr. Overend remembered there was still time to make an appointment with his important client if he departed at once. He seized his hat.

"There's nothing else, is there," said he, "except the —er—the translation of the hieroglyphics?"

"That is all," said Mr. Bottleby.

Mr. Overend caught up Mr. Purch on the stairs.

They heard the door of the Council Chamber close and the voices of Mr. Mercer and Mr. Charrington following them before they reached the hall.

Mr. Bottleby and Mr. Roebuck remained looking at each other across the shrivelled body of the mummy.

"Why did they come?" asked Mr. Roebuck.

Mr. Bottleby did not hear the question. He was looking at the remaining hairs of the eyebrow on the mummy's forehead.

CHAPTER XVI

THESE two gentlemen did not eat any lunch. Mrs. Twiss sent up word three times by Ramp that a meal was ready in the Curator's wing.

On the first occasion, Mr. Bottleby said, "Yes," but whether it referred to the translation he was writing out as Mr. Roebuck deciphered it, or whether it referred to the meal, Ramp could not say.

On the second occasion, Mr. Roebuck said: "Shut the door when you go out."

On the third occasion, Ramp received no answer at all. They were both peering over a figure, partly obliterated, on the outside of the coffin lid. First Mr. Roebuck looked through the magnifying glass, then Mr. Bottleby. Catching sight of the head of the mummy for the first time as he came nearer to the table, Ramp turned quickly and went away.

"They've got a dead body up there," he told Mrs. Twiss, "and they're goin' on and goin' on. I expect it takes their appetite away, that's what it's done. They don't seem to want nothin' to eat."

Mrs. Twiss looked at the piece of steak that was swiftly passing the stage of human consumption, at the strips of onion that had acquired the consistency of leather bootlaces. "I'll never," she said emphatically, "never again!"

But of what it was that Mrs. Twiss would not, and why so irrevocably as that, Ramp had no idea. Knowing somewhat of women, it sounded to him like a thing she was most likely to do the very next time.

By six o'clock that evening, having definitely refused tea and eaten nothing all day, Mr. Roebuck had completed the translation of the description of the dead and the funerary texts that were painted on the coffin Mr. Lawrence had presented to the Thurnham Museum:

"Ta-mai—the truth-speaking daughter of Tchet-ra—doorkeeper of the Temple of Osiris at Thebes. XXVIth Dynasty, circa B.C. 600."

This was what Mr. Bottleby had written down at the head of the sheet of paper on which followed the various scenes and texts with which the body had been committed to its long rest.

Below the rough portrait of the face of Ta-mai, a round-cheeked, almond-eyed maiden, carved out of the head of the coffin-lid, was painted a figure of the goddess Nŭt, the sky goddess, wife of Geb, who provided the deceased with water in the other world. At each side of this figure were two lines of hieroglyphics, representing an appeal from Ta-mai to the sky goddess, "Oh mother, Nŭt, I am in thy presence. I have done nought with a false heart. Spread out thy wings that I may rest among the stars that never set. Let my body be stablished that it doth not decay. Let it germinate. Let it wake up in peace. Let it bathe in the light of the Disk, let it drink water from the depths of the river. Let my soul come forth and perform its journey."

Below the inscription, scenes of the funeral were depicted, and at about the centre of the coffin, above where the hands of the mummy were folded, there was a picture of the body of Ta-mai lying upon a bier, whilst above her floated her spirit in the form of "Ba," the hawk-headed man.

It had taken Mr. Roebuck five hours to complete these decipherings. It was now six o'clock. The swallows were still tirelessly flying high over the garden outside. The swifts were chasing each other round the gables and the Tudor chimneys of the house. The evening was still early.

Mr. Bottleby sat back in his chair, re-reading what he had written at the Egyptologist's laboured dictation.

"Why was 'Ba,' the spirit, represented in the form of a hawk-headed man?" he asked.

"The hawk," said Mr. Roebuck, "and the ibis were both sacred birds to the Egyptians. They occur in numberless hieroglyphic formulæ. Horus, Her-sa-Aset, Her-aakhuti, are gods all represented by the hawk. 'Ba,' I must warn you, is the soul possessed by 'Khat,' the corruptible body. It is not the same as what is called 'the spirit' in the Christian Church. 'Sahu' is the spirit being, possessing a spirit soul called 'Aakhu.' The 'Ba,' or animal soul, returns from time to time to visit the animal body preserved in the tomb. 'Aakhu' departs from the body after death and presumably finds another existence. It's all very complicated, even to the Egyptologist. We get the mass of their beliefs and have to sift them out. I've no doubt in another two thousand years Christianity will be just as complicated to the expert as the Egyptian religion is now to us. Think of the intricate process of disentangling Roman Catholicism from Protestantism, Congregationalism from Unitarianism, and from amongst all the various sects and creeds eliminating a clear conception of the worship of Christ. It is open to considerable doubt whether Christ will stand out as plainly then as Osiris does now to us."

Mr. Bottleby listened like a child at its lessons. Communicative as Mr. Roebuck was inclined to be, he could not satisfy the Curator's appetite for knowledge upon a new subject. He held the paper in his hand, and directly Mr. Roebuck had stopped speaking he continued:

"Let it bathe in the light of the Disk," he read, "let it drink water from the depths of the river. Let my soul come forth and perform its journey."

"What exactly," he asked, "was meant by the 'Disk'? I presume the sun? Wasn't Khaperá the sun-god?"

"Khaperá," replied Mr. Roebuck, "was the form of the sun about to rise. He typified matter on the point of passing from inertia into active life. He also represented the dead body about to find expression in a new existence. Tenu, or Atura, at one time head of the nine great gods of Heliopolis, was the form of the sun when about to set. He was the Closer of the day. But in later dynasties Ra, the Heliopolitan sun-god, usurped the attributes and worship both of Tenu and Khaperá. He became the king of the gods. His spirit dwelt in the Benben Stone. Human sacrifices were made to him. He was the personification of the midday sun, the sun in full strength. He was the Disk. The great quality of the Egyptian religion was its capacity for growth. It took its derivation from Nature; and as their knowledge of Nature became better informed, so the Egyptian changed his religion. His intelligence was not shackled in the chains of dogma. That is the secret of the prolonged power and vitality of the Egyptian civilisation."

"It seems a peculiar thing," said Mr .Bottleby, "that the essential vitality of growth in a man should be governed by his beliefs about the things he does not know. I should have preferred it to be otherwise."

"That is an interesting statement," said Mr. Roebuck.

They sat for an appreciable length of time in silence, considering how the pursuit of exact science affected the essential vitality of their growth as men. With Mr. Bottleby these considerations lasted but a moment. So little consciousness had he of himself, that his mind had almost immediately wandered into vague theosophical speculations about the spirit of Ta-mai. Mr. Roebuck, being a specialist in Egyptology—suppressed therefore, as Mr. Bottleby would have described him, in mental growth—allowed his mind to wander, mainly through fatigue, to the nearest object of interest in his life. When he left home that morning, his dog, Lucy, was beginning to have her first litter of puppies. She had already had two when he left. He sat there in the Council Chamber, with the magnifying glass still in his hand, wondering how many more there would be when he returned.

In this silence they were found by Mrs. Twiss, whose perturbation was now beyond control. After consultation with Ramp, she opened the door of the Council Chamber and looked in.

"If you gentlemen don't want to starve," said she, "I've hotted up the steak and I've put on a fresh lot of potatoes. The onions have gone to the dogs."

Still in silence, they rose and followed her into the Curator's wing.

The body of Ta-mai lay in its coffin, the sightless eyes turned to the ceiling, the withered hands folded, Atura, the sun-god, low in the heavens now, just glinting on one of the finger nails, still polished with its tinting of henna.

The window was open. Once again that day there was a cry of terror amongst the swallows as they wheeled in the sky.

Suddenly there was a rush of wings. A swallow sped in through the open window. With a lightning sweep another bird followed it. One circling of the room and the swallow was gone, out through the open window once again. Dazed in the sudden restraint of light, the other bird lost all sense of how it had entered. It beat about the room, against the other window-panes. Again and again it fell to the floor. It rose to the ceiling and was beaten back in the confinements of its cage. Exhausted at last with its efforts at escape, it settled.

When Mr. Bottleby returned to the Council Chamber alone, he found a hawk perched upon the coffin of Ta-mai.

CHAPTER XVII

A GLASS case, hermetically sealed, was specially made for the mummied body of Ta-mai. She lay in her coffin with the lid removed, the bandages as Mr. Roebuck had unwound them, exposing her head, her feet and hands, and that part of the body where the embalmers had made their incision to remove the viscera. The Council felt that, having obtained a mummy for the Museum, it was not only due to the public, but owing to themselves, that as much as possible should be seen of it.

All that Mr. Bottleby succeeded in the way of securing privacy for the body was a piece of brown American oil-cloth which was laid on the top of the glass. Visitors could remove it themselves if they wanted to see. He contended that light might in time affect the condition of the mummy. They allowed him his piece of oil-cloth.

On a card, adhesively attached to the glass, was printed—

TA-MAI—THE TRUTH-SPEAKING DAUGHTER OF TCHET-RA—
DOOR-KEEPER OF THE TEMPLE OF OSIRIS AT THEBES.
XXVITH DYNASTY—(CIRCA B.C. 600).

In addition to this, Mr. Bottleby had written a brief description of the embalmer's art, intended to direct and uplift the interest of those who came to inspect the exhibit.

For the first month or so there was a constant stream of people jostling and pushing each other round the glass case. Sometimes when he passed by they had the appearance to Mr. Bottleby of flies about a carcass.

Pointing them out on one occasion to Ramp, he said:

"The evolution of the mind is just reaching the carnivorous stage. We're progressing, Ramp—we're progressing. The minds of many are still herbiferous, but there are signs of progress. In twenty thousand years, after long periods of ruined mental digestion, we shall be consuming wholesome food."

"Yes, sir," said Ramp, and later asked Mrs. Twiss what she had been giving the guv'nor for his dinner.

With pride, the members of the Council advertised their acquisition to the Museum. Mrs. Charrington gave a tea-party at which Mr. Charrington, surrounded by ladies—a position to which his association with the drapery business had accustomed him—gave vivid particulars of Mr. Roebuck's unrolling of the bandages. When he spoke of the incision in the head and informed them of the occasional custom of extracting the brains by the nostrils, they shuddered delicately but not unpleasantly.

Mr. Overend spoke of it frequently, but with gentlemanly restraint. Ordering some copies on sale or return of Rider Haggard's "Cleopatra," Mr. Mercer made it serve his trade. Mr. Purch mentioned it on many occasions from the body of the court.

"I do not stand up here for my own good!" he said in one case he was defending. "I am a public servant. When I cast my vote for the acceptance of that mummy we have now in the Museum, I was considering the interests of the public as much as I do now when I protest the defendant is innocent of the charge laid against him."

The magistrate refused to convict.

For more than a month the usual peace of the rooms and galleries of Thurnham Museum was destroyed for Mr. Bottleby by the sudden influx of visitors. After a while, things became more normal. The Curator began to feel that the Museum was once again his own. He was able to set to work on the little maps he was making to be displayed with every specimen of British Birds, showing that part of the world to which they migrated during the different seasons. He was able to concentrate his mind once more on the compiling of the new catalogue.

This was a work, not merely a record of the exhibits in the Museum. With each department he was writing a treatise on every subject to supply to the student a comprehensible view of the collection. Neither Mr. Nougass nor Mr. Lorden, each a specialist in his way, had been capable of this. The Council recognised that when complete this would be a work of considerable importance. They felt it would bring great credit, not only to the town but to themselves, when their names were painted in letters of gold on those tablets up the stairs.

When, therefore, Mr. Bottleby came to them with the information that he could not continue his labours without some clerical assistance, they listened to him with interest.

"I have a girl clerk," said Mr. Overend; "she does typing for me—she does it very badly—but I could spare her two or three afternoons a week. I think the funds of the Museum could run to that."

Mr. Bottleby pointed out that an inferior typist three afternoons a week would only hinder him in his work. "If I have anyone," said he, "I want a young man of intelligence who can appreciate the work I'm doing and to whom I can give a certain amount of responsibility. A woman is no good."

Mr. Purch entirely agreed with him. He had an unshakable contempt for women except in their capacity as drudges or as human beings convenient to talk to during a thunderstorm. It was true he liked talking to a handsome woman at any time, but only in the way that he wore his clothes, because she showed him to advantage.

Mr. Mercer, on the other hand, Mr. Charrington also, both gentlemen whose respect for their wives was increased not a little by fear, were all in favour of a female assistant. They said things which, if not exactly to be reported, could be repeated when they went home. Mr. Overend was, without sentiment, on the side of economy.

"A young man with any intelligence," said he, "would insist upon four if not five pounds a week. There are many girls quite intelligent, so far as girls go, who would take a post like this for almost anything you like to give them. This girl of mine gets a pound a week. She lives at home, so that's quite good pay for her. If Mr. Bottleby really requires an assistant—and I suppose he does—I don't think the Council ought to pass an allowance of a penny more than two pounds a week. That will be a fortune to a lot of girls."

Mr. Bottleby hazarded the suggestion that he would pay the extra himself in order to get a young man. He had a suspicion that this would offend their dignity, and it did.

"I think the Council," said Mr. Overend smoothly, sensing the temper of his fellow members—"I think the Council must be the judge in this matter. Dr. James left ample means for the support of the Museum, and we cannot have it understood that we are accepting help in meeting our liabilities to him."

There was no further debate on the subject after this. Mr. Mercer was deputed to insert advertisements in such papers as would be likely to reach the class of young person they required.

Mr. Overend was quite correct in his prognostications as to the supply for such a post. Mr. Bottleby was inundated with letters. He sat in his office reading them, and in despair throwing them one after another into the waste-paper basket. Some were incredible. He was more than ever convinced of the ineptitude of women for any other than the domestic life; and of that, having lost his own mother when he was ten, he had no practical experience. He did not regard Mrs. Twiss as a woman at all. She was a machine that cooked his meals for him with mechanical regularity. In the same automatic way she appeared from nowhere to brush his clothes when he was going out, to give him a clean handkerchief, and at night to bring his slippers from some hidden place where she kept them.

So little did he recognise her as a woman that on one occasion, being attacked by lumbago in his bath and unable to lift himself out of the water, he had called to Mrs. Twiss to help him. So matter-of-fact had she been in her assistance, with such absence of concern had she entered the room and with so much regard for warmth rather than decency had she wrapped a towel round him and conducted him back to his bed, that it was not until he had recovered that he realised the situation as it would have appeared to an onlooker. For a few days after that he was a little shy when he encountered Mrs. Twiss, but so obviously had she forgotten it herself that it soon passed entirely out of his mind.

Out of the hundred or so applications he received, they were all so obviously young women looking for something to do to give them freedom from their homes, that with two exceptions they all found their way into the waste-paper basket. The two he kept were non-committal. The writers might have been anything from young girls to staid and elderly women. They simply applied for the post, stating that they thought they would suit. The first was plain and to the point, giving no qualifications. The second was no more discursive, but she had a B.A. degree and enclosed a letter from a professor of history from the college where she had graduated, informing whoever might read it that "Miss Hazlitt while at college had given evidence of originality of mind."

These two letters Mr. Bottleby brought before the Council at their next meeting.

"I am afraid," he said, "that even these—the only two letters worth answering—will prove to be wholly incompetent." The Council took no notice of that and made appointments for the applicants to be interviewed.

They arrived on the same train, Miss Hazlitt from London, Miss Tripson from Beckenham farther down the line. Coming out of the station first, Miss Tripson inquired her way to the Museum, and became aware, as she followed the directions given her, that Miss Hazlitt was not far behind. After the third time that Miss Tripson had looked round over her shoulder, instinct told them both they were antagonists in the same encounter.

Being past the interesting age of women and having but little resiliency in her stride, Miss Tripson was only a few yards in front of Miss Hazlitt when they entered the hall. In obedience to instructions, Ramp showed them into a little waiting-room, closing the door and leaving them there until such moment as the Council should be ready to interview them.

Miss Hazlitt was not extravagantly dressed, but her skirt was fashionably short. In the first moments of silence when they were left alone together, Miss Tripson drew down her long skirt about her ankles to point out to Miss Hazlitt that she did not approve of the modern fashion. Miss Hazlitt saw but did not look. Behind her big horn-rimmed spectacles, she might have been looking anywhere but at Miss Tripson. Miss Tripson coughed the cough preliminary to speech. Miss Hazlitt walked across the room to look at an old engraving of Thurnham Bridge before it was destroyed in 1879.

Miss Tripson ejected a breath through her nostrils and said:

"I suppose you've come about this job."

Miss Hazlitt would have given her short skirt, bought for the occasion, her horn-rimmed spectacles and the funny little poke bonnet she wore to be able to say "No." But she had to say, "Yes."

"Funny sort of idea their calling it an assistant," said Miss Tripson. "I don't think myself it'll be much good."

"It was the—assistant—made me apply," said Miss Hazlitt.

"But you've trained for secretary—haven't you? I mean you look like it."

With an interest annoyingly maintained in the engraving, Miss Hazlitt said she was already engaged upon those duties.

"And you come looking for another job?"

"Yes."

"Is that your idea of playing the game?"

"I hate games," said Miss Hazlitt.

"Well—you know what I mean."

"No—not quite."

Miss Tripson had a bag. It could not be called a vanity bag. It was a receptacle for a well-used handkerchief, a bunch of keys, and the receipts from shops which she had received over a long period of time. She opened the bag. She spread out the handkerchief from the ball it had become and, with much meaning, she blew her nose.

"Hope they don't want quickness of intellect for this job," she said.

Miss Hazlitt was very young. She was only twenty-three. She was at the age that when things appeared worth saying, it seemed such a pity not to say them.

"I suppose that's why you applied for it," said she.

Miss Tripson screwed her handkerchief into a ball again and thrust it into her bag.

"Some people," she remarked, "are too clever. I shouldn't wonder if you'd taken your degree."

Miss Hazlitt could not have said why it gave her such satisfaction, but with an inward sense of pleasure she replied: "Don't know that that would do me much good, would it?"

"Wouldn't it!" said Miss Tripson. "If you'd got one you'd soon be flinging it about."

"Not to hurt anybody, I hope," said Miss Hazlitt, and then Ramp opened the door.

In these human encounters the question of who takes precedence for the impending interview has an unwarranted significance to the applicants. Miss Hazlitt's heart sank when she did not hear her name. As though she were spreading canvas to a following wind, Miss Tripson arranged her skirts and sailed out of the room.

CHAPTER XVIII

MISS TRIPSON was one of those women who physically wear a certain kind of powerful corset and spiritually move through life with an elastic-sided belief in the necessity of their existence. She inspired fear in men. By reason of this, she had secured secretarial posts and held them much longer than most other women would have done in the circumstances. Men had been afraid to refuse her engagement. Her qualifications were so essentially secretarial. There was nothing which a secretary would be required to do which Miss Tripson could not do. She made her questioner appear foolish when he inquired about her shorthand speed; she made him appear impertinent when he asked why she had left her last engagement.

She had the capacity of making a man think to himself: "Well—I want a secretary. I don't want a dressmaker's model. There'll be no fooling about with this woman. She knows her job." Thinking that, they engaged her. Fearing after a few weeks to tell her that she dried the very soul in them or that the mere sight of her with the letters in the morning was like a dose of medicine that had to be swallowed, she kept her post until human endurance was exhausted. Such a woman obtains excellent references.

Miss Tripson appeared before the Council of the Thurnham Museum, confident of being the very person they wanted. Had it not been for Mr. Bottleby, that confidence would not have been misplaced. Mr. Bottleby, the last man in the world one would have expected to be influenced by a woman's appearance, knew the moment he saw Miss Tripson that she would be of no assistance to him.

Answering all the questions that had been put to her with eminent satisfaction, Miss Tripson had returned to the waiting-room not wishing to appear uncharitable, indeed feeling how little the quality of mercy needed to be strained.

"I expect they'll see you, my dear," she said affably, though by no means convinced about it. "It 'ud be silly getting you to come all this way without an interview. But I expect they've made up their minds by this. I can always tell. I'm glad it isn't as if you were looking for something to do."

For a moment all the hope and courage with which she had come down to Thurnham that morning turned, in Miss Hazlitt's heart, to water. It was that word—assistant—in the advertisement that had crept insidiously into her imagination. She was secretary to a shipping firm in the city. All the hopes and ambitions with which she had left college were slowly being crushed beneath the material weight of commerce. She had nourished dreams of large, silent libraries to work in. Her offices were in Creechurch

Lane, where the carts clattered all day long over the cobbles. She had pictured herself reverently disturbing the dust of knowledge settled about some benign but elderly librarian. Her employer was a ship-broker who believed that Sunderland was the centre of the world's hustle. She had seen herself up on the top of a library ladder, reaching out to touch the wisdom of the world. She found herself typing inventories of the equipment of ships that had not even the romance of sailing but, just a mere name on paper, passed from one fool through the broker's hands to the next fool who would pay the biggest price.

Then this advertisement—"Wanted—an assistant to the Curator of Thurnham Museum." Assistant! She had cut it out when the chief clerk was not looking. Assistant! She had taken it out of her purse and read it at least six times on her way home in the bus.

She had read meanings into it when to assist meant to lend a hand in fetching and carrying. She assisted Mr. Crupper when he told her he wanted the big ledger and she struggled with a huge leather-bound volume into his private office. It would be assistance to type from the moment she came to the time she went. It would be assistance to keep books of double entry. But none of these were the meanings she chose. An assistant, as she understood the word, was one who, out of the creative self, gave energy to the work that was to be done. A secretary was merely a machine, like a duplicator or a dictaphone. An assistant? It really was assistant and not secretary. She took out the newspaper cutting for the seventh time and read it there again. It was—assistant.

"I wish to apply for the post of assistant," she had written to the Curator. Should she say how qualified she felt she was to assist any man in work like that, where there was no buying or selling to be done? A certain wisdom, which for all its drawbacks, she had learnt in Creechurch Lane, warned her to be brief. She asked for an appointment, signed her name, enclosed a copy of her letter from the professor and thrust the envelope into the pillar-box as though she were throwing a stone into a well.

Then her letter had been answered. The appointment had been made. With no qualm of conscience, she had told Mr. Crupper that owing to her mother's illness she could not come to work the next day. It did not seem a lie in Creechurch Lane. Nothing seemed a lie there. She had no shame about it. If that were a lie, then she typed lies every day in indelible ink. They had often worked her overtime without remuneration. She felt no compulsion to suggest that a day's pay should be deducted from her salary. It was theft. She plainly recognised that. But in Creechurch Lane, if one did not thieve, one did not live. It was convincing to argue that is was more important to live than preach a gospel of honesty in Creechurch Lane.

And now, as she walked from the waiting-room to the Council Chamber, she felt—Miss Tripson's assurance of manner had convinced her—that all of it had been to no purpose. They were going to see her, but merely out of a common sense of courtesy because she had come all that distance. Having given her an appointment, it was incumbent upon them to keep it.

So far as the Council had been concerned, Miss Tripson's assurance was well grounded. Without exception they had approved of her impression of mechanical efficiency. While waiting for Miss Hazlitt, they discussed her evident qualifications.

Mr. Purch, who disliked the presence of women in his private office, unless they were clients, felt she would be excellent.

"A woman like that," said he, "you wouldn't know she was about. You wouldn't look at her."

They all felt the truth and importance of that.

"Her references," said Mr. Mercer, "are unquestionably good. I believe in references."

Noticing her long skirt, Mr. Charrington had shuddered, but felt it was for the best.

Mr. Overend had followed her with a shrewd eye as she left the room, and said: "She'll never get married. That's one of the difficulties with women. They learn their job and just when you've got accustomed to them, they go and take on another one of which they know nothing."

All cynicism was subtle in Thurnham. They saw the implied irony at intervals like men numbering off in a squad. It came last to Mr. Charrington. He tittered.

Only Mr. Bottleby was silent in this discussion. He had looked at Miss Tripson when she entered and, for the rest of the interview till her departure, had not looked again. He had wanted a young man for the post. Some response was to be expected from a man of spirit, even if he were ignorant. It was not in the nature of an actual need, indeed he was scarcely aware of it, but he missed that element of response in Thurnham. He had once considered that, apart from the mechanics of their various occupations, the people of Thurnham were as plunged in ignorance as primeval man—if not more so. They were farther from nature, and therefore the less instinctive. All that had been provided for them in the way of education in their youth, they had long forgotten. Except for the bodily ministrations of Mrs. Twiss, there were occasional moments when Mr. Bottleby realised that he was alone in Thurnham. However, being alone suited him. With memories of Mrs. Charrington's tea party, he quickly became philosophical and recognised it was a pleasurable alternative. But he had wanted a young man for his assistant.

A force of which he knew nothing—which so far, indeed, has defied the exactitude of science—had shut a door in his mind against Miss Tripson the moment she entered the room. He felt as averse to addressing one word to her as he had felt the momentary impulse to pour forth the stream of his knowledge into the empty receptacle of Mrs. Wolhop's mind. Something, he knew not what, warned every instinct in his nature. He looked at Miss Tripson that once and then said no more for the rest of the time that she was in the room. She was not even aware when she left that he was the Curator.

"I wish, gentlemen," said he while they were waiting for Miss Hazlitt, "I wish the Council could have seen its way to allow for the salary of a young man for this post. As that cannot be, had we not better see the other young woman who is waiting?"

"You don't approve of this one?" asked Mr. Overend, and later on it was remembered by every member of the Council that Mr. Bottleby had replied: "I am not ordinarily aware of the presence of women at all, but if that woman sat in the same room with me for more than five minutes, I should be incapable of showing her respect."

Recalled as that was by the hazy memories of various members of the Council, it came to have fine shades of meaning by the time it had circulated through the society of Thurnham.

Miss Hazlitt entered the room with that spirit of despair which only served to lend her an air of independence. If, as she had been told, they had already decided to take Miss Tripson, then they should not find in her one who would cringe for the favour of consideration. Beneath the rim of that poke-bonnet of a hat and behind the horn-rimmed spectacles, her eyes regarded them with an indifference that intrigued their attention. A long time after, Mr. Bottleby remembered he had felt the presence of Jenny

Hazlitt in that room the moment she had closed the door behind her. There is little doubt about the truth of this effect upon him, for whereas with Miss Tripson he had maintained a determined silence, he began at once to catechise Jenny Hazlitt before any of the members of the Council had even time to inquire into her credentials.

"I am the Curator here," he said, "and my work is of a highly varied nature connected with anthropological, archæological and natural history subjects. I want an assistant rather than a mere shorthand typist, and when I say that, I mean one who can take an intellectual interest in the work she has to do. I see you come from London."

Without hesitation she acknowledged the fact, and the next instant was wishing with all the intensity of mind under that queer poke-bonnet of a hat that she had qualified the admission.

"Then you know nothing of the country?"

"I know a certain amount of botany," she replied, which was technically correct, though she said it to imply an acquaintance with plant life which no fortnightly holidays every year could ever have afforded her.

"You know the anatomy of plants?"

"I do."

Mr. Bottleby's interest sharpened.

"Know anything about entomology?"

She thought very quickly. A certain knowledge of the derivation of language came to her assistance. Entomology! Greek *entomon*—an insect; *logos*—science. The science of insects. Butterflies! Flies! Moths! In the back garden of their house in Hampstead her brothers used to put rum and treacle on the trees at night and catch moths by the score. She had seen them pinned down with strips of paper on pieces of cork.

"I know something about moths," said she.

Before she realised what she had let herself in for, Mr. Bottleby had reached for a card he had brought in with him to show to the members of the Council. It was an example of the mimetic instincts of nature, a specimen of the *Encosma Subicella,* which when at rest bears a striking resemblance to the excrement of small birds.

"Excuse me a moment, gentlemen," said Mr. Bottleby, "if I interrupt the proceedings to show you an example of the mimetic habits which nature employs for the preservation of certain species. If this lady knows something about moths, I should like her to see it too."

As an exhibit for the Museum's collection it was characteristic of the delicacy of Mr. Bottleby's work. In one corner was a specimen of the *Encosma,* showing all the wing markings in full flight. Across the card was a pressed sprig of the tree on which the female laid her eggs. This divided the specimen in flight from that of the insect with its wings closed, mimicking for its own safety the excrement of a small bird. Beside this, showing the excellence of the artifice, was the excrement of a sparrow which Mr. Bottleby had secured with great care from the window-sill of his bedroom in the Curator's wing.

In a silence, not completely devoid of pride, Mr. Bottleby had passed it round the table. They all looked at it in turn.

"I see the moth," said Mr. Overend. "Are we supposed to know what this other thing is?"

He passed it on to Mr. Purch, who, screwing up his eyes to examine it, then handed it on to Mr. Mercer with the remark: "Ladies present."

Judging by the expression on the bookseller's face, he might never have seen the dropping of a bird in his life. He handed it to Mr. Charrington. With a lifetime's experience of dealing delicately with ladies' garments, Mr. Charrington was frankly shocked. It was not a thing he would have shown to his wife. With a swift and somewhat sideward glance at the card, he leant across the table and handed it back to Mr. Bottleby.

"Is there any necessity," he said, "to show this to Miss Hazlitt? We all know that nature is nature, but I fail to see how a knowledge of this—kind of thing—is essential to her qualifications as a shorthand-typist."

Mr. Bottleby was irresistibly reminded of his speculations upon the qualities of decency as he lay in his bunk that first night on board the *Georgina Mary*. With a contrariness that had something almost feminine in it at the same time it possessed a deeper motive of inquiry, he handed the card immediately to Miss Hazlitt.

Hardened by his profession to what might be called the intimacies of life, Mr. Overend watched her face. The other gentlemen, being gentlemen, turned away. Mr. Purch leaned back in his chair, looking out of the window and whistling. Mr. Charrington entered into a close conversation with Mr. Mercer. By every indication of propriety they contrived to make the situation as improper as they felt it to be.

To Mr. Overend's surprise the childish expression on Miss Hazlitt's face underneath that poke-bonnet remained unperturbed. It appeared to the solicitor that she did not know what they were talking about. He anticipated some fatuous remark and was astounded when, after a moment's silence, she said:

"Of course, I've never seen a moth like this. It's very wonderful—isn't it? But wouldn't it have been more illuminating as a specimen of the mimicry of nature if you had mounted——" for an instant she did hesitate here—"if you had mounted—something—of the bird, to show how really like it was?"

From that instant Mr. Bottleby's mind was made up.

With triumph he almost shouted: "But I have! There it is—there—that one in the left-hand corner! But you're quite right—excellent observation! Undoubtedly I must draw attention to that or the public won't grasp the fact. Miss Hazlitt—as far as I am concerned, your work as an assistant will suit me. I'll just discuss your further qualifications with these gentlemen here, and if you'll wait somewhere about in the Museum, I'll let you know the result in a few moments."

She thought he must be mad. She went out of the room in a daze thinking how wonderfully mad he was. The instant she had closed the door Mr. Bottleby addressed the Council.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this is the lady who will suit my requirements as an assistant as well as any young man. Probably better. Women develop quicker than men. They have to. That girl is probably more mentally advanced than any of us here in this room."

Both Mr. Overend and Mr. Purch took immediate exception to this statement. Whatever the others may have felt, they left it to these two to express their resentment.

"I don't know what you mean exactly by mentally advanced," said the solicitor, "but don't try and persuade me to such nonsense as that that girl could give an opinion worth having about a matter of law——"

"Or," interposed his rival, "that she could work out a valuation of property to anything approximating a reasonable computation."

"The two examples you have given," replied Mr. Bottleby, "relate not to mentality but to experience. Obviously I did not make myself clear when I used the phrase—mentally advanced. Experience is not so much an education of the mind as a training of the wits. It takes experience and practice to make a successful card-sharper or tight-rope walker. But I should not hold that an accomplished trapezist was a mentally advanced or educated man. The action of the mind is a very different process from the performance of the brain. The brain can be trained by practice and experience to accomplish feats of accurate calculation with amazing reliability. But concerning any other matter than that in relation to which it is accustomed to function, it is singularly impotent. This means that the mind is conspicuously undeveloped. By the mind I mean not merely the operation of the brain cells, but the quality of them, their development, their susceptibility to a variety of responses, even the ideas and ideals which are registered in the form of abstract thought. I have known men whose mentality was scarcely further developed than that of a performing sea-lion, balancing an india-rubber ball on the end of its snout. Yet the opportunity of experience has gained for them occupation of no little importance. The people who come here to the Museum to see the mummy in its case are mostly of that category. They are like dogs sniffing at a dead rabbit. You wouldn't call that an advanced state of mentality, would you? This girl—I don't mind what age she is—realised in a moment, without any false modesty, the educational value and purpose of that specimen of the *Encosma Subicella.* Living in London, I doubt if her knowledge of entomology is as extensive as she led us to suppose. She is at present a secretary in a firm of shipping agents. But her mind has not been trammelled by that. It is alive. It is advanced. I, for one, am quite prepared to admit it is more advanced than my own. I have no further desire to know how educated she is. The fact that she has a B.A. degree means nothing——"

"That girl!" said Mr. Overend.

"A B.A. degree!" exclaimed Mr. Purch.

"She graduated at twenty-one at London University," said Mr. Bottleby. "I have a letter here from the Professor of History under whom she worked saying she has a very original mind. I am satisfied that that is no misstatement of fact and I am prepared to engage her at once if you gentlemen are agreeable."

The four members of the Council put their heads together, like magistrates conferring on the Bench. They were obviously impressed. Being the only one directly associated with trade, Mr. Mercer feared that these qualifications might demand too high a salary.

"Do you happen to know, Mr. Bottleby," he asked, "what salary this young woman requires for her services?"

"Two pounds a week," replied the Curator.

Mr. Overend, being the only one amongst them who had been to the University, threw up his hands in despair and exclaimed: "Is that all that's paid for education nowadays!"

"It's consistent," said Mr. Bottleby, "with the demand."

Jenny Hazlitt was engaged. All four gentlemen of the Council went home and told their wives they had selected a girl with a B.A. degree to be assistant to the Curator at the Museum.

Mr. Bottleby himself went out to find Miss Hazlitt. Not wishing to display her advantage over Miss Tripson, she had wandered about the Museum. Mr. Bottleby found her leaning on the glass case, looking down at the body of Ta-mai.

He stood a moment watching her. Was she after all like the rest, responsive merely to a morbid curiosity?

"Why are you looking at that?" he asked.

Though she had not suspected his presence, and the sudden sound of his voice must have been some shock to her senses, she raised her head very slowly and looked in his direction.

"I was trying to believe that she was dead," she replied.

"And couldn't you?"

"No."

He came down the gallery and stood beside her, looking down at the withered skin of Ta-mai, the truth-speaking daughter of Tchet-ra. He felt an extraordinary excitement at the thought of telling her his news.

"The Council have accepted your application," he informed her.

"I knew they would," she replied.

"How did you know that?"

"There was a sudden moment while I was standing here that I knew it."

"I must go and get my supper," said he, and went away through a door into the Curator's wing.

She had to follow him and knock on the door and inquire of Mrs. Twiss where the Curator was before she could learn of him when her duties were to commence.

"To-morrow," said he.

"But how about the firm I'm working for?" she inquired.

"Give them notice."

"But they'll want a month."

"Business people are very unreasonable!" exclaimed Mr. Bottleby. "Can't you tell them there's work I want you to start on at once?"

CHAPTER XIX

The shipping firm of Messrs. Crupper and Dodds in Creechurch Lane would not release Jenny Hazlitt until her full month's notice had expired. On the fifteenth of April, a bright spring morning, she walked out into Bishopsgate with eight pounds in her pocket, dazed, as a bird is dazed that finds the door of its cage open.

She looked about her, apprehensively, as though every moment she expected the chief clerk in Mr. Crupper's office to turn a corner and ask what she was doing there. Even when she had climbed on to a bus the sense of unreality pursued her. As the vehicle came to the first block in the traffic outside the Mansion House, she half believed that every sound of footsteps up the stairs on to the roof were those of the chief clerk with his pointed nose, his small brown eyes and the paper cuff-protectors protruding from his sleeves.

She went home that day all the way by bus to Hampstead. It was like the first tentative flight of the bird, finding its wings after a long captivity. Her month's notice had terminated that day at twelve o'clock. Messrs. Crupper and Dodds had kept her there to the last minute. Now she was taking the better part of two hours to get home. She even descended from the bus somewhere in the neighbourhood of Mornington Crescent Tube station and took her lunch in an A.B.C., looking at the clock and saying to herself, "Another five minutes and I should have been back in the office again." At one o'clock, she pictured the door of Mr. Crupper's private office opening, his quick look to see if she had returned from lunch, his last glance around the office as he went out. More enslaving than words, that glance said: "Everything here is mine—desks, ledgers typewriters, duplicators and the human beings."

That look would now fall upon the meek little girl who had taken her place and for the last fortnight had been living in her shadow. The full light of the office would be upon her now. Then, at that very moment perhaps, Mr. Crupper's glance might be drying the soul in her body.

She let the hand of the clock point to five minutes past one, just to prove she was no more returning to Creechurch Lane. Then she sauntered out, stopped at a bookseller's window, and on the hazard of an impulse went inside. There was a whole month's money in her pocket. She felt reckless. She wanted to spend it—just to buy something—something which, whenever she looked at it afterwards she could say, "Got that the day I left Crupper and Dodds."

There was a copy of Blake's poems in the window. She paid seven and sixpence for it, amazed at her extravagance. All the way home on the top of the next bus, she read:

"Piping down the valleys wild,
Piping songs of pleasant glee,
On a cloud I saw a child
And he laughing, said to me—

'Pipe a song about a lamb.'
So I piped with merry cheer.
'Piper, pipe that song again.'
So I piped. He wept to hear.

'Piper, drop thy happy pipe,
Sing thy songs of merry cheer,'
So I sang the same again
While he wept with joy to hear.

'Piper, sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read.'
So he vanished from my sight,
And I plucked a hollow reed,

And I made a rural pen,
And I stained the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear."

No less than this she felt she was about to do herself. On the top of that bus she was being carried out to Hampstead, but it was not really Hampstead at all. It was farther than that.

"I shall want you to come out with me on some of my botanical and geological excursions," Mr. Bottleby had written to her since that interview before the Council. Altogether he had written four letters to her during that last month of imprisonment, letters which, notwithstanding the information they gave about her duties, seemed as though there had been no real need for their writing. All that he told her in those letters could easily have waited until she arrived in Thurnham. Yet she kept and read them with increasing curiosity that developed in time to a lively anticipation.

"You must be prepared," he had said in the last she had received, "for long trudges across country."

He had even in this letter condescended to something in the nature of a jest. "In case these duties sound somewhat unusual, I must assure you that you will not be expected to climb trees after birds' eggs or chase butterflies with a net. Anything required of that nature I undertake to do myself."

Had he a sense of humour? From that interview in the Council Chamber and later beside the mummy in its glass case, she would never have guessed it. He had seemed mad, eccentric, but scarcely humorous. To have a sense of humour, one had to have some contact with life. Apparently he had none. As she had thought about him in the last month, he had seemed to her like one walking through life as a blind man walks, finding his way by the mere tapping of a stick. And during that last interview she had had with him in the Curator's wing, before she returned to London, she had received another impression. He still appeared like a blind man to her, but one who, arriving at a street-crossing, was standing on the kerbstone calling for some hand to lead him to the other side.

Up to a point, this was the same sort of impression that Mrs. Pennyquick had obtained of Mr. Bottleby. She too had seen him, tapping his way, blind to the surroundings of life. Only her intuition had not brought her so far as Jenny Hazlitt. She had not seen him standing on the kerbstone, beating his stick in the air.

Possibly these letters he had written had served to contribute to that impression. Having regard to her duties as an assistant they had been unnecessary. Yet she felt between every line some urgent necessity in his mind as he had written them.

"All this," he had said in the last, which was the longest of them all, "all this may sound to you something like a programme for a schoolboy's holiday. That is probably my incompetent way of putting it. I seldom express myself in epistolary form."

She laughed out loud at that phrase. It had so obviously been called forth by a sharp need for formality. He had suddenly remembered himself as the Curator and her as the assistant. In the next phrase he had forgotten it. But there, plainly enough, was the unintentional confession. He seldom wrote letters. Yet he had written four unnecessary ones to her. This was one standing on the kerbstone. Here was the waving stick of a blind man signalling his appeal for a hand. What else could she think? But her thoughts led her no further than that. She could not hear the voice in him crying out, "Pity the poor blind." He did not even realise he was blind. He was one of those who had had no sight from his birth. His stick and his sense of touch had served him so far. Now, at the kerbstone, he was waving it about in the air. There was nothing for it to touch. He wanted an assistant. But by no means had he realised he was blind.

If there were a flavour of romance in these conceptions she was the last to be aware of it. She was twenty-three—a grown woman with all her wits about her and no nonsense. She was going to be his assistant.

When all was said and done, the phrase he had used in his letter was quite right. It did sound extraordinarily like a schoolboy's holiday. That anyone should pay her two pounds a week for glorious trudges across country, interspersed with work of such interest that thrilled her at the mere thought of it, seemed something in the nature of a dream. It was too good to be true. But if it really were true, then that bus was not merely carrying her out of the dungeons of Creechurch Lane into a breathing space of Hampstead air. It was bearing her out into the freedom of the whole world, where some quality of spirit she knew to be within her would have room to breathe and grow and find the fullness of its being.

Do many young women of twenty-three know they have a quality of spirit? And those that do, how do they recognise it?

To Jenny Hazlitt it was an instinctive knowledge roused in moments as on occasions when her will had come in conflict with that of Mr. Crupper and she had known and he had known she would have lost her job rather than sacrifice a hazy conception of independence. She had been conscious of it frequently during her courses at college, and most of all in the studies she had undertaken of language and literature. She had read with an insatiable appetite. In poetry she had found that consciousness of spirit most of all. Once read, certain poetry remained with her. It was not so much a faculty of memory as an absorption of ideas which, once they had taken hold upon her mind, stayed there with the accompanying music of their words.

After two years of office work in Creechurch Lane, she had realised subconsciously that this quality of spirit was being crushed out of her. Looking ahead, she knew that in a few years it would be but a shadow of what it was. Seeing her girl friends marrying to release themselves from the monotony of city life at the beck and call of their employers, she had begun to calculate that she in turn would succumb to that. Like them, she might persuade herself for a short while that romance was in it. But when it came—as it inevitably came with all of them—to the still more exacting labours of a home, she knew she would give up, as they gave up, becoming the drudge of necessity against which an independence of will might beat itself till it was broken.

And now, this breach in the impenetrable barrier! This sudden leap into a new world!

As she had stood in the museum at Thurnham, looking down at the withered body of Ta-mai, knowing, as she had told Mr. Bottleby she knew, that her application for the post of assistant was going to be accepted, she had felt more conscious of that quality of spirit than she had ever felt in her life before.

She was trying, as she had told him, to believe that Ta-mai, the truth-speaking daughter of Tchet-ra, was dead. With an inwardness of conviction she had failed. The spirit that once had occupied that parched yet life-shaped shell could not absolutely have departed from the utmost regions of space. She had felt it must be somewhere. Something—she did not know whether to call it the personality, the essence, or what it was—something of Ta-mai seemed to her to have been there about in that place. It could no longer animate that body with its bitumenised skin, its shrivelled eyes still clinging in their sockets, lying there in its glass case. But she had felt it near her, blind, in the same sort of way as Mr. Bottleby was blind, searching for something, as he was searching; beating the air, and, even more than he, crying out, "Pity the poor dead, pity the poor dead."

These had not been thoughts, they were shapeless fancies that swept, as wind sweeps from nowhere, across and through her mind. She could have fashioned no words to them. They had just carried her mind with them away from contact with actual things so that she had not heard the approach of Mr. Bottleby, and only returned slowly to reality at the sound of his voice.

Then in those moments, combining with the knowledge that she was to escape from Crupper and Dodds, she had felt that quality of her spirit more than she had ever felt it in her life.

Now, as she rode home on the top of the bus, the escape was made. Reading that poem of Blake's, her mind turned involuntarily to the last letter Mr. Bottleby had written. She had it in her bag, a receptacle not unlike Miss Tripson's, but containing more intimate things than receipted shop bills. There were three pages of it. She read it all through, stopping at one sentence in particular.

"The Council may have given you the impression," he wrote, "that it was little more than a shorthand-typist that was required. Before you come, and so that you may be under no misconception, I must disillusion your mind as to this. It is an assistant in my work that I require. Except for the occasional visits of members of sundry scientific societies, I find myself, in the work that I am doing in Thurnham, like a man cast away on a desert island. Until quite lately solitude used to suit me. I wanted nothing better than to be left alone to do my work. Somehow or other in that respect I seem to have altered. I cannot explain the change. I merely seem to be aware of the fact that I am getting but a part of myself out of myself. My mind seems cramped in the silence that surrounds me. It is incomplete. It is the paramount duty of everyone to complete themselves. No duty is higher than this. Doubtless there are others equal to it. I don't know much about duty. But when you gave evidence of the approach of your mind to work such as this I am engaged upon here, I felt then that you were the assistant I required. I probably seemed a little abrupt and impulsive in my decision about this and with apparently little reason that was obvious to you at the time, but knowing one's mind is a process that does not call for reason."

Then had followed his descriptions of what he might want her to do, the trudges across country, his little jest—if it was intended to be a jest—about climbing trees, and finally that phrase: "All this may sound to you something like a programme for a schoolboy's holiday."

She put the letter back in her bag and opened the copy of Blake once more.

"And I plucked a hollow reed,
And I made a rural pen,
And I stained the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear."

Towards this the Hampstead bus was bearing her, away from Crupper and Dodds in Creechurch Lane. She had to grip the seat on which she sat to prevent herself from standing up and shouting out to the whole of Haverstock Hill: "I'm free—I'm free!"

CHAPTER XX

FOLLOWING the instructions of Mr. Bottleby, Mrs. Twiss had found rooms for Jenny Hazlitt in Leather Lane. All who know Thurnham know Leather Lane. It runs parallel with the River Conway, leading to the street in which the museum stands. The houses there lean with overhanging gables across the narrow roadway. More than probably at one time they were cottages for the labourers on the estate of Dillingham Manor, when all that part of the town was meadowland dropping down in broad acres to the river.

Number ten, where Mrs. Naylor lived and by some virtue of her consent because he earned his living Mr. Naylor lived also, was the biggest house in the lane. It was obviously two cottages at some time knocked into one. Mrs. Naylor took lodgers, and though her husband earned a decent wage as a handyman in Mr. Purch's office, she considered that what she managed to make out of her spare rooms was of more importance than his labours. Mr. Naylor paid the rent. If he had not done that and supplied the wherewithal for the household expenses, Mrs. Naylor might have reconsidered her position as his wife. She wore the breeches, as they say, which, as a picture, is part of a woman's deserts for doing so.

The front sitting-room and the bedroom at Mrs. Naylor's were vacant. Mrs. Twiss discovered that. Hearing it was a young lady who wanted the room, Mrs. Naylor was not enthusiastic. She preferred looking after young men. To the young men who had lodged there from time to time she had been almost affable. Mr. Naylor had often sat in the evenings in the back kitchen watching his wife do things for the gentleman in the front room, mending his socks, sewing buttons on his shirts, which seemed womanly and comfortable to him. The young gentlemen were nearly as afraid of her as Mr. Naylor was, but for a certain length of time, before their freshness had worn off, they got on with her very well. None of them stayed longer than a few months. She always quarrelled with them in the end. In fact, the whole psychology of Mrs. Naylor was that she liked company, and for preference any other than that of her husband. To satisfy this craving in her, she had sacrificed the whole of her home, thrusting her husband into a back kitchen, where it became his painful occupation, after working hours, to watch his wife catering for those who occupied the best rooms in his house.

Women as lodgers were all right if they did not stay too long or want too much done for them. The back bedroom and sitting-room were already occupied by Miss Pinsett, who looked uncomfortably like being a fixture. Mrs. Naylor was tired of bringing her her breakfast in bed. But there it was. She paid good money. The front rooms had been vacant for a week. Mrs. Naylor was hoping it would be a young gentleman. Then came Mrs. Twiss from the Museum inquiring for rooms for the Curator's assistant. It was annoying, for that looked like a long let. Yet thirty shillings a week was fair money, and there was always a little to be made on the breakfasts, the suppers, and the washing. Three pounds a week for her spare rooms alone, and Mr. Naylor was only paying thirty pounds a year rent. Mrs. Naylor's liking for young gentlemen weighed heavily in her mind, but money overbalanced it. Having received no definite assurance from Mrs. Twiss as to how long Miss Hazlitt was going to stay, she finally and not too graciously consented.

"Seeing she's got to work with Mr. Bottleby," said Mrs. Twiss, "a young girl like that, what's got no experience of men—likely she'll be gone in a month. He'd drive me into Barming Asylum if I hadn't been married meself and knew he didn't mean nothin' by it."

That clinched the matter. Sooner or later another young gentleman would be sure to come along. Mrs. Naylor took the bird in the hand with no intention of being too careful of its feathers.

Two mornings after her departure from Crupper and Dodds, a fly from the station deposited Jenny Hazlitt at number ten Leather Lane. Her trunk was taken to the bedroom upstairs. Mrs. Naylor stood icily at the door, ready to resent any criticism, while Jenny looked at the bed with its feather mattress, at the grained chest of drawers, the dressing table, and then out of the window across the clustering red-tiled roofs that gave her the impression of being transported, as though by a magic carpet, into the fourteenth century.

There are certain natures that only reveal themselves to a few chance people in their journeys through life. To all others they appear distant, superior, aloof.

When Jenny said, "It's very nice," Mrs. Naylor sniffed and invited her to inspect the sitting-room downstairs. She did not know that behind that imperturbable exterior and those horn-rimmed spectacles there was a voice shouting in Jenny as it had shouted on the top of the bus on Haverstock Hill, "This is mine! My bedroom! I shall wake up in that bed in the morning and look out on those roofs and chimney pots and think and think—all by myself!"

At home, she had always shared a bedroom with an elder sister. Nothing had been hers. Brushes, combs, even towels and sponges, by very nature of that sharing, had been joint property. Everything there she used in that room would be her own. She could wake up in the middle of the night, light a candle and read if she liked.

"It's very nice," she said quietly, and heard herself saying it in the distance she found between herself and Mrs. Naylor. She could have laughed at the ridiculous sound of it.

The sitting-room downstairs was more wonderful still. If she shared the bedroom at home with her sister, she shared the sitting-room with the whole family. Nothing there belonged to anyone. It was communal. The mere sight of that sitting-room, knowing it was her own, made her feel an aristocrat. Here was her spirit rising in stature by inches. She knew at last she was going to be herself.

She could have thrown her arms round Mrs. Naylor's neck, only that fortunately for herself that external side of her nature keeping guard over her behind the horn-rimmed spectacles allowed nothing in the nature of demonstration.

"I'm sure I shall be very comfortable," she said, at which Mrs. Naylor left her alone and went into the back kitchen and pushed the cat off the kitchen table and said what she thought about women lodgers to her husband, who had just come home after a hard day's work.

It was about tea-time. Mrs. Naylor called from the kitchen door to know whether Jenny would have her tea then. For a moment she thought she would—her first tea all by herself in her own sitting-room. Then, unexpectedly, as though a voice had called her, she considered she had come down there to be Mr. Bottleby's assistant. Involuntarily she remembered his letters, especially the last one.

"My mind seems cramped in the silence that surrounds me. It is incomplete."

She went to the door and called back:

"I think I ought to go over to the Museum and let the Curator know that I've arrived."

Ramp was just shutting the doors. The last hour for the admission of the public was just striking. Having no memory of her from that day of the Council's interview and being one who appreciated the first and last letter of his duty and appreciated no more, he stood well in the doorway.

"Sorry, miss," he said with a voice that was a closed door in itself, "the Museum's shut at five o'clock. Next month it's open till six."

"But I want to see Mr. Bottleby."

"Sorry, Miss, Mr. Bottleby's not in the Museum now."

"Well, would you tell him that Miss Hazlitt has—has arrived?"

"Arrived where, Miss?"

"In Thurnham."

"Certainly, Miss—I suppose he'll understand what that means."

"Well—I've come here to take the post of his assistant."

Of course that was a different matter. She might have said that at first. But there was no letting her in that way. She would have to go round to the Curator's wing.

Mrs. Twiss had more intelligence. When it comes to a question of the absence of education, this is characteristic of women. She was also more acquainted with the facts. Mr. Bottleby was having his tea. She showed Jenny into the oak-panelled sitting-room. By the light of a low sun, the Curator was bent over a book on the table. The milk on the surface of his cup of tea had made a pale scum as it grew cold. He had a portion of toast in his hand but had not yet bitten a piece out of it. He did not even look up as the door opened.

Unaccustomed in any case to the formalities of announcing guests and having had no experience of it in that household, Mrs. Twiss merely opened the door and, as a shepherd says of his sheep, she eased Jenny into the room and closed the door behind her.

Fearing to interrupt anyone so engrossed as Mr. Bottleby, she stood there a moment hoping the end of a sentence or the bottom of a page might break his concentration. When, still without looking up, he turned over the next page, she summoned her voice, a somewhat tentative effort in her throat, and said:

"I'm sorry for interrupting."

Her voice might have been stentorian for the effect it had upon him. He laid down his piece of toast on the book. The pages closed on it. Had it been calculated, it might have seemed intentional to keep his place. Completely oblivious for the moment of the amenities of the situation, he forgot to rise to his feet, but stared across the sunlight at her face and omitted to ask her to sit down.

"Do you remember standing by the mummy in the museum," he said, as though it were the continuation of a conversation momentarily interrupted, "and saying you were trying to think she was dead and could not succeed?"

In astonishment at this greeting, Jenny could do no more than nod her head.

"Well, listen to this." He opened the book at the piece of toast and now, biting a morsel out of it as though he had recollected it was his duty to eat it, he read aloud with his mouth full:

"At present the endeavour to make discoveries is like gazing at the sky through the boughs of an oak. Here a beautiful star shines clearly; here a constellation is hidden by a branch; a universe by a leaf. Some mental instrument or organon is required to enable us to distinguish between the leaf which may be removed and a real void; when to cease to look in one direction and to work in another."

He paused an instant as though he were leaving something out, and then with a triumph he gave unhesitatingly to the words he read, he concluded: "There are infinities to be known but they are hidden by a leaf."

With a quick look he glared across the low sunlight at her again.

"That was what you were doing," he said, "making discoveries—when you stood there looking down at that mummy. In the impetus of your spirit then you ought to have ceased to look in that direction. You ought to have looked in another. Perhaps if in that instant you had looked in another you might have made your discovery. You might have been able to distinguish between the body that could have been removed and the sometimes apparent void of death."

"I did look in another," said she.

"Where?"

"Don't you remember you called out asking me why I was standing there. I looked up then."

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Bottleby. "You looked up at me. That was just with your eyes. Jefferies doesn't mean with your eyes."

It was hard to let him believe that she did not understand that, but what else was there to do?

"You've let your tea get cold," she said. "Would you like me to pour you out some fresh?"

He looked at the cup of tea and then up at her as though for the first time he actually realised she was there in body as well as mind.

"That's very kind of you. Have you just arrived?"

She nodded her head.

"Have you had any tea yourself?"

"No."

He suddenly jumped up and pulled out a chair from the table for her to sit on, and went to the bell and rang it two or three times.

"You'll have tea with me then."

She began to shake her head.

"You'll have tea with me," he repeated, and as Mrs. Twiss appeared at the door, he asked for another cup and saucer as though he had asked for it many times and she had not complied with his request.

"Ever read Jefferies?" he asked as he sat down again.

She confessed she had not.

"One of them," he muttered—"one of them."

"One of whom?"

"One of the ones who knew that nature was the first law—that we can learn nothing till we've learnt that."

"Have you learnt it?" she inquired.

"It's about all I have learnt," said he. "I don't know anything else."

"Look in another direction," she suggested.

He stared at the horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Do you know that's what I believe I am doing? I wrote some letters to you, didn't I?"

She smiled. They were in her bag then as it lay on the table.

"Didn't I say something about finding that I was only getting part of myself out of myself?"

"You did."

"Well—that's funny—but that's what I have been feeling these last few months. I am looking in another direction. It's as though something had taken my head and twisted it round. I am looking in another direction, but I don't know where. I'm frequently out of patience with myself."

"I know," she said.

"You feel like that?"

"Yes."

"That must have been why I felt I wanted an assistant at this job."

"Yes."

"You seem to know all about it."

"No—I only understand."

Then, before she could realise why she had done it, she quoted:

"'Piping down the valleys wild,
Piping songs of pleasant glee,
On a cloud I saw a child,
And he laughing, said to me—
"'Pipe a song about a lamb.'"——

There she stopped. A sudden awkwardness, a swift consciousness, that here was she a mere assistant, the first day in a new job, spouting poetry at her employer, flashed across her with a hot wave of confusion.

"Go on," he said. "Go on. What comes after that?"

"Haven't you read Blake?" she asked.

"No, I've never read any poetry in my life. Go on. Say the rest of it."

She said it all, and then Mrs. Twiss came in with the fresh cup for her tea.

CHAPTER XXI

For the first two or three weeks Jenny's duties consisted in typing the work Mr. Bottleby had already completed on the new catalogue. In the variety of subjects with which he had dealt she began to realise the scope of his knowledge. It was obvious he must have spent every hour of his forty years in acquiring it. Was he forty? What age was he? Her respect for his mind increased with every page she typed. So conscious indeed of his mind did she become in those first two or three weeks, that she lost sight of her early impressions of the quaint figure he cut with his disarranged tie, the sweater he often wore to cover any discrepancies in dress, and the impossible hat which apparently he insisted upon wearing in the street.

Sometimes she hazarded suggestions about his work as to grammar and style. She was too timid at that time to offer them to him in the form of corrections.

"I have been typing this part here to-day," she said, in a deferential tone of voice which the horn rims of her spectacles seemed to emphasise, as though she had drawn a ring round her remarks just to bring them to his notice, "and I can't quite see how you use the verb here in relation to the substantive."

He looked at the passage her finger was pointing to.

Then he looked at her. She caught an impression of him at that moment as of a small boy trying to explain away a mistake in his home lessons.

"Can't you?" said he.

"No. Can you?"

He looked back at the passage again. It was awkward. She appeared to want a more definite answer. He supposed it was best in the long run to make no bones about it and admit he could not.

"Then what's the matter with it?" he added.

"Well, the verb is too far away. It's right at the edge. It's nearly slipping off the meaning of the sentence."

"Is it?"

He looked up at her, prepared to believe anything.

"Yes," she nearly laughed.

"Well, push it on a bit," said he. "I don't mind where you put it, so long as it's there."

"Well"—how far dared she go?—"there's another question?"

"How another question?"

He had not lost his temper yet. Indeed he was extraordinary. Mr. Crupper would have flown into a passion of resentment long before this. Mr. Bottleby merely sat there with his hands on his lap and looked at her. She felt if she had told him to stand to his feet while she was talking to him, he would immediately have done so.

"How another question?" he repeated.

"Well—do you think you want that particular verb at all?"

"Don't I?"

"I don't know. But 'negotiate' means to transact, or to treat with someone in a matter of business—*Negotium* —business, *Nec*—not, and *otium*—leisure." She felt if it lost her her job she must go on with it now. The mere pride of accuracy was in it by this. "You don't exactly want to convey a transaction here, or a treaty."

"Oh—don't I?"

"Not as I read it."

"What do I want to convey then?"

"Well—something more in the sense of to transfer."

"Yes—yes—well, won't 'negotiate' do?"

"No—not quite. Relegate would do better."

"Relegate!"

He stood up and shouted it back at her. "That was the word I wanted when I wrote it. You're more than an assistant—aren't you?"

"Am I?"

She felt a sudden inclination to laugh with joy.

"Yes—you're—you're a collaborator."

He stood a moment staring at the horn-rimmed spectacles and then he smiled. She saw it alter the whole of his face and watched it gradually pass away from every feature but his eyes.

She tried to think of what an assistant says to an employer when he pays her a genuine compliment about her work, and heard herself replying: "You'll have to teach me a lot before I can be that."

"I'll teach you," said he, "as soon as this typing is done, we've got to begin our trudges across country. Birds are building. That's the time. The leaf's out, hiding all we want to discover. This was about the time they made their sacrifices to Astarte. We've lost that."

"I'll do my typing," she said.

He nodded his head quite seriously.

"You'll do your typing," said he, "and more than that—and more than that."

She had not quite the courage to ask him what he meant. It seemed highly unlikely from the tone in his voice that he knew himself.

Whatever he had meant, she went back to number ten Leather Lane that evening singing under her breath at the top of the voice in her mind.

On the stairs going up to her bedroom—her bedroom—she passed Miss Pinsett, to whom, for no more reason than that life was worth living, she said, "Good evening."

This was plain flouting of that external and guardian self that conducted her ordinary behaviour towards strangers from behind the horn-rimmed spectacles. She received her deserts.

"I beg your pardon," said Miss Pinsett, not icily but properly, "I don't think I have the pleasure of your acquaintance."

Jenny reached her room in time to close the door and bury her face in the pillows on the bed. Laughter, suddenly roused in her, was liable to lift to a shrill note. She smothered it.

Mr. Bottleby's explanation of this, when, for his amusement, she informed him of the incident next morning, was characteristic of the logical sequences of his mind. He admitted it was entertaining, but something more interesting than that gave him pre-occupation from laughter.

"There is a natural suspicion of life for life," he said. "You can trace it from the lowest to the highest forms of animals. Even domesticated beasts like cows resent the intrusion of a stranger into their midst. The most violent battles will take place between cows for a day or so after a new beast is admitted to the field. The English people, who confidently believe themselves to be the most civilised race in the world, are as susceptible to this primitive suspicion as the most unenlightened savage. Find someone to introduce you to this good lady in Leather Lane and she will probably prove to be a delightful companion."

"I don't want to know her," said Jenny.

"Ah yes," said Mr. Bottleby, "but saying good evening to a stranger in a place like Thurnham is a sufficient indication that you do, and nothing rouses the primitive suspicion of country people in England more than this. They do not know the good-fellowship of good day or good night. Town manners in country places are like ploughmen turned dandies—a sad sight, for there's no wit in them."

Every day with her brought some new insight into the intricate simplicities of Mr. Bottleby's mind. In all physical relation to life he was extraordinarily like a child, needing mothering. Sometimes she found herself envying Mrs. Twiss those insistent brushings of his clothes before he went out, the setting out of his meals, and the demand that he should eat them while they were hot.

At moments, catching herself out in this covetousness, Jenny informed herself of the merely contemptible sentiment of which it was compounded.

"It's just this sort of thing they think about men," she told herself, "that makes women little better than drudges. I'd never be a drudge to any man. I might brush his clothes for him because they wanted brushing, but not because I liked brushing them."

The next time she was present at this operation, she forced herself to observe the pathetic servitude of Mrs. Twiss, as, deaf to all his entreaties, she fetched the clothes-brush and seized him by the lapel of his coat. It was a pity to think that women had so submitted themselves to the needs of men. Why could he not brush himself? Or if he did not want to, then let him go out with the dust on his shoulders.

It was annoying to see him smile his gratitude at Mrs. Twiss, and to observe the hard wrinkles of her face softening in response to it. Women would never win any independence of spirit so long as they succumbed to such reward as that. Servitude would be their lot to the end of time.

Mrs. Twiss would brush his clothes again, without reward. It was only occasionally, when he realised what she was doing, that he smiled at her. Again and again she would brush them, and fetch his slippers and serve his meals for the occasional reward of his gratitude. It was pitiable how women sacrificed themselves for men. He did not smile at her like that for the work she did for him. Well—he had once. On that occasion when he told her she was a collaborator. He had smiled then.

She turned away, quite annoyed that morning with Mrs. Twiss, and went on with her typing.

Two days later, on a Saturday afternoon, it was pouring with rain. This was her half-holiday. Not that she wanted it. She sat in her sitting-room reading a book on geology which Mr. Bottleby had recommended to her out of the Museum library. The consciousness that it was all a part of her work, part of her apprenticeship for being the perfect assistant she was determined to be—a collaborator perhaps—made it absorbing. At moments she would let her mind stop to compare it with the work at Crupper and Dodds', its monotony, its selfishness, its everlasting strain to make profit at the expense of others. Then looking round the walls of the little room with its comforts of her own possessions, a light of some kind of inward laughter would flicker up in her eyes as she brought them back to her book.

During one of these voluntary interruptions, she heard Miss Pinsett come downstairs and pass out of the front door into Leather Lane. At an angle from her window, she could see the umbrella put up to protect what was evidently Miss Pinsett's best hat and best black costume of serge. She had on a pair of spotless white kid gloves with black stitchings at the back, at the sight of which automatically Jenny said aloud:

"Oh, why do you walk through the fields in gloves,
Missing so much and so much?
Oh, fat, white woman whom nobody loves,
Why do you walk through the fields in gloves
When the grass is soft as the breast of doves
And shivering-sweet to the touch?
Oh, why do you walk through the fields in gloves,
Missing so much and so much?"

She addressed the whole triolet to Miss Pinsett as though, standing outside on the doorstep, she could hear every word and might reply if she chose. Then, having paid this tribute to poetry and Frances Cornford, she went on with her geology.

Two minutes later, the bell rang in the kitchen premises, disturbing Mrs. Naylor from her perusal of the daily paper and compelling Mr. Naylor to look up from the stitching of a patch into an old vest.

Jenny looked out of the window. It was the return of Miss Pinsett. She had not been far. Perhaps the rain had driven her back. Her mind was returning to geology when, at the sound of Mrs. Naylor opening the front door, she heard Miss Pinsett inquire if Miss Hazlitt were in.

Miss Hazlitt in! She had not time to grasp what it meant before the door opened and, in the voice of a master of ceremonies, Mrs. Naylor announced Miss Pinsett.

The good lady smiled into the room. With white gloves and black stitchings she seemed to fill it. Jenny scrambled to her feet. Mrs. Naylor closed the door. They were alone together.

"I hope I have not paid my visit too soon," said Miss Pinsett. "Where shall I put this? My umbrella. Perhaps I had better leave it out in the hall. It's dribbling. Such a shocking day, isn't it?"

She continued talking as she opened the door and deposited her umbrella outside.

"I haven't called before, because I know when one's settling into a new place one is so disturbed. So I left it just three weeks for you to get comfortable——" Her head came round the corner of the door again. She entered the room and closed the door behind her. There was no escape: "I left it just three weeks," she repeated, "but of course from the first I've wanted to make your acquaintance. You work at the Museum, don't you? How extremely interesting that must be. May I sit down? This is not your chair, is it? No—I see you were sitting there. Reading? Light literature in spare time, I suppose. I don't read as much as I ought to. I quite envy you your work at the Museum, you know. They must have such a lot of things there—old things, I'm told, with a history attached to nearly all of them. Haven't they birds' eggs too, and stuffed birds and that sort of thing? Wonderfully interesting for those who care about those sort of things. I've not visited it yet myself, but I must go. I've scarcely been here a year yet. Of course there are lots of places of real interest in Thurnham. I have a little book on the place—perhaps you've seen it?—written by a local—quite well written, I thought. Amazing, you know, a man like that—with quite an ordinary education, I suppose, to be able to put his thoughts together for the benefit of others. You must tell me something about yourself, because we're quite near neighbours, aren't we? Ha! ha! When first I heard Mrs. Naylor say your name—Hazlitt—I said to myself: 'Hazlitt! Hazlitt!' And then I remembered Hazlitts I knew in Yorkshire. Well—I didn't exactly know them, but they lived in a big house near where I was staying. I was wondering if you were any relation of theirs. And I hear you have a degree—a B.A. Fancy a girl of your age being as clever as that. What a lot must have been spent on your education!"

Only that her glove button got caught in the chain of her pince-nez, she might have continued indefinitely, but there she paused, and in the pause Jenny said:

"My education didn't cost anything. I was educated at the Council schools—from there I got scholarships that took me on till I went to college and graduated. I don't think any of my family ever lived in a big house. They weren't well off. Would you like some tea?"

These home truths somewhat quietened Miss Pinsett. Her enthusiasm in her visit waned a little. She continued nevertheless a desultory fire of questions while Mrs. Naylor laid the tea, all tending to satisfy her curiosity about Jenny's relations, their station in life, together with her own prospects in taking up the work she was doing with Mr. Bottleby.

"He's a strange man, I hear," said Miss Pinsett, "very averse to the opposite sex. Will never marry, they tell me, though he has a very good salary there as Curator. Has written some rather strange books, I believe. One called 'The Evolution of Desire.' I haven't read it myself. I suppose if you're scientific there's no harm in your writing about that sort of thing. But I'm sure no one in Thurnham reads them."

"That's probably because it's not the kind of desire they're interested in," said Jenny.

"But you haven't read that one yourself, have you?"

"Why not?"

"Well—my dear child—you can't be more than twenty-two."

"I'm nearly twenty-four. And if I was only fifteen I shouldn't think it would hurt any girl to read about plants and insects and crustaceans."

"Plants!" echoed Miss Pinsett. "But what have plants got to do with it?"

Jenny felt some pleasure in observing that desire was probably a more common instinct than Miss Pinsett had discovered in her experience.

"I'm glad to say," replied Miss Pinsett, "that my life has not been troubled like that. I hope yours never will, my dear. But they do tell me Mr. Bottleby is a most extraordinary man. I saw him myself one day in the street in broad daylight with his shirt all open at the neck."

"I've seen women at the theatre," said Jenny, "with no shirt on at all."

Miss Pinsett thought a moment and then elected to be amused.

"It was naughty of you to say that!" she chuckled. "But I expect you're one of those modern girls who like their little joke. I never affect a really low-necked dress myself, but then I know I'm an exception."

Mrs. Naylor had brought in the tea when the front door-bell rang again. Some functional chamber in Jenny's heart expanded as she heard Mr. Bottleby's voice saying her name. The next moment he appeared at the doorway, and at the sight of Miss Pinsett looked extraordinarily like running away.

Almost upsetting the tea-table, Jenny was at the door the next instant, asking him to come in.

"No—no—please not—I didn't know you had visitors. I thought you'd be alone."

"Was there anything you wanted?"

"Well—no—no—nothing much."

"What? Can't I do it for you?"

"Not now—it was only—just I was a bit stuck up over a description in the catalogue. It's not—well—I thought you could see what was the matter with it. It'll do on Monday. It'll do on Monday. Don't let me spoil your tea."

He had gone.

Spoil her tea!

"You must excuse me in a moment," she said to Miss Pinsett. "Mr Bottleby wants some work done and I must go over to the Museum."

"On a Saturday afternoon?"

"Yes."

"But don't you get any time off?"

"Oh, yes."

"You mustn't let him make a slave of you, my dear. You insist on your free time to yourself. I shall have to look after you, I can see that."

In five minutes, Jenny had escaped. She went straight to the Curator's wing. Mrs. Twiss admitted her, saying: "He's havin' his tea, Miss. Don't stop him havin' his tea. He hasn't touched it for three days, and he's eatin' it quite nicely this evenin'."

She went to the sitting-room door. Mr. Bottleby looked up as she opened it and a smile spread in a beam of gratitude over his face. Then she laughed.

CHAPTER XXII

In his compilation of the catalogue, Mr. Bottleby observed the customary principle of recording the contents of each room in numerical order.

"When I get to number six, the gallery containing geological specimens," he said, "I shall stop for this spring and summer. I shan't do any more till the winter comes in again. This is a winter's job. I can't sit here at my desk and see the sparrows out of the window depositing nesting materials under the eaves without feeling that scribbling with a pen on a piece of paper is a poor substitute for labour. The persistence and transmutation of instincts is a wide field for investigation. A doctor told me once of a woman who every spring was urged by an irresistible impulse to make nests. She used no instruments but her fingers, and could make a chaffinch's nest so like the genuine thing that only the eye of the bird herself could have discovered the imitation. She had no inclination to this at any other time of the year. She was quite aware of it. Submitted to all the chaff that was heaped upon her for doing it, but frankly confessed she would have been miserable without the occupation. The persistence of instincts and the way Nature in man has transmuted them without losing the force of their impulse is a subject for greater consideration than has been given it."

With a twist, characteristic of the way his mind was wont to switch when it had recorded a thought, Mr. Bottleby suddenly asked her if she knew anything about ants.

Jenny shook her head.

"Ever studied an ant's nest?"

She had never seen one, but did not like to admit it.

"One doesn't get much opportunity in Creechurch Lane," said she.

He held up one finger and looked at her steadily as though she were the smallest girl in the class.

"I'll show you an ant's nest this summer," he said. "I had some thousands of them here under observation this last summer. I had to give them up. Mrs. Twiss complained. Women have no sense of inquiry. She said they got on to the butter and that she'd found hundreds of them in the sugar basin. I can't see that that really mattered. The butter seemed all right to me. There were none in the sugar basin when she put it on the table. She got cantankerous all the same. She threatened to go if I didn't give up my experiments with ants. She didn't mind the moths, or the tadpoles, or a couple of lizards I was keeping for breeding observations, but she wouldn't have ants. There are certain women in the world," added Mr. Bottleby, "who have no sense of a man's work. Do you know what she said to me, the morning she found the ants in the sugar basin and was late with my breakfast?"

Jenny shook her head.

"She said: 'I've only got one pair of hands, sir.' That's what women will say to excuse their omissions in the next life when they stand before their God."

"They wouldn't say that," said Jenny, "if men in this life would only stand before women and say—'Thank you.'"

Mr. Bottleby gazed at her in astonishment. She was probably correct. He could not recall his ever having said "Thank you" to Mrs. Twiss since he had occupied the Curator's wing. The pertinence of Jenny's observation confused him. She took the breath away with which he was going to tell her more about ants. He struggled to regain it.

"Shall we keep to what we were saying?" he suggested feebly.

She nodded her head.

"I was talking about my experiments with ants."

She nodded her head again.

He took a step nearer to her. "I could go on showing you things in nature," he said, "till I was an old man and you had left this childhood of yours years away behind you."

It was as good as calling her a child. She felt a child. She had a sensation of his taking her by the hand and leading her about the world to see the wonders of it She felt he knew where those wonders were, and not a man in the world could show them to her so well as he. She did not want anyone else to show them to her. He stood looking down at her with a sternness that often came into his face when he was intent, and, had she been asked to describe her sensations, she could have said no more than that she was frightened. Fear was uppermost in her consciousness.

Beneath that she knew how much she wanted to go, anywhere, everywhere, to see all there was to be seen.

Early in April the catalogue had reached room number six. A little half-landing was just outside the entrance to the gallery containing the geological specimens. There was nothing there but a small case of flint arrow-heads, the subject of which he had treated in another section. There, too, were the remains of Ta-mai in its hermetically sealed glass case.

"It's the only exhibit of this nature," he said, "that we have in the whole Museum. Shall I give a few pages to the principles of embalming and the Egyptians' regard for their dead, or just leave it to a short description of the exhibit?"

"I think it would be interesting to write something," she replied.

"Why?"

She could not say why. She did not realise the fact that his informing her of the Council's acceptance of her application when she was standing beside it had made it seem the most important exhibit in the Museum to her.

"It seems a pity not to write something," she said. "Egyptology is as interesting as anything else."

"Yes—but why so interesting to you? It's not part of a collection. It's an isolated exhibit. It's not really in the character of the place. This Museum relates more to matters of archæological interest, etc., in this county of Kent."

"I don't think the catalogue would be complete if you didn't include it," she persisted. "Otherwise, why do you have it in the Museum at all?"

He seemed worried by her persistence, yet not averse to it.

"I'll come down presently and see what I feel about it," he said. "Will you just go and have a look at that case of arrow-heads? See if there's any particular specimen I ought to refer to—otherwise I shall pass that case over.

It should really be in room four, if we could find a place for it."

She went away and mounted the stairs to the half-landing. There was every intention in her mind to examine carefully the case of arrow-heads as he had instructed her, but the body of Ta-mai drew her towards it. She lifted up the cover of American oil-cloth. Leaning her elbows on the glass, she gazed down at the withered face beneath her.

Two thousand five hundred years! What an age of time to have kept one's spirit, and for it still to be there. For every time she looked at the face of Ta-mai she felt that the spirit of the truth-speaking daughter of Tchet-ra had not departed from the regions of space.

She knew but vaguely of theosophy. But she had read and re-read "The Song Celestial." While at college the "Light of Asia" had induced her to write to a Buddhist society in London publishing facts about the Buddhist religion. In all their various conversations, Mr. Bottleby had not yet touched upon that subject, except when one day, as he had been talking about the migratory instincts of birds, he had suddenly said: "What's your religion?"

Confused at the unexpectedness of the question and feeling it needed a particular answer, she had not known how to reply. He might be one of those who had a vicious weakness for dogmatic religion. She did not want to rouse antagonism. His approval of her as an assistant was more valuable to her than a dozen dogmas. She cast swiftly about in her mind for a conciliatory answer and, in accordance with an uncompromising direction of character which denied her many superficial friends, found nothing better than the truth.

"I haven't any," she had replied, "that goes about with a label on it."

She had waited in trepidation for his reply. For a long moment he had stared as though he were staring at the make of her spectacles, and then he had said:

"The nightingale in its migrations travels as far as Siberia."

He had not spoken of religion again. He had told her nothing of his ideas of theosophy. What she felt about the spirit of Ta-mai, as she stood there leaning on the hermetically sealed glass case, was thought in vapour, like scarves of mist floating nebulously across her mind. As with mist over the meadows, so in her mind it created all kinds of fantastic hallucinations. She saw the spirit of Ta-mai, a wandering, restless impulse without shape, hovering about the body there beneath her, urging towards the expression of life again, finding itself surrounded by human bodies already tenanted with spirits, strangers to the plane on which she had moved when doubtless she was one of the sacred women, wedded to Osiris in the Temple of Thebes.

For some incomprehensible reason, she felt she wanted to look at the body of Ta-mai with her naked eyes. She wore her glasses more for the saving of her sight than any actual aid to vision. Fear of headaches and the advice of an oculist induced her to wear them constantly. She was never without them. Yet there were times when, looking more with her mind than her sight, she took them off to feel the conscious touch of vision.

She laid them on the top of the case in front of her. Lowering her head close to the glass, she tried to pierce with her naked eyes that inscrutable expression which, by an hallucination, seemed to flicker and pass and come again upon the rigid features of Ta-mai.

What a secret there was there, hidden by the withered rucks of flesh that still shaped the parted lips and clung to the protruding cheek-bones! If these, like the leaf, could be removed! If the void of death could be spanned!

Her thoughts and her imagination were leading her into spaces where there was no substance for the mind to hold to. She was beginning to be confused by the venturous flight of her fancies when she heard Mr. Bottleby mounting the stairs. Even his approach for a moment had no power to bring her back to human contacts. He was standing by the side of her before she raised her head.

She realised then that he was looking at her as though he had never seen her before. What was the matter? Had one or the other of them lost their senses? There was a strange feeling in her mind as she saw the expression on his face that she had dreamed her existence for the last three weeks; that she was not there at all as his assistant, that she had only come down for the day from Crupper and Dodds' to apply for the post, and that he was there to tell her it was no good. A sense that everything was unreal or that it was so real that by fault of experience she could not recognise it, assailed her mind with sharp blows of fear.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Is there anything the matter with me?"

"You've changed," he said.

"How?"

"I don't know. You're different. You're not the same girl. You haven't got a degree. You've never been through college and struggled with city life to make your own living. It wasn't you told me about my grammar and altered my mistakes in style. It couldn't have been you."

She stared at him in a bewildered amazement. What was he talking about? What did he mean? Had something really happened to make it all a dream? Were those three weeks all a mirage? Had the vision of the happiest time in her life disappeared at last? She felt a tremor coming in her lip. There was a thought of distress in her mind that she wanted to run away, to escape from this tragic disillusionment.

"Why do you say that?" she faltered.

"Because you're not the same," he said. "I don't recognise you. What have you done to yourself?"

Suddenly she knew. It was her spectacles. They gave her the academic look. The first time she had put them on, she had cried to think she would never look her real self again. Common sense had soon dried her tears for her. Whatever she looked, it was preferable to headaches. So used had she got to them by now that, until this moment, she had forgotten the change they made in her.

As though afraid to let him see that other woman in her then, as though, with the sudden sternness she heard in his voice, he had frightened her with a warning of the insecurity of her post, she reached quickly for the horn-rimmed spectacles. As quickly she put them on.

"There," she said, "is that better?"

He seemed to come to himself.

"Yes—I can see you all right again now," said he, and she did not know whether she was glad or sorry. She had regained her assistantship. It was all real. Nothing was lost. Was nothing lost?

He stared back now at the glass of her spectacles. He saw a reflection of himself in them, and for the first time in his life was conscious of his own appearance.

He thought what an ass he looked.

CHAPTER XXIII

It was midway in April when they set out for their first expedition across country. Mr. Bottleby took nothing but a zinc specimen box in his pocket. Its bulk in no way interfered with the cut of his coat, which was the worst Jenny had ever seen him wear. Even Mrs. Twiss made no attempt to tidy him before he departed. Jenny saw the despairing look in her eye, but as it was soon after a fairly early breakfast, there was little fear he would be seen by those whom Mrs. Twiss called the gentry. Mr. Overend she allowed to be one of these. His legal manner impressed her. Having heard Mr. Purch bargaining over a purchase in the ironmonger's, she had never believed in his grand manner any more.

As for Mr. Mercer and Mr. Charrington, her snobbery about these two gentlemen because they were associated with trade was frank and unequivocal. She just said: "Shop!"

Mrs. Twiss did not mind so much how many of these saw Mr. Bottleby in what she called his "anyhows," but having once heard that, looking far from tidy, he had met Mr. Pennyquick—Mr. Pennyquick who did nothing for a living but just walk agreeably with a walking-stick and a little dog and say "Good morning" to people in the town—she had regarded it as the greatest stroke of ill-luck.

It being too early in the day for such as these to be abroad, Mrs. Twiss let him go that morning in the most abandoned of his "anyhows" with no more disapproval on her part than a gesture of despair. Even Jenny herself felt inclined to laugh when first she saw him.

She tried to imagine what her mother's feeling would be were she to behold her daughter walking down the street of any respectable town with a man dressed as Mr. Bottleby was dressed that morning. She tried to understand why at the thought of it she felt more exhilarated, more alive and proud in herself than she had ever felt in her life. For the first ten minutes as they walked in silence till they got out of the town, she asked herself what it was that made the vibration of life, and came to the conclusion it was when, as with the telegraph wires over their heads, it thrummed and trembled with the wordless messages it bore.

Once they were quit of the town and, not waiting to see how she would negotiate it, he had climbed a fence into the fields that left pavements and roads behind them, Mr. Bottleby began to talk.

For a while it was merely spasmodic conversation, a chance observation shot at her here and there, like a boy with peas and a pea-shooter. He hit or he missed. This first day in the country was too full of sights and sounds for him to wait to see which.

At the first cry of a chiff-chaff he had heard that year, he gripped her arm and held her still to listen.

"Hear that?"

"What?"

"Chiff-chaff. Hear him?"

She listened, imagining she heard, as much as actually hearing the two sharp notes blending with all the massed song of birds that rose from a belt of wood they were approaching. Standing there with his hand lifted and a light of expectation about his face, Mr. Bottleby irresistibly reminded her of a *chef d'orchestre* just waiting to give his instruments the signal to begin.

Then gradually with the silence of their voices and the clamour of the birds which, note by note as he heard them he named for the benefit of her ear, it all seemed actually like an orchestra to her. She caught a spirit of it from him, from the light on his face, the note of renewed wonder in his voice as, hearing each bird for the first time that year, he named its name as though he were naming an instrument—now wood, now wind.

This it was to be an assistant. This was her work. By violence of contrast, it brought back to her ears the music of a city with the sound of typewriters hammering in the office of Crupper and Dodds'. Here the wind made a stringed accompaniment through the young leaves of the beech trees. There she could still hear the confusion of carts on the cobbles in Creechurch Lane, the distant roar of traffic in Bishopsgate, the cries of paper boys and the fret of passing feet.

"Oh!" she suddenly exclaimed.

It was so unexpected that he looked round at her quickly, asking what was the matter.

She was reluctant to show him an impulse of sheer sentiment. He might laugh at her. He might think she was not after all really suitable for her job. She had not ignored the warning of his amazement when he found her without her spectacles. There were certain things he expected of her. She was not going to fail him in those. She had not required the whole of those first three weeks to realise that sentiment, whether he approved of it or not, was a quality amongst the constituents of human character, of which he knew nothing. She had read his "Evolution of Desire." By the end of these first three weeks, Jenny flattered herself that she knew Mr. Bottleby. There can be little doubt that she did, so far as Mr. Bottleby knew himself. Possibly a little further.

His attention to her repetition of quotations from the poets, and sometimes whole poems she knew by heart, did not deceive her. It was only the unaccustomed sound of the rhymed and rhythmical arrangement of words that arrested his interest. There was none of the emotional sentiment of the poet in his nature. Frequently he made her repeat pieces of Browning she knew by heart. But he seldom cared to hear more than once those poems more intimately alive with definite strokes of character. Blake he would always listen to, but made no effort to read him. "Tiger, tiger," fascinated him.

"There's the whole crux of life!" he shouted, when first he heard it. She was always trying new poetry to test him.

Often in the midst of most serious work on the catalogue, he would look across at the desk where she was typing and say, as though he were giving her a clerical order: "Say 'Tiger, Tiger.'"

Without taking her hands off the keys and in a prompt obedience, with no tone of a recitation in her voice, she would repeat:

"Tiger, tiger, burning bright."

Of the modern poets, he liked Walter de la Mare the best. Hearing her one day saying:

"A twangling harp for Mary,
A silvery flute for John,
And now we'll play the livelong day,
'The Miller and his Son,'"

he had wanted to know the story of the miller, and listened with his eyes fixed in a corner of the room while she said it all.

He had not looked at her when she had finished, but still had stared into the corner of the room, saying:

"The doves that lead you so far—eh—and never bring you near," as though it were a question to which he neither expected nor wanted an answer.

She could not persuade him to read it himself. He was never averse to hearing a new poem—often, in fact, he asked if she knew more. She spoke them on a level voice, almost without inflexion. Somehow she sensed he liked to hear them best that way. In that manner she read them to herself.

After three weeks he had exhausted most of the snatches and complete poems she knew by heart, and only the night before they started on this first excursion she had conceived the idea of learning fresh ones for his benefit. She lay in bed that night and by the light of the candle learnt the first of a new repertoire.

When, making that exclamation, he turned suddenly asking her what was the matter, it came into her mind then. On an impulse she answered with it.

"Pleasure it is
To hear, iwis,
The birdes sing.
The deer in the dale,
The sheep in the vale,
The corn springing;
God's purveyance
For sustenance

It is for man.
Than we always
To give him praise,
And thank him than,
And thank him than."

The silence after her voice, like a hollow in the ground filled by a running stream, was filled with the song of birds again from the wood.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"William Cornish."

"Mediæval?"

She was in a quandary. She did not know the exact date and he liked facts. She hazarded late fourteenth century and satisfied him with that. It was a period he felt more at home with than the Georgian poets, most of whom were far too introspective for this new taste for poetry she had discovered in him.

"And that's the meaning of your exclamation," said he. It was as near, she told him, as she could get.

They went on through the woods, where, often without explanation, he would suddenly stop and listen, catching a hand on her arm to silence her if she were talking. Often he would go down on his hands and knees, peering into the undergrowth at something which the trained quickness of his eye had seen where there appeared to her to be no movement at all.

Sometimes he pointed out the things he had observed to her. Sometimes he said nothing. He would get up quickly to his feet and stride on, when it became necessary for her to break into spasmodic runs to keep up with him.

Over ploughed fields, if he had not stopped occasionally to pick up a piece of flint from the fresh turned soil, she would have found it impossible to keep his pace. Through woods the trailers of brambles caught about her legs and tore holes in her stockings. Either from a sense of modesty, or a complete ignorance of her difficulties, he left her to manipulate the fences herself. It was with the greatest effort of control she disguised from him the fact that often she was out of breath. By the time the sun was midway in the heavens she was plainly tired, but would not have let him guess it for the world.

It was all too new, too satisfying, to suggest a moment or a thought of complaint. This was a new world, with a new purpose to animate and direct it. She felt closer to life than she had ever felt before. An overwhelming gratitude to him for everything, as though the woods and the fields were his, was like a fountain in her mind. Out of some extraordinary generosity he seemed to be sharing them with her. She felt she had no right to them, except what he allowed her. With the exception of his occasional silences, he allowed her the right to everything that was in his mind.

Here, too, out in the country, she found a different man in him from that she knew in the more exact surroundings of his work in the Museum. He was prone there to long discourses upon every subject that stimulated the speculations of his mind. Here he was short and abrupt, exclamatory and full of the impulses of a mere unthinking joy. She found him years younger, with the enthusiasms of a boy playing truant out of school. She heard him laugh for the first time, and his smile was so frequent that she was infected with an unceasing delight in everything about her.

With all this, she was not sorry when, coming to a stream, he sat down on the bank and said: "We'll stop here a bit. I always come here every year. There's enough to be learnt in this little bit of running water to fill volumes on the fresh-water insects. You're going to learn something now. Are you prepared?"

For the first time that morning he looked directly at her and realised she was out of breath. He could see her heart was thumping. Her efforts to let the breath come easily through her lips only made plainer the proof of it. He was suddenly aware not of her sex but that she was only a girl. He knew he had tried her too hard. In a stumbling way he began to make apology. With no consideration for tact, he put it all down to her lesser powers of endurance as a woman.

She hated that. Apart from the fact that it offended her defensive pride in her sex, it suggested the possibility that he might not want to bring her again. She had four brothers. She knew the distaste of men for the want of physical endurance in their womenfolk.

"I'm not tired," she said, and said it with such spirit as to startle him into the same kind of submissiveness as he showed to Mrs. Twiss when she insisted on brushing his clothes.

"I'm sorry," said he with a genuine repentance. "I didn't intend to hurt your feelings. I thought you looked tired. Doesn't seem to me such a terrible thing to have said."

Perhaps she took a little too much advantage of this note of submissiveness. It is a moot point whether a man likes or does not like at times to be bullied.

"Being out of breath is not being tired," she said with a certain degree of sharpness. "I'm not in training like you are. You've always lived in the country. You seem to forget that I've been sitting on one chair in an office for the last three years."

There was little doubt about it, Mr. Bottleby was being put in his place. He could command her services so far as work was concerned, but he could not drag her out across country as though they were following the beagles and then accuse her of being tired when she was merely out of breath. She let him understand this in no uncertain way, and, never knowing that she was fighting for her right to be taken out again, he learnt it with the meekness of a child in a kindergarten.

"I'm extremely sorry," he said. She had made him feel the enormity of his want of understanding. "Of course you're out of training. It was silly of me to walk so fast. My first day out in the country, I always feel I want to cover it all before the day's out. Well, lie down here. Lie down on your stomach and look into the stream here and I'll show you something."

She lay down as she was bid. He had made amends. This was their first conflict. It was not that she thought he was weak about it. All her wits were there to tell her where his strength lay. But she had won. She gazed into the running stream that turned the brown pebbles at the bottom and raced over them. There was another instrument in his orchestra. Its note rippled and trilled. But there was nothing, she said, that she could see.

"See that thing that looks like a little bit of stick—under the water there—down by that blue pebble?"

She looked. She saw the little piece of stick, scaled like armour. Fast though the stream was running down, it remained stationary.

"See it?" he muttered.

There was a note in his voice that excited her. She muttered, "Yes."

"Watch it."

"I am watching."

She saw it move. Up the stream. It was not a stick. She leant over the bank and watched it closer. Wild mint was growing there. A clump of kingcups was blooming on the opposite bank. A ring-dove was repeating its two soft monotonous notes in a wood near by. In cut patches, the water was throwing back the blue of a cloudless sky. It was nearly as hot as summer.

She felt and knew all those things at the same time that her mind was given to the phenomenon of this spectacle he showed her. She was learning something—some new thing—something about nature which, while to most people it might be quite useless, would be of eternal value to her.

This power of making real and permanent the eternal issues of nature and throwing material values like seed into the wind to find whatever soil might chance, was where his strength lay. It was not the strength of Mr. Crupper in Creechurch Lane, who, whenever there was a storm sat calculating in his office what wrecks there might be on the coast and, in his capacity of salvage broker, could tell to a nicety what profit would accrue to him. Compared with the men she had come in contact with in the City who undoubtedly ran the world and contributed to that commercial prosperity which made England, as they would have expressed it, what she was, this energy of Mr. Bottleby and his application of it to the affairs of life was like child's play.

When Mr. Crupper had heard that Jenny was leaving his office to become an assistant to the curator of a museum, he had stared at her in an amaze.

"A curator of a museum!" he had exclaimed.

"Yes."

"What! A man who collects birds' eggs and blows them? Who runs about the country with a butterfly net and fishes for tiddlers in the ponds?"

He was annoyed at her leaving him. He had offered her an immediate rise of half her salary. She had refused it. He had let her go, thinking she had lost her proper senses. She had known what he thought. It was what the greater part of the world would think of Mr. Bottleby himself. Yet the more she saw him, the more she understood him to be real and, beside all those in Creechurch Lane, of a strength of spirit beyond their comprehension.

"What is it?" Jenny asked presently when for some moments she had watched the animations of this thing beneath the water against the swift current of the stream.

They were both lying on their stomachs on the grass like children, fishing for tiddlers, as Mr. Crupper might have said. Pretty sort of work to keep England in her place amongst the nations! Ships might be wrecked on the Goodwin Sands, and a lot they would know about it, or care what could be salved from the waste of the sea. But her mind was not capable of visualising Mr. Crupper's contempt just then. She saw another of these moving objects beneath the water—and another—and another. Some were short and fat, others were long and thin. All had this power of locomotion against the stream.

"What are they?" she whispered.

He put his hand down into the water and lifted one up. It was a shell of armour plate. Countless tiny pieces of flaky gravel welded together in a tube-like case from the mouth of which a head shot forth and withdrew again, leaving its two feelers to play about in the unaccustomed medium of air.

"This," said Mr. Bottleby, "is the caddis-worm."

He then told her the life history of the caddis-fly, a romance as she listened to his telling of it. For again, somewhat as he had talked to Mrs. Wolhop, though in a degree finely regulated to her intellect, he made inevitably a story of it. He started right away from the beginning and ended with death, which, as he said, "the more you see of life, is merely a pause; the disappearance as it were of the thread in the spinning, that passes below and then appears above to make the intricate texture of the whole."

"Nature," said Mr. Bottleby, "squanders nothing. It is only machinery that has its dumps of clinker waste."

CHAPTER XXIV

THEY had a meal at the Hen Pheasant in the village of Haffenden. A couple of boiled eggs and some bread and cheese seemed a feast for gods, not men. Even Mr. Bottleby appeared conscious of the material as he took the first mouthful of his glass of draught ale.

"Some things have the quality of the eternal," he said, and lifted his glass again. "Here's one of them. It's older than civilisation. Older than man. I had a note from a naturalist travelling in Nigeria the other day, telling me he saw a baboon drunk with a home-made brew. He told me that the Pagans out there know as an indisputable fact that the baboons brew a kind of native beer named 'peto.' They steal corn-heads from the native farms and put them in hollows of the rocks filled with rain-water. For five or six days they leave them there to ferment. Then they get drunk on the liquor. Even Noah could make a brew, by all accounts, that would send some of our modern concoctions dribbling with shame back into the cellar.

"I see by the papers," he continued, "which I never read, that authorities in America think that prohibition has come to stay. I hear at the same time from a friend of mine who lives in Chicago that you can get an alcoholic poison in some corner of every street that will act on your intestines like sulphuric acid on a piece of zink. I suppose the law of any country will stay so long as the members of its government support it. That doesn't mean it will be obeyed."

He drank at intervals all the time he was talking till the pot was empty. Then he filled it again.

"In the whole course of history, there's been no government that could alter the laws of nature. Man after all is only an experimentalist. All that he invents and discovers has been made before him by Nature. He only takes out a fresh patent. Man rediscovers things in every succeeding civilisation, but the forces he lays bare and the laws he reveals were all in nature before he came out of the caves and the forests. When by mere legislation man can stop fruit from fermenting of its own accord after it falls to the ground, he can talk about a law of prohibition. The very word destroys its meaning. You can't prohibit Nature. This is good beer."

"That," said Jenny, "is the first time I've heard you talk like a human being."

In the act of putting a piece of bread and cheese into his mouth, Mr. Bottleby laid it down again in astonishment.

"I don't understand this," said he. "Aren't I as human as anyone else? Aren't I more human than those gentlemen you saw on the Council?"

"You haven't got their smugness," she replied. "You haven't got their hypocrisy. You don't live as they do for what they can get out of life. But they do have their likes and dislikes. I've been here several weeks and I've never heard you say that you liked any material thing till just now."

"What did I say just now?"

"You said, 'This is good beer.'"

"So it is."

"Yes—and you meant you liked it."

"So I do."

"Well, Mrs. Twiss said to me the other day it was the hardest job in the world to get you to eat anything."

"I'm hungry now."

"You mean you're human."

He looked steadily at her horn-rimmed spectacles and asked her what she knew about humanity.

"We all learn something from someone," said she. "I've learnt about caddis-flies to-day. Evidently the only way to make you human is to make you hungry. More than half your life, probably the whole of it, for all I know, you've not been aware of yourself at all. You haven't got the natural instincts of self-assertion and self-preservation. If Mrs. Twiss didn't put your food in front of you, you'd starve. If she didn't put your overcoat on your back in winter you'd go out and catch your death of cold. You wouldn't wear a hat. She tells me she often puts it on your head. Ought I to be talking like this? Do you mind?"

"I asked you to," said he.

"Yes, but I'm only your assistant."

He stared at her for a moment or two and then he said: "Mrs. Twiss thinks I'm odd, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, very odd. Please don't say I said so."

"And you do, too?"

"How do you want me to answer that?"

"As you feel—nothing else."

"I shan't lose my job?"

With no intention of paying her a compliment, he said quite naturally, "Oh no, you're here for good now." He suddenly remembered that reflection of himself in the glass of her spectacles. "I'm not such a fool as I look," he added. "Mrs. Twiss says I'd starve if she did not push the food in front of me. Perhaps she's right. But I know what I want and I don't let it go when I've got it."

She felt there was something extraordinary about this conversation, something beyond and outside both of them. He had the assurance to suppose that, no matter what her plan of life might be, she was going to remain there working for him. It tied her tongue from refuting this supposition when, had it been Mr. Crupper, she would have laughed at him for impertinence.

She said nothing.

"You can say what you like," he added. "Your job's all right. I'm going to write a new book next winter on the persistence and transmutation of instincts. You're going to improve my style. You're going to make it alive. You can say what you like. You don't leave Thurnham Museum. Do you find me odd?"

"Extremely," said she.

He forgot his bread and cheese. He even forgot his draught beer. He leaned with his elbows on the table, full of interest while she ate her boiled egg. "Why?" he asked.

"Well—this very assumption of yours that I'm going to stay on indefinitely in Thurnham."

"Don't you feel you are?" said he.

That was an awkward question. It was almost unfair. She certainly wished nothing better in life than the day she was having in this free adventure with nature, when at every step, it seemed, she learnt something she had never heard before. But was that to be the whole of her life? Was it any woman's life? There had been a time when she had thought she would never marry. She had passed through yet another phase when it seemed impossible to believe she would never have children. The two had been irreconcilable. She had applied for the post of Mr. Bottleby's assistant, feeling that work worth doing was the only thing worth having in life. Never had it seemed so well worth doing as it had done these last three weeks. Nevertheless, she felt his question to be unfair. She told him so.

What would she say next? She was forcing him to a consideration of her as an individual—an attitude of mind he had never adopted towards anyone else in his life. Yet the more she said, the less he understood her. Unfair? What was there unfair about it? He was practically guaranteeing her occupation for the rest of her life. As time went on, she would become more useful, more valuable. She would be worth more and more to him and, if it had to be cut out of his own salary, he would pay her more, until it became a good living for any woman to make. He did not know the value of money. He knew the value of such services as hers. If it were a matter of increasing her pay, he would increase it there and then. He was shrewd enough to know that, with her classical education and her knowledge of languages, her mind was complement to his with all that which he had learnt in the school of nature. It seemed inconceivable to him that any girl should give up an occupation so congenial and profitable as this would prove itself to be.

Where his own work was concerned, Mr. Bottleby was not wanting in a sense of intuition. Though apparently he had hardly been aware of her presence that morning, he had not been lost to a realisation that she was revelling in every moment of it. Through a submerged consciousness, her enthusiasm had penetrated into his mind. He knew she was happy. Her happiness had infected his enthusiasm.

Making allowance for the fact that this was his first day out in the country that year, it had never seemed quite so enthralling to him before. It had felt to him as though he had found the caddis-worms for the first time. For the first time it had almost seemed he had heard that chiff-chaff, the willow-wren they had discovered building, the wry-neck they had watched at work in the hollow of an apple tree in a farm orchard. It was beyond anything to expect of a man that he could part with such valuable assistance and companionship as she had brought him. She was more than an assistant. He had told her so. He had said she was a collaborator. Wasn't that enough for any girl? If she did not realise it now, she would when the catalogue was finished and he began his book on the persistence and transmutation of instincts.

"What's unfair about it?" he repeated, this time aloud. "I ask you if you don't feel you are here at this work for good, and you say the question's unfair."

"Perhaps you're not used," said Jenny, "to considering other people's points of view."

No. Perhaps he was not.

"But that doesn't explain why the question's unfair," he persisted.

"It's unfair," said she, "because, if I answer it, it forces me to say things about myself that I'd rather keep to myself."

"What things?"

There was almost a note of emotional curiosity in his voice which was strange to her and extraordinary to him as he heard it.

"Oh—things I sometimes think about, that's all."

"Yes, but can't you tell me what they are? If they affect your staying here they affect me."

She saw the justice of that.

"Well, some time or other I might want to be married. I might want a home."

"You're engaged, are you?"

Even his contempt was emotional. This marrying was the curse of young women whose intellects were any value at all. Why in the name of heaven they equipped themselves for useful work in the world and then, just when they had found a serviceable niche, they wanted to go and throw the whole of their preparation to the four winds in order to take on the fretsome troubles of a home, was more than he could understand. This was why he ought to have had a young man. A young man could have gone and married fifty women if he had wanted to, and it would have made no difference to his work. Yet, as he thought of a young man there with him that day, Mr. Bottleby knew quite well his present companion had been infinitely preferable. A young man would have wanted to walk much faster than he had walked; he would probably have voiced his own opinions when they were not wanted.

"Are you engaged?" he repeated. There was a feeling of sickness somewhere in the region of his stomach as he waited for her answer.

"No—I'm not," she replied.

"But you've got some young man in your mind?"

She did not know whether to laugh at or resent his questions. They were so frankly inquisitive, and yet she felt it was no idle or personal curiosity in him. He did not know what he was asking. He did not know in what secret depths of her whole heart and nature he was probing. Natural history was one thing and human nature was another to him. He might know the habits and customs of the caddis-worm from birth through all its metamorphoses till death, but he had not begun to reckon the natural instincts of man.

"I haven't got any young man in my mind," she said on the verge of laughter; and then, as she would have snapped a dry stick, she snapped her laughter as he asked her if it was because she was not satisfied with the salary she was getting.

She did not reply. For a moment she looked at him, unbelievingly, too hurt to try and understand. The next she rose to her feet and went out of the parlour of the Hen Pheasant, waiting in the road till he had paid the bill and joined her.

They had started to walk back by another way to Thurnham. He was afraid of her then. Obviously he had hurt her feelings—but why, it was beyond his powers of comprehension to understand.

He had tried to think of things to say as they crossed the fields. Everything seemed futile. He did not know the sort of things that brought women out of themselves to their senses.

Presently he saw a kestrel hawk hovering in the air above their heads. He stopped and had the temerity to take her arm, directing her observation to the fluttering wings. It was in his province, the only thing he could fall back upon to attract her interest and attention.

"Kestrel hawk," he said, "waiting to swoop." It came into his mind to tell her about the exhumation of the body of Ta-mai. He spoke about "Ba" the bodily spirit of the departed dead—"Ba" the hawk-headed man.

"And when I came back to the Council Chamber," he concluded "there was a kestrel hawk, settled on the corner of the coffin."

She stared up at the hawk above their heads. He could not distract her eyes from it. Only when it had swooped and disappeared into the belt of bracken did she seem to remember where she was.

CHAPTER XXV

THE life of Mr. Bottleby had been one undisturbed sequence of tranquil events until his meeting with Mrs. Wolhop and the encounter with her husband on board the *Georgina Mary* at Rochester. His early education after he had left a dame's preparatory had been at one of the smaller public schools. Later he had gone for science to Vienna and Leipzig. He had never had any fights with his fists at school. Whenever and wherever possible he had avoided cricket and football, having no eye to hit or kick a moving object and being but poorly equipped for that matter to perform any feats of skill with one that was stationary. He had learnt once how to palm a penny and produce it from the top of his head. This he had never forgotten. But it was his only accomplishment.

So far as romantic adventures were concerned he had had none. Girls in his youth had laughed at him, at his somewhat ungainly walk, at the way, even then, his clothes seemed loath to hang with any sense of symmetry upon his back. Later in life, women had ignored him. He had never in the most indirect measure been mixed up in what in a young man's life is called an affair.

Once a lady had spoken to him in London in the streets. She had said, "Good night, dearie."

Not quite catching the term of endearment and thinking in the darkness she might have mistaken him for someone else, he had replied: "Good night—but I think you must have made a mistake."

To which, swinging in her walk quickly with his, she had answered, "No, I haven't. You were down in Brighton last summer."

He had denied the fact, not emphatically, because at that age, he was far too afraid of them to be emphatic with women. He had never been to Brighton in his life. She must have made a mistake.

"Well," she had persisted, "you're exactly like a boy I knew down there. Nice boy he was. We had a good time. I can be fair sporty you know."

Mr. Bottleby would not have known it unless she had told him. In fact he was not quite sure what "sporty" meant as applied to women. At school, he knew, he had not been what the other boys called "sporty." He had hated games. He was not quite sure what games women played. Wishing to be polite, he had said he was sure she was.

Up till that moment he had thought it was an awkward if genuine case of mistaken identity. He must have been extremely like someone she knew, and she was loath to accept his assurance that he was not the same person. But when he agreed he was sure she must be sporty, it had a peculiar effect upon her. She took his arm and, in the open street—though fortunately it was quite dark—she nudged him with a sudden sideward movement of her body. He was not quite certain, but it seemed as though she pushed him with her hip. He was jolted sideways on the pavement.

Then he had suddenly recollected the tales he had heard from students at college about the women in big cities. A sheer terror had possessed him. He had felt, as later he was to experience it, the same panic as when he entered Mrs. Charrington's drawing-room and was introduced to Mrs. Spiers. Disengaging himself from the lady's arm, as though he were freeing himself from the tentacles of an octopus, he had sped down a side street with gigantic strides, prepared at any moment to break into a run if she followed. She had had enough knowledge of human nature not to consider that worth while. Nevertheless he heard her voice calling after him and using such language as for some time had made him terrified whenever he passed a woman appearing but casually occupied in the street.

This was the only adventure Mr. Bottleby had ever had until, when bringing the body of Ta-mai on board the *Georgina Mary,* he had encountered Mrs. Wolhop.

In some peculiar way, quite foreign to his nature, he had been conscious of her as a feminine entity. He had observed, if he had not felt, her purely animal attraction. Considering it afterwards, he had been able to understand the jealousy of Captain Wolhop, though at the time he had been quite incapable of appreciating the form in which he had expressed it. The strange part of it all had been that Mrs. Wolhop had evidently been interested in him.

Then again with Miss Tripson, he had felt so palpable an antipathy as to surprise even himself. One way or another, he had never come across a woman who had inspired in him so strong a feeling of antagonism. Women to him had been no more than creatures of the female sex, part of the design of nature, calculated to obey certain instincts necessary to the perpetuation of the species. There were men, too, who occupied this category in his mind. He regarded Mr. Purch, who had had seven children, in much the same way as he would have looked at a prize animal in a cattle show.

But with Miss Tripson he had experienced a sense of aversion so strong as made it almost seem to be outside himself. During the ten minutes she was being interviewed by the council, Mr. Bottleby had known that if they had insisted upon selecting her as his assistant, he would undoubtedly have thrown up the post of curator and employed his energies and his knowledge elsewhere.

And now, returning from this first excursion with Jenny Hazlitt and sitting alone over his supper that evening, he had been dimly conscious again of an attitude of his mind towards this girl which was entirely new to him.

She had hinted at the possibility of her one day being married. Hinted! When he came to think it over, it was he who had dragged it out of her. She had been reluctant to talk about it at all. Indeed her very reluctance made it the more potential.

Could he prevent it? Extraordinary as it seemed, he undoubtedly could not. Did he want to prevent it? Still more extraordinarily was he aware that he did. Something there was about her mind which, as he had realised before, was complementary to his own. Her corrections of his style, the trenchant criticisms she had made, not so much of the matter as of the form of his book, "The Evolution of Desire," had made him appreciate the value she would be to him in his future work. He had known his arguments in that book had not been put as forcibly as they might. He knew he had not marshalled his facts in irresistible array. But he had never plainly admitted the fact to himself until, after her first reading of it, Jenny had frankly told him so.

Until then he had never known the value of criticism. None of his scientific friends had ever had the candour or the courage to tell him of his faults. It had had a peculiar effect upon him. It had made him ambitious. Within so short a time as those three weeks during which she had been working with him he had received the impetus to write this new book on the persistence and transmutation of instincts. It was a gigantic subject. But with this new help of criticism it did not dismay, it exhilarated him. She must not marry. It was preposterous. He would make her work so interesting to her that she would not want to marry.

Mrs. Twiss came in with a dish of apple charlotte, a confection which she knew by experience was always tempting to his appetite. As she set it down in front of him he looked up at her with a directness in his gaze not usually characteristic of him.

"Mrs. Twiss," he said, "*is* it a common instinct of woman to want to marry?"

"Yes, sir," she replied.

"Why?"

She opened her eyes very wide and she stared all round the room as though, somewhere in some corner of the apartment, she might find inspiration for an answer that would satisfy a man of his intelligence. Apparently she found none of entire satisfaction. Her eyes had the same stare in them when they came round and settled on his face again.

"I suppose it is," said she, "that being brought up to trouble, women can't do without it. They hanker after it, as you might say. It's a kind of second nature to them."

As a reason this did not wholly satisfy Mr. Bottleby. She had not supposed it would. He wanted immediately to know if that were why she had married herself.

"Well, you see, sir," she said, "there are women and women."

This startled him. It was so plain and simple a truth that whenever he had casually thought about women, as, for instance, he had of Mrs. Wolhop, it had never occurred to him before. He had always considered women as though in one piece, some more highly coloured than others, some frankly drab and repulsive like Miss Tripson, but all woven off the same loom with no break or variation in their texture. Here was Mrs. Twiss saying there were women and women, and it had never occurred to him till then.

"Do you mean," he asked, "that some want to be married and some don't?"

She was too astonished by this curious interest in Mr. Bottleby to think of being diplomatic or even careful in her answers.

"Oh, no, sir—they all want to be married," she said.

"It's like a dog going down a rabbit burrow. He just wants to know if there's anything at the bottom of it, whether he believes there's a rabbit there or not. But there's less and less of 'em wants to have children. At least that's my way of seein' it. There's not much catch a poor woman havin' a child, you know. Haven't you never heard a woman sayin' it's more trouble than it's worth?"

Mr. Bottleby had never heard a woman talk about having children in his life, but he nodded his head.

"Well—that's about it," said Mrs. Twiss.

"Then you think," said Mr. Bottleby, "that if a woman can be given enough interest in life and sufficient to live upon she might not want to marry at all?"

Mrs. Twiss thought nothing of the kind. She had said nothing in fact to make him suppose it, but rather to the contrary. Yet such was the functioning of her brain that it operated merely as her body operated, in the capacity of a menial servant. She felt that the affirmative to this was the answer Mr. Bottleby required, just as one day he needed apple charlotte for his supper and on another banana fritters or a milk pudding.

"That's right, sir," she said amiably. "I'm sure I'd never have married—if I'd known. But you're not thinking of marryin' yourself, sir—are you?"

The prospect of such a construction being put upon his question horrified Mr. Bottleby. He jumped in his chair. With a kind of terror he gazed at Mrs. Twiss as though her very mentioning of it had made it a possibility, and he exclaimed: "Me? Married? Mrs. Twiss, you don't think a thing like that could happen to me—do you? I mean—I'm not like a dog. I have no inclination to look down a rabbit burrow. Matrimony contains no magnetic attraction for me."

She helped him to a portion of apple charlotte and begged him to eat it while it was hot.

CHAPTER XXVI

FEW people were better set up and intellectually furnished than Mr. Bottleby to write an interesting and original work on the persistence and transmutation of instincts.

Of the force of circumstance he knew nothing.

He had acted all through his life as though there were no such thing as circumstance at all and, as though providence had considered it would be taking a mean advantage of one so ingenuous, circumstance had left him mercifully alone until that day when he had brought the mummied body of Ta-mai on board the *Georgina Mary*.

From that onwards, providence reserved no special regard for him. After that, the ship of Mr. Bottleby's destiny having been safely harboured since its building, was launched upon that voyage of adventure which it is the lot of very few to escape.

The advent of Jenny Hazlitt so closely into his mental life was one event the significance of which he was quite unable to determine. He just accepted her, as he accepted everything that was of value to his work. The mere thought of her leaving him he thrust aside. It was unthinkable, therefore, in his experience it could not be. Marry? She couldn't marry. If he had to pay her half his own salary he would prevent it. He neither knew the value nor the limitations of money. He just lodged it in the bank as it came and did not even trouble to put it on deposit. If she wanted to marry he would merely increase her salary until it was not worth her while to alter her condition. He simply would not accept a circumstance of that nature. His mind disgorged it.

But it was a different matter when Mrs. Naylor began to raise objections to the early-morning risings which were becoming Jenny's habit in her further excursions with Mr. Bottleby.

There was a good deal in the curator's contention that the wild life of nature is never so open a book to the naturalist as in the early morning before man has shaken the earth with his labour.

Having some apprehension as to what Jenny would put up with in regard to the hours of her work, he had begun with a natural and quite sub-conscious cunning to advance the hour at which, upon these excursions, they set out. Discovering then that the earlier it was in the day the better she liked it, he came along one morning at five o'clock and threw pebbles up against the window of her bedroom looking out on to Leather Lane.

It has been remarked before that Mr. Bottleby's aim at a moving object was not to be considered; that is to say, the moving object had no reason to consider it. It was of some account to anyone or anything else in the neighbourhood. In the case of a stationary object the chances were he would hit it once in six consecutive attempts.

His first shot with a pebble at Jenny's window being so near the mark, he was emboldened to try again and with renewed vigour. Selecting a big stone out of the pebbles he had in his pocket, since he argued that the heavier the missile the more certainty there was of the aim, he threw it about twice as hard as the first.

Never having had the experience to judge his own strength in these matters, he must have thrown it very hard, for not only did it strike a window, but it broke the pane. A star of fractured glass appeared like a planet in the black gape of the window. Even this would not have been so unfortunate had it been the window he had aimed at. But it was the one to the right instead of to the left of the door down in the lane.

The moment he saw what he had done, Mr. Bottleby had a puerile inclination in his legs to run away. There is little doubt that had he been sharp about things like this he would have done so before it was too late. He was just about to turn away and "shin it"—as they say—down Leather Lane, when the window above him was flung open. Mrs. Naylor, as God and Mr. Wincklebotham, the draper, with a flannel night-gown, had together contrived to make her, thrust out her head.

"Who's that breaking my windows?" she shouted.

Had that puerile impulse in Mr. Bottleby been deeply rooted in what he himself would have called a persistent instinct, he would have taken to his heels then and there and lost no time about it. But never in his youth had the curator practised those adventures of knocking on doors and running away. He had never made life worth living with a pea-shooter from a secretive doorway. He had never known the abandoned joy of a squirt from the upper window of a house in a crowded street. The instinct had long been transmuted into other channels.

Being addressed with a plain question, he felt himself in duty bound to answer it.

"Who's that breaking my windows?" Mrs. Naylor shouted for the second time while he was gathering his wits.

And then, with a simple though somewhat timorous statement of fact, he replied:

"It's Mr. Bottleby."

When she heard who it was, Mrs. Naylor hid Mr. Wincklebotham's stock line in flannel night-gowns behind the muslin curtains.

"Well, I must say," Mr. Bottleby heard her remark, evidently to Mr. Naylor in the bed, "that's no reason for breaking my windows."

Looking ruefully at Jenny's window, Mr. Bottleby turned away. There was no more to be done and apparently no more to be said. He dared not trust himself to try his aim again. He had lost all confidence in it. He went out that morning by himself and, finding an interesting deposit in Alford drifts, was not back again till midday.

News awaited him. Mrs. Naylor had informed Jenny that this early rising in the morning was so disturbing to the house, let alone the damage done to her window, that she would be much obliged if she would look for rooms elsewhere.

"And she's coming to see you herself this evening," said Jenny in conclusion.

Mr. Bottleby gazed at her in genuine and bewildered innocence. What had she done, or for that matter, what had he done—except for the breaking of a window which could easily be mended and for which of course he would pay—that affected the peace of Leather Lane? Some of the men living there went out to work at half-past five. It might be justly said that Jenny herself was going out to work. It did not occur to him that if that were the case, two pounds a week for a twelve-hour day was poor remuneration. But Mr. Bottleby did not reckon in this manner.

Nature would not wait for those who were not up betimes to meet her. Where nature was concerned, he knew no such thing as procrastination. Unpunctuality to him was a crime against nature when he had any assignation with her, but he would often keep Jenny waiting half an hour for letters he had to sign.

Circumstance had not yet bent Mr. Bottleby to the inevitable. Captain Wolhop's fist had not convinced him there were things in this life that he must yield to. Even Mrs. Naylor, when she came that afternoon, properly dressed, to convey her indignation, did not open his eyes to the inviolable fact that there are some things in this world for which there is no price of compensation. The results of them must be faced, and those who have not the spirit to oppose them with courage must be beaten under and disappear from the common consideration of their fellow-men.

There was no question of Mr. Bottleby having courage. With so high a moral courage had he faced Captain Wolhop that that gentleman's physical superiority had been quelled by it. He had not done what Mr. Bottleby had admitted he was quite capable of doing. He had not thrown the curator six times in succession into the river. Had he done this, Mr. Bottleby might in the end have yielded to and been bent by circumstance.

It was the same with Mrs. Naylor. Only here the proprietress of number ten Leather Lane was of more tenacious material than Captain Wolhop. She was not satisfied with the compensation for her broken window. Being dressed that evening in her best clothes, she felt in every way equipped to meet the curator—the whole council of the museum if necessary.

"You must have my window mended of course," she said, and the note in her voice might have cut the glass all ready for the job; "but that doesn't mean I'm compelled to go on having this young lady disturbing the whole neighbourhood by the time she gets up of a morning, let alone your coming down there in the street and throwing up stones to wake her."

"But I can get an alarm clock, Mrs. Naylor," suggested Jenny.

"And have a beastly thing like that going off with a rattle just when hard-working people are getting their last hour of sleep? No, thank you, Miss Hazlitt."

"Well, it'll be very difficult for me to get rooms anywhere else," said Jenny. "I've been about to different places this morning and everyone's full up. It's the summer time. They've all let their rooms."

She pushed her horn-rimmed spectacles on to her nose. She was finding it difficult to keep her temper. It had been distinctly foolish of Mr. Bottleby to do what he did, especially if he could not be sure of his aim; but it was exasperating of Mrs. Naylor to behave in this manner.

Mr. Bottleby sat mildly listening to the argument that arose between them. He had never heard an argument between two women before. He had never been interested to listen. Now it seemed to him an incredible thing to think that in the end Mrs. Naylor could not be persuaded to allow Miss Hazlitt to stay on at number ten Leather Lane. She paid her rent. She was a lady. She was so immeasurably superior to Mrs. Naylor that it seemed to him to be an honour for the landlady to shelter her under her roof. He could not conceive the possibility of Mrs. Naylor wanting anyone else. If she had told him of her predilection for young men he would not have believed it. Miss Hazlitt was there, in occupation, paying an extortionate rent, together with extras even a sea-side landlady might blush to ask for. What more could she possibly want? In addition to this, Miss Hazlitt's work was there, in Thurnham, at the museum. There appeared to Mr. Bottleby to be no leg for her to stand upon. There was no force behind her argument. And it was here that his ignorance of the force of circumstance was to confront him with the implacability of the inevitable.

Mrs. Naylor wanted a change of company in Leather Lane, and nothing in the power of heaven or on earth was going to despoil her of this opportunity of getting it.

In three days' time the bill came in to Mr. Bottleby for the repair of Mr. Naylor's window, and Jenny, within four days of her notice to quit, was still without the prospect of finding rooms elsewhere. Everyone who had rooms to let in Thurnham was full up.

The curator sat in the armchair at the desk in his office staring at the impenetrable obstacle of a woman's will. Never in all his life had he encountered it before. For not only was Mrs. Naylor's will in the matter, there was the force of circumstance as well. Of these two agencies in the presence of life, Mr. Bottleby knew little or nothing.

It was as bad, if not worse, than the prospect of Jenny one day getting married. At least that had the redeeming quality of being speculative and in the future. This was definite and it operated in four days. If in four days she found she could not get rooms elsewhere, she would have to leave Thurnham, leave her work, and he would have to look out for another assistant already domiciled in the town.

It was impossible. More than that it was ludicrous. From the quality of intelligence he had seen about him in Thurnham, with its whole population of about ten thousand people, there had not been one with whom he would have entrusted the blowing of a sparrow's egg.

Without being aware of it, Mr. Bottleby was finding himself in this emergency thrust upon the quality of his wits. For an hour that morning he cudgelled his brains. Then, with a shout of delight, as he realised the means of escape from the predicament, he leapt to his feet, striding through all the rooms of the museum to find Jenny.

She was putting the fresh labels he had written on the specimens in the geological section. Taking no notice of a visitor who was bent over one of the cases in the gallery, he called out from one end to the other: "I've got it!"

It was not difficult to see the state of mind he was in. A note of hilarious excitement was in his voice. Jenny came down the gallery to him as quickly as she could. There was no knowing what he might not say in that condition. Surprised out of the study of a donation he had made the year before, the visitor was standing up to listen to what it was

Mr. Bottleby had got. Before Mr. Bottleby could say any more Jenny was at his side.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"The rooms," said he. "I've got it. Where you can go."

With no desire to have her private affairs discussed before museum visitors, as undoubtedly Mr. Bottleby in his state of excitement would have discussed them, she went to his office, sure of his following her. So fast did he hurry after her that, as they passed the glass case containing the body of Ta-mai, he trod on her heels. She stumbled and fell, catching at the case to save herself. A pair of scissors in her hand struck sharply against the glass. Mr. Bottleby stepped forward and helped her to her feet.

"It's all my fault," he said excitedly. "It's all my fault—but I've got it. Mrs. Naylor can whistle for lodgers"—which, being an accomplishment of the lips Mr. Bottleby had never attained, meant more to him than most people.

Almost before he had closed the door behind them, he had begun to tell her.

"The curator's wing," he said. "There are two rooms there I never occupy. Mrs. Twiss tidies them out every week, but I never use them. You can have a bedroom and a sitting-room there, be as snug as a bug in a rug"—a slang expression like this showed how excited he was—"and have your meals with me or in your own sitting-room—just as you like."

Jenny stared at him in astonishment. Did he realise what he was talking about? However obvious the suggestion might be, as far as accommodation was concerned, had he no conception of what people might say?

"But I can't come and live in the curator's wing with you," she stammered.

"Why not?"

"Well—it isn't the sort of thing people do," said she.

"They don't do it," shouted Mr. Bottleby, "because it's not required of them. It's not forced upon them. I must have you here to work with me. You must have somewhere to live. These two statements are unanswerable. What other people say is a matter for their own tongues. Do you want to live your own life or other people's? Are you answering for your own soul to God or the county council? Do you want to do your work with me?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well, how much do you want to do it?"

She did not answer.

"Does it mean as much to you as the opinion of Mrs. Charrington or Mrs. Spiers or any of the ladies whose lives consist of what they can say of the lives of others?"

"Of course it does."

"Then why do you hesitate about it? Is your life your own?"

"What's the good of asking me that?"

"Well—are you going to make it yourself or are you going to have it knitted for you at a mothers' meeting?"

The change in Mr. Bottleby was astonishing. Circumstance and Mrs. Naylor between them were contriving to extract from him a speciousness of argument one would scarcely have thought him capable of. He was almost eloquent. He certainly proved himself to be possessed of a quality of wit. Except when he had liked the beer at the Hen Pheasant he had never seemed so human to Jenny before.

"I've never come up against these considerations in life before," said he. "I've heard they exist. But I fail to see the force of them. What people say of you does not make you what you are. It's what you are matters. Are you conscientious and keen about your work?"

"Of course I am!"

"Are you learning anything by working here? Are you raising the standard of yourself higher than it was when you worked in Creechurch Lane?"

"You know that. A thousand times."

"Well, are the tongues of Mrs. Charrington and Mrs. Overend and all the society of Thurnham to have the power to prevent you from doing that? If what you can do for yourself is a better thing than what they can say of you—false or true—why don't you choose it? This situation being forced upon me, I can realise that many people are confronted with the same problem and few have courage enough to solve it with the truth. It's one of the penalties of civilisation. But if nature were conducted on such plans as those, the world would have become as barren as the moon long before this. Man can fill the world with prohibitions, he can write 'Verboten' on every doorway, but he can't prevent the physical or spiritual growth in nature except amongst those who are too weak in the roots to grow. These opinions of people you're afraid of——"

"I'm not afraid," she interrupted.

He took no notice. He was concerned with the truth of what he was saying.

"These are the opposing principles of life, intended to stimulate the growth of spirit to overcome them. They have their virtue, like lime in the soil—though they're more like clay. Lime lightens—clay clogs the roots. They're more like clay. But if the whole of mankind were to submit to them, it would die out, like the mastodon and the dinosaurus. Public opinion is merely the obstructive circumstance that weeds out the weakling in the survival of the fittest."

He was beginning to forget the issue in the interest of the subject. Jenny interposed before it was too late to stop him.

"Then if it isn't so much what people can say it's what they can do," said she. "Don't you realise they can make things very uncomfortable for you in a place like this? It wouldn't be so bad if there were a chaperon——"

With a shout of laughter in which she heard the word "chaperon"—like an echo of her own, he jumped up and left the room. In two minutes he returned with Mrs. Twiss, leading her by the arm.

"Here's your chaperon," he said—"the most respectable woman in Thurnham."

Jenny laughed. His persistence had the quality of being ludicrous. She asked Mrs. Twiss what she thought about it.

"I don't know nothing what I've got to think about," said the bewildered woman.

Mr. Bottleby explained the situation in language about one-tenth of which she understood. She grasped the main essentials. The lady assistant had no place where she could lodge in Thurnham. Mr. Bottleby, mad as he was, seemed to be sane enough in his wish to keep her for himself. Mrs. Twiss, before she came to the museum, had had a young man staying in her house and no one had thought nothing and no one had said nothing. There was nothing to think or to say. His mentioning of the social proprieties had been Dutch to her. There were the two rooms vacant in the curator's wing. It was a thankless task cleaning out empty rooms. She liked people about her. Miss Hazlitt, with her spectacles, was a quiet little thing and would not be so much more bother as what would probably be made worth her while to take. She saw nothing against it. Indeed she saw everything in its favour.

Now whether Mrs. Twiss had a romantic turn to her mind, as it would seem most women have, and whether she saw interesting developments in this arrangement, it would not be possible to say. When women are set upon a romantic adventure, they become as practical as a chartered accountant. Whatever she may have thought, she gave her opinion in the most matter-of-fact way.

"I should say," she replied, "if you was to ask me, that that's what you ought to have done from the first instead of squanderin' money in Leather Lane. I'll have those two rooms in Pimlico order by Saturday and then you can come in."

"In what order?" Jenny asked when she had gone.

"Pimlico."

"But why Pimlico?"

"That's a phrase of theirs in these parts," said Mr. Bottleby. "I can only suppose Pimlico is an orderly place."

CHAPTER XXVII

WHETHER the council was aware of the change in Jenny's domicile is only to be guessed at. They were certainly not formally acquainted of the fact by Mr. Bottleby. So long as he was the curator of the museum, the apartments in that wing set aside by Dr. James were for his use. By inference it was up to his conscience what he did with them. There were no qualified restrictions as to their disposition.

Mr. Bottleby's conscience was quite clear.

And whatever conscience Jenny may have had, in ways that women are more readily susceptible to, it was largely pacified by Mrs. Twiss's ready acceptance of the post of chaperon. The arguments also that had been used by Mr. Bottleby had carried a weight of conviction with them.

To return to work in London after this wonderful month she had spent in Thurnham was more than her sense of the rightness and promise of things could bear. She was fully conscious of that growth of spirit he had spoken of. As an individual it was her undeniable right to grow. She knew she would in time have been exterminated in Creechurch Lane under the soulless influence of Mr. Crupper and the men with whom he dealt. Her roots there, indeed, as Mr. Bottleby had said, were set in clay. Everything about her had clogged her spirit's growth. Now she felt like a plant transplanted. She knew the life-giving properties of this new soil.

It would have been impossible to go back again to that death-bringing atmosphere after these open skies of heaven. If conscience had stirred in her as to the advisability of Mr. Bottleby's suggestion, she had been only too ready to listen to his arguments and accept reassurance from the willing assistance of Mrs. Twiss.

For the next three or four weeks her life had in it all the elements of a fairy tale. Mr. Bottleby was beginning to collect material—apart from the notes he had already amassed for his work on the persistence and transmutation of instincts. They discussed it on their cross-country excursions. The importance of it grew in her mind as the substance accumulated. She felt she was contributing towards the creating rather than the despoiling purposes of life, and all the time, almost without knowing it, she was realising humanities in Mr. Bottleby.

He had no conception of the common courtesies due to women. He never opened a door for her and scarcely ever waited till she had finished speaking. But on that first day in the country when she had admitted she was out of breath and on various occasions when some weakness or physical inferiority of her sex had been brought home to him, he had revealed a concern and a tenderness of consideration beneath which she discerned a man whose more human characteristics had never been given opportunity to mature.

From Mrs. Twiss also she learnt one or two things about his generosity and consideration which had surprised her.

In a letter she had written home she said:

"He's what you would call a silly ass and he can bray—

but I believe he'd carry you on his back till his legs dropped under him."

She was not conscious how many times she went into the kitchen and talked to Mrs. Twiss about Mr. Bottleby. It was not that she underrated Mrs. Twiss's intelligence. For many things she admired it. It was more that in this matter she was blind and could see no meaning in the small, sharp eyes of Mrs. Twiss watching her.

"I expect," said Mrs. Twiss on one occasion, "you'll be marryin' one of these fine days, and then off you'll go and leave us."

"I shall never marry," said Jenny abruptly, without a qualm in her conscience concerning the suggestion she had made to Mr. Bottleby. That was true when she said it. This was true now in the kitchen with Mrs. Twiss. She did not inquire into the reason for her change of mind. She would have had arguments as convincing for the one as she had now for the other. Sitting on the table while Mrs. Twiss made a batter pudding, she proceeded to give them to the shrewd old woman at length.

They were all essentially modern. She never expected to find a man she could love and whose intelligence she could respect at the same time.

"Marriage isn't just a ceremony," she said. "It's either a tragedy or an achievement."

Not quite able to follow this, Mrs. Twiss had made a remark of her own. She made it into the basin containing the batter pudding.

"Mr. Bottleby's a clever man," she said.

"Well—of course," said Jenny, and proceeded to give a shrewd and unbiased analysis of Mr. Bottleby's intellect that would have surprised him for its accuracy could he have heard it. To Mrs. Twiss it meant no more than that Jenny was interested to talk about him. Occasionally to encourage her, she would interpose the remark, "Well—there now—is he?" But whether he was or was not made not a ha'pennyworth of difference to her. What she was interested in was the light of interest in Jenny's eye and the uninterruptible sound in her voice.

"There'll be a pair of you then," said Mrs. Twiss presently, when she could get a word in sideways. "'Cos he'll never marry. He don't know what a woman is."

Pushing her spectacles on to her nose, Jenny said:

"Oh, no—I know that."

But how she knew and how much this knowledge of hers conveyed to Mrs. Twiss it would be hard to say. Certainly Mrs. Twiss gave no evidence of having learnt anything. She drove her spoon into the batter and hit it about, but there was not the slightest expression of intelligence in her face.

For three weeks her change of lodging was like the completed *motif* in a symphony to Jenny. Her rooms were lighter and more airy. There was a more open view than in Leather Lane. Simple as it was, the furniture that Mr. Bottleby had stored in there since he came was preferable to that of Mrs. Naylor's. There was no drawer in the chest of drawers in her bedroom which was locked and claimed by the owner. The house was still and quiet. She had no fear in her sitting-room of being invaded by Miss Pinsett or anyone else for that matter. Such conversation as she had with Mr. Bottleby was always in his oak-panelled sitting-room. He left her entirely alone. Except for a knocking on her door when they went out on their early-morning rambles she would scarcely have realised they were living in the same house. And with her work and the help she felt she was giving him in his, there was something in the nature of a fairy tale to her that life had taken upon itself. It was unbelievable after Creechurch Lane. Every morning, when she woke up, she had the inclination to stare about her to assure herself it was still true.

And then the first shadow of reality fell upon it all.

Meeting Miss Pinsett in the street one day, Jenny said: "Good afternoon."

With her eyes fixed steadily in front of her, Miss Pinsett passed by like an agitated comet passing into space.

A sickness spread to Jenny's heart.

"It's all over," she whispered to herself. "It's finished!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE first and human inclination that possessed Jenny's mind was to say nothing about this affair to Mr. Bottleby.

She knew it might mean the end of her work in Thurnham, but the only honest thing to do was to warn the curator of the apparent trend of public opinion. He merely laughed when she told him.

"Who's Miss Pinsett?" he asked.

She reminded him of the fellow-lodger in Leather Lane who had paid her a formal call in order to introduce herself.

"And does that mean anything to you," he asked, "that a woman who does not know her own sex until she puts on a pair of white kid gloves and rings a door-bell should choose to ignore you in the street because of some uncharitable, not to say indecent, ideas she has encouraged in her mind? Is that going to affect your comfort one way or another?"

"I don't think you understand," said Jenny.

A load had lifted from her conscience now she had told him. But with Mr. Bottleby's ingenuousness of mind, allowing him to belittle it like this, seemed somewhat like whistling to a blind man's dog to distract him from his destination.

"Miss Pinsett will talk. The whole of Thurnham will soon be talking. It's what I warned you when you first suggested it. You're so odd. You don't seem to know the sort of things people say and how impossible they can make life."

"I wouldn't allow yourself to be so mistaken about me," said Mr. Bottleby. "You seem to think I want looking after. I can look after myself. Indeed, lately, I don't know what's happened to me, but I appear to be thrust into circumstances when I must look after myself. It's never happened to me before, but undoubtedly it's happening now. If I hadn't looked after myself that time I was bringing the mummy up the river on the barge I should have been drowned in ten feet of muddy water. I found then by telling a man how he appeared to me and would appear to the world in general that what one man thinks can be quite as effective as what another one does. If I hadn't looked after myself, the council would have forced that Miss Tripson on me as an assistant. If I hadn't insisted on your coming here to live I should have lost your work with me. I'm not getting conceited about myself. Circumstance, or whatever you like to call it, appears to be forcing me to take an active part in life, and I must admit, much to my own surprise, I seem to be quite capable of doing it. I should never have thought it likely myself—but there it is—I am. I feel I am. There's some new impulse in me. I don't know what it is. I want you to work with me. I don't mind telling you that I couldn't do without you now. And I'm not going to lose you. I admit I don't know what people say. I've never made a study of people. People, just as people, are only a species of animal. We don't keep them alive in cages in the Zoo. I can't imagine why not. We might realise their peculiar interest as social beings if we did. But we have them in our museums, natural history and medical. We have Ta-mai up there in an hermetically-sealed glass case, and she was once as alive as you and I. We have specimens in glass bottles preserved in methylated spirits in our medical museums, very little different from the snakes in bottles we have here. The fact that they weren't actually born doesn't appear to me to make any difference to their species as human beings. I fail to see what time has to do with it. The fact that a mummy is three thousand years old and a fœtus has not actually seen the light of day can't make them less than human beings. They've both had breath in their bodies or they couldn't have lived at all. I don't know what these people say, but possessing the power of speech, I know what they could say if they allowed their minds to be dominated by ideas they've inherited from the lower animals. And if they do say things like that, what has it to do with me?"

"You said just now," Jenny reminded him, "that what one man thinks can be quite as effective as what another one does."

"*What* he thinks—yes. Not anything he thinks. His thought has got to be more elevated than the mere instincts of the lower animals. He hasn't got to think the worst of his fellow-men, but the best of them. He hasn't got to think beastliness, he's got to think clean. He hasn't got to think what is foul, he's got to think what is noble, to think with understanding, not with spite."

This was a new Mr. Bottleby to Jenny. She could say nothing more. To her amazement she had found an idealist where she had imagined there was no more than an eccentric and soft-hearted professor. She went away in silence to her typewriter, and the hammering of the letters on to the vulcanite carriage of the machine seemed to keep in time to the pumping action of her heart. Mr. Bottleby had amazed her. She could think no more than that.

Had the curator been as interested as he said in the study of people as he was in ants, had he in fact held Mrs. Spiers and Mrs. Charrington under observation as he did his lizards and his tadpoles, he would have noticed peculiar and significant behaviour on their part whenever he met them in the street. At the first sign of his approach he would have observed that they hurried out of sight into a convenient shop, just as tadpoles at the sight of some threatening object in the water scurry away with wriggling tails behind the secreting sanctuary of a piece of weed. Had he been able to follow them into their own homes he would have seen them collected, as tadpoles collect over a morsel of food, opening their mouths to the pieces of gossip that fell from one another's lips.

He might indeed have made many interesting studies of human nature subsequent to Jenny's occupation of the rooms in the curator's wing if he had been so inclined. But walking down the Thurnham High Street whenever he had occasion to go into the town, his mind was fully occupied with the persistence and transmutation of instincts. The influence of Jenny had stimulated his ambition to make a great work of this, the most important contribution to science he had yet attempted. The action of Mrs. Spiers and Mrs. Charrington could not invade his thoughts while they were occupied upon this. They ran into their secreting shops and to explain their sudden presence had to purchase things they did not want at all while Mr. Bottleby strode obliviously by in the street outside.

The only person in the whole of Thurnham who thought cleanly—as Mr. Bottleby would have said—about the matter was Mrs. Pennyquick.

With that same twinkle in her eye which, after three more years, Thurnham still failed to understand, she said when she heard the news:

"Why, then, he is a marrying man."

But this opinion was too honest for Thurnham. The Spiers, the Charringtons, the Overends and the Mercers had not the courage to see it in that light. The morals of Mr. Bottleby and Jenny Hazlitt became a matter of their vital interest. So many things did they say about them, all speculatively based on the fact that Jenny was living in the curator's wing, that it would have been little short of a tragedy to these ladies were they not proved to be true. The story of Mrs. Naylor's broken window pane at five o'clock in the morning had leaked out through tributary channels distantly associated with Miss Pinsett.

"Well—what are you to think?" asked Mrs. Charrington in her circle, and what her circle was left to think was entirely a matter for the quality of their imagination.

It was undoubtedly the movement of thought amongst the womenfolk of Thurnham that ultimately brought pressure to bear upon the council of the museum. Nominally in the interests of Dr. James's bequest to the town, but fundamentally in the interest of their drawing-rooms, they called an extraordinary meeting.

Mr. Bottleby received a letter from Mr. Overend requesting him to be present to discuss a matter of importance the following Monday. He put the letter in his pocket and, after consideration in which he found entirely new functions of his brain were being called into operation, he decided to say nothing about it to Jenny. After that he put it out of his mind. Every day was adding fresh material from the vast collection of his notes for the persistence and transmutation of instincts. He found he could leave Jenny to sort out these innumerable documents, some merely on half-sheets of note-paper, and could be sure that nothing would escape her observation that was of the slightest service to his book.

Stopping in front of her one day when her table was