

Marsh Richard

Under One Flag



Richard Marsh

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A PET OF THE BALLET

I

She was regarding, ruefully, the condition of her white satin shoes. They were articles which the ladies of the ballet had to provide for themselves. Twice she had sewn on fresh uppers, and now both uppers and soles had gone. Clearly it was a case in which a new pair would have to be bought. And yet, this week, money seemed shorter than ever. She wondered if skilful patching would not make them do till treasury. And, while she wondered, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Polly Steele was the only visitor who ever came her way. She took it for granted that it was Polly now-though why Miss Steele should be so ceremonious as to knock she did not stop to think. She was continuing to consider the question of the possibility of repairing the shoes when a voice behind her caused her to spring to her feet with a start.

"Pardon-Miss Lizzie Emmett?"

Standing in the doorway was an individual who was dressed in a fashion in which gentlemen in the immediate neighbourhood of Hercules Buildings were not accustomed to dress. His clothes were beautiful, he wore patent leather shoes, his tie was a marvel, he carried a glossy silk hat in a well-gloved hand. He became his costume-so tall and so slender; with a little beard cut to a point; a charming moustache, the ends of which curled gracefully upwards. The vision was such an unexpected one that Lizzie, forgetful, for the moment, of her manners, stared at the stranger with bewildered surprise. "I'm Liz Emmett." The stranger bowed and smiled.

"In that case, Miss Emmett, I believe that I have the honour of being the bearer of a little parcel for you. I trust that the contents may have the pleasure to meet with your approbation-also the source from which it comes."

He advanced into the room-the poor, scantily-furnished, untidy, tawdry little room! – holding out to her a small, neatly-fastened package. She took it with what was almost an air of sullen indifference, evincing neither curiosity nor satisfaction. "I don't know you." Again a bow and a smile.

"That is my misfortune, which I hope is on the high road towards amendment. My name is Philippe Rossignol. It may be that the day is not far distant when mademoiselle will come to look upon me as a friend-as a very good friend indeed-eh?"

There was something in the fellow's obsequious bearing which savoured of impertinence-something which it seemed as if the girl resented.

"I shouldn't think that you'd ever be a friend of mine. You don't look as if you was my sort."

The smile became more pronounced, and also more insulting.

"Not your sort? I pray that I have not so much ill fortune."

He paused, as if for her to speak. She spoke.

"I don't care for foreigners. Can't abide 'em. Never could."

The man drew himself up as if she had struck him. The smile lingered about his lips, though something very different was in his eyes. He was silent, as if considering what to say. His words, when they came, ignored her unflattering remark.

"The abode of mademoiselle is a little difficult to discover, unless one happens to know just exactly where it is."

"No one asked you to discover it, as I know of, so I don't see what odds that makes to you."

The girl's insistent rudeness seemed to occasion the stranger not only surprise, but something else as well, something approaching to curiosity. He observed her with more attention, as if she suggested a problem to his mind which was of the nature of a puzzle. She was young, strongly built, healthy. Beyond that, so far as he could see, she was nothing. She had neither face nor figure. Her movements were ungainly, her features were, emphatically, plain. Her dress was not only poor-worse, it was in execrable taste. She seemed to have decked herself in as many colours as she conveniently could, none of them being in sympathy with her complexion. Her manners were those of a woman of the people, her voice was a female Cockney's. Metaphorically, M. Rossignol shrugged his shoulders; to himself he said, -

"What there is attractive in her is for him to decide; for my part, I would rather that it were for him than for me. It is a folly even for a fool, even such a fool as that!"

Aloud he bade the lady farewell. "I have the pleasure of wishing mademoiselle a very good day."

As he backed towards the door he favoured her with a bow which could scarcely have been lower had she been an empress. She let him go without a word or sign of greeting. It was only when he had vanished, and the sound of his footsteps had ceased upon the stairs, that she found her tongue.

"Greasy foreigner, nasty, sneering beast! Coming shoving his nose in here as if he was somebody and me the dirt under his feet. I'll show him! If he'd stayed much longer, a-trying it on with me, I'd have give him one for himself, and helped him to the door. What's this, I'd like to know." She glanced down at the package she was holding, as if suddenly remembering it was there. She read the address which was on it. "'Miss Lizzie Emmett, 14 Hercules Buildings, Westminster.' He's got my address all right, though how he's got it is more than I can say. What's inside? Feels as if it was something hard." She made as if to open it. Then in a fit of sudden petulance she threw it from her, so that it landed on the bed which was at her back. "I'm not going to trouble myself about his rubbish. I never set eyes on him in all my life before-who's he, I'd like to know. If ever he shows himself inside my place again, I'll start him travelling." She resumed her consideration of the vexed question of the shoes. "I can't get no more till Saturday, so they'll have to do, and that's all about it. I'll fake 'em up with cardboard, same as I did once before, and if anybody notices it, why, they'll have to."

Seating herself on the only chair the room contained she began to cut, with a pair of scissors, pieces out of the lid of a cardboard box, which was yellow on one side and white on the other. She was not deft with her fingers, nor quick. The job promised to be a long one, and not remarkable for neatness when done. As with hunched shoulders she pursued her task of cobbling, for a second time there came a knock at the door.

"Now who's that? If it's that bloke back again, he'll get what for." This, *sotto voce*; then, aloud, "Is that you, Polly?"

It was not Polly, as the voice which answered showed.

"Does anyone live here named Emmett?"

The visitor this time was a woman. Lizzie eyed her with as much surprise as she had eyed the man; certainly she was every whit as much out of place in Hercules Buildings as he had been. Like him, she was tall and slender, and beautifully dressed. Lizzie's feminine gaze, taking in the details of her costume, dimly realised its costliness.

"May I come in?"

"If you like you can."

Apparently the stranger did like. She closed the door behind her, standing, for a moment, to regard Miss Emmett. Then her look wandered about the room. She wore a big hat, to which was attached a veil which was so thick as almost to entirely obscure her features. But one realised, from something in her attitude, that what she saw filled her with amazement.

"I think that I may have made a mistake."

"I shouldn't be surprised but what you had."

"Is it a Miss Lizzie Emmett who lives here?"

"Yes-Liz Emmett-that's me."

"You!" The astonishment in the speaker's voice was unequivocal, and not complimentary. One understood that she was studying Lizzie from behind her veil as if she could scarcely believe her eyes. Her speech faltered. "Excuse me, but are you in the profession?"

A hint of defiance came into Lizzie's tone. She was beginning to suspect that her visitor might be something in the district-visiting line.

"I'm in the ballet at the Cerulean Theatre-that's what I am!"

The stranger seemed to shiver as she heard; as if the answer removed from her mind the last traces of doubt, leaving her, instead, with a feeling of uncomfortable certainty. Turning towards the tiny fireplace, she began to trifle with the odds and ends which were on the mantelshelf. Then, once more confronting Lizzie, with a deliberate movement she raised her veil.

"Do you know me?"

"I can't say as how I do."

"I am Agnes Graham."

Lizzie was moved to genuine emotion. She rose from her chair in a flutter of excitement. She became more awkward than ever.

"Think of me not knowing you! I ought to, seeing how often I've seen your picture. I beg your pardon, Miss Graham, I'm sure, but won't you take a chair?"

"Thank you, for the present I'll stand." She eyed the other steadfastly; it seemed as if the more she gazed the more her wonder grew. "I'm afraid that I have come to you on a foolish errand, and that you will laugh at me before I've done, if you don't do worse."

"Laugh at you, Miss Graham. That I'm sure I won't."

"May I ask, Miss Emmett, if you know anything of my private history?"

"Me!" The inquiry might have conveyed a reproach, Lizzie's denial was uttered with so much earnestness. "I don't know nothing at all about you, miss, except what's in the papers."

"Except what's in the papers!" Miss Graham smiled, not sunnily. "In that case you know more about me than I do about myself. Still, I am disposed to inflict on you a fragment of personal history. You might not think it, but, in spite of what is in the papers, I'm a dreamer."

"Indeed, miss? I'm a dreamer too."

The words were spoken so simply that it seemed difficult to suspect the speaker of a second intention. Miss Graham, however, shot at her a sudden doubting glance. Her tone became harder.

"I trust, for both our sakes, that our dreams do not run on the same lines. I have always dreamed of a home; of a harbour at last; of peace at the end; of a time when I shall be able to take my seat among the best, with a mind at ease. It may sound odd, but I have always looked forward to making a good marriage."

"I should think, miss, that you might have done that over and over again."

"I might, but I haven't. But lately I have thought that I might. I am sick of the stage, sick to death!"

She gave a little passionate gesture. In her voice there was a ring of sincerity.

"I shouldn't have thought, miss, that you would ever have been sick of the stage."

"You wouldn't have thought! What do you know of it? You!" She cast a look at Lizzie which was as scornful as her words. Then glanced at the empty rust-worn grate. Then again met Lizzie

face to face. "I will be as frank with you as I would ask you to be frank with me. I have dreamed-I use the word advisedly! – I say that I have dreamed of being Countess of Bermondsey."

"Countess of Bermondsey! I'd like to lay, miss, that you could be anything you please!"

Miss Graham's lips were drawn close together.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"Laughing at you! Me, miss! I shouldn't think of doing such a thing."

"Then may I ask you to be as candid as myself? Before this my dream might have been something more solid than a dream, if it had not been for you."

"For me!"

Lizzie was open-eyed and open-mouthed.

"Pray don't let us play the actress off the boards. Don't you think we might confine that sort of thing to our hours of business?"

"But I don't understand you, miss. Do you mean that you might have been the Countess of Bermondsey if it had not been for me?"

Miss Graham's eyes were as keen and cold as the other's were hot and eager.

"I see that a denial is trembling on your lips. Pray don't trouble yourself to utter it. Is that the sort of person you are? I assure you that, in this case, at least, you make a mistake; for unfortunately I speak from knowledge." She stopped, then resumed with a strain of passion in her voice which, almost with every word, became more strenuous. "The Earl of Bermondsey, as, doubtless, you are aware, although for reasons of your own you may feign ignorance, has, for some time, been a friend of mine. I had reason to believe that he might become more, until, recently, the outward tokens of his friendship waned. I looked for the reason. I found it. He has, lately, become an assiduous patron of the Cerulean Theatre. This morning I taxed him with it. He offered no denial. I asked him for the lady's name. He floundered-as you may be aware his lordship is an adept at floundering-and, as he floundered, a piece of paper fell from his pocket on to the floor. I picked it up. On it was a lady's name and her address. I asked if she was the attraction at the Cerulean. He owned that she was. He said things of her," the speaker's voice quivered, "which I do not care to recount at second hand to you. 'Lizzie Emmett, 14 Hercules Buildings, Westminster,' was on the paper, and it was of you those things were said."

"Me!"

The actress moved slightly away from the fireplace, speaking with a strength of feeling and an eloquence of gesture which, had she been capable of such efforts on the stage, would have gained her immortality.

"It may be sport to you-I daresay it is, there was a time when I used to think that sort of thing was sport-but it is death to me. Death! He has as good as promised that I shall be his wife. I have staked everything upon the fulfilment of his promise. Nothing can compensate me for his breaking it. I won't try to make you understand why-you mightn't understand me if I tried! But if he does, I'll go under-under! If you only knew what I've endured since he's begun to tire, you'd pity me. I'm here to ask you to pity me now. We're both women-be generous-I'll be sworn it's not of much consequence to you-be good to me. If you'll only send him back to me, help me to be his wife, there's nothing I won't do for you, in reason or out of reason. I swear it. I'll put it down in black and white in any form you like!" With trembling hands she caught hold of Lizzie's shabby sleeve. "But don't be cruel to me-don't be cruel!"

Lizzie shrunk away from her.

"You're making a mistake, Miss Graham, a big mistake!"

"Don't say that, for pity's sake, don't say that! Show mercy to me, as one day you may want some other woman to show mercy to you."

Lizzie withdrew herself still farther from the other's eager pleading.

"You've got it all wrong, I'm not the girl you're taking me for. I don't know no Earl of Bermondsey, nor yet no Earl of anything, and I don't want to."

"Why should you deny it?"

"Because it's the truth. I'm straight, I am, and I always have been, and I always mean to be, and if any of your toffs came playing it off on to me he'd get a bit more than he quite wanted."

The girl's tone and manner carried conviction even to her hearer.

"Is it possible that he is known to you under some different name? Tell me, what friends have you?"

The singularity of the request did not seem to occur to Lizzie. The reply came as promptly as if the question had been a commonplace.

"Friends? Do you mean fellows? The only fellow that ever was a friend to me, and he's only a sort of a one, is Joe Mason, what's carpenter up at the theatre; he's no earl. Ask yourself the question-do I look the sort of girl an earl would take up with?"

Miss Graham felt that she did not-had felt so all along; not although the earl was possessed of such peculiar tastes as was the one in question.

"You might look different on the stage-one can make oneself look like anything there."

"I might and I mightn't. As far as I know no one ever took me for a beauty even on the stage, not even Joe Mason."

The girl's eyes twinkled with laughter, as if the bare possibility of such a thing struck her as comical. Her visitor returned to the fireplace. She made a little troubled movement with her hands.

"I wish you would be frank with me. You must know something of him, even if you don't know him, else how came your name and address to be in his pocket, and why should he claim your acquaintance?"

"It beats me fair, it does. I never gave it him, that's certain. There's a muddle somewhere."

"Is there anyone else of your name at the theatre?"

"If there is I never heard of it, and I've been there now getting on for two years. There's no one else of that name in the ballet, that I do know."

"Have you ever acted for him as a go-between? Just think! I'll tell you what he looks like. He's quite young, only twenty-two; short, rather stout, light hair parted on the side, no moustache, red face, blue eyes; and when he's at all excited he speaks as if he had a plum in his mouth."

Lizzie shook her head.

"If he's like what you say he's not a beauty, but, so far as I know, I never set eyes on him; and as for being a go-between, either for him or for anybody else, I'd scorn to do it."

Agnes Graham's glance returned to the empty grate. She seemed to be reflecting.

"I believe you. You sound honest, and you look it. But that there's a mystery somewhere I'm persuaded. I'm in a desperate strait, and I want you to do something for me. I'll pay you for it well."

"I don't want your pay."

The other went on unheeding.

"I want you to use your eyes, and to find out who it is at the Cerulean he is after. That there is someone I have the best of reasons for knowing. When you have found out I want you to tell me. And if you won't do it for pay, do it out of kindness."

Lizzie hesitated.

"I'm not fond of spying, and I'm not fond of them as is, but as he don't seem to be using you well, if I do find out who he's playing it off with-though, mind you, I don't see how I'm going to-still, as I say, if I should happen to find out, why, I'll tell you, straight!"

"Thank you."

Agnes Graham held out her hand, in order that, by grasping it, the girl might ratify the bargain. And she did.

When she was again alone, Liz Emmett was lost in wonder. As she had said, she also was a dreamer and, as became a dreamer, had her heroes and her heroines. Theatrical heroines hers, for the most part, were; not, that is, the creations of the dramatist's fancy, but their flesh-and-blood enactors. The popular actress was the ideal creature of her waking visions. Who, on the contemporary stage, was more popular, in her own line, than Agnes Graham? There was a time when Lizzie had been more than half inclined to bate her voice when uttering her name. Even to this hour she had regarded her with a kind of reverence. Now this idol, whom the public voice had set upon such a lofty pedestal, had actually been to visit her; had come unceremoniously into her room and filled it with her presence, with, for purpose, such an errand.

The errand was not the least strange part of this strange happening. Agnes Graham, famous as she was beautiful, in the theatrical firmament a bright particular star, had supposed that she, Lizzie Emmett, was her rival for the heart, and possibly the hand, of an earl; a belted earl, as she remembered to have seen it printed somewhere. The thing was most confounding. How could such a notion have got into the air?

Lizzie, taking down the oblong shilling mirror from the nail on which it hung, surveyed her face in it relentlessly. She was conscious of her imperfections, and indifferent to them. She had supple limbs, was fairly quick upon her feet, sufficiently smart at rehearsals, equal to the average *figurante*. She was aware that, when so much was said, about all was said. She had neither good looks nor cleverness, was no scholar, nor wished to be, had a rough tongue, a quick temper, and a clumsy, if a willing, hand. And Agnes Graham had imagined that she had out-distanced her in the affections of a belted earl! Was ever idea more ludicrous? As the ridiculous side struck Lizzie she began to laugh; she continued laughing till her merriment threatened to become hysterical.

As it approached a climax she caught sight of the package which she had thrown upon the bed. She checked herself.

"Then there was that foreign bloke. I wonder what rubbish is in that paper of his."

Putting down the looking-glass, she took up the parcel. She cut it open with her scissors with a contemptuous air. Inside was a leather case. She paused to examine it. She had seen others like it in the windows of jewellers' shops. Pressing a spring, the top flew open. As it did so she gave a sort of gasp. On a bed of satin reposed a necklace of shimmering crystals. They gleamed and glistened like drops of dew. The pupils of her eyes dilated. She spoke in a whisper.

"Diamonds? They can't be diamonds?" She had seen diamonds in shop windows and on other women. "They can't be real."

Suddenly she gave utterance to an exclamation which the squeamish would have called an oath and a vulgarity. Presently she joined to it a snatch from the slang of the streets.

"This cops the biscuit."

She was staring, with wide-open eyes, at a strip of pasteboard which was in the centre of the necklace, so that it was surrounded by a stream of light. It was a gentleman's visiting-card. On it was engraved "Earl of Bermondsey." She glared at it, as if she fancied that her seeing sense must be playing her tricks. Her voice, when she spoke, was vibrant; in it there was a curious ringing.

"Well, if this don't take the blooming barrowful, straight it does. 'Earl of Bermondsey'! If that ain't the bloke she was a-talking of. If this ain't a case of Queer Street, I'm a daisy!"

She picked the card up between her finger and thumb gingerly, as if she was afraid it might burn her. She turned it over; on the reverse something was scribbled in pencil. Not being skilled in reading illegible handwriting, it was with difficulty she deciphered it: "With Mr Jack Smith's compliments."

"And who may Mr Jack Smith be, I'd like to know, when he's at home. Anyhow, one thing's certain sure, this little lot ain't meant for me. I don't know nothing about no Jack Smith, nor yet about no Earl of Bermondsey neither, and I don't want to; and as for oily foreigners, I can't abide

'em. I'll just take the entire boiling to Miss Graham. Perhaps she'll be able to twig the bloke's little lay; it's more than I can."

II

Lizzie Emmett had already departed some time when fresh visitors made an unceremonious entry into her empty room. The door was opened and, without giving any premonitory notice of her intention, a girl came in.

"Lizzie!" she cried. Then perceived that there was no one there. "Well, if Lizzie isn't out!" She slightly raised her voice. "Tom, Lizzie's out, but she's not gone far, because she hasn't locked the door. You can come in-I'll give you leave. We'll wait for her."

There entered the room, with something of a shuffle, a man with a rough, untrimmed brown beard. He was big and broad, also, it seemed, a little shy; attired, obviously, in his best clothes. He seemed ill at ease in them, as if, somehow, they deprived his limbs of their wonted freedom. He gripped the brim of his brown billycock with both his large red hands. There was on his good-natured face a mixture of amusement with confusion, as though he was in possession of some happiness of which he was, at one and the same time, proud yet ashamed.

The girl looked him up and down, as if searching for something wrong in his costume or his bearing.

"Now you've got to behave yourself."

He shuffled from one foot to the other. And he grinned.

"Don't I always behave myself?"

"You've got to behave yourself extra special well, you're in a lady's room." He looked about him, his grin continually expanding. The girl, propping up the mirror which Lizzie had left upon the table against a box, began, by its aid, to fidget with her hat, talking as she did so. "Tom Duffield, you're on your good behaviour; as I might say, you're on appro. If I'm going to be your wife you've got to do something to show that you deserve it, so don't you seem to forget it." The man laughed, for so big a fellow, with curious softness. "It's all very well for you to laugh, but perhaps it is not all so cut and dried as you quite think. You're going to take two ladies out for a holiday to Kew Gardens, Mr Duffield, by the boat, so just you behave to them in a way that'll show you'll do credit to me as a husband." He laughed again. She faced him. "Well, and what might you be laughing at?"

He shuffled with his feet.

"Nothing-at you."

"That's a nice thing to say, upon my word. If you think I'm nothing, or that I'm going to be treated as nothing, you'll soon find that you're mistaken, and so I tell you. Don't stand fidgeting there like a great gawk; go and get some sweets-chocolates-good ones, none of your cheap truck, mind, and some fruit-grapes; Lizzie'll be ready by the time you're back."

The man put on his hat. He went, without a word, to do her bidding, with the obedience and the silence of a well-trained dog. Indeed, on his face, in his eyes, even in his bearing, there was something which was dog-like. The girl stared for a moment at the door through which he had gone.

"He's useful if he's not ornamental."

She returned to the mirror. Not impossibly it suggested to her that exactly the contrary might have been said of herself-she was ornamental if she was not useful. Even stronger than the man's resemblance to a dog was hers to a humming-bird. Like it, she was small; like it, too, she was exquisitely, daintily fashioned, almost too fragile for human nature's daily food. She seemed singularly out of place in that poor, tawdry chamber. Fitted, rather, for a gilded cage, or at least for some shrine of elegance and glitter. Everything about her was in proportion, tiny, and, if she was a little overdressed-if, for instance, in the details of her costume there was too much colour, the accentuation became her peculiarly exotic beauty. Her attitudes, her gestures, her little tricks of movement, all were bird-like; one felt, so free from grossness was her frame, that she scarcely was a thing of earth at all.

She preened herself before the poor apology for a looking-glass as if there was nothing in the world which could be better worth her doing. In it her pretty black eyes flashed back their enjoyment of the situation; they loved to see themselves imaged in a mirror; nor were they ashamed to confess their pleasure. If, on her cheeks, there was the suspicion of a bloom which was not Nature's, it was not there because either youth or health was failing; when one earns one's living behind the floats one's roses fade. The blood-red line of her lips was real enough, as also was the rose-pink of her delicate nostrils.

She had scarcely been alone a minute, and with so small a looking-glass had had no time to examine all that there was of herself that would repay examining, when she heard the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. She listened.

"Who's that?" Her small white teeth gleamed between her scarlet lips. "It's that silly Tom come back again. Now, what's he forgotten? Perhaps he's met Liz, so they've both come back together." The steps were but a single pair, hardly a woman's. There was an audible uncertainty in the way in which they negotiated each separate tread which suggested that the road was unfamiliar. "It's that Tom! Now, what's he want, I wonder?" Someone tapped at the door. "That doesn't sound like Tom. Someone, I expect, for Lizzie. Bother!" Then aloud, "Come in."

The abuse which had been on the tip of the girl's tongue, ready to be hurled at the offending Tom, gave place to something very different indeed. She appeared, for the moment, to be overcome by something which was akin to consternation, to have lost her presence of mind, her readiness of speech. Nor, possibly, was her confusion lessened by the fact that the newcomer seemed to be, every whit, as embarrassed as she was. He was a young man, except, perhaps, in a legal sense, nothing but a boy. Not a very intellectual nor healthy-looking boy either. For a person of his age he was unpleasantly stout; so stout as almost to merit the epithet of bloated. His cheeks were puffy, so also was his body. That the redness of his face was not the ruddiness of physical vigour was demonstrated by the obvious fact that the mere exertion of climbing the staircase had made him short of breath. Although his dress was that of a man of fashion he scarcely seemed a gentleman. Not only was he *gauche* and clumsy, there was about him an atmosphere of coarseness which was redolent rather of the tap-room than the drawing-room. One perceived, instinctively, that the society in which he would be most at home would be that of the *convives* of the bar.

That the girl knew him was evident-as evident as that he knew her. He looked at her with something in his eyes which was not spiritual; she at him as if she would infinitely have preferred his room to his company.

She was the first to speak.

"Well, you've got a cheek! Upon my word! What do you mean by coming here?"

There was a curious quality in his voice as he replied, which almost amounted to an impediment in his speech.

"When you gave me your address last night, Miss Emmett, I told you I'd look you up. You didn't suppose I gave you a fiver for it unless I meant to use it."

The girl continued to look at him for still another second. Then a burning flush set all her face in flames. She turned away trembling, as if she were positively frightened. She murmured to herself, -

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish! The brute! If I hadn't clean forgotten all about it! Whatever shall I say?"

He came farther into the room.

"I hope you've received my little present, Miss Emmett, and that you like it."

She angrily confronted him.

"My name's not Emmett, so don't you think it."

"Not Emmett!" He winked. "Of course not. Still, as it's been good enough for me to find you with, it's near enough, for me. If it comes to that, my name's not Smith."

"I don't care what your name is, and the sooner you get out of this the better it'll be for you."

"Don't be cross, my dear. I only want you and I to understand each other."

"I don't want any of your understandings. I don't want to have anything to say to you. My friend's just stepped out; if he comes back and finds you here he'll throw you down the stairs quicker than you came up them."

"Your friend?" An ugly look came into the young man's eyes. "So you've got a friend."

As she met his glance the girl's face hardened.

"What do you mean? You think yourself too clever. I'm not the sort you take me for. When I say my friend I mean the young man to whom I'm engaged to be married, so don't you make any error."

"On my honour, I believe that you look prettier by day than you do by night."

"Don't try any of your nonsense on with me. Are you going to get out of this?"

"You might at least thank me for the pretty present which I sent you!"

"Don't talk stuff to me about your presents, you've sent me none of them."

A look of inquiry came into the young man's face, and of annoyance.

"Hasn't Rossignol been yet? Do you mean to say you haven't had it?"

"Had what? Oh, stow this, do! Do you think I don't know what kind of chap you are? You're a barber's clerk, that's what you are. You've got a pound or two in your pocket, and you go gassing about and pretending you're a don, and talk about sending presents as if you'd got the Bank of England at your back, when, I lay odds, it breaks you to pay for your clothes. We girls come across lots of your sort, so we come to know your trade mark, don't you see."

"I do assure you that in my case you're wrong, Miss Emmett."

"Don't I tell you that my name's not Emmett? When you said last night that you'd give me five pounds for my name and address I saw that you were fool enough for anything, so I gave you the first that came, and that happened to be a friend of mine's, and I'm in her place now, waiting for her to come back with my young man, so that's how you've chanced to find me here."

Her companion eyed her as if he were endeavouring to ascertain from her countenance whether or not she was speaking the truth.

"If what you say is true, then I shouldn't be surprised if your friend has got the present I sent to you."

"Oh, has she? Then she's welcome. I daresay fifteen pence would pay for it." With an exclamation as of alarm she ran to the door. "There's my young man. If you don't go, I'll call out to him. If there's anything you want to say to me you can say it to-night at the theatre. Now, are you going?"

"Honour bright, if I come to the theatre will you let me speak to you?"

"Of course I will. Haven't I always done. Hark! there's my young man coming along the pavement, I know his step. Go, there's a good chap, you don't want to get me into trouble."

"Will you give me a kiss if I go?"

"What, here, now? What do you take me for? Do you want me to get my head knocked off my shoulders? If my young man caught me at any of those games he'd do it as soon as look at me, and yours too. We'll talk about that sort of thing to-night, at the theatre. Can't you go when I ask you?"

It appeared that he could, because he did. She shut the door behind him the instant he was through it, keeping fast hold of the handle with her hand. She listened to his descending footsteps with an expression of satisfaction not unmingled with anxiety. As they died away she sighed—a sigh of unequivocal relief.

"That was a near thing, it ought to be a lesson to me, it's given me quite a turn." In spite of its artificial bloom, her pretty, dainty face had assumed a sudden pallor, a fact of which her candid friend, the mirror, at once informed her. "I declare that I look quite white; that sort of thing's enough to make anyone look white." She repaired her loss of complexion with the aid of something

which she took from her pocket. "It's a mercy Tom wasn't here, or even Lizzie. She's a queer sort, is Lizzie, and she might have wanted a lot of explanation before she could have been got to see the joke of my giving him her name and address instead of mine. Of course I only did it for a lark. If I'd thought he meant to do anything with it I wouldn't have given it him for a good many fivers, though the coin was useful." There came from between her lips a little ripple of laughter almost like the burst of music which proceeds from a song-bird's throat. "What fools fellows are! He's no toff, anyone can see it with half an eye, he's only a clerk or something got hold of 'a little bit of splosh' and trying to do the swagger. He's said his last words to me, anyhow; Saturday, the theatre'll see my back for good and all. And until then I'll take care that Tom comes and does the dutiful." She stood in an attitude of listening. "That is Lizzie. It's lucky that Mr Jack Smith was off the premises before she came."

Lizzie came boisterously in, her cheeks red with the haste she had made, her eyes glistening with excitement.

"Polly Steele!" she exclaimed. "You here!"

The other girl bestowed on her one mischievous glance, then returned to the mirror.

"It looks like it, doesn't it? You don't happen to have seen Tom, I suppose?"

"Tom? Tom Duffield?"

"That's the gentleman. I've got a bit of news for you, my dear. Tom and I have made it up."

"Made it up?" She looked at the speaker inquisitorially, then read her meaning. "Oh, Polly, I'm so glad!"

"I thought you would be. He doesn't seem sorry."

"When was it? Last night at the theatre I didn't seem as if I could get a word with you."

"No? I wonder how that was." Polly eyed her friend, her face alive with mischief. "It was this morning, my dear. He came round while I was at breakfast, and he went on so, and he seemed so set on it, that I couldn't find it in my heart to keep on saying no. So the banns are to be put up on Sunday, and we're to be married a month to-day."

"Oh, Polly!"

"And Saturday'll be my last appearance on any stage. Tom's going to allow me forty shillings a week until we're married; and of course I shall have my meat for nothing-he won't hear of my keeping on at the theatre. He's making money hand over fist at that shop of his; sold ten beasts last week and I don't know how many sheep. You should hear him talking! I shall be riding in my carriage before you know where you are."

Lizzie was leaning against the mantelshelf as Agnes Graham had leaned, and, as the famous actress had done, was looking down at the empty grate.

"I'm glad you're leaving the theatre. I was beginning to get worried about you."

"Worried about me! Whatever for?"

Again Miss Polly's countenance was instinct with impish roguery.

"Oh, you know very well what I mean, my lady, so no pretending. You're too pretty for the theatre, and that's the truth."

"Why, I thought a theatre was just the place where pretty girls are wanted."

"Maybe. But pretty girls don't want a theatre, leastways, not if they can help it, they don't." Lizzie spoke with sudden animation. "But talk about your news! What do you think's come my way?"

"A set of diamonds?"

There was mockery in Polly's tone, and in her eyes.

"You may laugh, but that's just what it was-leastways, a diamond necklace."

"Lizzie!"

"Yes, as fine a one as ever you saw-better than Maggie Sinclair's, and they say hers is worth a thousand."

"It wasn't meant for you."

"Wasn't it? There it was upon the parcel as plain as print, 'Miss Lizzie Emmett, 14 Hercules Buildings, Westminster,' and inside there was the fellow's card-'With Mr Jack Smith's compliments.'"

"What? Lizzie! Where is it?"

"It's where it ought to be-with her as Mr Jack Smith ought to marry."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Why, Polly, it's like a story, just like it is in the books. Who do you think's been here this morning? In this very room?"

Polly drew back, as with a sudden accession of timidity.

"Not Jack Smith?"

"Jack Smith! I'd have Jack Smithed him if he'd shown his nose inside my place. Someone as is worth a good few Jack Smiths-Agnes Graham!"

"Agnes Graham!"

"Yes, you may stare, but it's truth, she came into this very room. And I've just come from her place. And what do you think she done as I was coming away? Kissed me-yes! straight. It seems as this here Jack Smith he's as good as promised to marry her, and she's been driving herself half silly because he's been carrying on with a girl at our show-yes! And this morning, as they was having a few words, something fell out of his pocket. She picked it up. On it was my name and my address. She asks him if that was the girl. He says it was-like his blamed impudence! So she comes round to me and asks me not to sneak away her bloke."

"Asks you?"

"Yes, queer start, ain't it? I'm the sort to sneak away anybody's bloke! I'd give a bit to know how he got hold of my name and address."

"It does seem odd!"

"Odd ain't the word for it. There's something what's a little more than odd about it, as it seems to me. And who do you think Jack Smith is?"

"Some barber's clerk or other, I suppose."

"Barber's clerk! Why, he's the Earl of Bermondsey!"

"Who? Lizzie! You don't mean that!"

"I do, it's gospel truth! His name was printed on the card; 'With Mr Jack Smith's compliments' was wrote on the back. Miss Graham told me it was him, she knew his writing directly she set eyes on it. He's been passing himself off as Jack Smith to some girl or other up at our place, and going on no end."

Miss Steele, her face turned away from Lizzie, was drumming on the table with the fingers of her left hand.

"Did you say that he was going to marry Miss Graham?"

"It seems that he as good as promised that he would, but now she's afraid that he'll take up with this other girl what he's been carrying on with."

"What makes her think so?"

"Don't I tell you that he about equal to up and told her so."

Miss Steele was silent.

"Does she think" – there was a tremulous break in her voice-"that he would marry the other girl?"

"That's what she's afraid of, though, if I was her, I'd let him. If I was Miss Graham I wouldn't marry him, not if he was a hundred times the Earl of Bermondsey. Don't you remember what we was reading about him only the other day-how he'd just come into his money, and what a lot of it there was? And houses, and parks, and forests, and I don't know what? My truth! He's only a kid, and a pretty sort of kid he seems to be; one of them fools what's worse than the clever ones, just

because they're fools. I shouldn't be surprised if this girl what he's been carrying on with-I'll find out who she is before this night is gone, and if she gave him my address I'll mark her!"

"Perhaps she only did it for a joke!"

"A nice sort of joke! What do you think? I'll spoil her beauty, the nasty cat! I shouldn't be surprised, if she played her cards cleverly, but what she got him to take her to church."

"I wonder!"

"The Countess of Bermondsey! That's a mouthful, ain't it?"

"The Countess of Bermondsey!"

As Miss Polly Steele echoed her companion's words she was still standing against the table, her little slender figure drawn as upright as a dart. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were sparkling, her lips were parted; one could see how her bosom rose and fell as her breath came in quick, eager respirations. Something had filled her with a strange excitement which each moment was mastering her more completely.

It was Lizzie who first heard the ascending footsteps.

"Hullo!" she cried. "Here's Mr Duffield."

A sudden peculiar change had taken place in the expression on Polly's countenance; it had become hard, even angry, her gleaming teeth had closed upon her lower lip. Lizzie admitted the returning lover.

"Morning, Mr Duffield." She looked at him with what was intended to be archness. "Polly has been telling me all about it. I wish you joy."

He laughed, as though she had perpetrated a capital joke.

"Thank you, Miss Emmett. We mean to have a bit if we can get it, don't we, Polly?" He was laden with paper parcels. He advanced with them towards the little silent figure which was standing at the table, his good-humoured face one mighty smile. "I've brought the whole shop full. Here you are, old girl. You'll want a cart to carry them."

She struck out at him with her clenched hands, dashing the parcels he was holding out to her in confusion on to the floor. She was in a flame of passion.

"I don't want your rubbish! And how dare you call me old girl? Who do you think you are, and what do you think I am? Keeping me waiting here, dancing attendance on your pleasure, and then insulting me; if you ever try to speak to me again I'll slap your face."

She pushed past him towards the door.

"Polly!" cried Lizzie, staring at her in a maze of wonder.

Miss Steele shook her fist so close to Lizzie's face it grazed her skin. Rage transfigured her. Her voice was shrill with fury.

"You great, ugly, stupid idiot! You've done more harm this morning than you'll ever do good in all your life! Let me pass!"

At the door she turned to shake her fist at Mr Duffield.

"Don't you dare to follow me!"

She vanished, flying down the stairs three or four steps at a time, in a whirlwind of haste, leaving her lover and her friend in speechless amazement, as if the heavens had fallen.

A CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

"Bank holidays are admittedly common nuisances; they are neither Sundays nor week-days; they disorganise everything, both public and private life; and what is Christmas Day but a bank holiday, I should like to know! Here am I actually having to make my own bed and prepare my own breakfast; goodness only knows what I shall do about my lunch and dinner. And this in the twentieth century."

It was a monstrous fact. Granted that to a certain extent I had to thank my own weakness, still, Christmas Day was to blame. When, about a month before, Mr and Mrs Baines had begun to drop hints that they would like to spend Christmas Day with relatives at some out-of-the-way hole in Kent-it was three years since they had spent Christmas Day together, Mrs Baines told me with her own lips-I was gradually brought to consent. Of course I could not remain alone with Eliza-who is a remarkably pretty girl, mind you, though she is a housemaid-so I let her spend Christmas Day with her mother. They all three went off the day before-Eliza's home is in Devonshire-so that there was I left without a soul to look after me.

I allow that to some small extent the fault was mine. My bag was packed-Baines had packed it with his own hands, assisted by his wife and Eliza, and to my certain knowledge each had inserted a Christmas present, which it was intended should burst upon me with the force of a surprise. I had meant to spend Christmas with Popham. It seemed to me that since I had to spend it under somebody else's roof it might as well be under his. But on the morning of the twenty-fourth-Tuesday-I had had a letter-a most cheerful letter-in which Popham informed me that since one of his children had the measles, and another the mumps, and his wife was not well, and his own constitution was slightly unbalanced owing to a little trouble he had had with his motor-he had nearly broken his neck, from what I could gather-it had occurred to him that Christmas under his roof might not be such a festive season as he had hoped, and so he gave me warning. Obviously I did not want to force myself into a hospital, so I wired to Popham that I thought, on the whole, that I preferred my own fireside.

But I said nothing about my change of plans to Mr and Mrs Baines or Eliza, for it seemed to me that since they had made their arrangements they might as well carry them out, and I had intended to go to one of those innumerable establishments where, nowadays, homeless and friendless creatures are guaranteed-for a consideration-a "social season."

Eliza started after breakfast, Mr and Mrs Baines after lunch. I told them that I was going by the four o'clock and could get my bag taken to the cab without their assistance. When the time came I could not make up my mind to go anywhere. So I dined at the club and had a dullish evening. And on Christmas Day I had to make my own bed and light my own fire.

A really disreputable state of affairs!

I never had such a time in my life. I was bitterly cold when I first got up-it had been freezing all night-but I was hot enough long before I had a fire. The thing would not burn. There was a gas stove in the kitchen, I could manage that all right, to a certain extent-though it made an abominable smell, which I had not noticed when Mrs Baines had been on the premises-but I could not spend all Christmas Day crouching over half a dozen gas jets. Not to speak of the danger of asphyxiation, which, judging from the horrible odour, appeared to me to be a pretty real one. I wanted coal fires in my own rooms, or, at least, in one of them. But the thing would not behave in a reasonable manner. I grew hot with rage, but the grate remained as cold as charity.

I live in a flat-Badminton Mansions-endless staircases, I don't know how many floors, and not a Christian within miles. I had a dim notion, I don't know how I got it, but I had a dim notion that a person of the charwoman species ascended each morning to a flat somewhere overhead to do-I had not the faintest idea what, but the sort of things charwomen do do. Driven to the verge of desperation-consider the state I was in, no fire, no breakfast, no nothing, except that wretched gas

stove, which I was convinced that I should shortly have to put out if I did not wish to be suffocated-it occurred to me, more or less vaguely, that if I could only intercept that female I might induce her, by the offer of a substantial sum, to put my establishment into something like order. So, with a view of ascertaining if she was anywhere about, I went out on to the landing to look for her.

"Now," I told myself, "I suppose I shall have to stand in this condition" – I had as nearly as possible blacked myself all over-"for a couple of hours outside my own door and then she won't come."

No sooner had I shown my unwashed face outside than I became conscious that a child-a girl-was standing at the open door of the flat on the opposite side of the landing. I was not going to retreat from a mere infant; I declined even to notice her presence, though I became instantly aware that she was taking the liveliest interest in mine. I looked up and down, saw there were no signs of any charwoman, and feeling that it would be more dignified to return anon-when that child had vanished-was about to retire within my own precincts, when-the child addressed me.

"I wish you a merry Christmas."

I was really startled. The child was a perfect stranger to me. I just glanced across at her, wishing that I was certain if what I felt upon my nose actually was soot, and replied-with sufficient frigidity, -

"Thank you. Your wish is obliging. But there is not the slightest chance of my having a merry Christmas, I give you my word of honour."

My intention was to-metaphorically-crush the child, but she was not to be crushed. I already had my back to her, when she observed, -

"I am so sorry. Are you in any trouble?"

I turned to her again.

"I don't know what you call trouble, but on a morning like this I am without a fire and it seems extremely probable that I shall have to remain without one."

"No fire!" Even from across the landing I was conscious that that child's eyes were opened wider. "Why, it's freezing. Haven't you any coals or wood?"

"Oh, yes, I've plenty of coals and wood, but what's the good of them if they won't burn?"

"Won't burn? Why ever won't they burn?"

"I don't know why they won't burn-you'd better ask 'em."

I am altogether without a clear impression of how it happened. I can only say that that child came across the landing, and, as I returned into my own quarters, she came after me-quite uninvited. We moved to the dining-room, the scene of my futile efforts. She regarded the recalcitrant grate with thoughtful gaze. It began to be borne in on me that she was rather a nice-looking child, with brown hair, and a great deal of it, and big brown eyes. Presently she said, -

"I have seen people make a fire."

Which was an absurd remark. I snubbed her.

"I don't know that there's anything remarkable in that. I also have seen people make a fire."

"One would never think it to look at that grate."

"What's the matter with the grate?"

"It's too full of everything. To make a fire you begin with paper."

"Haven't I begun with paper? There are at least six newspapers at the bottom of that grate; it's stuffed full of paper."

"That's just it; I believe it's stuffed too full. And I feel sure that you don't want to start with a whole forest full of wood. And it looks to me as if you had emptied a whole scuttle full of coals on the top of all the rest."

"I have."

"Then how ridiculous of you. How can you expect it to burn? I think I can show you how it ought to be."

She showed me. I ought not to have let her; I do not need to be told that, but I did. I held the scuttle while she put back into it nearly all the coal; then she removed about five-sixths of the wood and nine-tenths of the paper, and started to lay that fire all over again. And she kept talking all the time.

"Have you had your breakfast?"

"I emphatically haven't."

"I haven't had any either."

It struck me that there was a suggestiveness about her tone.

"I'm afraid I can't ask you to share mine."

"Why? Haven't you any food?"

"Oh, I daresay there's food, but-it wants cooking."

"Well, let's cook it! Oh, do let's cook it! I should so love to cook my own breakfast; I never have; it would be just like a picnic."

"I don't know that I care for picnics; I'm too old."

"I've seen people older than you are." I felt flattered; I am not so very old after all. "What have you got? Have you any eggs?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if I have some eggs."

"Then, to begin with, we'll say eggs. How shall we cook them?"

"Boil them."

"Couldn't we fry them? I'm rather fond of fried eggs."

"So far as I'm concerned I'm sure we couldn't fry them."

"I'm afraid I might make rather a mess of it. Then we'll say boiled eggs. What else-bacon?"

"I imagine that there may be bacon."

"Then we'll say eggs and bacon; that'll be lovely. Don't you like bacon?"

"I don't object to it-occasionally-if it's properly cooked."

"How do you like it cooked?"

"I haven't a notion. I've never even seen anyone cook bacon."

"I don't think I have either. But we'll see what we can do. And cocoa?"

"No cocoa. I doubt if there's any in the place. And we won't say coffee. I don't believe there are more than half a dozen people in the world who can make good coffee. And I feel convinced that I'm not one of them."

"I don't care for coffee. We'll say tea-and toast."

"I think I could make some toast, if pressed."

"I'm glad you can do something. You see; now the fire's going to burn. Where's the pantry? Let's go and look what's in it."

The fire certainly did show signs of an intention to behave as a fire ought to. I don't know how she had done it, it seemed simple enough, but there it was. Feeling more and more conscious that my conduct was altogether improper, not to say ridiculous, I led that child from the dining-room, across the kitchen, to the receptacle where Mrs Baines keeps her store of provisions. She looked round and round and I knew she was not impressed.

"There doesn't seem to be very much to eat, does there?"

The same thing had struck me. The shelves seemed full of emptiness, and there was nothing hanging from the hooks. Still, as coming from an entire stranger, the remark was not in the best of taste.

"You see," I explained, feebly enough, "it's Christmas."

That child's eyes opened wider than ever; I was on the point of warning her that if she went on like that they would occupy the larger part of her face.

"Of course it's Christmas. Do you suppose that I don't know it's Christmas? That's just the reason why you should have more to eat than ever. Some people eat more at Christmas than they do during all the rest of the year put together."

This was such a truly astonishing statement to make that, unless I wished to enter into a preposterous argument, I had nothing to say. I also realised that it did not become me to enter at any length, to a mere child-and she an utter stranger! – into the reasons why, at Christmas, it had come to pass that my larder did not happen to be so well filled as it might have been. I merely endeavoured to pin her to the subject in hand.

"There are eggs and bacon and bread, and I believe there's tea-all the materials for the morning meal. I don't know what else you require."

"That's true-that's quite true. There are eggs in three different baskets; I expect one basket's for cooking eggs, one for breakfast eggs and one for new-laid. We'll have new-laid. How many shall we have? Could you eat two?"

"I have been known to eat two; especially when, on occasions like the present, breakfast has been about two hours late."

"Then we'll have two each. Then there's the bacon; fortunately it's already cut into rashers, but-how shall we cook it? I know!" She clapped her hands. "I'll fetch Marjorie!"

"Marjorie!" As she uttered the name I was conscious of a curious fluttering sensation, which was undoubtedly the result of the irregular proceedings. I had known a person of that name myself once, but it was absurd to suppose that the fluttering had anything to do with that. "Who's Marjorie?"

"Marjorie's my sister, of course." I did not see any of course about it, but I had too much self-respect to say so. "She's ever so fond of cooking; she's a splendid cook. I'll go and get her to cook that bacon."

Before I could stop her she was off; the child moved like lightning. What I ought to have done would have been to slam my front door and refuse to open it again. Who was Marjorie? Extraordinary how at the mere mental repetition of the name that fluttering returned. Her sister? She might be a young woman of two or three-and-twenty. I could not allow strange persons of that description to cook my bacon, with me in my dressing-gown and soot upon my nose.

I am practically persuaded that I was nearly on the point of closing the front door, with a view-so to speak-of not opening it again during the whole of the day, when that child returned, with another child a little taller than herself. This child had black hair, dark blue eyes, and was as self-possessed a young person as I ever yet encountered; grave as a judge-graver! She looked me straight in the face, with her head inclined just a little forward.

"I beg your pardon. It seems curious that I should call on you without even knowing your name, but my sister Kathleen told me that you were in rather a trouble about your breakfast, so I thought I would come and see if I could help you."

"That's-that's very good of you. Will-will you both of you breakfast with me?"

I wasn't one quarter so self-possessed as she was; indeed, I was all of a quiver.

"Kathleen tells me that she has already consented to do so, and I should be very pleased to join her. Now, Kathleen, where is that bacon you spoke about?"

They went into the pantry and took matters into their own hands as if the place belonged to them and as if they had been cooking my breakfasts for years. I positively felt in the way, and hinted as much-with an inclination to stammer.

"Perhaps-perhaps you'll be able to do without my assistance."

The young woman was quite clear upon that subject, and did not hesitate to say so.

"Thank you; I would much rather be without your assistance. I don't care to have men meddle in domestic matters."

She spoke as if she had been fifty instead of perhaps twelve. I wondered if she had her sentiments from her mother; I could have sworn she had them from someone.

"Then in that case I might-I might have a wash and-and put myself into another coat."

She looked me up and down with something in her air which was not suggestive of approval.

"I'm sure you might. You don't look at all tidy; not in the least like Christmas Day. Only please be ready in five minutes."

I was, so was the bacon; everything was ready in that five minutes. I do not know how they did it, those two children, but they did. There was the table laid, places for three, and we three sat down to an excellent meal. Marjorie served the bacon. I have tasted a good deal worse, mind you, and the plates were hot! Kathleen poured out the tea, and I ate and drank and looked on, and wondered how it all had happened. Presently Marjorie asked a question.

"Have you had any Christmas presents yet?"

"No, I can't say that I have, not just yet, but-my goodness!" An idea occurred to me. "A most extraordinary thing; do you know, I was positively forgetting to give you two people your Christmas presents."

Both looked at me, their faces notes of exclamation. Marjorie spoke.

"You can't really have presents for us-not really. I daresay half an hour ago you didn't know we were in the world."

"Can't I? Such an observation simply shows the limitations of your knowledge."

I rose from the table; I left the room. When I returned I had a parcel in either arm.

"Now if those two parcels don't contain the very Christmas presents you want, then all I can say is, I have misjudged your wants entirely and beg to apologise."

You should have seen their countenances! their looks of wonder when inside each parcel was discovered a doll, the very finest and largest article of the kind that could be procured, although I say it. Of course they had been meant for Popham's girls, but more dolls could be bought for them and sent on afterwards. In the meantime those two young women were in a state of almost dangerous agitation.

"Why," cried Marjorie, "mine has black hair and blue eyes!"

"And mine has brown hair and brown eyes!"

"You dear!"

They said this both together. Then they precipitated themselves at me, and they kissed me-absolute strangers! Then the dolls had breakfast with us. Each sat on a chair beside its proprietor, and I, as it were, sat in the centre of the four. I have seldom assisted at a livelier meal. We laughed and we talked, and we ate and we drank, and we fed the dolls-those dolls had both a large and an indigestible repast. I felt convinced they would suffer for it afterwards. And in the midst of it all I heard a strange voice; at least it was strange to me.

"I beg ten thousand pardons, but I couldn't think what had become of those children-I thought I heard their voices. What are they doing here?"

I looked up and there, standing in the open doorway, was a lady; a young lady, a charming, and, indeed, a pretty young lady. Those two young women flung themselves at her as they had flung themselves at me; only, if anything, more so.

"Mamma! mamma! just look at our dolls! Aren't they beautiful? And when you lay them down they shut their eyes and say good-night."

The lady was their mamma; exactly the right sort of mamma for them to have. I explained, and she explained, and it was all explained. By a most amazing coincidence she was in almost the same plight as I was. She was a Mrs Heathcote; had recently come with her two girls from India; had taken the flat opposite mine in the expectation of her husband joining her by Christmas Day, instead of which his ship had been delayed in the Suez Canal, or somewhere, somehow, and he could not possibly reach her for at any rate a day or two. And on the previous day, Christmas Eve, her cook had behaved in the most abominable manner, and had had to be sent packing, and her sympathetic friend, the housemaid, had gone with her, so that on Christmas Day Mrs Heathcote

was positively left without a soul to do a thing for her; precisely my condition. She had gone out to see if temporary help could be procured, and during her absence those two daughters of hers had slipped across to me. She had found no help, so that she had to deal with precisely the same problem which confronted me. She had breakfast with us-and the dolls! – Marjorie explaining that it was she who had cooked the bacon, and in an amazingly short space of time we were all of us on terms of the most delightful sociability.

I insisted that they must all go out with me to lunch at a restaurant. It might not seem to promise much entertainment to have to go for a meal to a place of the kind on Christmas Day, but the girls were delighted. It is my experience that most children like feeding in public, I don't know why, and when pressed their mother was willing, so I was charmed.

"Now," I observed, "that it is settled we are to go somewhere, the question is-where?"

"May I choose?" asked Mrs Heathcote.

"My dear madam, if you only would, you would confer on me a really great favour. On the subject of the choice of a restaurant I consider a lady's opinion to be of the very first importance."

That was not, perhaps, the whole truth, but on such matters, at such moments, one need not be a stickler. She smiled-she had an uncommonly pleasant smile; it reminded me of someone, somewhere, though I could not think who. She rested her elbows on the table, placing her hands palm to palm.

"Then I say Ordino's."

When she said that I had a shock. I stared.

"Excuse me-what-what did you say?"

She smiled again.

"I suppose you'll think I'm silly, and I daresay you've never heard of the place, and I myself don't know where it is, and anyhow it mayn't be at all nice-mind I'm not giving it any sort of character. But if the place is still in existence, since it is Christmas Day and we are to lunch at a restaurant, if the choice is left to me, I say again-Ordino's."

"May I ask if you've any special reason for-for choosing this particular place?"

There was an interval of silence before she answered. Although I had purposely turned my back to her I had a sort of feeling that there was an odd look upon her face.

"Yes, I have a special reason, in a sort of a way. When we've lunched perhaps I'll tell it you. If the lunch has been a very bad one then you'll say-quite rightly-that you'll never again rely upon a woman's reason where a restaurant's concerned."

It was-I had to hark back into my forgotten mental lumber to think how many years it was since I had entered Ordino's door. I had told myself that I would never enter it again. And yet here was this stranger suddenly proposing that I should visit it once more, on Christmas Day of all days in the year. Why, the last time I fed there-the very last time-it was a Christmas Day.

I should write myself down a fool were I to attempt to describe the feelings with which I set about that Christmas morning's entertainment. We lunched at Ordino's. It was within half a mile of where I lived, and yet I had never seen or passed it since. The street in which it was had been to me as if it were shut at both ends. If a cabman had wanted to take me down that way I had stopped him, even though it meant another sixpence.

It had scarcely changed, either within or without. As the four of us trooped inside-six with the dolls, for the dolls went out to lunch with us-I had an eerie sort of sensation that it was only yesterday that I was there. The same window with the muslin curtain drawn across; the same small room with the eight or ten marble tables; the same high desk, and if it was not the same woman who was seated at it then she was a very decent imitation.

"What a queer little place it seems."

Mrs Heathcote said this as we stood looking about for a table.

"Yes, it does seem queer."

It did-for a reason I was not disposed to explain. I chose the same table-that is, the table next to the desk in which the woman sat. As might have been expected, we had the place to ourselves, and the whole services of the one waiter. I fancy that the establishment provided us with a tolerable meal; the cooking always had been decent at Ordino's. Judging from the way in which the others despatched the fare which was set before us, the tradition still survived. So far as I was personally concerned I was scarcely qualified to criticise. Each mouthful "gave me furiously to think;" I thought between the mouthfuls; never before had I had a meal so full of thinking. My guests were merry enough; those two young women were laughing all the time.

At last we came to the dessert. "Madam," I began, "have you been badly treated or well?"

"Excellently treated, thank you. I think it has all been capital, only I'm afraid you haven't had your proper share."

"Oh, yes, I have had my proper portion and to spare. Is it allowable to ask you to gratify my curiosity by telling me for what special reason you chose Ordino's?"

She toyed with a pear which she was peeling.

"You will laugh at me."

"There will be no malice in my laughter if I do."

"Then the story is not mine."

"Whose then?"

"It's about my sister-Marjorie."

I gripped the edge of the table, but she did not notice, she was peeling her pear. Her daughters were occupied with their dolls. They were teaching them the only proper way in which to consume a banana. Judging from his contortions the one waiter seemed to find the proceedings as good as a play.

"You have a sister whose name is Marjorie?"

"Oh, yes, she is all the relations I have."

"Marjorie what?"

"Marjorie Fleming." Then I knew that a miracle had happened. "My eldest girl is named after her." I might have guessed it; I believe I did. "She's the dearest creature in the world, but she hasn't had the very best of times."

I said nothing, having nothing to say. I waited for her to go on, which presently she did do, dreamily, as she peeled her pear.

"Do you know that it was in this place-I suppose in this very room-perhaps at this very table, that her life was spoilt one Christmas Day."

"How-how spoilt?"

It seemed as if my tongue had shrivelled in my mouth.

"What is it that spoils a woman's life?"

"How should I know?"

"I thought that everyone knew what spoils a woman's life-even you cynical bachelors." Cynical bachelors! I was beginning to shiver as if each word she uttered was a piece of ice slipped down my back. "Different people write it different ways, but it's all summed up in the same word in the end-a lover."

"I thought that it was a lover who is supposed to make a woman's life the perfect thing it ought to be."

"He either makes or mars it. In my sister's case he-marred it."

"A woman's life is not so easily spoilt."

"Hers was. All in a moment. It was years and years ago, but it's with her still-that moment. I know, I know! Poor Marjorie! The whole of her life worth living is in the land of ghosts."

My heart stopped beating. The sap in my veins was dried. It seemed as if the world was slipping from me. All Marjorie's life worth living was in the land of ghosts? Why, then, we were in the land of ghosts together!

"She told me the story once, and only once, but I've never forgotten it-never; a woman never does forget that kind of story, and I'm sure Marjorie never will. I know it's just as present to her now as if it had only happened yesterday. Dear Marjorie! You don't know what a dear sister my sister is. Although, in those days, she was only a young girl, she lived alone in London. Our father and mother died when we were children. She was full of dreams of becoming a great artist; they are gone now, with the other dreams. She had a lover, who was jealous of her artist friends. They had lovers' tiffs. They used often to come to this place. They came here together one Christmas Day, of all days in the year. And it is because of what happened on that Christmas Day that Ordino's Restaurant has been to me a sort of legend, a shrine which had to be visited when occasion offered. They quarrelled. Marjorie told me that she never could remember just how the quarrel began, and I believe her. Quarrels, especially between a man and a woman, spring out of nothing often and often. They grew furiously hot. Suddenly, in his heat, he said something which no man ever ought to say to any woman, above all to the woman whom he loves. Marjorie stood up. She laid on the table the locket he had just given her-a Christmas gift-with, in it, his portrait and hers. And she said, 'I return you your locket. Presently, when I get home, I will return all that you have given me. I never wish to see you, or to hear from you, again.' And she went towards the entrance, he doing nothing to stop her. As she opened the door she saw him stand up and give the locket, her locket, to the woman who sat at the desk, as that woman is sitting now, and he said, in tones which he evidently intended that she should hear, 'Madam, permit me to beg your acceptance of this locket. Since it is associated with someone whom I wish I had never met, you will do me a great favour by relieving me of its custody.' Marjorie waited to hear no more. She went out, alone, into the street, that Christmas Day, and she has never seen him since or heard if he is alive or dead."

I was speechless. I could only sit and stare at the ghosts who stared at me.

All at once "the woman who sat at the desk," as Mrs Heathcote had put it, came down from her place and stood beside us.

"Madam," she exclaimed, in what struck me, even then, as tones of singular agitation, "it is a miracle, a true miracle. You must forgive me, I could not help but listen; my parents have told me the story many and many a time. It all happened as you have said. It was to my mother the locket was given. She wished very much not to take it, but the young gentleman, he was very excited, and at last, to avoid a scene, my father said to her, 'At least in your keeping it will be safe; worse might befall it than to be left in your hands. These foolish young people will make it up again. Presently they will return; you will be able to give back the locket to its proper owner.' But they did not return, neither the one nor the other, never, not once! At last my mother died; the locket came to me. She wished that when I was in the desk I should always carry it as she had done, for she believed that, at last, there would arrive a day when one or the other would return and the locket would be restored. Madam, here is the locket. I entreat you to permit me to beg you to return it to your sister, to whom it properly belongs."

The speaker held out something which I vaguely recognised as the locket of that eventful Christmas Day, which I had purchased with such loving thought and tender carefulness, and of which I had rid myself in such a storm of rage. Mrs Heathcote stared alternately at it and at the woman who for so long had held it, as a sacred charge, in such safe keeping, as if its sudden appearance had robbed her of her power of speech. I was conscious that someone had come into the place. Instantly those two young persons-who were still instructing their dolls in the proper manner of eating a banana-tore off towards the door, crying, at the top of their voices, -

"Father! father! Oh, mother, here's father!"

And all at once Mrs Heathcote went pushing past me, then I knew that she was in the arms of a man with a beard-I believe she was crying! – and exclaiming, -

"Robert, have you dropped from the skies?"

"No," he responded, reasonably enough, "I've merely dropped in from the overland route. I made up my mind I'd get at you somehow by Christmas Day, and I have. But before I was allowed to go to you, where I supposed you to be, I was made to come here. For some mysterious reason of her own that sister of yours, before she went anywhere else, insisted on visiting Ordino's Restaurant; for an explanation, if you want one, I can only refer you to Marjorie."

Marjorie! Behind him was a woman whose face, whose form, whose everything I knew. It seemed that "the woman who sat at the desk" recognised her also. She held out the locket.

"Madam, allow me to have the happiness to return to you your locket. That it is yours I am sure because of your portrait which is in it. You have scarcely altered at all since the day it was taken."

I snatched it from her.

"Give it to me!" I stormed. "Since, through all these years, it has been held in such safe keeping, Marjorie, won't you take your locket back again?"

She had never moved her eyes from off my face, just as I had kept mine on hers. She moved a little forward. And-then I had her in my arms and her cheek was next to mine, and the locket was in her hand, and-we both of us were crying-I admit it... Oh, yes, it was a miracle of grace and healing, since by the grace of God the open wound was healed. For us-for Marjorie and me-the life worth living is no longer in the land of ghosts. We are living it now, together; dear wife! together.

And it is universally admitted that we are the best customers Ordino's Restaurant has. Those two young persons have been there again and again since then, with their dolls, whom they are still instructing in the proper manner of eating a banana. I should be afraid to estimate how many bananas they have themselves consumed in the process of instruction. And to think that that Christmas miracle all came about because that child intruded herself into my apartments-actually! – with a view of showing me how to make a fire!

In itself, was that not a miracle too?

OUR MUSICAL COMEDY

"I forbid you to do it!"

Of course when George said that, with such an air, and in such a tone, I should have been perfectly justified in making an end of everything. The idea of his actually ordering me, when we had been engaged scarcely any time at all, was really too much. But I remembered what was due to myself and-I think! – behaved beautifully. I was merely crushing.

"You will remember, if you please, that, at present, I am not your wife. And may I ask if you propose to speak to me like that when I am?"

"I trust that whenever I see you contemplating a false step I shall always use my influence to endeavour to persuade you not to take it."

"Persuasion is one thing-ordering is quite another."

It all began with the private theatricals in aid of the parochial charities. Almost for the first time since I had been in the place people seemed to have found out my existence. It was the rector's son-Frank Spencer-who was the actual discoverer. I really believe it was that fact which George did not like. Mr Spencer came and said that they were going to have theatricals and would I take part in them? I told him that I had never acted in my life. He declared that they could not do without me. I explained that I did not see how that could be, since I had not had the least experience, and, indeed, doubted if I should not make a complete spectacle of myself and spoil everything. He replied that it was ridiculous to talk like that-which I thought was rather rude of him, since he was sure that I should make a first-rate actress-though I could not even guess what made him sure; and everybody was certain that the whole thing would be an utter failure without me-then look how the parochial charities would suffer! I confess that I did not understand why everybody should take that view; though, on the other hand, I did not want the charities to languish on my account, and-well, I may as well own it-I rather liked the idea. I thought it was not half a bad one. Because I never had acted was no reason why I never should; at any rate, it occurred to me that it would be capital fun to try.

So when I informed Mr Spencer that I would consider the matter, I fancy that I rather conveyed the impression that my consideration might have a favourable issue.

Then the trouble began. George objected. When I wrote and told him that I was thinking of taking part in an amateur dramatic performance in aid of some most deserving charities, which were much in need of help, he sent me back a letter which rather surprised me. In the course of it he observed that there was a great deal too much of that sort of thing about-if that were so then certainly hitherto none of it had come my way; that not seldom amateur theatricals were but a cloak for something about which the less said the better-what he meant I had not the least idea; that they were generally exhibitions of incompetent vanity-which was not exactly a pleasant remark to make; that he could not understand how any sane person could wish to be connected with proceedings which, as a rule, were merely the outcome of a desire for vulgar notoriety. He concluded by remarking that while he had not the slightest desire to bias my judgment, of which, as I was aware, he had the highest opinion, at the same time he hoped that I would consider very carefully what he had said before arriving at a final decision.

Two days afterwards I met Mr Spencer, and he overpersuaded me. It is not to be denied that he had a most persuasive manner, and was, decidedly, not bad-looking; though, of course, that had nothing to do with it. It was the moving fashion in which he depicted the lamentable condition of the Coal Club, and the Clothing Club, and the Soup Kitchen, and that kind of thing, which induced me to promise to do all that I could for the Good Cause.

Still, when later Mr Spencer informed me that it was suggested that *A Pair of Knickerbockers* should be one of the pieces, and I had read it, and understood that it was proposed I should play

Mrs Melrose to his Mr Melrose, I admit that I was taken aback. It was at this point that George came on the scene. When he heard, there was quite a storm.

"Do you actually propose to appear upon the public stage attired in a pair of knickerbockers?"

"Do you call the Assembly Room at the 'Lion' the public stage?" I asked.

"I do, since anyone will be admitted who chooses to pay at the door."

"I'm sure there's nothing wrong in the piece or the rector wouldn't allow it to be played."

"The rector! You're not engaged to the rector, you're engaged to me, and I forbid you to do it."

It was then I made that crushing retort about not being his wife yet. Still, at the bottom of my heart I felt that there was reason in what he said. I doubt if any girl ever has looked well—really well!—in knickerbockers, and I was sure that they would not suit me. I had not the faintest intention of appearing either in public or private in any garment of any kind whatever which I knew would make me look a fright. So I made a great show of my willingness to meet George's wishes on every possible occasion, and promised that I would not act in *A Pair of Knickerbockers*. He was delighted, and—well, we had rather a nice time.

When I told Mr Spencer of my decision I quite expected that he would not like it. On the contrary, he did not seem to mind in the least; indeed, he seemed to be almost relieved.

"That decides it!" he exclaimed. "Your refusal is the last straw; it brings me to the sticking point; now I have made up my mind."

Then he made of me a confidant.

It appeared that he was a dramatist; he had written a play. It was most interesting. He had sent it to the manager of every theatre in London, and to a good many out of London too, and not one of them would bring it out. Which showed that there was something in it.

"Because," as he explained, "it's notorious that a man who's an outsider, and by that I mean one who wasn't born on the stage, or doesn't own a newspaper, or fifty thousand a year, or a handle to his name, has no more chance of getting a decent play accepted than he has of flying to the moon. If this play of mine was piffle, or the usual kind of stodge, then it might have a chance of being produced. The mere fact that it has not been produced, and probably never will be, proves that it is out of the common ruck."

He looked so handsome as he said this, and so full of scorn for the people who were incapable of seeing merit when it stared them in the face, that I felt a wave of sympathy sweep over me.

"Not that it matters," he continued. "In this world nothing matters."

It seemed rather a sweeping assertion. But I understood the bitterness which called it forth. So, with one fleeting glance out of the corner of my eye to let him know that there was one who comprehended, I suffered him to go on. And he went on.

"However, where there's a will there's a way, and when a man's set on gaining his end it's hard to stop him—if he is a man! There's more roads lead to Rome than one. My play shall see the light in the same fashion that many a work of genius has done before. Who knows how and where Shakespeare's first play was produced? We'll act it at the 'Lion.'"

"How splendid!" I exclaimed.

"Mind you," he added with a modesty which did him credit, "I don't say that my play's a work of genius."

"But I'm sure it is."

He shook his head.

"Frankly, it's not. In fact, it's a musical comedy in one act."

"But a musical comedy may be a work of genius."

He regarded me with what I felt almost amounted to an air of mystery.

"Did you ever know a musical comedy that was?"

"Yours may be an exception to the rule."

He suddenly seemed to make up his mind to adopt an air of perfect frankness.

"I know whereabouts my piece is as well as anyone living, and I give you my word it's not a work of genius. It's a kind of a go-as-you-please sort of thing; you'll see what I mean when you've read it."

I did see; or, rather, it would be more correct to say that I did not see. I told him so when we met again.

"I found it so difficult to make out what it's all about; it seems so vague. Nothing that anybody does seems to have any connection with anything that anybody else does."

The way in which he received my criticism was charming; he did not show the slightest sign of being hurt.

"You think that's a fault?" he said.

"It does appear to be rather a disadvantage. You know when people go to the theatre they like to have some idea of what they're looking at."

"I suppose they do. The fact is, that that's where the trouble was-I got stuck. When anyone had been doing anything I couldn't think what they ought to do next, so I started someone else doing something else instead. That's why I said it was a kind of a go-as-you-please. You observe I call it *A Lover's Quarrel*. Don't you think it's rather a good title?"

"It's not a bad title. But I don't understand which the lovers are supposed to be, or where the quarrel comes in."

"Perhaps not. You see the title was used in a sort of general sense." A bright idea seemed all at once to strike him. I was beginning to suspect that that was a kind of thing which did not strike him very often. "I tell you what-you've got the dramatic instinct-couldn't you give me a hint or two? What I want is a collaborator."

I felt convinced that he wanted something.

"Of course, I'm quite without experience. I think you're rash in crediting me with a dramatic instinct. I'm not sure that I even know what you mean. But I'll look through it again and see if I can be of any use."

"Do! and, mind you, do with it as you like; turn it inside out; cut it to pieces; anything! I know you'll make a first-rate thing of it. And I tell you what, we'll announce ourselves as joint authors."

In a weak moment-he certainly had very seductive eyes! – I yielded what amounted to a tacit consent. I read his play again, and came to the conclusion that while, as it stood, it was absolute rubbish, it yet contained that of which something might be made. I re-wrote the thing from beginning to end. What a time I had while I was in the throes of composition! and what a time everyone else had who came within a mile of me! I was scarcely on speaking terms with a single creature, and when anyone tried to speak to me I felt like biting them.

When it was finished Mr Spencer was in ecstasies.

"It's splendid! magnificent! there's nothing like it on the London stage!" I admit that I thought that that was possible. "There's no mistake about it, not the slightest shred of a scintilla of doubt, we've written a masterpiece!"

The "we" was good, and as for the "masterpiece," it was becoming plainer and plainer that Mr Frank Spencer was one of those persons who are easily pleased; which, as that sort is exceedingly rare, was, after all, a fault on the right side.

"Everybody," he went on, "will be enraptured with it; they won't be able to help it; they're absolutely bound to be."

I wished I felt as certain of that as he did. Indeed I doubted so much if rapture would represent the state of mind of a certain gentleman that, in the daily letter which I always wrote to him, I never even hinted that I was engaged on a work of collaboration; though, for a time, that work filled my mind to the extinction of everything else.

"Now," continued my co-author, "the thing is to cast it, and, mind you, this will want casting, this will; no round pegs in square holes. We don't want to have a fine play spoilt by anyone incapable; everyone will have to be as good as we can get."

Although he spoke as if it would be a task of the most delicate kind-and, for my part, I did not see how, in the neighbourhood of West Marden, we were going to cast it at all; yet, in actual practice he seemed to me to make nothing of the matter. When he came with what he called the "proposed cast" I was really amazed.

"Do you seriously mean, Mr Spencer, that these are the people whom you suggest should act in our play?"

"Certainly. I've thought this thing out right to the bed-rock, and I assure you that we couldn't do better. Of course, you must remember that I shall do a good bit myself. I fancy you'll be surprised when you see me act. I haven't much voice, but it isn't voice, you know, that's wanted in this sort of thing; and though I can't say that I'm a regular dancer I can throw my feet about in a way that'll tickle 'em. And then there's you-you'll be our winning card; the star of the evening. You'll carry off the thing on your own shoulders, with me to help you. The others, they'll just fill in the picture, as it were."

"I do hope, Mr Spencer, that you won't rely on me too much. I've told you, again and again, that I've never acted in my life, and have not the faintest notion if I can or can't."

Putting his hands into his trouser pockets he tried to patronise me as if he were a wiseacre of two hundred instead of a mere child of twenty.

"My dear Miss Wilson, I know an actress when I see one."

"You have an odd way of expressing yourself. I hope that you don't mean that when you see me you see an actress; because I assure you that I trust that you do nothing of the kind."

I wondered what George would think and say if he heard that hare-brained young simpleton accusing me of looking like an actress.

"You give my words a wrong construction. I only meant to express my profound conviction that in your hands everything will be perfectly safe."

"I can only say, Mr Spencer, that I hope you're right, because when I think of some of the people whose names you have put upon this piece of paper I have my doubts. I see you have Mrs Lascelles to act Dora Egerton, who is supposed to be a young girl, and who has to both sing and dance. I should imagine that Mrs Lascelles never sang a note; her speaking voice is as hoarse as a crow's. And as for dancing, why, she must weigh I don't know what, and is well past forty."

"There's nothing else Mrs Lascelles could act."

"Nothing else she could act! Act! I'm perfectly convinced that she can't act anything."

Mr Spencer winked, which was a reprehensible habit-one of several which I was meaning to tell him I objected to.

"She'll take two rows of reserved seats."

"Indeed, is that her qualification? Then am I to take it that the qualifications of all the rest of the people whom you have down on your piece of paper are of a similar kind?"

His manner immediately became confidential; he was very fond of becoming confidential. It was a fondness which I was commencing to perceive that it might become advisable to check before it went too far. There were moments when I never knew what he was going to say. I felt that he might say anything.

"You see, between ourselves, on the strict QT, it's like this; if we want to make the show the howling success it ought to be, what we've got to do is to see that everyone in the cast represents money."

"I don't understand."

I did not.

"Oh, yes, you do; only-I know!" He winked again; there was positively an impertinent twinkle in his eye. "You can see as far through a brick wall as anybody, when you like, only sometimes you don't like. What we've got to do is to fill the Assembly Rooms with money, and with more money, mind you, than the room holds. And the way to do that is to get the people to act whose names I have got down on that piece of paper."

"I still don't follow you. However, since you are managing the affair I suppose it's no business of mine. You are responsible for its success, not I."

"Exactly; you've hit it! I am responsible, and you may take it from me that in a little matter of this sort I know my way about. It's going to be a success-a bumper."

In spite of his confidence, when we came to actual business, things did not begin auspiciously.

By way of a commencement, he read the piece to the people who were going to act it. He said that dramatists always did so, and that it was necessary to do everything in regular order. The reading took place at Mrs Lascelles's house, The Grange. I had not been in the house before, and from the manner in which she received me I inclined to the opinion that she would just as soon I had not come into it then. As I looked round the room I could not but feel that, for the performance of a musical comedy, Mr Spencer had gathered together a truly curious company. I began to wish that I had had no hand in the collaboration. Before he had finished the reading that wish took a very much more definite form.

He was not a good reader; that fact forced itself upon one's attention before he had got through three lines. But had he been the finest reader in the world it would not have made a great deal of difference. A more dreadful set of people to read a musical comedy to one could not by any possibility imagine. The jokes-especially as he read them! – did not strike even me as being very good ones, and sometimes they were a little frivolous. What does one expect in a musical comedy? Had they been the finest jokes conceivable it would not have mattered. I do not believe there was a person present who could have seen a joke at all, even with the aid of a surgical operation. Each time there was a touch of frivolity the faces of the audience grew graver. And as for the songs! Everybody knows the kind of songs one does hear in musical comedies. The words are not suggestive of either Shakespeare or the musical glasses. I had planned mine on the same lines. There was one chorus which struck me as rather catchy.

"It tickled me so I had to smile;
I told the girl she was full of guile.
She said, 'What ho!'
I replied, 'Oh, no!
To put salt on my tail you must walk a mile!'"

I do not pretend that that's poetry, or anything but nonsense. You expect nonsense in a musical comedy. But when Mr Spencer had read two verses, Mrs Parker, who is the wife of the chairman of our local bench, rose from her chair with an expression of countenance calculated to sour all the milk for miles around, and observed-in such a tone of voice! -

"Excuse me, Mr Spencer. I must go. When I received your invitation I did not expect this kind of thing."

"What kind of thing?"

Mr Spencer looked up with a start. It was rapidly becoming more and more obvious to me that he was one of those young men who are incapable of seeing even as far as the tips of their own noses. He had been stammering and stumbling on in apparently sublime unconsciousness of the sort of reception which our masterpiece was receiving. The singularity of Mrs Parker's bearing seemed to take him entirely by surprise.

"May I ask, Mr Spencer, what you call the-stuff you have been reading?"

"Stuff? You mean the piece? It's a musical comedy."

"Indeed. I haven't noticed any music yet, and as for comedy-there is none. It appears to me to be a mere tissue of meaningless vulgarity. Where did you get it from?"

"Miss Wilson and I wrote it together-that is, she did the greater part of it. In fact, Miss Wilson practically wrote it all."

Which was true enough, but he need not have put it quite so emphatically just at that moment.

"Miss Wilson?" Mrs Parker put up her glasses and she looked at me. How she looked! "I have not the pleasure of Miss Wilson's acquaintance, but I cannot help thinking that she might have been better employed."

Then she went. Fancy my sensations!

Mr Spencer must have been pachydermatous. He seemed unable to feel either on his own account or on mine. Candid criticism of that ultra-candid sort was to him like water on a duck's back. Directly Mrs Parker was out of the room he turned to Mrs Lascelles.

"I don't think it's so bad, do you? – considering!"

"Considering." She said this with an accent for which I could have thrown something at her. That wretched boy only smiled. It seemed to be his *role* in life-to smile. Mrs Lascelles was good enough to add a sort of saving clause. "I daresay it will be better on the stage than it is off."

Mr Spencer jumped at the opening.

"Of course! On the stage it will be simply ripping! It's meant to be acted, not read; no good play ever reads well. The better it is the worse it reads."

"This one doesn't read well, does it? In any case I think you made a mistake in asking Mrs Parker to take part in a piece of the kind."

"It was a mistake, wasn't it?"

That young man beamed as if he were congratulating himself on having done something exceedingly clever. In return, Mrs Lascelles observed him with an air which was not exactly beaming.

"Frankly, Mr Spencer, I don't see much of a part in the piece for me."

As a matter of fact there was no part; there was just a song and a dance and nothing else. But I, personally, was convinced that that was too much. That extraordinary young man, however, put the matter in a way which staggered me.

"You see, Mrs Lascelles, it's like this: your part at present is simply outlined-the outline has to be filled in. That's the advantage of a piece like this, you can do that so easily. What I want is your idea of what you'd like the part to be, and then I'll write it up. See what I mean?"

I did not see what he meant. Under the circumstances I think I was to be congratulated on having been able to hold my peace-till later.

The reading limped to a finish. Then came the chorus. So far as I was able to gather, not a creature thought anything of the play, and they thought still less of the parts which had been allotted them. Mr Spencer scattered promises like leaves in autumn. It made my ears burn to listen to him. I was not so pliable. For instance, Major Hardy came up to me to make some truly sensible remarks.

"Candidly, Miss Wilson" – everybody was candid, it was in the air-"my idea was that we should represent *Hamlet*. I don't know if you are aware that I am by way of being a Shakespearian scholar. I have formed my own notion of the Prince of Denmark. I fancy that I might give shape and substance to that notion if I were allowed to read the part. I should have to read it. Between ourselves, my memory is so imperfect that I could never hope to get anything off by heart. You will therefore see that it is something of a jump to the-eh-kind of thing we have just been listening to. So far as I understand it is proposed that I should play a negro minstrel. Now Mrs Hardy would never permit me to black my face-never! She'd be afraid that it wouldn't come off again. On some points she is extremely nervous. Could the part not be transformed into that of a Highland piper? I have the kilts, and I have the pipes, and I can do some remarkable things with the bagpipes when

I am once fairly started. Sometimes it takes me a little time to get into my stride, apt to make two or three false starts, don't you know; wind goes wrong or something, but really, people seem to find that the most amusing part of it."

I informed him that the character could not be "transformed" into a Highland piper; that as for bagpipes, they were out of the question. I had heard of his "pipes." He was fond of playing on them in remote portions of his grounds; people had mistaken them for foghorns. In fact, I tried to convey the impression that I was not to be trifled with. From the look which came on his face I fancy that, to a great extent, I succeeded.

What does anyone suppose was the first remark which Mr Spencer addressed to me when at last we were alone together? – with all the assurance in the world!

"Went off magnificently, didn't it? I told you it would; with a regular bang!"

My attitude, when confronted by this amazing observation, was one of polar frigidity.

"I noticed the bang; it was one of those bangs which accompany a final explosion. Of course, I need scarcely observe that, so far as I am concerned, the whole affair is at an end."

"Miss Wilson! you're joking! You're not going to let them see that you're afraid of them?"

"Afraid! Mr Spencer, you use the most extraordinary language. Why should I be afraid? I beg to inform you that I am afraid of nothing, and of no one."

"I'm sure of it! All you have to do is to show a bold front and you'll do as you like with the lot of them."

"So far I've not observed much of the bold front about you. You kowtow to everyone as if you liked nothing so much as being trampled on."

"That's diplomacy; bound to be diplomatic. This sort of thing always begins like this."

"Does it? Then I wish you'd told me so at the beginning. I hate diplomacy."

"Miss Wilson, you have the dramatic instinct-"

"Mr Spencer, I wish you wouldn't talk nonsense. I believe you say that to everyone. I heard you tell Mrs Lascelles that when she appears on the stage she'll hold the audience in the hollow of her hand."

"So she will. She's going to appear in short skirts. When they catch sight of her they'll kill themselves with laughing."

When he said that a dreadful suspicion flashed across my mind that he was making fun of us all, including me; having a joke at our expense. I had little doubt, after what I had seen and heard that afternoon, that he was perfectly capable of such disgraceful conduct. I did not hesitate to let him know at once what I suspected.

"Mr Spencer, is it your intention that we shall all of us make laughing-stocks of ourselves for your amusement? Because, if so, I beg to state that I, for one, decline. I heard what you said to Mrs Lascelles; I heard you tell her that she would make the hit of the piece."

"So she will; a hit's made in all kinds of ways."

"Do you dare to tell me that all the while you were intentionally leading her on to making a complete idiot of herself?"

No eel that ever lived could compare with that young man for slipperiness. He always had an explanation handy-the more impossible the position the readier the explanation was.

"It's like this. If people are bent on making fools of themselves, and will only bite your nose off if you try to stop them, what are you to do? I tell you that the burden of the piece will be on your shoulders and mine before the night comes round, and we'll carry it off. But it's no good telling people that now, it has to be managed. Let's wait till they've got themselves into a fine old hole, and all the tickets are sold. All the country-side will crowd to see them make fools of themselves. Then, when they've muddled themselves into a state of semi-idiocy, they'll come and beg us-as a favour-to do what they wouldn't let us do at any price if we were to propose it now. You leave it

to me. I've perhaps got a funny way of my own of doing things, but I've a knack of getting where I want at the end. You keep your eyes wide open and you'll see some sport."

He closed one of his eyes that very moment and winked at me again. It was clear enough that he was a reprehensible young rascal, and all the while there was a doubt at the back of my head as to whether he would not wind up by landing me in a disagreeable situation. But, as I think I have already said, he had such a way about him, and such a plausible air, and he really was so good-looking, that he actually succeeded in persuading me-after all that had already happened-to continue my connection with that miserable play.

We had the first rehearsal. Oh, dear, it was dreadful! Not only were we all at sixes and sevens-no one knew anything of his or her part, or had the faintest notion what to do-but not a creature seemed to have an idea of how to put matters even a little into shape. As for that Spencer boy, he was worse than useless. It seemed to me that he took either an imbecile or a malicious pleasure in making confusion worse confounded. As for order! Everybody was talking together, and as no one could get anyone to pay the least attention to what he or she was saying, by degrees some of them began to sulk.

"You ought," I yelled to Mr Spencer when, for a moment, I succeeded in catching him by the coat sleeve, "for the first rehearsal to have called the principal performers only; we shall never get on like this."

Although the piece was only in one act there was a long cast, and a tremendous chorus, besides no end of people who were just supposed to dress up and walk on and off. "Get half the parish on the stage, and the other half is bound to come and laugh at them" – that was Mr Spencer's idea. The consequence was that that ridiculous little platform at the "Lion," which was going to be the stage, was so crammed with people that there was scarcely room to move, so that the proceedings almost resembled a scrimmage in a game of Rugby football.

Miss Odger, who was standing by, heard what I said, although Mr Spencer apparently continued oblivious of my presence. Quite uninvited she answered for him.

"And pray, Miss Wilson, who would you describe as the principal performers? I suppose you, of course, are one."

She certainly was not another, she was only in the chorus.

"Anyhow, Miss Odger, one would hardly speak of the members of the chorus as principals, would one?"

"Is that so? I had no idea. In my ignorance I thought we were all supposed to be equal. Since we are all doing our best I did not know that some of us were to be treated as inferiors. May, did you?"

She turned to Miss Taylor, who, I was aware, hated the sight of me, as her answer showed.

"Didn't you know, my dear, that Miss Wilson not only wrote most of the piece, but proposes to act most of it too? I daresay she will let Mr Spencer do a little, but the rest of us, I imagine, are only to form a kind of background."

"If that is the case the sooner it becomes generally known the better. Miss Wilson will find that she will be at liberty to do it all by herself, though she may have to do it without the background."

It was no use my attempting to match myself against them at saying disagreeable things there, even had my dignity permitted it, which it did not. I simply walked away.

That rehearsal, which really never was a rehearsal at all, ended in something like a general squabble. Everybody went away on pretty bad terms with everybody else. I doubt if one single creature left that room in a good temper, except Frank Spencer. He seemed absolutely radiant. I should not have been a scrap surprised to learn that, directly the last of us was out of sight, he had to hold his hands to his sides to keep himself from bursting with laughter.

The next day, as regards my share in the proposed entertainment, there came the final straw in the shape of a visit from his mother. Such a visit! Mrs Spencer was an individual to whom I never

had felt drawn. A little, fussy woman, with a fidgety manner, who was always tangling herself up in her own sentences. When she was announced, what she wanted with me I could not guess. It was with indescribable sensations that I gradually learnt.

"Miss Wilson," she began, "you are an orphan." I admitted it. From the way in which she was regarding me she might have been expecting me to deny it. "Therefore, much should be excused you. Providence does not wish us to press hardly on the motherless." I did not know what she meant, or why she was nodding her head as if it were hung on springs. "My dear young lady, I would ask you to excuse me if, on this occasion, I speak in a manner calculated to show you that I appreciate your situation, if I ask you to regard me as if I were your mother." I stared. I could not at all fancy Mrs Spencer as my mother. But that was only the beginning. What she proceeded to say next took my breath away. "I know my boy. I know his faults. I know his virtues. He has many fine qualities." Had he? I could only say I had not noticed them. "But it has not been always altogether fortunate for him that he is such a universal favourite-especially with young women." She looked at me in a style which made me go both hot and cold. "He has generous instincts; noble impulses; a natural inclination to do only what is right and proper. But-alas! – he is of a pliant disposition, as clay in the hands of the modeller; easily led astray."

"Is that so? I am bound to admit that your son has not struck me as being a very vertebrate creature, but I don't see what his peculiarities have to do with me."

"Miss Wilson, I don't like to hear you talk like that. I don't like it."

"Mrs Spencer!"

"It shows a callous disposition, especially in one who is, apparently, so young."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean perfectly well. Your own conscience is telling you, as you sit there, that you have taken advantage of his simplicity to induce my boy to do what he never would have done if he had been left alone."

"Mrs Spencer! This is monstrous!"

"It is no use your jumping up from your chair in that excitable manner and raising your voice. I am here to do my duty as a mother, and as the wife of the rector of this parish. Already your machinations have created a scandal, and you have set the whole place by the ears. Can you deny that you have entangled my son in a dreadful business, the end and aim of which is to perform in public a stage play for which you are responsible?"

"I presume that you are aware that you are alluding to Mr Frank Spencer's own musical comedy."

"It is not straightforward of you to attempt to take up such an attitude, Miss Wilson. Is it not a fact that for the play-which Mrs Parker informs me is of an absolutely impossible kind-

"Oh, Mrs Parker was your informant, was she?"

"Certainly. She was never more shocked in her life. To think that she should have been invited-actually invited! – to listen to such dreadful stuff!"

"It was your son who invited her; it was he who read the dreadful stuff, of which he is part author."

"Miss Wilson, it is unworthy of you to try to put the blame upon my boy, who is a mere lad."

"He's older than I am."

"In years, but we do not count by years only. I insist upon your telling me if for that dreadful play you are not principally, and practically, solely responsible?"

"I certainly have tried to make sense of your son's nonsense."

"And you really propose to perform it in public?"

"For the benefit of the parochial charities."

"For the benefit of the parochial charities!" You should have seen the expression which was on her funny little face as she repeated my words. "Miss Wilson, you dare to say such a thing!"

When you are perfectly well aware that neither the rector nor I would ever permit a farthing of any money obtained by such means to be devoted to such a purpose!"

"This is the most extraordinary thing I ever heard. Don't you know that the inception of the whole affair is your son's? He came and begged me to take part in an entertainment in aid of the parochial charities; he forced me to read his wretched play-"

"Oh, Miss Wilson! Miss Wilson! How can you talk to me in such a manner!" She actually wrung her hands, or seemed to. "Your painful behaviour compels me to ask if it is a fact that you are engaged to be married?"

"I am, though I do not see what that has to do with the matter under discussion."

"Then, under such circumstances, do you think it right and proper to encourage my poor boy?"

"Encourage your poor boy! I!"

I thought when she said that, that I should have had a fit.

"He is always with you; it is common talk. He is continually at your house-"

"Do you imagine that I invite him?"

I believe that I screamed at her.

"He has a photograph of yours in his cigarette-case; another in his pocket-book; another in his desk; a fourth on his bedroom mantelpiece."

"That's where my photographs have vanished to! Now I understand! Let me inform you, Mrs Spencer, that if, as you say, your son has my photographs, he has stolen them. Yes, stolen them-without asking my permission, and without my knowledge-like any common thief."

I do not deny that I lost my temper, but who, under the circumstances, would not have done? We had a brisk discussion. When we parted it was with a mutually-expressed hope that it was to meet no more.

Soon afterwards I went out to get some stamps. Old Bunting, who keeps the general shop and the post-office, received me with what he perhaps meant for an ingratiating simper.

"I hear, miss, that we're to have lively doings up at the Assembly Rooms; real old-fashioned ballet dancing and all sorts of things."

"I don't know what you mean, Mr Bunting."

I did not.

"Regular music-hall performances, so I'm told; short skirts and no end. It seems a bit unusual for ladies and gentlemen to go in for that kind of thing, but you'll have the place crammed to the doors, I promise you so much."

When I left Bunting's almost the first person I encountered was Mr Frank Spencer. I had it out with him then and there.

"Mr Spencer, will you at once return those four photographs of mine which you have stolen, or will it be necessary to communicate with the police?" He had the assurance to pretend to look surprised, but then he had assurance enough to pretend anything. "Your mother informs me that the whole idea of a performance in aid of the parochial charities is an invention of your own; on your father's behalf she repudiates it altogether. How dare you attempt to drag me into such a thing? As for that miserable musical comedy of yours-"

"Of ours."

If I could believe my senses there was still a twinkle in his eye.

"Of yours; you will give me your word of honour that you will destroy it at once, or I promise you that you shall hear from my solicitors."

"Really, Miss Wilson, I think it's rather hard of you to assail a fellow tooth and nail like this."

"You think I'm hard on you, do you? Here comes someone who, I fancy, you will find is of a different opinion." For who should come sailing into sight but George. Although I had not the faintest notion where he had sprung from, on the whole the sight of him was not unwelcome.

"George," I began, "Mr Spencer has stolen four of my photographs. I want him to return them to me at once."

"So this is Mr Spencer." George looked him up and down in a style which was not exactly flattering. "I am sure, Mr Spencer, that it is unnecessary for me to emphasise Miss Wilson's request."

"Quite. Here are two of the photographs in question." He took one from a cigarette-case, and a second from a pocket-book, as his mother had said. That boy's audacity! "I will see that the other two are forwarded directly I reach home."

I still addressed myself to George.

"Mr Spencer appears desirous of associating me with a scrawl which he calls a musical comedy. Will you request him to see that the manuscript of the thing is entirely destroyed?"

"You hear, Mr Spencer?"

"Perfectly. I will do better than Miss Wilson asks. I will send the 'scrawl' in question with the two photographs. She will then be able to do with it what she pleases. While apologising for any inconvenience which Miss Wilson may have been occasioned, I would beg to be allowed to add that I think that Miss Wilson is disposed to regard me with almost undue severity. She forgets how hard up for amusement a fellow may be in a place like this. My idea was to get her to join me in playing off a joke on the aboriginals which wouldn't be forgotten for years. I can only express my regret that she should have taken up the point of view she has."

The impertinent young rascal walked off with his head in the air, and a look on his face which nearly suggested that he was the injured party. And, of course, George proceeded to lecture me.

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