

Alice Sit-By-The-Fire

By

J. M. Barrie

One would like to peep covertly into Amy's diary (octavo, with the word 'Amy' in gold letters wandering across the soft brown leather covers, as if it was a long word and, in Amy's opinion, rather a dear). To take such a liberty, and allow the reader to look over our shoulders, as they often invite you to do in novels (which, however, are much more coquettish things than plays) would be very helpful to us; we should learn at once what sort of girl Amy is, and why to-day finds her washing her hair. We should also get proof or otherwise, that we are interpreting her aright; for it is our desire not to record our feelings about Amy, but merely Amy's feelings about herself; not to tell what we think happened, but what Amy thought happened. The book, to be sure, is padlocked, but we happen to know where it is kept. (In the lower drawer of that hand-painted escritoire.) Sometimes in the night Amy, waking up, wonders whether she did lock her diary, and steals downstairs in white to make sure. On these occasions she undoubtedly lingers among the pages, re-reading the peculiarly delightful bit she wrote yesterday; so we could peep over her shoulder, while the reader peeps over ours. Then why don't we do it? Is it because this would be a form of eavesdropping, and that we cannot be sure our hands are clean enough to turn the pages of a young girl's thoughts? It cannot be that, because the novelists do it. It is because in a play we must tell nothing that is not revealed by the spoken words; you must find out all you want to know from them; there is no weather even in plays nowadays except in melodrama; the

novelist can have sixteen chapters about the hero's grandparents, but we cannot even say he had any unless he says it himself. There can be no rummaging in the past for us to show what sort of people our characters are; we are allowed only to present them as they toe the mark; then the handkerchief falls, and off they go.

So now we know why we must not spy into Amy's diary. Perhaps we have not always been such sticklers for the etiquette of the thing; but we are always sticklers on Thursdays, and this is a Thursday.

As you are to be shown Amy's room, we are permitted to describe it, though not to tell (which would be much more interesting) why a girl of seventeen has, as her very own, the chief room of a house. The moment you open the door of this room (and please, you are not to look consciously at the escritoire as if you knew the diary was in it) you are aware, though Amy may not be visible, that there is an uncommonly clever girl in the house. The door does not always open easily, because attached thereto is a curtain which frequently catches in it, and this curtain is hand-sewn (extinct animals); indeed a gifted woman's touch is everywhere; if you are not hand-sewn you are almost certainly hand-painted, but incompletely, for Amy in her pursuit of the arts has often to drop one in order to keep pace with another. Some of the chairs have escaped as yet, but their time will come. The table-cover and the curtains are of a lovely pink, perforated ingeniously with many tiny holes, which when you consider them against a dark background, gradually assume the appearance of something

pictorial, such as a basket of odd flowers. The fender stool is in brown velvet, and there are words on it that invite you to sit down. Some of the letters of this message have been burned away. There are artistic white bookshelves hanging lopsidedly here and there, and they also have pink curtains, no larger than a doll's garments. These little curtains are for covering the parts where there are no books as yet. The pictures on the walls are mostly studies done at school, and include the well-known windmill, and the equally popular old lady by the shore. Their frames are of fir-cones, glued together, or of straws which have gone limp, and droop like streaks of macaroni. There is a cosy corner; also a milking-stool, but no cow. The lampshades have had ribbons added to them, and from a distance look like ladies of the ballet. The flower-pot also is in a skirt. Near the door is a large screen, such as people hide behind in the more ordinary sort of play; it will be interesting to see whether we can resist the temptation to hide some one behind it.

A few common weeds rear their profane heads in this innocent garden; for instance a cruet-stand, a basket of cutlery, and a triangular dish of the kind in which the correct confine cheese. They have not strayed here, they live here; indeed this is among other things the dining-room of a modest little house in Brompton made beautiful, or nearly so, by a girl, who has a soul above food and conceals its accessories as far as possible from view, in drawers, even in the waste-paper basket. Not a dish, not a spoon, not a fork, is hand-painted, a sufficient indication of her contempt for them.

Amy is present, but is not seen to the best advantage, for she has been washing her hair, and is now drying it by the fire. Notable among her garments are a dressing-jacket and a towel, and her head is bent so far back over the fire that we see her face nearly upside-down. This is no position in which we can do justice to her undoubted facial charm. Seated near her is her brother Cosmo, a boy of thirteen, in naval uniform. Cosmo is a cadet at Osborne, and properly proud of his station, but just now he looks proud of nothing. He is plunged in gloom. The cause of his woe is a telegram, which he is regarding from all points of the compass, as if in hopes of making it send him better news. At last he gives expression to his feelings. 'All I can say,' he sums up in the first words of the play, 'is that if father tries to kiss me, I shall kick him.'

If Amy makes any reply the words arrive upside-down and are unintelligible. The maid announces Miss Dunbar. Then Amy rises, brings her head to the position in which they are usually carried; and she and Ginevra look into each other's eyes. They always do this when they meet, though they meet several times a day, and it is worth doing, for what they see in those pellucid pools is love eternal. Thus they loved at school (in their last two terms), and thus they will love till the grave encloses them. These thoughts, and others even more beautiful, are in their minds as they gaze at each other now. No man will ever be able to say 'Amy,' or to say 'Ginevra,' with such a trill as they are saying it.

'Ginevra, my beloved.'

'My Amy, my better self.'

'My other me.'

There is something almost painful in love like this.

'Are you well, Ginevra?'

'Quite well, Amy.'

Heavens, the joy of Amy because Ginevra is quite well.

'How did my Amy sleep?'

'I had a good night.'

How happy is Ginevra because Amy has had a good night. All this time they have been slowly approaching each other, drawn by a power stronger than themselves. Their intention is to kiss. They do so.

Cosmo snorts, and betakes himself to some other room, his bedroom probably, where a man may be alone with mannish things, his razor, for instance. The maidens do not resent his rudeness. They know that poor Cosmo's time will come, and they are glad to be alone, for they have

much to say that is for no other mortal ears. Some of it is sure to go into the diary; indeed if we were to put our ear to the drawer where the diary is we could probably hear its little heart ticking in unison with theirs.

It is Ginevra who speaks first. She is indeed the bolder of the two. She grips Amy's hand and says quite firmly, 'Amy, shall we go to another to-night?' This does not puzzle Amy, she is prepared for it, her honest grey eyes even tell that she has wanted it, but now that it is come she quails a little. 'Another theatre?' she murmurs. 'Ginevra, that would be five in one week.'

Ginevra does not blanch. 'Yes,' she says recklessly, 'but it is also only eight in seventeen years.'

'Isn't it,' says Amy, comforted. 'And they have taught us so much, haven't they? Until Monday, dear, when we went to our first real play we didn't know what Life is.'

'We were two raw, unbleached school-girls, Amy--absolutely unbleached.'

It is such a phrase as this that gives Ginevra the moral ascendancy in their discussions.

'Of course,' Amy ventures, looking perhaps a little unbleached even

now, 'of course I had my diary, dear, and I do think that, even before Monday, there were things in it of a not wholly ordinary kind.'

'Nothing,' persists Ginevra cruelly, 'that necessitated your keeping it locked.'

'No, I suppose not,' sadly enough. 'You are quite right, Ginevra. But we have made up for lost time. Every night since Monday, including the matinee, has been a revelation.'

She closes her eyes so that she may see the revelations more clearly. So does Ginevra.

'Amy, that heart-gripping scene when the love-maddened woman visited the man in his chambers.'

'She wasn't absolutely love-maddened, Ginevra; she really loved her husband best all the time.'

'Not till the last act, darling.'

'Please don't say it, Ginevra. She was most foolish, especially in the crepe de chine, but we know that she only went to the man's chambers to get back her letters. How I trembled for her then.'

'I was strangely calm,' says Ginevra the stony hearted.

'Oh, Ginevra, I had such a presentiment that the husband would call at those chambers while she was there. And he did. Ginevra, you remember his knock upon the door. Surely you trembled then?'

Ginevra knits her lips triumphantly.

'Not even then, Amy. Somehow I felt sure that in the nick of time her lady friend would step out from somewhere and say that the letters were hers.'

'Nobly compromising herself, Ginevra.'

'Amy, how I love that bit where she says so unexpectedly, with noble self-renunciation, "He is my affianced husband."'

'Isn't it glorious. Strange, Ginevra, that it happened in each play.'

'That was because we always went to the thinking theatres, Amy. Real plays are always about a lady and two men; and alas, only one of them is her husband. That is Life, you know. It is called the odd, odd triangle.'

'Yes, I know.' Appealingly, 'Ginevra, I hope it wasn't wrong of me to go. A month ago I was only a school-girl.'

'We both were.'

'Yes, but you are now an art student, in lodgings, with a latchkey of your own; you have no one dependent on you, while I have a brother and sister to--to form.'

'You must leave it to the Navy, dear, to form Cosmo, if it can; and as the sister is only a baby, time enough to form her when she can exit from her pram.'

'I am in a mother's place for the time being, Ginevra.'

'Even mothers go to thinking theatres.'

'Whether mine does, Ginevra, I don't even know. This is a very strange position I am in, awaiting the return from India of parents I have not seen since I was twelve years old. I don't even know if they will like the house. The rent is what they told me to give, but perhaps my scheme of decoration won't appeal to them; they may think my housekeeping has been defective, and may not make allowance for my being so new to it.'

Ginevra takes Amy in her arms. 'My ownest Amy, if they are not both on their knees to you for the noble way in which you have striven to prepare this house for them--'

'Darling Ginevra, all I ask is to be allowed to do my duty.'

'Listen, then, Amy: your duty is to be able to help your parents in every way when they return. Your mother having been so long in India can know little about Life; how sweet, then, for you to be able to place your knowledge at her feet.'

'I had thought of that, dearest.'

'Then Amy, it would be simply wrong of us not to go to another theatre to-night. I have three and ninepence, so that if you can scrape together one and threepence--'

'Generous girl, it can't be.'

'Why not, Amy?'

The return of Cosmo handling the telegram more pugnaciously than ever provides the answer.

'Cosmo, show Miss Dunbar the telegram.'

Miss Dunbar reads: 'Boat arrived Southampton this morning.'

'A day earlier than they expected,' Amy explains.

'It's the other bit I am worrying about,' Cosmo says darkly. The other bit proves to be 'Hope to reach our pets this afternoon. Kisses from both to all. Deliriously excited. Mummy and Dad.'

Now we see why Cosmo has been in distress.

'Pets, kisses,' he cries. 'What can the telegraph people think.'

'Surely,' Amy says, 'you want to kiss your mother.'

'I'm going to kiss her,' he replies stoutly. 'I mean to do it. It's father I am worrying about; with his "kisses to both from all." All I can say is that, if father comes slobbering over me, I'll surprise him.'

Here the outer door slams, and the three start to their feet as if Philippi had dawned. To Cosmo the slam sounds uncommonly like a father's kiss. He immediately begins to rehearse the greeting which is meant to ward off the fatal blow. 'How are you, father? I'm glad to see you, father; it's a long journey from India; won't you sit down?'

Amy is the first to recover. 'How silly of us,' she says; 'it is only nurse with baby.'

Presumably what we hear is a perambulator backing into its stall in the passage. Then nurse is distinctly heard in the adjoining room, and

we may gather that this is for the nonce the nursery of the house, though to most occupants it would be the back dining-room. There is a door between the two rooms, and Cosmo, peeping through a chink in it, sounds to his fellow-conspirators the All's Well.

'Poor nurse,' Amy says with a kind sigh, 'I suppose I had better show her the telegram. She is sure to cry. She looks upon mother as a thief who has come to steal baby from her.'

Ginevra wags her head to indicate that this is another slice of Life; and nurse being called in is confronted with the telegram. She runs a gamut of emotion without words, implies that she is nobody and must submit, nods humbly, sets her teeth, is both indignant and servile, and finally bursts into tears. Amy tries to comfort her, but gets this terrible answer: 'They'll be bringing a black woman to nurse her--a yah-yah they call them.'

Amy signs to Ginevra, and Ginevra signs to Amy. These two souls perfectly understand each other, and the telegraphy means that it will be better for dear Ginevra to retire for a time to dear Amy's sweet little bedroom. Amy slips the diary into the hand of Ginevra, who pops upstairs with it to read the latest instalment. Nurse rambles on. 'I have had her for seventeen months. She was just two months old, the angel, when they sent her to England, and she has been mine ever since. The most of them has one look for their mammas and one look for their nurse, but she knew no better than to have both looks for me.'

She returns to the nursery, wailing 'My reign is over.'

'Do you think Molly will chuck nurse for mother?' asks Cosmo, to whom this is a new thought.

'It is the way of children,' the more experienced Amy tells him.

'Shabby little beasts,' the man says.

'You mustn't say that, Cosmo; but still it is hard on nurse. Of course,' with swimming eyes, 'in a sense it's hard on all of us--I mean to be expecting parents in these circumstances. There must be almost the same feeling of strangeness in the house as when it is a baby that is expected.'

'I suppose it is a bit like that,' Cosmo says gloomily. He goes to her as the awfulness of this sinks into him: 'Great Scott, Amy, it can't be quite so bad as that.'

Amy, who is of a very affectionate nature, is glad to have the comfort of his hand.

'What do we really know about mother, Cosmo?' she says darkly.

They are perhaps a touching pair.

'There are her letters, Amy.'

'Can one know a person by letters? Does she know you, Cosmo, by your letters to her, saying that your motto is "Something attempted, something done to earn a night's repose," and so on.'

'Well, I thought that would please her.'

'Perhaps in her letters she says things just to please us.'

Cosmo wriggles.

'This is pretty low of you, damping a fellow when he was trying to make the best of it.'

'All I want you to feel,' Amy says, getting closer to him, 'is that as brother and sister, we are allies, you know--against the unknown.'

'Yes, Amy,' Cosmo says, and gets closer to her.

This so encourages her that she hastens to call him 'dear.'

'I want to say, dear, that I'm very sorry I used to shirk bowling to you.'

'That's nothing. I know what girls are. Amy, it's all right, I really

am fond of you.'

'I have tried to be a sort of mother to you, Cosmo.'

'My socks and things--I know.' Returning anxiously to the greater question, 'Amy, do we know anything of them at all?'

'We know some cold facts, of course. We know that father is much older than mother.'

'I can't understand why such an old chap should be so keen to kiss me.'

'Mother is forty,' Amy says in a low voice.

'I thought she was almost more than forty,' Cosmo says in a still lower voice.

Amy shudders. 'Don't be so ungenerous, Cosmo.' But she has to add. 'Of course we must be prepared to see her look older.'

'Why?'

'She will be rather yellow, coming from India, you know. They will both be a little yellow.'

They exchange forlorn glances, but Cosmo says manfully, 'We shan't be any the less fond of them for that, Amy.'

'No, indeed.'

They clasp hands on it, and Cosmo has an inspiration.

'Do you think we should have these yellow flowers in the room? They might feel--eh?'

'How thoughtful of you, dear. I shall remove them at once. After all, Cosmo, we seem to know a good deal about them; and then we know some other things by heredity.'

'Heredity? That's drink, isn't it?'

She who has been to so many theatres smiles at him. 'No, you boy! It's something in a play. It means that if we know ourselves well, we know our parents also. From thinking of myself, Cosmo, I know mother. In her youth she was one who did not love easily; but when she loved once it was for aye. A nature very difficult to understand, but profoundly interesting. I can feel her within me, as she was when she walked down the aisle on that strong arm, to honour and obey him henceforth for aye. What cared they that they had to leave their native land, they were together for aye. And so--' Her face is flushed. Cosmo interrupts selfishly.

'What about father?'

'Very nice, unless you mention rupees to him. You see the pensions of all Indian officers are paid in rupees, which means that for every 2s. due to them they get only 1s. 4d. If you mention rupees to any one of them he flares up like a burning paper.'

'I know. I shall take care. But what would you say he was like by heredity?'

'Quiet, unassuming, yet of an intensely proud nature. One who if he was deceived would never face his fellow-creatures, but would bow his head before the wind and die. A strong man.'

'Do you mean, Amy, that he takes all that from me?'

'I mean that is the sort of man my mother would love.'

Cosmo nods. 'Yes, but he is just as likely to kiss me as ever.'

The return of Ginevra makes him feel that this room is no place for him.

'I think,' he says, 'I'll go and walk up and down outside, and have a look at them as they're getting out of the cab. My plan, you see, is

first to kiss mother. Then I've made up four things to say to father, and it's after I've said them that the awkward time will come. So then I say, "I wonder what is in the evening papers"; and out I slip, and when I come back you will all have settled down to ordinary life, same as other people. That's my plan.' He goes off, not without hope, and Ginevra shrugs her shoulders forgivingly.

'How strange boys are,' she reflects. 'Have you any "plan," Amy?'

'Only this, dear Ginevra, to leap into my mother's arms.'

Ginevra lifts what can only be called a trouser leg, because that is what it is, though they are very seldom seen alone. 'What is this my busy bee is making?'

'It's a gentleman's leg,' Amy explains, not without a sweet blush.

'You hand-sew them and stretch them over a tin cylinder, and they are then used as umbrella stands. Art in the Home says they are all the rage.'

'Oh, Amy, Boudoir Gossip says they have quite gone out.'

'Again! Every art decoration I try goes out before I have time to finish it.'

She remembers the diary.

'Did my Ginevra like my new page?'

'Dearest, that is what I came down to speak about. You forgot to give me the key.'

'Ginevra, can you ever forgive me? Let us go up and read it together.'

With arms locked they seek the seclusion of Amy's bedroom. Cosmo rushes in to tell them that there is a suspicious-looking cab coming down the street, but finding the room empty he departs again to reconnoitre. A cab draws up, a bell rings, and soon we hear the voice of Colonel Grey. He can talk coherently to Fanny, he can lend a hand in dumping down his luggage in the passage, he can select from a handful of silver wherewith to pay his cabman: all impossible deeds to his Alice, who would drop the luggage on your toes and cast all the silver at your face rather than be kept another minute from her darlings. 'Where are they?' she has evidently cried just before we see her, and Fanny has made a heartless response, for it is a dejected Alice that appears in the doorway of the room.

'All out!' she echoes wofully, 'even--even baby?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

The poor mother, who had entered the house like a whirlwind, subsides

into a chair. Her arms fall empty by her side: a moment ago she had six of them, a pair for each child. She cries a little, and when Alice cries, which is not often for she is more given to laughter, her face screws up like Molly's rather than like Amy's. She is very unlike the sketch of her lately made by the united fancies of her son and daughter; and she will dance them round the room many times before they know her better. Amy will never be so pretty as her mother, Cosmo will never be so gay, and it will be years before either of them is as young. But it is quite a minute before we suspect this; we must look the other way while the Colonel dries her tears. He is quite a grizzled veteran, and is trying hard to pretend that having done without his children for so many years, a few minutes more is no great matter. His adorable Alice is this man's one joke. Some of those furrows in his brow have come from trying to understand her, he owes the agility of his mind to trying to keep up with her; the humorous twist in his mouth is the result of chuckling over her.

She flutters across the room. 'Robert,' she says, thrilling. 'I daresay my Amy painted that table.'

'Yes, ma'am, she did,' says Fanny.

'Robert, Amy's table.'

'Yes, but keep cool, memsahib.'

'I suppose, ma'am, I'm to take my orders from you now,' the hard-hearted Fanny inquires.

'I suppose so,' Alice says, so timidly that Fanny is encouraged to be bold.

'The poor miss, it will be a bit trying for her just at first.'

Alice is taken aback.

'I hadn't thought of that, Robert.'

Robert thinks it time to take command.

'Fiddle-de-dee. Bring your mistress a cup of tea, my girl.'

'Yes, sir. Here is the tea-caddy, ma'am. I can't take the responsibility; but this is the key.'

'Robert,' Alice says falteringly. 'I daren't break into Amy's caddy. She mightn't like it. I can wait.'

'Rubbish. Give me the key.' Even Fanny cannot but admire the Colonel as he breaks into the caddy.

'That makes me feel I'm master of my own house already. Don't stare at

me, girl, as if I was a housebreaker.'

'I feel that is just what we both are,' his wife says; but as soon as they are alone she cries, 'It's home, home! India done, home begun.'

He is as glad as she.

'Home, memsahib. And we've never had a real one before. Thank God, I'm able to give it you at last.'

She darts impulsively from one object in the room to another.

'Look, these pictures. I'm sure they are all Amy's work. They are splendid.' With perhaps a moment's misgiving, 'Aren't they?'

'I couldn't have done them,' the Colonel says guardedly. He considers the hand-painted curtains. 'She seems to have stopped everything in the middle. Still I couldn't have done them. I expect this is what is called a cosy corner.'

But Alice has found something more precious. She utters little cries of rapture.

'What is it?'

'Oh, Robert, a baby's shoe. My baby.' She presses it to her as if it

were a dove. Then she is appalled. 'Robert, if I had met my baby coming along the street I shouldn't have known her from other people's babies.'

'Yes, you would,' the Colonel says hurriedly. 'Don't break down now. Just think, Alice; after to-day, you will know your baby anywhere.'

'Oh joy, joy, joy.'

Then the expression of her face changes to 'Oh woe, woe, woe.'

'What is it now, Alice?'

'Perhaps she won't like me.'

'Impossible.'

'Perhaps none of them will like me.'

'My dear Alice, children always love their mother, whether they see much of her or not. It's an instinct.'

'Who told you that?'

'You goose. It was yourself.'

'I've lost faith in it.'

He thinks it wise to sound a warning note. 'Of course you must give them a little time.'

'Robert, Robert. Not another minute. That's not the way people ever love me. They mustn't think me over first or anything of that sort. If they do I'm lost; they must love me at once.'

'A good many have done that,' Robert says, surveying her quizzically as if she were one of Amy's incompleting works.

'You are not implying, Robert, that I ever--. If I ever did I always told you about it afterwards, didn't I? And I certainly never did it until I was sure you were comfortable.'

'You always wrapped me up first,' he admits.

'They were only boys, Robert--poor lonely boys. What are you looking so solemn about, Robert?'

'I was trying to picture you as you will be when you settle down.'

She is properly abashed. 'Not settled down yet--with a girl nearly grown up. And yet it's true; it's the tragedy of Alice Grey.' She

pulls his hair. 'Oh, husband, when shall I settle down?'

'I can tell you exactly--in a year from to-day. Alice, when I took you away to that humdrummy Indian station I was already quite a middle-aged bloke. I chuckled over your gaiety, but it gave me lumbago to try to be gay with you. Poor old girl, you were like an only child who has to play alone. When for one month in the twelve we went to--to--where the boys were, it was like turning you loose in a sweet-stuff shop.'

'Robert, darling, what nonsense you do talk.'

He makes rather a wry face. 'I didn't always like it, memsahib. But I knew my dear, and could trust her; and I often swore to myself when I was shaving, "I won't ask her to settle down until I have given her a year in England." A year from to-day, you harum-scarum. By that time your daughter will be almost grown-up herself; and it wouldn't do to let her pass you.'

'Robert, here is an idea; she and I shall come of age together. I promise; or I shall try to keep one day in front of her, like the school-mistresses when they are teaching boys Latin. Dearest, you haven't been disappointed in me as a whole, have you? I haven't paid you for all your dear kindnesses to me--in rupees, have I?'

His answer is of no consequence, for at this moment there arrives a direct message from heaven. It comes by way of the nursery, and is a

child's cry. The heart of Alice Grey stops beating for several seconds. Then it says, 'My Molly!' The nurse appears, starts, and is at once on the defensive.

NURSE. 'Is it--Mrs. Grey?'

ALICE hastily, 'Yes. Is my--child in there?'

NURSE. 'Yes, ma'am.'

COLONEL, ready to catch her if she falls, 'Alice, be calm.'

ALICE, falteringly, 'May I go in, nurse?'

NURSE, cold-heartedly, 'She's sleeping, ma'am, and I have made it a rule to let her wake up naturally. But I daresay it's a bad rule.'

ALICE, her hands on her heart, 'I'm sure it's a good rule. I shan't wake her, nurse.'

COLONEL, showing the stuff he is made of, 'Gad, I will. It's the least she can do to let herself be wakened.'

ALICE, admiring the effrontery of the man, 'Don't interfere, Robert.'

COLONEL. 'Sleeping? Why, she cried just now.'

NURSE. 'That is why I came out--to see who was making so much noise.'

An implacable woman this, and yet when she is alone with Molly a very bundle of delight.

'I'm vexed when she cries--I daresay it's old-fashioned of me. Not being a yah-yah I'm at a disadvantage.'

ALICE, swelling, 'After all, she is my child.'

COLONEL, firmly, 'Come along. Alice,'

ALICE. 'I would prefer to go alone, dear.'

COLONEL. 'All right. But break it to her that I'm kicking my heels outside.'

Alice gets as far as the door. The nurse discharges a last duty.

NURSE. 'You won't touch her, ma'am; she doesn't like to be touched by strangers.'

ALICE. 'Strangers!'

COLONEL. 'Really, nurse.'

ALICE. 'It's quite true.'

NURSE. 'She's an angel if you have the right way with her.'

ALICE. 'Robert, if I shouldn't have the right way with her.'

COLONEL. 'You.'

But the woman has scored again.

ALICE, willing to go on her knees, 'Nurse, what sort of a way does she like from strangers?'

NURSE. 'She's not fond of a canoodlin' way.'

ALICE, faintly, 'Is she not?'

She departs to face her child, and the natural enemy follows her, after giving Colonel Grey a moment in which to discharge her if he dares, that is if he wishes to see his baby wither and die. One may as well say here that nurse weathered this and many another gale, and remained in the house for many years to be its comfort and its curse.

Fanny, with the tea-tray, comes and goes without the Colonel's being aware of her presence. He merely knows that he has waved someone away.

The fact is that the Colonel is engrossed in a rather undignified pursuit. He is listening avidly at the nursery door, and is thus discovered by another member of his family who has entered cautiously. This is Master Cosmo, who, observing the tea-tray, has the happy notion of interposing it between himself and his father's possible osculatory intentions. He lifts the tray, and thus armed introduces himself.

COSMO. 'Hullo, father.'

His father leaves the door and strides to him.

COLONEL. 'Is it--it's Cosmo.'

COSMO, with the tray well to the fore, 'I'm awfully glad to see you--it's a long way from India.'

COLONEL. 'Put that down, my boy, and let me get hold of you.'

COSMO, ingratiatingly, 'Have some tea, father.'

COLONEL. 'Put it down.'

Cosmo does so, and prepares for the worst. The Colonel takes both his hands.

'Let's have a look at you. So this is you.'

He waggles his head, well-pleased, while Cosmo backs in a gentlemanly manner.

COSMO, implying that this first meeting is now an affair of the past,
'Has Mother gone to lie down?'

COLONEL. 'Lie down? She's in there.'

Cosmo steals to the nursery door and softly closes it.

'Why do you do that?'

COSMO. 'I don't know. I thought it would be--best.' In a burst of candour, 'This is not the way I planned it, you see.'

COLONEL. 'Our meeting? So you've been planning it. My dear fellow, I was planning it too, and my plan--' He is certainly coming closer.

COSMO, hurriedly, 'Yes, I know. Now that's over--our first meeting, I mean; now we settle down.'

COLONEL. 'Not yet. Come here, my boy.'

He draws him to a chair; he evidently thinks that a father and his boy

of thirteen can sit in the same chair. Cosmo is burning to be nice to him, but of course there are limits.

COSMO. 'Look here, father. Of course, you see--ways change. I daresay they did it, when you were a boy, but it isn't done now.'

COLONEL. 'What isn't done, you dear fellow?'

COSMO. 'Oh--well!--and then taking both hands and saying 'Dear fellow'--'It's gone out, you know.'

The Colonel chuckles and forbears. 'I'm uncommon glad you told me, Cosmo. Not having been a father for so long, you see, I'm rather raw at it.'

COSMO, relieved, 'That's all right. You'll soon get the hang of it.'

COLONEL. 'If you could give me any other tips?'

COSMO, becoming confidential, 'Well, there's my beastly name. Of course you didn't mean any harm when you christened me Cosmo, but--I always sign myself "C. Grey"--to make the fellows think I'm Charles.'

COLONEL. 'Do they call you that?'

COSMO. 'Lord, no, they call me Grey.'

COLONEL. 'And do you want me to call you Grey?'

COSMO, magnanimously, 'No, I don't expect that. But I thought that before people, you know, you needn't call me anything. If you want to attract my attention you could just say "Hst!"--like that.'

COLONEL. 'Right you are. But you won't make your mother call you Hst.'

COSMO, sagaciously, 'Oh no--of course women are different.'

COLONEL. 'You'll be very nice to her, Cosmo? She had to pinch and save more than I should have allowed--to be able to send you into the navy. We are poor people, you know.'

COSMO. 'I've been planning how to be nice to her.'

COLONEL. 'Good lad. Good lad.'

Cosmo remembers his conversation with Amy, and thoughtfully hides the 'yellow flowers' behind a photograph. This may be called one of his plans for being nice to mother.

COSMO. 'You don't have your medals here, father?'

COLONEL. 'No, I don't carry them about. But your mother does, the

goose. They are not very grand ones, Cosmo.'

COSMO, true blue, 'Yes, they are.'

An awkward silence falls. The Colonel has so much to say that he can only look it. He looks it so eloquently that Cosmo's fears return. He summons the plan to his help.

'I wonder what is in the evening papers. If you don't mind, I'll cut out and get one.'

Before he can cut out, however, Alice is in the room, the picture of distress. No wonder, for even we can hear the baby howling.

ALICE, tragically, 'My baby. Robert, listen; that is how I affect her.'

Cosmo cowers unseen.

COLONEL. 'No, no, darling, it isn't you who have made her cry. She--she is teething. It's her teeth, isn't it?' he barks at the nurse, who emerges looking not altogether woeful. 'Say it's her teeth, woman.'

NURSE, taking this as a reflection on her charge. 'She had her teeth long ago.'

ALICE, the forlorn, 'The better to bite me with.'

NURSE, complacently, 'I don't understand it. She is usually the best-tempered lamb--as you may see for yourself, sir.'

It is an imitation that the Colonel is eager to accept, but after one step toward the nursery he is true to Alice.

COLONEL. 'I decline to see her. I refuse to have anything to do with her till she comes to a more reasonable frame of mind.'

The nurse retires, to convey possibly this ultimatum to her charge.

ALICE, in the noblest spirit of self-abnegation, 'Go, Robert. Perhaps she--will like you better.'

COLONEL. 'She's a contemptible child.'

But that nursery door does draw him strongly. He finds himself getting nearer and nearer to it. 'I'll show her,' with a happy pretence that his object is merely to enforce discipline. The forgotten Cosmo pops up again; the Colonel introduces him with a gesture and darts off to his baby.

ALICE, entranced, 'My son!'

COSMO, forgetting all plans, 'Mother!' She envelops him in her arms, worshipping him, and he likes it.

ALICE. 'Oh, Cosmo--how splendid you are.'

COSMO, soothingly, 'That's all right, mother.'

ALICE. 'Say it again.'

COSMO. 'That's all right.'

ALICE. 'No, the other word.'

COSMO. 'Mother.'

ALICE. 'Again.'

COSMO. 'Mother--mother--' When she has come to: 'Are you better now?'

ALICE. 'He is my son, and he is in uniform.'

COSMO, aware that allowances must be made, 'Yes, I know.'

ALICE. 'Are you glad to see your mother, Cosmo?'

COSMO. 'Rather! Will you have some tea?'

ALICE. 'No, no, I feel I can do nothing for the rest of my life but hug my glorious boy.'

COSMO. 'Of course, I have my work.'

ALICE. 'His work! Do the officers love you, Cosmo?'

COSMO, degraded, 'Love me! I should think not.'

ALICE. 'I should like to ask them all to come and stay with us.'

COSMO, appalled, 'Great Scott, mother, you can't do things like that.'

ALICE. 'Can't I? Are you very studious, Cosmo?'

COSMO, neatly, 'My favourite authors are William Shakespeare and William Milton. They are grand, don't you think?'

ALICE. 'I'm only a woman, you see; and I'm afraid they sometimes bore me, especially William Milton.'

COSMO, with relief, 'Do they? Me, too.'

ALICE, on the verge of tears again, 'But not half so much as I bore my baby.'

COSMO, anxious to help her, 'What did you do to her?'

ALICE, appealingly, 'I couldn't help wanting to hold her in my arms, could I, Cosmo?'

COSMO, full of consideration, 'No, of course you couldn't.' He reflects. 'How did you take hold of her?'

ALICE. 'I suppose in some clumsy way.'

COSMO. 'Not like this, was it?'

ALICE, gloomily, 'I dare say.'

COSMO. 'You should have done it this way.'

He very kindly shows her how to carry a baby.

ALICE, with becoming humility, 'Thank you, Cosmo.'

He does not observe the gleam in her eye, and is in the high good humour that comes to any man when any woman asks him to show her how to do anything.

COSMO. 'If you like I'll show you with a cushion. You see this'--scoops

it up--'is wrong; but this'--he does a little sleight of hand--'is right. Another way is this, with their head hanging over your shoulder, and you holding on firmly to their legs. You wouldn't think it was comfortable, but they like it.'

ALICE, adoring him. 'I see, Cosmo.' She practises diligently with the cushion. 'First this way--then this.'

COSMO. 'That's first-class. It's just a knack. You'll soon pick it up.'

ALICE, practising on him instead of the cushion, 'You darling boy!'

COSMO. 'I think I hear a boy calling the evening papers.'

ALICE, clinging to him, 'Don't go. There can be nothing in the evening papers about what my boy thinks of his mother.'

COSMO. 'Good lord, no.' He thinks quickly. 'You haven't seen Amy yet. It isn't fair of Amy. She should have been here to take some of it off me.'

ALICE. 'Cosmo, you don't mean that I bore you too!'

He is pained. It is now he who boldly encircles her. But his words, though well meant, are not so happy as his action. 'I love you,

mother; and I don't think you're so yellow.'

ALICE, the belle of many stations, 'Yellow?' Her brain reels. 'Cosmo, do you think me plain?'

COSMO, gallantly, 'No, I don't. I'm not one of the kind who judge people by their looks. The soul, you know, is what I judge them by.'

ALICE. 'Plain? Me.'

COSMO, the comforter, 'Of course it's all right for girls to bother about being pretty.' He lures her away from the subject. 'I can tell you a funny thing about that. We had theatricals at Osborne one night, and we played a thing called "The Royal Boots."'

ALICE, clapping her hands, 'I played in that, too, last year.'

COSMO. 'You?'

ALICE. 'Yes. Why shouldn't I?'

COSMO. 'But we did it for fun.'

ALICE. 'So did we.'

COSMO, his views on the universe crumbling, 'You still like fun?'

ALICE. 'Take care, Cosmo.'

COSMO. 'But you're our mother.'

ALICE. 'Mustn't mothers have fun?

COSMO, heavily, 'Must they? I see. You had played the dowager.'

ALICE. 'No, I didn't. I played the girl in the Wellington boots.'

COSMO, blinking, 'Mother, I played the girl in the Wellington boots.'

ALICE, happily, 'My son--this ought to bring us closer together.'

COSMO, who has not yet learned to leave well alone, 'But the reason I did it was that we were all boys. Were there no young ladies where you did it, mother?'

ALICE. 'Cosmo.' She is not a tamed mother yet, and in sudden wrath she flips his face with her hand. He accepts it as a smack. The Colonel foolishly chooses this moment to make his return. He is in high good-humour, and does not observe that two of his nearest relatives are glaring at each other.

COLONEL, purring offensively, 'It's all right now, Alice; she took to

me at once.'

ALICE, tartly, 'Oh, did she!'

COLONEL. 'Gurgled at me--pulled my moustache.'

ALICE. 'I hope you got on with our dear son as well.'

COLONEL. 'Isn't he a fine fellow.'

ALICE. 'I have just been smacking his face.' She sits down and weeps, while her son stands haughtily at attention.

COLONEL, with a groan, 'Hst, I think you had better go and get that evening paper.'

Cosmo departs with his flag flying, and the bewildered husband seeks enlightenment.

'Smacked his face. But why, Alice?'

ALICE. 'He infuriated me.'

COLONEL. 'He seems such a good boy.'

ALICE, the lowly, 'No doubt he is. It must be very trying to have me

for a mother.'

COLONEL. 'Perhaps you were too demonstrative?'

ALICE. 'I daresay. A woman he doesn't know! No wonder I disgusted him.'

COLONEL. 'I can't make it out.'

ALICE, abjectly, 'It's quite simple. He saw through me at once; so did baby.'

The Colonel flings up his hands. He hears whisperings outside the door. He peeps and returns excitedly.

COLONEL. 'Alice, there's a girl there with Cosmo.'

ALICE, on her feet, with a cry, 'Amy.'

COLONEL, trembling, 'I suppose so.'

ALICE, gripping him, 'Robert, if she doesn't love me I shall die.'

COLONEL. 'She will, she will.' But he has grown nervous. 'Don't be too demonstrative, dearest.'

ALICE. 'I shall try to be cold. Oh, Amy, love me.'

Amy comes, her hair up, and is at once in her father's arms. Then she wants to leap into the arms of the mother who craves for her. But Alice is afraid of being too demonstrative, and restrains herself. She presses Amy's hands only.

ALICE. 'It is you, Amy. How are you, dear?' She ventures at last to kiss her. 'It is a great pleasure to your father and me to see you again.'

AMY, damped, 'Thank you, mother----Of course I have been looking forward to this meeting very much also.'

ALICE, shuddering, 'It is very sweet of you to say so.'

'Oh how cold,' they are both thinking, while the Colonel regards them uncomfortably. Amy turns to him. She knows already that there is safe harbourage there.

AMY. 'Would you have known me, father?'

COLONEL. 'I wonder. She's not like you, Alice?'

ALICE. 'No. I used to be demonstrative, Amy----'

AMY, eagerly, 'Were you?'

ALICE, hurriedly, 'Oh, I grew out of it long ago.'

AMY, disappointed but sympathetic, 'The wear and tear of life.'

ALICE, wincing, 'No doubt.'

AMY, making conversation, 'You have seen Cosmo?'

ALICE. 'Yes.'

AMY, with pardonable curiosity, 'What did you think of him?'

ALICE. 'He--seemed a nice boy----'

AMY, hurt, 'And baby?'

ALICE. 'Yes--oh yes.'

AMY. 'Isn't she fat?'

ALICE. 'Is she?'

The nurse's head intrudes.

NURSE. 'If you please, sir--I think baby wants you again.'

The Colonel's face exudes complacency, but he has the grace to falter.

COLONEL. 'What do you think, Alice?'

ALICE, broken under the blow, 'By all means go.'

COLONEL. 'Won't you come also? Perhaps if I am with you--'

ALICE, after giving him an annihilating look, 'No, I--I had quite a long time with her.'

The Colonel tiptoes off to his babe with a countenance of foolish rapture; and mother and daughter are alone.

AMY, wishing her father would come back, 'You can't have been very long with baby, mother.'

ALICE. 'Quite long enough.'

AMY. 'Oh.' Some seconds elapse before she can speak again. 'You will have some tea, won't you?'

ALICE. 'Thank you, dear.' They sit down to a chilly meal.

AMY, merely a hostess, 'Both milk and sugar.'

ALICE, merely a guest, 'No sugar.'

AMY. 'I hope you will like the house, mother.'

ALICE. 'I am sure you have chosen wisely. I see you are artistic.'

AMY. 'The decoration isn't finished. I haven't quite decided what this room is to be like yet.'

ALICE. 'One never can tell.'

AMY, making conversation, 'Did you notice that there is a circular drive to the house?'

ALICE. 'No, I didn't notice.'

AMY. 'That would be because the cab filled it; but you can see it if you are walking.'

ALICE. 'I shall look out for it.' Grown desperate, 'Amy, have you nothing more important to say to me?'

AMY, faltering, 'You mean--the keys? Here they are; all with labels on them. And here are the tradesmen's books. They are all paid up to

Wednesday.' She sadly lets them go. They lie disregarded in her mother's lap.

ALICE. 'Is there nothing else?'

AMY, with a flash of pride. 'Perhaps you have noticed that my hair is up?'

ALICE. 'It so took me aback, Amy, when you came into the room. How long have you had it up?'

AMY, with large eyes, 'Not very long. I--I began only to-day.'

ALICE, imploringly, 'Dear, put it down again. You are not grown up.'

AMY, almost sternly, 'I feel I am a woman now.'

ALICE, abject, 'A woman--you? Am I never to know my daughter as a girl!'

AMY. 'You were married before you were eighteen.'

ALICE. 'Ah, but I had no mother. And even at that age I knew the world.'

AMY, smiling sadly, 'Oh, mother, not so well as I know it.'

ALICE, sharply, 'What can you know of the world?'

AMY, shuddering, 'More I hope, mother, than you will ever know.'

ALICE, alarmed, 'My child!' Seizing her: 'Amy, tell me what you know.'

AMY. 'Don't ask me, please. I have sworn not to talk of it.'

ALICE. 'Sworn? To whom?'

AMY. 'To another.'

Alice, with a sinking, pounces on her daughter's engagement finger;
but it is unadorned.

ALICE. 'Tell me, Amy, who is that other?'

AMY, bravely, 'It is our secret.'

ALICE. 'Amy, I beg you--'

AMY, a heroic figure, 'Dear mother, I am so sorry I must decline.'

ALICE. 'You defy me.' She takes hold of her daughter's shoulders.
'Amy, you drive me frantic. If you don't tell me at once I shall insist

on your father--. Oh, you--'

It is not to be denied that she is shaking Amy when the Colonel once more intrudes.

COLONEL, aghast, 'Good heavens, Alice, again! Amy, what does this mean?'

AMY, as she runs, insulted and in tears, from the room, 'It means, father, that I love you very much.'

COLONEL, badgered, 'Won't you explain, Alice?'

ALICE. 'Robert, I am in terror about Amy.'

COLONEL. 'Why?'

ALICE. 'Don't ask me, dear--not now--not till I have spoken to her again.' She clings to her husband. 'Robert, there can't be anything in it?'

COLONEL. 'If you mean anything wrong with our girl, there isn't, memsahib. What great innocent eyes she has.'

ALICE, eagerly, 'Yes, yes, hasn't she, Robert.'

COLONEL. 'All's well with Amy, dear.'

ALICE. 'Of course it is. It was silly of me--My Amy.'

COLONEL. 'And mine.'

ALICE. 'But she seems to me hard to understand.' With her head on his breast, 'I begin to feel Robert that I should have come back to my children long ago--or I shouldn't have come back at all.'

The Colonel is endeavouring to soothe her when Stephen Rollo is shown in. He is very young--too young to be a villain, too round-faced; but he is all the villain we can provide for Amy. His entrance is less ostentatious than it might be if he knew of the role that has been assigned to him. He thinks indeed (sometimes with a sigh) that he is a very good young man; and the Colonel and Alice (without the sigh) think so too. After warm greetings:

STEVE. 'Alice, I daresay you wish me at Jericho; but it's six months since I saw you, and I couldn't wait till to-morrow.'

ALICE, giving him her cheek, 'I believe there's someone in this house glad to see me at last; and you may kiss me for that, Steve.'

STEVE, who has found the cheek wet, 'You are not telling me they don't adore her?'

COLONEL. 'I can't understand it.'

STEVE. 'But by all the little gods of India, you know, everyone has always adored Alice.'

ALICE, plaintively, 'That's why I take it so ill, Steve.'

STEVE. 'Can I do anything? See here, if the house is upside down and you would like to get rid of the Colonel for an hour or two, suppose he dines with me to-night? I'm dying to hear all the news of the Punjab since I left.'

COLONEL, with an eye on the nursery door, 'No, Steve, I--the fact is--I have an engagement.'

ALICE, vindictively, 'He means he can't leave the baby.'

STEVE. 'It has taken to him?'

COLONEL, swaggering, 'Enormously.'

ALICE, whimpering, 'They all have. He has stolen them from me. He has taken up his permanent residence in the nursery.'

COLONEL. 'Pooh, fiddlededee. I shall probably come round to-night to

see you after dinner, Steve, and bring memsahib with me. In the meantime--'

ALICE, whose mind is still misgiving her about Amy, 'In the meantime I want to have a word with Steve alone, Robert.'

COLONEL. 'Very good.' Stealing towards the nursery, 'Then I shall pop in here again. How is the tea business prospering in London, Steve? Glad you left India?'

STEVE. 'I don't have half the salary I had in India, but my health is better. How are rupees?'

COLONEL. 'Stop it.' He is making a doll of his handkerchief for the further subjugation of Molly. He sees his happy face in a looking-glass and is ashamed of it. 'Alice, I wish it was you they loved.'

ALICE, with withering scorn, 'Oh, go back to your baby.'

As soon as the Colonel has gone she turns anxiously to Steve.

'Steve, tell me candidly what you think of my girl.'

STEVE. 'But I have never set eyes on her.'

ALICE. 'Oh, I was hoping you knew her well. She goes sometimes to the

Deans and the Rawlings--all our old Indian friends--'

STEVE. 'So do I, but we never happened to be there at the same time. They often speak of her though.'

ALICE. 'What do they say?'

STEVE. 'They are enthusiastic--an ideal, sweet girl.'

ALICE, relieved, 'I'm so glad. Now you can go, Steve.'

STEVE. 'It's odd to think of the belle of the Punjab as a mother of a big girl.'

ALICE. 'Don't; or I shall begin to think it's absurd myself.'

STEVE. 'Surely the boy felt the spell.' She shakes her head. 'But the boys always did.'

ALICE, wryly, 'They were older boys.'

STEVE. 'I believe I was the only one you never flirted with.'

ALICE, smiling, 'No one could flirt with you, Steve.'

STEVE, pondering, 'I wonder why.' The problem has troubled him

occasionally for years.

ALICE. 'I wonder.'

STEVE. 'I suppose there's some sort of want in me.'

ALICE. 'Perhaps that's it. No, it's because you were always such a good boy.'

STEVE, wincing, 'I don't know. Sometimes when I saw you all flirting I wanted to do it too, but I could never think of how to begin.' With a sigh, 'I feel sure there's something pleasant about it.'

ALICE, 'You're a dear, old donkey, Steve, but I'm glad you came, it has made the place seem more like home. All these years I was looking forward to home; and now I feel that perhaps it is the place I have left behind me.' The joyous gurgling of Molly draws them to the nursery door; and there they are observed by Amy and Ginevra who enter from the hall. The screen is close to the two girls, and they have so often in the last week seen stage figures pop behind screens that, mechanically as it were, they pop behind this one.

STEVE, who little knows that he is now entering on the gay career, 'Listen to the infant.'

ALICE. 'Isn't it horrid of Robert to get on with her so well. Steve,

say Robert's a brute.'

STEVE, as he bids her good afternoon, 'Of course he is; a selfish beast.'

ALICE. 'There's another kiss to you for saying so.' The doomed woman presents her cheek again.

STEVE. 'And you'll come to me after dinner to-night, Alice? Here, I'll leave my card, I'm not half a mile from this street.'

ALICE. 'I mayn't be able to get away. It will depend on whether my silly husband wants to stay with his wretch of a baby. I'll see you to the door. Steve, you're much nicer than Robert.'

With these dreadful words she and the libertine go. Amy and Ginevra emerge white to the lips; or, at least, they feel as white as that.

AMY, clinging to the screen for support, 'He kissed her.'

GINEVRA, sternly, 'He called her Alice.'

AMY. 'She is going to his house to-night. An assignation.'

GINEVRA. 'They will be chambers, Amy--they are always chambers. And after dinner, he said--so he's stingy, too. Here is his card: "Mr.

Stephen Rollo."

AMY. 'I have heard of him. They said he was a nice man.'

GINEVRA. 'The address is Kensington West. That's the new name for West Kensington.'

AMY. 'My poor father. It would kill him.'

GINEVRA, the master mind, 'He must never know.'

AMY. 'Ginevra, what's to be done?'

GINEVRA. 'Thank heaven, we know exactly what to do. It rests with you to save her.'

AMY, trembling, 'You mean I must go--to his chambers?'

GINEVRA, firmly, 'At any cost.'

AMY. 'Evening dress?'

GINEVRA. 'It is always evening dress. And don't be afraid of his Man, dear; they always have a Man.'

AMY. 'Oh, Ginevra.'

GINEVRA. 'First try fascination. You remember how they fling back their cloak--like this, dear. If that fails, threaten him. You must get back the letters. There are always letters.'

AMY. 'If father should suspect and follow? They usually do.'

GINEVRA. 'Then you must sacrifice yourself for her. Does my dearest falter?'

AMY, pressing Ginevra's hand, 'I will do my duty. Oh, Ginevra, what things there will be to put in my diary to-night.'