

### **ACT III**

Lob's room has gone very dark as it sits up awaiting the possible return of the adventurers. The curtains are drawn, so that no light comes from outside. There is a tapping on the window, and anon two intruders are stealing about the floor, with muffled cries when they meet unexpectedly. They find the switch and are revealed as Purdie and his Mabel.

Something has happened to them as they emerged from the wood, but it is so superficial that neither notices it: they are again in the evening dress in which they had left the house. But they are still being led by that strange humour of the blood.

MABEL (looking around her curiously). A pretty little room; I wonder who is the owner?

PURDIE. It doesn't matter; the great thing is that we have escaped Joanna.

MABEL. Jack, look, a man!

(The term may not be happily chosen, but the person indicated is Lob curled up on his chair by a dead fire. The last look on his face before he fell asleep having been a leery one it is still there.)

PURDIE. He is asleep.

MABEL. Do you know him?

PURDIE. Not I. Excuse me, sir, Hi! (No shaking, however, wakens the sleeper.)

MABEL. Darling, how extraordinary.

PURDIE (always considerate). After all, precious, have we any right to wake up a stranger, just to tell him that we are runaways hiding in his house?

MABEL (who comes of a good family). I think he would expect it of us.

PURDIE (after trying again). There is no budging him.

MABEL (appeased). At any rate, we have done the civil thing.

(She has now time to regard the room more attentively, including the tray of coffee cups which MATEY had left on the table in a not unimportant moment of his history.) There have evidently been people here, but they haven't drunk their coffee. Ugh! cold as a deserted egg in a bird's nest. Jack, if you were a clever detective you could construct those people out of their neglected coffee cups. I wonder who they are and what has spirited them away?

PURDIE. Perhaps they have only gone to bed. Ought we to knock them up?

MABEL (after considering what her mother would have done). I think not, dear. I suppose we have run away, Jack--meaning to?

PURDIE (with the sturdiness that weaker vessels adore). Irrevocably. Mabel, if the dog-like devotion of a lifetime ... (He becomes conscious that something has happened to LOB'S leer. It has not left his face but it has shifted.) He is not shamming, do you think?

MABEL. Shake him again.

PURDIE (after shaking him). It's all right. Mabel, if the dog-like devotion of a lifetime ...

MABEL. Poor little Joanna! Still, if a woman insists on being a pendulum round a man's neck ...

PURDIE. Do give me a chance, Mabel. If the dog-like devotion of a lifetime ...

(JOANNA comes through the curtains so inopportunistly that for the moment he is almost pettish.)

May I say, this is just a little too much, Joanna!

JOANNA (unconscious as they of her return to her dinner gown). So, sweet husband, your soul is still walking alone, is it?

MABEL (who hates coarseness of any kind). How can you sneak about in this way, Joanna? Have you no pride?

JOANNA (dashing away a tear). Please to address me as Mrs. Purdie, madam. (She sees LOB.) Who is this man?

PURDIE. We don't know; and there is no waking him. You can try, if you like.

(Failing to rouse him JOANNA makes a third at table. They are all a little inconsequential, as if there were still some moon-shine in their hair.)

JOANNA. You were saying something about the devotion of a lifetime; please go on.

PURDIE (diffidently). I don't like to before you, Joanna.

JOANNA (becoming coarse again). Oh, don't mind me.

PURDIE (looking like a note of interrogation). I should certainly like to say it.

MABEL (loftily). And I shall be proud to hear it.

PURDIE. I should have liked to spare you this, Joanna; you wouldn't put your hands over your ears?

JOANNA (alas). No, sir.

MABEL. Fie, Joanna. Surely a wife's natural delicacy ...

PURDIE (severely). As you take it in that spirit, Joanna, I can proceed with a clear conscience. If the dog-like devotion of a lifetime--(He reels a little, staring at LOB, over whose face the leer has been wandering like an insect.)

MABEL. Did he move?

PURDIE. It isn't that. I am feeling--very funny. Did one of you tap me just now on the forehead?

(Their hands also have gone to their foreheads.)

MABEL. I think I have been in this room before.

PURDIE (flinching). There is something coming rushing back to me.

MABEL. I seem to know that coffee set. If I do, the lid of the milk jug is chipped. It is!

JOANNA. I can't remember this man's name; but I am sure it begins with L.

MABEL. Lob.

PURDIE. Lob.

JOANNA. Lob.

PURDIE. Mabel, your dress?

MABEL (beholding it). How on earth...?

JOANNA. My dress! (To PURDIE.) You were in knickerbockers in the wood.

PURDIE. And so I am now. (He sees he is not.) Where did I change? The wood! Let me think. The wood ... the wood, certainly. But the wood wasn't the wood.

JOANNA (revolving like one in pursuit). My head is going round.

MABEL. Lob's wood! I remember it all. We were here. We did go.

PURDIE. So we did. But how could...? where was...?

JOANNE. And who was...?

MABEL And what was...?

PURDIE (even in this supreme hour a man). Don't let go. Hold on to what we were doing, or we shall lose grip of ourselves. Devotion. Something about devotion. Hold on to devotion. 'If the dog-like devotion of a lifetime...' Which of you was I saying that to?

MABEL. To me.

PURDIE. Are you sure?

MABEL (shakily). I am not quite sure.

PURDIE (anxiously). Joanna, what do you think? (With a sudden increase of uneasiness.) Which of you is my wife?

JOANNA (without enthusiasm). I am. No, I am not. It is Mabel who is your wife!

MABEL. Me?

PURDIE (with a curious gulp). Why, of course you are, Mabel!

MABEL. I believe I am!

PURDIE. And yet how can it be? I was running away with you.

JOANNA (solving that problem). You don't need to do it now.

PURDIE. The wood. Hold on to the wood. The wood is what explains it. Yes, I see the whole thing. (He gazes at LOB.) You infernal old rascal! Let us try to think it out. Don't any one speak for a moment. Think first. Love ... Hold on to love. (He gets another tap.) I say, I believe I am not a deeply passionate chap at all; I believe I am just .... a philanderer!

MABEL. It is what you are.

JOANNA (more magnanimous). Mabel, what about ourselves?

PURDIE (to whom it is truly a nauseous draught). I didn't know. Just a philanderer! (The soul of him would like at this instant to creep into another body.) And if people don't change, I suppose we shall begin all over again now.

JOANNA (the practical). I daresay; but not with each other. I may philander again, but not with you.

(They look on themselves without approval, always a sorry occupation. The man feels it most because he has admired himself most, or perhaps partly for some better reason.)

PURDIE (saying good-bye to an old friend). John Purdie, John Purdie, the fine fellow I used to think you! (When he is able to look them in the face again.) The wood has taught me one thing, at any rate.

MABEL (dismally). What, Jack?

PURDIE. That it isn't accident that shapes our lives.

JOANNA. No, it's Fate.

PURDIE (the truth running through him, seeking for a permanent home in him, willing to give him still another chance, loth to desert him). It's not Fate, Joanna. Fate is something outside us. What really plays the dickens with us is some thing in ourselves. Something that makes us go on doing the same sort of fool things, however many chances we get.

MABEL. Something in ourselves?

PURDIE (shivering). Something we are born with.

JOANNA. Can't we cut out the beastly thing?

PURDIE. Depends, I expect, on how long we have pampered him. We can at least control him if we try hard enough. But I have for the moment an abominably clear perception that the likes of me never really tries. Forgive me, Joanna--no, Mabel--both of you. (He is a shamed man.) It isn't very pleasant to discover that one is a rotter. I suppose I shall get used to it.

JOANNA. I could forgive anybody anything to-night. (Candidly.) It is so lovely not to be married to you, Jack.

PURDIE (spiritless). I can understand that. I do feel small.

JOANNA (the true friend). You will soon swell up again.

PURDIE (for whom, alas, we need not weep). That is the appalling thing. But at present, at any rate, I am a rag at your feet, Joanna--no, at yours, Mabel. Are you going to pick me up? I don't advise it.

MABEL. I don't know whether I want to, Jack. To begin with, which of us is it your lonely soul is in search of?

JOANNA. Which of us is the fluid one, or the fluidier one?

MABEL. Are you and I one? Or are you and Joanna one? Or are the three of us two?

JOANNA. He wants you to whisper in his ear, Mabel, the entrancing poem, 'Mabel Purdie.' Do it, Jack; there will be nothing wrong in it now.

PURDIE. Rub it in.

MABEL. When I meet Joanna's successor--

PURDIE (quailing). No, no, Mabel none of that. At least credit me with having my eyes open at last. There will be no more of this. I swear it by all that is--

JOANNA (in her excellent imitation of a sheep). Baa-a, he is off again.

PURDIE. Oh Lord, so I am.

MABEL. Don't, Joanna.

PURDIE (his mind still illumined). She is quite right--I was. In my present state of depression--which won't last--I feel there is something in me that will make me go on being the same ass, however many chances I get. I haven't the stuff in me to take warning. My whole being is corroded. Shakespeare knew what he was talking about--'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings.'

JOANNA. For 'dear Brutus' we are to read 'dear audience' I suppose?

PURDIE. You have it.

JOANNA. Meaning that we have the power to shape ourselves?

PURDIE. We have the power right enough.

JOANNA. But isn't that rather splendid?

PURDIE. For those who have the grit in them, yes. (Still seeing with a strange clearness through the chink the hammer has made.) And they are not the dismal chappies; they are the ones with the thin bright faces. (He sits lugubriously by his wife and is sorry for the first time that she has not married a better man.) I am afraid there is not much fight in me, Mabel, but we shall see. If you catch me at it again, have the goodness to whisper to me in passing, 'Lob's Wood.' That may cure me for the time being.

MABEL (still certain that she loved him once but not so sure why.) Perhaps I will ... as long as I care to bother, Jack. It depends on you how long that is to be.

JOANNA (to break an awkward pause). I feel that there is hope in that as well as a warning. Perhaps the wood may prove to have been useful after all. (This brighter view of the situation meets with no immediate response. With her next suggestion she reaches harbour.) You know, we are not people worth being sorrowful about--so let us laugh.

(The ladies succeed in laughing though not prettily, but the man has been too much shaken.)

JOANNA (in the middle of her laugh). We have forgotten the others! I wonder what is happening to them?

PURDIE (reviving). Yes, what about them? Have they changed!

MABEL. I didn't see any of them in the wood.

JOANNA. Perhaps we did see them without knowing them; we didn't know Lob.

PURDIE (daunted). That's true.

JOANNA. Won't it be delicious to be here to watch them when they come back, and see them waking up--or whatever it was we did.

PURDIE. What was it we did? I think something tapped me on the forehead.

MABEL (blanching). How do we know the others will come back?

JOANNA (infected). We don't know. How awful!

MABEL. Listen!

PURDIE. I distinctly hear some one on the stairs.

MABEL. It will be Matey.

PURDIE (the chink beginning to close). Be cautious both of you; don't tell him we have had any ... odd experiences.

(It is, however, MRS. COADE who comes downstairs in a dressing-gown and carrying a candle and her husband's muffler.)

MRS. COADE. So you are back at last. A nice house, I must say. Where is Coady?

PURDIE (taken aback). Coady! Did he go into the wood, too?

MRS. COADE (placidly). I suppose so. I have been down several times to look for him.

MABEL. Coady, too!

JOANNA (seeing visions). I wonder ... Oh, how dreadful!

MRS. COADE. What is dreadful, Joanna?

JOANNA (airily). Nothing. I was just wondering what he is doing.

MRS. COADE. Doing? What should he be doing? Did anything odd happen to you in the wood?



PURDIE (taking command). No, no, nothing.

JOANNA. We just strolled about, and came back. (That subject being exhausted she points to LOB). Have you noticed him?

MRS. COADE. Oh, yes; he has been like that all the time. A sort of stupor, I think; and sometimes the strangest grin comes over his face.

PURDIE (wincing). Grin?

MRS. COADE. Just as if he were seeing amusing things in his sleep.

PURDIE (guardedly). I daresay he is. Oughtn't we to get Matey to him?

MRS. COADE. Matey has gone, too.

PURDIE. Wha-at!

MRS. COADE. At all events he is not in the house.

JOANNA (unguardedly). Matey! I wonder who is with him.

MRS. COADE. Must somebody be with him?

JOANNA. Oh, no, not at all.

(They are simultaneously aware that someone outside has reached the window.)

MRS. COADE. I hope it is Coady.

(The other ladies are too fond of her to share this wish.)

MABEL. Oh, I hope not.

MRS. COADE (blissfully). Why, Mrs. Purdie?

JOANNA (coaxingly). Dear Mrs. Coade, whoever he is, and whatever he does, I beg you not to be surprised. We feel that though we had no unusual experiences in the wood, others may not have been so fortunate.

MABEL. And be cautious, you dear, what you say to them before they come to.

MRS. COADE. 'Come to'? You puzzle me. And Coady didn't have his muffler.

(Let it be recorded that in their distress for this old lady they forget their own misadventures. PURDIE takes a step toward the curtains in a vague desire to shield her;--and gets a rich reward; he has seen the coming addition to their circle.)

PURDIE (elated and pitiless). It is Matey!

(A butler intrudes who still thinks he is wrapped in fur.)

JOANNA (encouragingly). Do come in.

MATEY. With apologies, ladies and gents ... May I ask who is host?

PURDIE (splashing in the temperature that suits him best). A very reasonable request. Third on the left.

MATEY (advancing upon Lob). Merely to ask, sir, if you can direct me to my hotel?

(The sleeper's only response is a slight quiver in one leg.)

The gentleman seems to be reposing.

MRS. COADE. It is Lob.

MATEY. What is lob, ma'am?

MRS. COADE (pleasantly curious). Surely you haven't forgotten?

PURDIE (over-riding her). Anything we can do for you, sir? Just give it a name.

JOANNA (in the same friendly spirit). I hope you are not alone: do say you have some lady friends with you.

MATEY (with an emphasis on his leading word). My wife is with me.

JOANNA. His wife! ... (With commendation.) You have been quick!

MRS. COADE. I didn't know you were married.

MATEY. Why should you, madam? You talk as if you knew me.

MRS. COADE. Good gracious, do you really think I don't?

PURDIE (indicating delicately that she is subject to a certain softening). Sit down, won't you, my dear sir, and make yourself comfy.

MATEY (accustomed of late to such deferential treatment). Thank you.  
But my wife ...

JOANNA (hospitably). Yes, bring her in; we are simply dying to make her acquaintance.

MATEY. You are very good; I am much obliged.

MABEL (as he goes out). Who can she be?

JOANNA (leaping). Who, who, who!

MRS. COADE. But what an extraordinary wood. He doesn't seem to know who he is at all.

MABEL (soothingly). Don't worry about that, Coady darling. He will know soon enough.

JOANNA (again finding the bright side). And so will the little wife! By the way, whoever she is, I hope she is fond of butlers.

MABEL (who has peeped). It is Lady Caroline!

JOANNA (leaping again). Oh, joy, joy! And she was so sure she couldn't take the wrong turning!

(Lady Caroline is evidently still sure of it.)

MATEY. May I present my wife--Lady Caroline Matey.

MABEL (glowing). How do you do!

PURDIE. Your servant, Lady Caroline.

MRS. COADE. Lady Caroline Matey! You?

LADY CAROLINE (without an r in her). Charmed, I'm sure.

JOANNA (neatly). Very pleased to meet any wife of Mr. Matey.

PURDIE (taking the floor). Allow me. The Duchess of Candelabra. The Ladies Helena and Matilda M'Nab. I am the Lord Chancellor.

MABEL. I have wanted so long to make your acquaintance.

LADY CAROLINE. Charmed.

JOANNA (gracefully). These informal meetings are so delightful, don't you think?

LADY CAROLINE. Yes, indeed.

MATEY (the introductions being thus pleasantly concluded). And your friend by the fire?

PURDIE. I will introduce you to him when you wake up--I mean when he wakes up.

MATEY. Perhaps I ought to have said that I am James Matey.

LADY CAROLINE (the happy creature). The James Matey.

MATEY. A name not, perhaps, unknown in the world of finance.

JOANNA. Finance? Oh, so you did take that clerkship in the City!

MATEY (a little stiffly). I began as a clerk in the City, certainly; and I am not ashamed to admit it.

MRS. COADE (still groping). Fancy that, now. And did it save you?

MATEY. Save me, madam?

JOANNA. Excuse us--we ask odd questions in this house; we only mean, did that keep you honest? Or are you still a pilferer?

LADY CAROLINE (an outraged swan). Husband mine, what does she mean?

JOANNA. No offence; I mean a pilferer on a large scale.

MATEY (remembering certain newspaper jealousy). If you are referring to that Labrador business--or the Working Women's Bank ...

PURDIE (after the manner of one who has caught a fly). O-ho, got him!

JOANNA (bowing). Yes, those are what I meant.

MATEY (stoutly). There was nothing proved.

JOANNA (like one calling a meeting). Mabel, Jack, here is another of us! You have gone just the same way again, my friend. (Ecstatically.) There is more in it, you see, than taking the wrong turning; you would always take the wrong turning. (The only fitting comment.) Tra-la-la!

LADY CAROLINE. If you are casting any aspersions on my husband, allow me to say that a prouder wife than I does not to-day exist.

MRS. COADE (who finds herself the only clear-headed one). My dear, do be careful.

MABEL. So long as you are satisfied, dear Lady Caroline. But I thought you shrank from all blood that was not blue.

LADY CAROLINE. You thought? Why should you think about me? I beg to assure you that I adore my Jim.

(She seeks his arm, but her Jim has encountered the tray containing coffee cups and a cake, and his hands close on it with a certain intimacy.) Whatever are you doing, Jim?

MATEY. I don't understand it, Carolyn; but somehow I feel at home with this in my hands.

MABEL. 'Carolyn!'

MRS. COADE. Look at me well; don't you remember me?

MATEY (musing). I don't remember you; but I seem to associate you with hard-boiled eggs. (With conviction.) You like your eggs hard-boiled.

PURDIE. Hold on to hard-boiled eggs! She used to tip you especially to see to them.

(MATEY'S hand goes to his pocket.)

Yes, that was the pocket.

LADY CAROLINE (with distaste). Tip!

MATEY (without distaste). Tip!

PURDIE. Jolly word, isn't it?

MATEY (raising the tray). It seems to set me thinking.

LADY CAROLINE (feeling the tap of the hammer). Why is my work-basket in this house?

MRS. COADE. You are living here, you know.

LADY CAROLINE. That is what a person feels. But when did I come? It is very odd, but one feels one ought to say when did one go.

PURDIE. She is coming to with a wush!

MATEY (under the hammer). Mr.... Purdie!

LADY CAROLINE. MRS. Coade!

MATEY. The Guv'nor! My clothes!

LADY CAROLINE. One is in evening dress!

JOANNA (charmed to explain). You will understand clearly in a minute, Carolyn. You didn't really take that clerkship, Jim; you went into domestic service; but in the essentials you haven't altered.

PURDIE (pleasantly). I'll have my shaving water at 7.30 sharp, Matey.

MATEY (mechanically). Very good, sir.

LADY CAROLINE. Sir? Midsummer Eve! The wood!

PURDIE. Yes, hold on to the wood.

MATEY. You are ... you are ... you are Lady Caroline Laney!

LADY CAROLINE. It is Matey, the butler!

MABEL. You seemed quite happy with him, you know, Lady Caroline.

JOANNA (nicely). We won't tell.

LADY CAROLINE (subsiding). Caroline Matey! And I seemed to like it! How horrible!

MRS. COADE (expressing a general sentiment). It is rather difficult to see what we should do next.

MATEY (tentatively). Perhaps if I were to go downstairs?

PURDIE. It would be conferring a personal favour on us all.

(Thus encouraged MATEY and his tray resume friendly relations with the pantry.)

LADY CAROLINE (with itching fingers as she glares at Lob). It is all that wretch's doing.

(A quiver from Lob's right leg acknowledges the compliment. The gay music of a pipe is heard from outside.)

JOANNA (peeping). Coady!

MRS. COADE. Coady! Why is he so happy?

JOANNA (troubled). Dear, hold my hand.

MRS. COADE (suddenly trembling). Won't he know me?

PURDIE (abashed by that soft face). Mrs. Coade, I 'm sorry. It didn't so much matter about the likes of us, but for your sake I wish Coady hadn't gone out.

MRS. COADE. We that have been happily married this thirty years.

COADE (popping in buoyantly). May I intrude? My name is Coade. The fact is I was playing about in the wood on a whistle, and I saw your light.

MRS. COADE (the only one with the nerve to answer). Playing about in the wood with a whistle!

COADE (with mild dignity). And why not, madam?

MRS. COADE. Madam! Don't you know me?

COADE. I don't know you ... (Reflecting.) But I wish I did.

MRS. COADE. Do you? Why?

COADE. If I may say so, you have a very soft, lovable face.

(Several persons breathe again.)

MRS. COADE (inquisitorially). Who was with you, playing whistles in the wood?

(The breathing ceases.)

COADE. No one was with me.

(And is resumed.)

MRS. COADE. No ... lady?

COADE. Certainly not. (Then he spoils it.) I am a bachelor.

MRS. COADE. A bachelor!

JOANNA. Don't give way, dear; it might be much worse.

MRS. COADE. A bachelor! And you are sure you never spoke to me before? Do think.

COADE. Not to my knowledge. Never ... except in dreams.

MABEL (taking a risk). What did you say to her in dreams?

COADE. I said, 'My dear.' (This when uttered surprises him.) Odd!

JOANNA. The darling man!

MRS. COADE (wavering). How could you say such things to an old woman?

COADE (thinking it out). Old? I didn't think of you as old. No, no, young--with the morning dew on your face--coming across a lawn--in a black and green dress--and carrying such a pretty parasol.

MRS. COADE (thrilling). That was how he first met me! He used to love me in black and green; and it was a pretty parasol. Look, I am old... So it can't be the same woman.

COADE (blinking). Old? Yes, I suppose so. But it is the same soft, lovable face, and the same kind, beaming smile that children could warm their hands at.

MRS. COADE. He always liked my smile.

PURDUE. So do we all.

COADE (to himself). Emma!

MRS. COADE. He hasn't forgotten my name!

COADE. It is sad that we didn't meet long ago. I think I have been waiting for you. I suppose we have met too late? You couldn't overlook my being an old fellow, could you, eh?



JOANNA. How lovely; he is going to propose to her again. Coady, you happy thing, he is wanting the same soft face after thirty years!

MRS. COADE (undoubtedly hopeful). We mustn't be too sure, but I think that is it. (Primly.) What is it exactly that you want, Mr. Coade?

COADE (under a lucky star). I want to have the right to hold the parasol over you. Won't you be my wife, my dear, and so give my long dream of you a happy ending?

MRS. COADE (preening). Kisses are not called for at our age, Coady, but here is a muffler for your old neck.

COADE. My muffler; I have missed it. (It is however to his forehead that his hand goes. Immediately thereafter he misses his sylvan attire.) Why ... why ... what ... who ... how is this?

PURDIE (nervously). He is coming to.

COADE (reeling and righting himself). Lob!

(The leg indicates that he has got it.)

Bless me, Coady, I went into that wood!

MRS. COADE. And without your muffler, you that are so subject to chills. What are you feeling for in your pocket?

COADE. The whistle. It is a whistle I--Gone! of course it is. It's rather a pity, but ... (Anxious.) Have I been saying awful things to you?

MABEL. You have been making her so proud. It is a compliment to our whole sex. You had a second chance, and it is her, again!

COADE. Of course it is. (Crestfallen.) But I see I was just the same nice old lazy Coady as before; and I had thought that if I had a second chance, I could do things. I have often said to you, Coady, that it was owing to my being cursed with a competency that I didn't write my great book. But I had no competency this time, and I haven't written a word.

PURDIE (bitterly enough). That needn't make you feel lonely in this house.

MRS. COADE (in a small voice). You seem to have been quite happy as an old bachelor, dear.

COADE. I am surprised at myself, Emma, but I fear I was.

MRS. COADE (with melancholy perspicacity). I wonder if what it means is that you don't especially need even me. I wonder if it means that you are just the sort of amiable creature that would be happy anywhere, and anyhow?

COADE. Oh dear, can it be as bad as that!

JOANNA (a ministering angel she). Certainly not. It is a romance, and I won't have it looked upon as anything else.

MRS. COADE. Thank you, Joanna. You will try not to miss that whistle, Coady?

COADE (getting the footstool for her). You are all I need.

MRS. COADE. Yes; but I am not so sure as I used to be that it is a great compliment.

JOANNA. Coady, behave.

(There is a knock on the window.)

PURDIE (peeping). Mrs. Dearth! (His spirits revive.) She is alone. Who would have expected that of her?

MABEL. She is a wild one, Jack, but I sometimes thought rather a dear; I do hope she has got off cheaply.

(ALICE comes to them in her dinner gown.)

PURDIE (the irrepressible). Pleased to see you, stranger.

ALICE (prepared for ejection.) I was afraid such an unceremonious entry might startle you.

PURDIE. Not a bit.

ALICE (defiant). I usually enter a house by the front door.

PURDIE. I have heard that such is the swagger way.

ALICE (simpering). So stupid of me. I lost myself in the wood ... and ...

JOANNA (genially). Of course you did. But never mind that; do tell us your name.

LADY CAROLINE (emerging again). Yes, yes, your name.

ALICE. Of course, I am the Honourable Mrs. Finch-Fallowe.

LADY CAROLINE. Of course, of course!

PURDIE. I hope Mr. Finch-Fallowe is very well? We don't know him personally, but may we have the pleasure of seeing him bob up presently?

ALICE. No, I am not sure where he is.

LADY CAROLINE (with point). I wonder if the dear clever police know?

ALICE (imprudently). No, they don't.

(It is a very secondary matter to her. This woman of calamitous fires hears and sees her tormentors chiefly as the probable owner, of the cake which is standing on that tray.) So awkward, I gave my sandwiches to a poor girl and her father whom I met in the wood, and now ... isn't it a nuisance--I am quite hungry. (So far with a mincing bravado.) May I?

(Without waiting for consent she falls to upon the cake, looking over it like one ready to fight them for it.)

PURDIE (sobered again). Poor soul.

LADY CAROLINE. We are so anxious to know whether you met a friend of ours in the wood--a Mr. Dearth. Perhaps you know him, too?

ALICE. Dearth? I don't know any Dearth.

MRS. COADE. Oh, dear what a wood!

LADY CAROLINE. He is quite a front door sort of man; knocks and rings, you know.

PURDIE. Don't worry her.

ALICE (gnawing). I meet so many; you see I go out a great deal. I have visiting-cards--printed ones.

LADY CAROLINE. How very distingue. Perhaps Mr. Dearth has painted your portrait; he is an artist.

ALICE. Very likely; they all want to paint me. I daresay that is the man to whom I gave my sandwiches.

MRS. COADE. But I thought you said he had a daughter?

ALICE. Such a pretty girl; I gave her half a crown.

COADE. A daughter? That can't be Dearth.

PURDIE (darkly). Don't be too sure. Was the man you speak of a rather chop-fallen, gone-to-seed sort of person.

ALICE. No, I thought him such a jolly, attractive man.

COADE. Dearth jolly, attractive! Oh no. Did he say anything about his wife?

LADY CAROLINE, Yes, do try to remember if he mentioned her.

ALICE (snapping). No, he didn't.

PURDIE. He was far from jolly in her time.

ALICE (with an archness for which the cake is responsible). Perhaps that was the lady's fault.

(The last of the adventurers draws nigh, carolling a French song as he comes.)

COADE. Dearth's voice. He sounds quite merry!

JOANNA (protecting). Alice, you poor thing.

PURDIE. This is going to be horrible.

(A clear-eyed man of lusty gait comes in.)

DEARTH. I am sorry to bounce in on you in this way, but really I have an excuse. I am a painter of sorts, and...

(He sees he has brought some strange discomfort here.)

MRS. COADE. I must say, Mr. Dearth, I am delighted to see you looking so well. Like a new man, isn't he?

(No one dares to answer.)

DEARTH. I am certainly very well, if you care to know. But did I tell you my name?

JOANNA (for some one has to speak). No, but--but we have an instinct in this house.

DEARTH. Well, it doesn't matter. Here is the situation; my daughter and I have just met in the wood a poor woman famishing for want of food. We were as happy as grigs ourselves, and the sight of her distress rather cut us up. Can you give me something for her? Why are you looking so startled? (Seeing the remains of the cake.) May I have this?

(A shrinking movement from one of them draws his attention, and he recognises in her the woman of whom he has been speaking. He sees her in fine clothing and he grows stern.)

I feel I can't be mistaken; it was you I met in the wood? Have you been playing some trick on me? (To the others.) It was for her I wanted the food.

ALICE (her hand guarding the place where his gift lies). Have you come to take hack the money you gave me?

DEARTH. Your dress! You were almost in rags when I saw you outside.

ALICE (frightened as she discovers how she is now attired). I don't ... understand ...

COADE (gravely enough). For that matter, Dearth, I daresay you were different in the wood, too.

(DEARTH sees his own clothing.)

DEARTH. What...!

ALICE (frightened). Where am I? (To Mrs. Coade.) I seem to know you ... do I?

MRS. COADE (motherly). Yes, you do; hold my hand, and you will soon remember all about it.

JOANNA. I am afraid, Mr. Dearth, it is harder for you than for the rest of us.

PURDIE (looking away). I wish I could help you, but I can't; I am a rotter.

MABEL. We are awfully sorry. Don't you remember ... Midsummer Eve?

DEARTH (controlling himself). Midsummer Eve? This room. Yes, this room ... You was it you? ... were going out to look for something ... The tree of knowledge, wasn't it? Somebody wanted me to go, too ... Who was that? A lady, I think ... Why did she ask me to go? What was I doing here? I was smoking a cigar ... I laid it down, there ... (He finds the cigar.) Who was the lady?

ALICE (feebly). Something about a second chance.

MRS. COADE. Yes, you poor dear, you thought you could make so much of it.

DEARTH. A lady who didn't like me-- (With conviction.) She had good reasons, too--but what were they...?

ALICE. A little old man! He did it. What did he do?

(The hammer is raised.)

DEARTH. I am ... it is coming back--I am not the man I thought myself.

ALICE. I am not Mrs. Finch-Fallowe. Who am I?

DEARTH (staring at her). You were that lady.

ALICE. It is you--my husband!

(She is overcome.)

MRS. COADE. My dear, you are much better off, so far as I can see, than if you were Mrs. Finch-Fallowe.

ALICE (with passionate knowledge). Yes, yes indeed! (Generously.) But he isn't.

DEARTH. Alice! ... I--(He tries to smile.) I didn't know you when I was in the wood with Margaret. She ... she ... Margaret... (The hammer falls.)

O my God!

(He buries his face in his hands.)

ALICE. I wish--I wish--

(She presses his shoulder fiercely and then stalks out by the door.)

PURDIE (to LOB, after a time). You old ruffian.

DEARTH. No, I am rather fond of him, our lonely, friendly little host. Lob, I thank thee for that hour.

(The seedy-looking fellow passes from the scene.)

COADE. Did you see that his hand is shaking again?

PURDIE. The watery eye has come back.

JOANNA. And yet they are both quite nice people.

PURDIE (finding the tragedy of it). We are all quite nice people.

MABEL. If she were not such a savage!

PURDIE. I daresay there is nothing the matter with her except that she would always choose the wrong man, good man or bad man, but the wrong man for her.

COADE. We can't change.

MABEL. Jack says the brave ones can.

JOANNA. 'The ones with the thin bright faces.'

MABEL. Then there is hope for you and me, Jack.

PURDIE (ignobly). I don't expect so.

JOANNA (wandering about the room, like one renewing acquaintance with it after returning from a journey). Hadn't we better go to bed? It must be getting late.

PURDIE. Hold on to bed! (They all brighten.)

MATEY (entering). Breakfast is quite ready.

(They exclaim.)

LADY CAROLINE. My watch has stopped.

JOANNA. And mine. Just as well perhaps!

MABEL. There is a smell of coffee.

(The gloom continues to lift.)

COADE. Come along, Coady; I do hope you have not been tiring your foot.

MRS. COADE. I shall give it a good rest to-morrow, dear.

MATEY. I have given your egg six minutes, ma'am.

(They set forth once more upon the eternal round. The curious JOANNA remains behind.)

JOANNA. A strange experiment, Matey; does it ever have any permanent effect?

MATEY (on whom it has had none). So far as I know, not often, miss; but, I believe, once in a while.

(There is hope in this for the brave ones. If we could wait long enough we might see the DEARTHIS breasting their way into the light.)

He could tell you.

(The elusive person thus referred to kicks responsively, meaning perhaps that none of the others will change till there is a tap from another hammer. But when MATEY goes to rout him from his chair he is no longer there. His disappearance is no shock to MATEY, who shrugs his shoulders and opens the windows to let in the glory of a summer morning. The garden has returned, and our queer little hero is busy at work among his flowers. A lark is rising.)

The End