

ACT III

[A few minutes ago the Comtesse de la Briere, who has not recently been in England, was shown into the London home of the Shands. Though not sufficiently interested to express her surprise in words, she raised her eyebrows on finding herself in a charming room; she has presumed that the Shand scheme of decoration would be as impossible as themselves.

It is the little room behind the dining-room for which English architects have long been famous; 'Make something of this, and you will indeed be a clever one,' they seem to say to you as they unveil it. The Comtesse finds that John has undoubtedly made something of it. It is his 'study' (*mon Dieu*, the words these English use!) and there is nothing in it that offends; there is so much not in it too that might so easily have been there. It is not in the least ornate; there are no colours quarrelling with each other (unseen, unheard by the blissful occupant of the revolving chair); the Comtesse has not even the gentle satisfaction of noting a 'suite' in stained oak. Nature might have taken a share in the decorations, so restful are they to the eyes; it is the working room of a man of culture, probably lately down from Oxford; at a first meeting there is nothing in it that pretends to be what it is not. Our visitor is a little disappointed, but being fair-minded blows her absent host a kiss for disappointing her.

He has even, she observes with a twinkle, made something of the most difficult of his possessions, the little wife. For Maggie, who is here receiving her, has been quite creditably toned down. He has put her into a little grey frock that not only deals gently with her personal defects, but is in harmony with the room. Evidently, however, she has not 'risen' with him, for she is as ever; the Comtesse, who remembers having liked her the better of the two, could shake her for being so stupid. For instance, why is she not asserting herself in that other apartment?

The other apartment is really a correctly solemn dining-room, of which we have a glimpse through partly open folding-doors. At this moment it is harbouring Mr. Shand's ladies' committee, who sit with pens and foolscap round the large table, awaiting the advent of their leader. There are nobly wise ones and some foolish ones among them, for we are back in the strange days when it was considered 'unwomanly' for women to

have minds. The Comtesse peeps at them with curiosity, as they arrange their papers or are ushered into the dining-room through a door which we cannot see. To her frivolous ladyship they are a species of wild fowl, and she is specially amused to find her niece among them. She demands an explanation as soon as the communicating doors close.]

COMTESSE. Tell me since when has my dear Sybil become one of these ladies? It is not like her.

[MAGGIE is obviously not clever enough to understand the woman question. Her eye rests longingly on a half-finished stocking as she innocently but densely replies:]

MAGGIE. I think it was about the time that my husband took up their cause.

[The COMTESSE has been hearing tales of LADY SYBIL and the barbarian; and after having the grace to hesitate, she speaks with the directness for which she is famed in Mayfair.]

COMTESSE. Mrs. Shand, excuse me for saying that if half of what I hear be true, your husband is seeing that lady a great deal too often. [MAGGIE is expressionless; she reaches for her stocking, whereat her guest loses patience.] Oh, mon Dieu, put that down; you can buy them at two francs the pair. Mrs. Shand, why do not you compel yourself to take an intelligent interest in your husband's work?

MAGGIE. I typewrite his speeches.

COMTESSE. But do you know what they are about?

MAGGIE. They are about various subjects.

COMTESSE. Oh!

[Did MAGGIE give her an unseen quizzical glance before demurely resuming the knitting? One is not certain, as JOHN has come in, and this obliterates her. A 'Scotsman on the make,' of whom DAVID has spoken reverently, is still to be read--in a somewhat better bound volume--in JOHN SHAND's person; but it is as doggedly honest a face as ever; and he champions women, not for personal ends, but because his blessed days of poverty gave him a light upon their needs. His self-satisfaction, however, has increased, and he has pleasantly forgotten

some things. For instance, he can now call out 'Porter' at railway stations without dropping his hands for the barrow. MAGGIE introduces the COMTESSE, and he is still undaunted.]

JOHN. I remember you well--at Glasgow.

COMTESSE. It must be quite two years ago, Mr. Shand.

[JOHN has no objection to showing that he has had a classical education.]

JOHN. Tempus fugit, Comtesse.

COMTESSE. I have not been much in this country since then, and I return to find you a coming man.

[Fortunately his learning is tempered with modesty.]

JOHN. Oh, I don't know, I don't know.

COMTESSE. The Ladies' Champion.

[His modesty is tempered with a respect for truth.]

JOHN. Well, well.

COMTESSE. And you are about, as I understand, to introduce a bill to give women an equal right with men to grow beards [which is all she knows about it. He takes the remark literally.]

JOHN. There's nothing about beards in it, Comtesse. [She gives him time to cogitate, and is pleased to note that there is no result.] Have you typed my speech, Maggie?

MAGGIE. Yes; twenty-six pages. [She produces it from a drawer.]

[Perhaps JOHN wishes to impress the visitor.]

JOHN. I'm to give the ladies' committee a general idea of it. Just see, Maggie, if I know the peroration. 'In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, these are the reasonable demands of every intelligent Englishwoman--I had better say British woman--and I am proud to nail them to my flag'---

[The visitor is properly impressed.]

COMTESSE. Oho! defies his leaders!

JOHN. 'So long as I can do so without embarrassing the Government.'

COMTESSE. Ah, ah, Mr. Shand!

JOHN. 'I call upon the Front Bench, sir, loyally but firmly'--

COMTESSE. Firm again!

JOHN. --'either to accept my Bill, or to promise WITHOUT DELAY to bring in one of their own; and if they decline to do so I solemnly warn them that though I will not press the matter to a division just now'--

COMTESSE. Ahem!

JOHN. 'I will bring it forward again in the near future.' And now Comtesse, you know that I'm not going to divide--and not another soul knows it.

COMTESSE. I am indeed flattered by your confidence.

JOHN. I've only told you because I don't care who knows now.

COMTESSE. Oh!

[Somehow MAGGIE seems to be dissatisfied.]

MAGGIE. But why is that, John?

JOHN. I daren't keep the Government in doubt any longer about what I mean to do. I'll show the whips the speech privately to-night.

MAGGIE [who still wants to know]. But not to go to a division is hedging, isn't it? Is that strong?

JOHN. To make the speech at all, Maggie, is stronger than most would dare. They would do for me if I went to a division.

MAGGIE. Bark but not bite?

JOHN. Now, now, Maggie, you're out of your depth.

MAGGIE. I suppose that's it.

[The COMTESSE remains in the shallows.]

COMTESSE. But what will the ladies say, Mr. Shand?

JOHN. They won't like it, Comtesse, but they've got to lump it.

[Here the maid appears with a card for MAGGIE, who considers it quietly.]

JOHN. Any one of importance?

MAGGIE. No.

JOHN. Then I'm ready, Maggie.

[This is evidently an intimation that she is to open the folding-doors, and he makes an effective entrance into the dining-room, his thumb in his waistcoat. There is a delicious clapping of hands from the committee, and the door closes. Not till then does MAGGIE, who has grown thoughtful, tell her maid to admit the visitor.]

COMTESSE. Another lady, Mrs. Shand?

MAGGIE. The card says 'Mr. Charles Venables.'

[The COMTESSE is really interested at last.]

COMTESSE. Charles Venables! Do you know him?

MAGGIE. I think I call to mind meeting one of that name at the Foreign Office party.

COMTESSE. One of that name! He who is a Minister of your Cabinet. But as you know him so little why should he call on you?

MAGGIE. I wonder.

[MAGGIE's glance wanders to the drawer in which she has replaced JOHN's speech.]

COMTESSE. Well, well, I shall take care of you, petite.

MAGGIE. Do you know him?

COMTESSE. Do I know him! The last time I saw him he asked me to--to--hem!--ma cherie, it was thirty years ago.

MAGGIE. Thirty years!

COMTESSE. I was a pretty woman then. I dare say I shall detest him now; but if I find I do not--let us have a little plot--I shall drop this book;

and then perhaps you will be so charming as--as not to be here for a little while?

[MR. VENABLES, who enters, is such a courtly seigneur that he seems to bring the eighteenth century with him; you feel that his sedan chair is at the door. He stoops over MAGGIE's plebeian hand.]

VENABLES. I hope you will pardon my calling, Mrs. Shand; we had such a pleasant talk the other evening.

[MAGGIE, of course, is at once deceived by his gracious manner.]

MAGGIE. I think it's kind of you. Do you know each other? The Comtesse de la Briere.

[He repeats the name with some emotion, and the COMTESSE, half mischievously, half sadly, holds a hand before her face.]

VENABLES. Comtesse.

COMTESSE. Thirty years, Mr. Venables.

[He gallantly removes the hand that screens her face.]

VENABLES. It does not seem so much.

[She gives him a similar scrutiny.]

COMTESSE. Mon Dieu, it seems all that.

[They smile rather ruefully. MAGGIE like a kind hostess relieves the tension.]

MAGGIE. The Comtesse has taken a cottage in Surrey for the summer.

VENABLES. I am overjoyed.

COMTESSE. No, Charles, you are not. You no longer care. Fickle one! And it is only thirty years.

[He sinks into a chair beside her.]

VENABLES. Those heavenly evenings, Comtesse, on the Bosphorus.

COMTESSE. I refuse to talk of them. I hate you.

[But she drops the book, and MAGGIE fades from the room. It is not a very clever departure, and the old diplomatist smiles. Then he sighs a beautiful sigh, for he does all things beautifully.]

VENABLES. It is moonlight, Comtesse, on the Golden Horn.

COMTESSE. Who are those two young things in a caique?

VENABLES. Is he the brave Leander, Comtesse, and is she Hero of the Lamp?

COMTESSE. No, she is the foolish wife of the French Ambassador, and he is a good-for-nothing British attache trying to get her husband's secrets out of her.

VENABLES. Is it possible! They part at a certain garden gate.

COMTESSE. Oh, Charles, Charles!

VENABLES. But you promised to come back; I waited there till dawn. Blanche, if you HAD come back--

COMTESSE. How is Mrs. Venables?

VENABLES. She is rather poorly. I think it's gout.

COMTESSE. And you?

VENABLES. I creak a little in the mornings.

COMTESSE. So do I. There is such a good man at Wiesbaden.

VENABLES. The Homburg fellow is better. The way he patched me up last summer--Oh, Lord, Lord!

COMTESSE. Yes, Charles, the game is up; we are two old fogies. [They groan in unison; then she raps him sharply on the knuckles.] Tell me, sir, what are you doing here?

VENABLES. Merely a friendly call.

COMTESSE. I do not believe it.

VENABLES. The same woman; the old delightful candour.

COMTESSE. The same man; the old fibs. [She sees that the door is asking a question.] Yes, come, Mrs. Shand, I have had quite enough of him; I warn you he is here for some crafty purpose.

MAGGIE [drawing back timidly]. Surely not?

VENABLES. Really, Comtesse, you make conversation difficult. To show that my intentions are innocent, Mrs. Shand, I propose that you choose the subject.

MAGGIE [relieved]. There, Comtesse.

VENABLES. I hope your husband is well?

MAGGIE. Yes, thank you. [With a happy thought] I decide that we talk about him.

VENABLES. If you wish it.

COMTESSE. Be careful; HE has chosen the subject.

MAGGIE. I chose it, didn't I?

VENABLES. You know you did.

MAGGIE [appealingly]. You admire John?

VENABLES. Very much. But he puzzles me a little. You Scots, Mrs. Shand, are such a mixture of the practical and the emotional that you escape out of an Englishman's hand like a trout.

MAGGIE [open-eyed]. Do we?

VENABLES. Well, not you, but your husband. I have known few men make a worse beginning in the House. He had the most atrocious bow-wow public-park manner---

COMTESSE. I remember that manner!

MAGGIE. No, he hadn't.

VENABLES [soothingly]. At first. But by his second session he had shed all that, and he is now a pleasure to listen to. By the way, Comtesse, have you found any dark intention in that?

COMTESSE. You wanted to know whether he talks over these matter with his wife; and she has told you that he does not.

MAGGIE [indignantly]. I haven't said a word about it, have I?

VENABLES. Not a word. Then, again, I admire him for his impromptu speeches.

MAGGIE. What is impromptu?

VENABLES. Unprepared. They have contained some grave blunders not so much of judgment as of taste---

MAGGIE [hotly]. I don't think so.

VENABLES. Pardon me. But he has righted himself subsequently in the neatest way. I have always found that the man whose second thoughts are good is worth watching. Well, Comtesse, I see you have something to say.

COMTESSE. You are wondering whether she can tell you who gives him his second thoughts.

MAGGIE. Gives them to John? I would like to see anybody try to give thoughts to John.

VENABLES. Quite so.

COMTESSE. Is there anything more that has roused your admiration Charles?

VENABLES [purring]. Let me see. Yes, we are all much edified by his humour.

COMTESSE [surprised indeed]. His humour? That man!

MAGGIE [with hauteur]. Why not?

VENABLES. I assure you, Comtesse, some of the neat things in his speeches convulse the house. A word has even been coined for them--Shandisms.

COMTESSE [slowly recovering from a blow]. Humour!

VENABLES. In conversation, I admit, he strikes one as being--ah--somewhat lacking in humour.

COMTESSE [pouncing]. You are wondering who supplies his speeches with the humour.

MAGGIE. Supplies John?

VENABLES. Now that you mention it, some of his Shandisms do have a curiously feminine quality.

COMTESSE. You have thought it might be a woman.

VENABLES. Really, Comtesse--

COMTESSE. I see it all. Charles, you thought it might be the wife!

VENABLES [flinging up his hands]. I own up.

MAGGIE [bewildered]. Me?

VENABLES. Forgive me, I see I was wrong.

MAGGIE [alarmed]. Have I been doing John any harm?

VENABLES. On the contrary, I am relieved to know that there are no hairpins in his speeches. If he is at home, Mrs. Shand, may I see him? I am going to be rather charming to him.

MAGGIE [drawn in two directions]. Yes, he is--oh yes--but--

VENABLES. That is to say, Comtesse, if he proves himself the man I believe him to be.

[This arrests MAGGIE almost as she has reached the dining-room door.]

MAGGIE [hesitating]. He is very busy just now.

VENABLES [smiling]. I think he will see me.

MAGGIE. Is it something about his speech?

VENABLES [the smile hardening]. Well, yes, it is.

MAGGIE. Then I dare say I could tell you what you want to know without troubling him, as I've been typing it.

VENABLES [with a sigh]. I don't acquire information in that way.

COMTESSE. I trust not.

MAGGIE. There's no secret about it. He is to show it to the whips tonight.

VENABLES [sharply]. You are sure of that?

COMTESSE. It is quite true, Charles. I heard him say so; and indeed he repeated what he called the 'peroration' before me.

MAGGIE. I know it by heart. [She plays a bold game.] 'These are the demands of all intelligent British women, and I am proud to nail them to my flag'--

COMTESSE. The very words, Mrs. Shand.

MAGGIE [looking at her imploringly]. 'And I don't care how they may embarrass the Government.' [The COMTESSE is bereft of speech, so suddenly has she been introduced to the real MAGGIE SHAND]. 'If the right honourable gentleman will give us his pledge to introduce a similar Bill this session I will willingly withdraw mine; but otherwise I solemnly warn him that I will press the matter now to a division.'

[She turns her face from the great man; she has gone white.]

VENABLES [after a pause]. Capital.

[The blood returns to MAGGIE's heart.]

COMTESSE [who is beginning to enjoy herself very much]. Then you are pleased to know that he means to, as you say, go to a division?

VENABLES. Delighted. The courage of it will be the making of him.

COMTESSE. I see.

VENABLES. Had he been to hedge we should have known that he was a pasteboard knight and have disregarded him.

COMTESSE. I see.

[She desires to catch the eye of MAGGIE, but it is carefully turned from her.]

VENABLES. Mrs. Shand, let us have him in at once.

COMTESSE. Yes, yes, indeed.

[MAGGIE's anxiety returns, but she has to call JOHN in.]

JOHN [impressed]. Mr. Venables! This is an honour.

VENABLES. How are you, Shand?

JOHN. Sit down, sit down. [Becoming himself again.] I can guess what you have come about.

VENABLES. Ah, you Scotsmen.

JOHN. Of course I know I'm harassing the Government a good deal--

VENABLES [blandly]. Not at all, Shand. The Government are very pleased.

JOHN. You don't expect me to believe that?

VENABLES. I called here to give you the proof of it. You may know that we are to have a big meeting at Leeds on the 24th, when two Ministers are to speak. There is room for a third speaker, and I am authorised to offer that place to you.

JOHN. To me!

VENABLES. Yes.

JOHN [swelling]. It would be--the Government taking me up.

VENABLES. Don't make too much of it; it would be an acknowledgment that they look upon you as one of their likely young men.

MAGGIE. John!

JOHN [not found wanting in a trying hour]. It's a bribe. You are offering me this on condition that I don't make my speech. How can you think so meanly of me as to believe that I would play the women's cause false for the sake of my own advancement. I refuse your bribe.

VENABLES [liking him for the first time]. Good. But you are wrong. There are no conditions, and we want you to make your speech. Now do you accept?

JOHN [still suspicious]. If you make me the same offer after you have read it. I insist on your reading it first.

VENABLES [sighing]. By all means.

[MAGGIE is in an agony as she sees JOHN hand the speech to his leader. On the other hand, the COMTESSE thrills.]

But I assure you we look on the speech as a small matter. The important thing is your intention of going to a division; and we agree to that also.

JOHN [losing his head]. What's that?

VENABLES. Yes, we agree.

JOHN. But--but--why, you have been threatening to excommunicate me if I dared.

VENABLES. All done to test you, Shand.

JOHN. To test me?

VENABLES. We know that a division on your Bill can have no serious significance; we shall see to that. And so the test was to be whether you had the pluck to divide the House. Had you been intending to talk big in this speech, and then hedge, through fear of the Government, they would have had no further use for you.

JOHN [heavily]. I understand. [But there is one thing he cannot understand, which is, why VENABLES should be so sure that he is not to hedge.]

VENABLES [turning over the pages carelessly]. Any of your good things in this, Shand?

JOHN [whose one desire is to get the pages back]. No, I--no--it isn't necessary you should read it now.

VENABLES [from politeness only]. Merely for my own pleasure. I shall look through it this evening. [He rolls up the speech to put it in his pocket. JOHN turns despairingly to MAGGIE, though well aware that no help can come from her.]

MAGGIE. That's the only copy there is, John. [To VENABLES] Let me make a fresh one, and send it to you in an hour or two.

VENABLES [good-naturedly]. I could not put you to that trouble, Mrs. Shand. I will take good care of it.

MAGGIE. If anything were to happen to you on the way home, wouldn't whatever is in your pocket be considered to be the property of your heirs?

VENABLES [laughing]. Now there is forethought! Shand, I think that after that--! [He returns the speech to JOHN, whose hand swallows it greedily.] She is Scotch too, Comtesse.

COMTESSE [delighted]. Yes, she is Scotch too.

VENABLES. Though the only persons likely to do for me in the street, Shand, are your ladies' committee. Ever since they took the horse out of my brougham, I can scent them a mile away.

COMTESSE. A mile? Charles, peep in there.

[He softly turns the handle of the dining-room door, and realises that his scent is not so good as he had thought it. He bids his hostess and the COMTESSE good-bye in a burlesque whisper and tiptoes off to safer places. JOHN having gone out with him, MAGGIE can no longer avoid the COMTESSE's reproachful eye. That much injured lady advances upon her with accusing finger.]

COMTESSE. So, madam!

[MAGGIE is prepared for her.]

MAGGIE. I don't know what you mean.

COMTESSE. Yes, you do. I mean that there IS some one who 'helps' our Mr. Shand.

MAGGIE. There's not.

COMTESSE. And it IS a woman, and it's you.

MAGGIE. I help in the little things.

COMTESSE. The little things! You are the Pin he picked up and that is to make his fortune. And now what I want to know is whether your John is aware that you help at all.

[JOHN returns, and at once provides the answer.]

JOHN. Maggie, Comtesse, I've done it again!

MAGGIE. I'm so glad, John.

[The COMTESSE is in an ecstasy.]

COMTESSE. And all because you were not to hedge, Mr. Shand.

[His appeal to her with the wistfulness of a schoolboy makes him rather attractive.]

JOHN. You won't tell on me, Comtesse! [He thinks it out.] They had just guessed I would be firm because they know I'm a strong man. You little saw, Maggie, what a good turn you were doing me when you said you wanted to make another copy of the speech.

[She is dense.]

MAGGIE. How, John?

JOHN. Because now I can alter the end.

[She is enlightened.]

MAGGIE. So you can!

JOHN. Here's another lucky thing, Maggie: I hadn't told the ladies' committee that I was to hedge, and so they need never know. Comtesse, I tell you there's a little cherub who sits up aloft and looks after the career of John Shand.

[The COMTESSE looks not aloft but toward the chair at present occupied by MAGGIE.]

COMTESSE. Where does she sit, Mr. Shand?

[He knows that women are not well read.]

JOHN. It's just a figure of speech.

[He returns airily to his committee room; and now again you may hear the click of MAGGIE's needles. They no longer annoy the COMTESSE; she is setting them to music.]

COMTESSE. It is not down here she sits, Mrs. Shand, knitting a stocking.

MAGGIE. No, it isn't.

COMTESSE. And when I came in I gave him credit for everything; even for the prettiness of the room!

MAGGIE. He has beautiful taste.

COMTESSE. Good-bye, Scotchy.

MAGGIE. Good-bye, Comtesse, and thank you for coming.

COMTESSE. Good-bye--Miss Pin.

[MAGGIE rings genteelly.]

MAGGIE. Good-bye.

[The COMTESSE is now lost in admiration of her.]

COMTESSE. You divine little wife. He can't be worthy of it, no man could be worthy of it. Why do you do it?

[MAGGIE shivers a little.]

MAGGIE. He loves to think he does it all himself; that's the way of men. I'm six years older than he is. I'm plain, and I have no charm. I shouldn't have let him marry me. I'm trying to make up for it.

[The COMTESSE kisses her and goes away. MAGGIE, somewhat foolishly, resumes her knitting.]

[Some days later this same room is listening--with the same inattention--to the outpouring of JOHN SHAND's love for the lady of the hiccoughs. We arrive--by arrangement--rather late; and thus we miss some of the most delightful of the pangs.]

One can see that these two are playing no game, or, if they are, that they little know it. The wonders of the world [so strange are the instruments chosen by Love] have been revealed to JOHN in hiccoughs; he shakes in SYBIL's presence; never were more swimming eyes; he who has been of a wooden face till now, with ways to match, has gone on flame like a piece of paper; emotion is in flood in him. We may be almost fond of JOHN for being so worshipful of love. Much has come to him that we had almost despaired of his acquiring, including nearly all the divine attributes except that sense of humour. The beautiful SYBIL has always possessed but little of it also, and what she had has been struck from her by

Cupid's flail. Naked of the saving grace, they face each other in awful rapture.]

JOHN. In a room, Sybil, I go to you as a cold man to a fire. You fill me like a peal of bells in an empty house.

[She is being brutally treated by the dear impediment, for which hiccough is such an inadequate name that even to spell it is an abomination though a sign of ability. How to describe a sound that is noiseless? Let us put it thus, that when SYBIL wants to say something very much there are little obstacles in her way; she falters, falls perhaps once, and then is over, the while her appealing orbs beg you not to be angry with her. We may express those sweet pauses in precious dots, which some clever person can afterwards string together and make a pearl necklace of them.]

SYBIL. I should not ... let you say it, ... but ... you ... say it so beautifully.

JOHN. You must have guessed.

SYBIL. I dreamed ... I feared ... but you were ... Scotch, and I didn't know what to think.

JOHN. Do you know what first attracted me to you, Sybil? It was your insolence. I thought, 'I'll break her insolence for her.'

SYBIL. And I thought... 'I'll break his str...ength!'

JOHN. And now your cooing voice plays round me; the softness of you, Sybil, in your pretty clothes makes me think of young birds. [The impediment is now insurmountable; she has to swim for it, she swims toward him.] It is you who inspire my work.

[He thrills to find that she can be touched without breaking.]

SYBIL. I am so glad... so proud...

JOHN. And others know it, Sybil, as well as I. Only yesterday the Comtesse said to me, 'No man could get on so fast unaided. Cherchez la femme, Mr. Shand.'

SYBIL. Auntie said that?

JOHN. I said 'Find her yourself, Comtesse.'

SYBIL. And she?

JOHN. She said 'I have found her,' and I said in my blunt way, 'You mean Lady Sybil,' and she went away laughing.

SYBIL. Laughing?

JOHN. I seem to amuse the woman.

[Sybil grows sad.]

SYBIL. If Mrs. Shand--It is so cruel to her. Whom did you say she had gone to the station to meet?

JOHN. Her father and brothers.

SYBIL. It is so cruel to them. We must think no more of this. It is madness.

JOHN. It's fate. Sybil, let us declare our love openly.

SYBIL. You can't ask that, now in the first moment that you tell me of it.

JOHN. The one thing I won't do even for you is to live a life of underhand.

SYBIL. The... blow to her.

JOHN. Yes. But at least she has always known that I never loved her.

SYBIL. It is asking me to give... up everything, every one, for you.

JOHN. It's too much.

[JOHN is humble at last.]

SYBIL. To a woman who truly loves, even that is not too much. Oh! it is not I who matter--it is you.

JOHN. My dear, my dear.

SYBIL. So gladly would I do it to save you; but, oh, if it were to bring you down!

JOHN. Nothing can keep me down if I have you to help me.

SYBIL. I am dazed, John, I...

JOHN. My love, my love.

SYBIL. I... oh... here...

JOHN. Be brave, Sybil, be brave.

SYBIL.

[In this bewilderment of pearls she melts into his arms. MAGGIE happens to open the door just then; but neither fond heart hears her.]

JOHN. I can't walk along the streets, Sybil, without looking in all the shop windows for what I think would become you best. [As awkwardly as though his heart still beat against corduroy, he takes from his pocket a pendant and its chain. He is shy, and she drops pearls over the beauty of the ruby which is its only stone.] It is a drop of my blood, Sybil.

[Her lovely neck is outstretched, and he puts the chain round it. MAGGIE withdraws as silently as she had come; but perhaps the door whispered 'd--n' as it closed, for SYBIL wakes out of Paradise.]

SYBIL. I thought---Did the door shut?

JOHN. It was shut already.

[Perhaps it is only that SYBIL is bewildered to find herself once again in a world that has doors.]

SYBIL. It seemed to me---

JOHN. There was nothing. But I think I hear voices; they may have arrived.

[Some pretty instinct makes SYBIL go farther from him. MAGGIE kindly gives her time for this by speaking before opening the door.]

MAGGIE. That will do perfectly, David. The maid knows where to put them. [She comes in.] They've come, John; they WOULD help with the luggage. [JOHN goes out. MAGGIE is agreeably surprised to find a visitor.] How do you do, Lady Sybil? This is nice of you.

SYBIL. I was so sorry not to find you in, Mrs. Shand.

[The impediment has run away. It is only for those who love it.]

MAGGIE. Thank you. You'll sit down?

SYBIL. I think not; your relatives---

MAGGIE. They will be so proud to see that you are my friend.

[If MAGGIE were less simple her guest would feel more comfortable. She tries to make conversation.]

SYBIL. It is their first visit to London?

[Instead of relieving her anxiety on this point, MAGGIE has a long look at the gorgeous armful.]

MAGGIE. I'm glad you are so beautiful, Lady Sybil.

[The beautiful one is somehow not flattered. She pursues her investigations with growing uneasiness.]

SYBIL. One of them is married now, isn't he? [Still there is no answer; MAGGIE continues looking at her, and shivers slightly.] Have they travelled from Scotland to-day? Mrs. Shand, why do you look at me so? The door did open! [MAGGIE nods.] What are you to do?

MAGGIE. That would be telling. Sit down, my pretty.

[As SYBIL subsides into what the Wylies with one glance would call the best chair, MAGGIE's men-folk are brought in by JOHN, all carrying silk hats and looking very active after their long rest in the train. They are gazing about them. They would like this lady, they would like JOHN, they would even like MAGGIE to go away for a little and leave them to examine the room. Is that linen on the walls, for instance, or just paper? Is the carpet as thick as it feels, or is there brown paper beneath it? Had MAGGIE got anything off that bookcase on account of the worm-hole? DAVID even discovers that we were simpletons when we said there was nothing in the room that pretended to be what it was not. He taps the marble mantelpiece, and is favourably impressed by the tinny sound.]

DAVID. Very fine imitation. It's a capital house, Maggie.

MAGGIE. I'm so glad you like it. Do you know one another? This is my father and my brothers, Lady Sybil.

[The lovely form inclines towards them. ALICK and DAVID remain firm on their legs, but JAMES totters.]

JAMES. A ladyship! Well done, Maggie.

ALICK [sharply]. James! I remember you, my lady.

MAGGIE. Sit down, father. This is the study.

[JAMES wanders round it inquisitively until called to order.]

SYBIL. You must be tired after your long journey.

DAVID [drawing the portraits of himself and partners in one lightning sketch]. Tired, your ladyship? We sat on cushioned seats the whole way.

JAMES [looking about him for the chair you sit on]. Every seat in this room is cushioned.

MAGGIE. You may say all my life is cushioned now, James, by this dear man of mine.

[She gives JOHN'S shoulder a loving pressure, which SYBIL feels is a telegraphic communication to herself in a cypher that she cannot read. ALICK and the BROTHERS bask in the evidence of MAGGIE's happiness.]

JOHN [uncomfortably]. And is Elizabeth hearty, James?

JAMES [looking down his nose in the manner proper to young husbands when addressed about their wives]. She's very well, I thank you kindly.

MAGGIE. James is a married man now, Lady Sybil.

[SYBIL murmurs her congratulations.]

JAMES. I thank you kindly. [Courageously] Yes, I'm married. [He looks at DAVID and ALICK to see if they are smiling; and they are.] It wasn't a case of being caught; it was entirely of my own free will. [He looks again; and the mean fellows are smiling still.] Is your ladyship married?

SYBIL. Alas! no.

DAVID. James! [Politely.] You will be yet, my lady.

[SYBIL indicates that he is kind indeed.]

JOHN. Perhaps they would like you to show them their rooms, Maggie?

DAVID. Fine would we like to see all the house as well as the sleeping accommodation. But first--[He gives his father the look with which chairmen call on the next speaker.]

ALICK. I take you, David. [He produces a paper parcel from a roomy pocket.] It wasn't likely, Mr. Shand, that we should forget the day.

JOHN. The day?

DAVID. The second anniversary of your marriage. We came purposely for the day.

JAMES [his fingers itching to take the parcel from his father]. It's a lace shawl, Maggie, from the three of us, a pure Tobermory; you would never dare wear it if you knew the cost.

[The shawl in its beauty is revealed, and MAGGIE hails it with little cries of joy. She rushes at the donors and kisses each of them just as if she were a pretty woman. They are much pleased and give expression to their pleasure in a not very dissimilar manner.]

ALICK. Havers.

DAVID. Havers.

JAMES. Havers.

JOHN. It's a very fine shawl.

[He should not have spoken, for he has set JAMES'S volatile mind working.]

JAMES. You may say so. What did you give her, Mr. Shand?

JOHN [suddenly deserted by God and man]. Me?

ALICK. Yes, yes, let's see it.

JOHN. Oh--I--

[He is not deserted by MAGGIE, but she can think of no way out.]

SYBIL [prompted by the impediment, which is in hiding, quite close]. Did he ... forget?

[There is more than a touch of malice in the question. It is a challenge, and the Wylies as a family are almost too quick to accept a challenge.]

MAGGIE [lifting the gage of battle]. John forget? Never! It's a pendant, father.

[The impediment bolts. JOHN rises.]

ALICK. A pendant? One of those things on a chain?

[He grins, remembering how once, about sixty years ago, he and a lady and a pendant--but we have no time for this.]

MAGGIE. Yes.

DAVID [who has felt the note of antagonism and is troubled]. You were slow in speaking of it, Mr. Shand.

MAGGIE [This is her fight.] He was shy, because he thought you might blame him for extravagance.

DAVID [relieved]. Oh, that's it.

JAMES [licking his lips]. Let's see it.

MAGGIE [a daughter of the devil]. Where did you put it, John?

[JOHN's mouth opens but has nothing to contribute.]

SYBIL [the impediment has stolen back again]. Perhaps it has been ... mislaid.

[The BROTHERS echo the word incredulously.]

MAGGIE. Not it. I can't think where we laid it down, John. It's not on that table, is it, James? [The Wylies turn to look, and MAGGIE's hand goes out to LADY SYBIL: JOHN SHAND, witness. It is a very determined hand, and presently a pendant is placed in it.] Here it is! [ALICK and the BROTHERS cluster round it, weigh it and appraise it.]

ALICK. Preserve me. Is that stone real, Mr. Shand?

JOHN [who has begun to look his grimmest]. Yes.

MAGGIE [who is now ready, if he wishes it, to take him on too]. John says it's a drop of his blood.

JOHN [wishing it]. And so it is.

DAVID. Well said, Mr. Shand.

MAGGIE [scared]. And now, if you'll come with me, I think John has something he wants to talk over with Lady Sybil. [Recovering and taking him on.] Or would you prefer, John, to say it before us all?

SYBIL [gasping]. No!

JOHN [flinging back his head]. Yes, I prefer to say it before you all.

MAGGIE [flinging back hers]. Then sit down again.

[The WYLIES wonderingly obey.]

SYBIL. Mr. Shand, Mr. Shand!--

JOHN. Maggie knows, and it was only for her I was troubled. Do you think I'm afraid of them? [With mighty relief] Now we can be open.

DAVID [lowering]. What is it? What's wrong, John Shand?

JOHN [facing him squarely]. It was to Lady Sybil I gave the pendant, and all my love with it. [Perhaps JAMES utters a cry, but the silence of ALICK and DAVID is more terrible.]

SYBIL [whose voice is smaller than we had thought]. What are you to do?

[It is to MAGGIE she is speaking.]

DAVID. She'll leave it for us to do.

JOHN. That's what I want.

[The lords of creation look at the ladies.]

MAGGIE [interpreting]. You and I are expected to retire, Lady Sybil, while the men decide our fate. [SYBIL is ready to obey the law, but MAGGIE remains seated.] Man's the oak, woman's the ivy. Which of us is it that's to cling to you, John?

[With three stalwarts glaring at him, JOHN rather grandly takes SYBIL'S hand. They are two against the world.]

SYBIL [a heroine]. I hesitated, but I am afraid no longer; whatever he asks of me I will do.

[Evidently the first thing he asks of her is to await him in the dining-room.]

It will mean surrendering everything for him. I am glad it means all that.
[She passes into the dining-room looking as pretty as a kiss.]

MAGGIE. So that settles it.

ALICK. I'm thinking that doesn't settle it.

DAVID. No, by God! [But his love for MAGGIE steadies him. There is even a note of entreaty in his voice.] Have you nothing to say to her, man?

JOHN. I have things to say to her, but not before you.

DAVID [sternly]. Go away, Maggie. Leave him to us.

JAMES [who thinks it is about time that he said something]. Yes, leave him to us.

MAGGIE. No, David, I want to hear what is to become of me; I promise not to take any side.

[And sitting by the fire she resumes her knitting. The four regard her as on an evening at The Pans a good many years ago.]

DAVID [barking]. How long has this been going on?

JOHN. If you mean how long has that lady been the apple of my eye, I'm not sure; but I never told her of it until today.

MAGGIE [thoughtfully and without dropping a stitch]. I think it wasn't till about six months ago, John, that she began to be very dear to you. At first you liked to bring in her name when talking to me, so that I could tell you of any little things I might have heard she was doing. But afterwards, as she became more and more to you, you avoided mentioning her name.

JOHN [surprised]. Did you notice that?

MAGGIE [in her old-fashioned way]. Yes.

JOHN. I tried to be done with it for your sake. I've often had a sore heart for you, Maggie.

JAMES. You're proving it!

MAGGIE. Yes, James, he had. I've often seen him looking at me very sorrowfully of late because of what was in his mind; and many a kindly little thing he has done for me that he didn't use to do.

JOHN. You noticed that too!

MAGGIE. Yes.

DAVID [controlling himself]. Well, we won't go into that; the thing to be thankful for is that it's ended.

ALICK [who is looking very old]. Yes, yes, that's the great thing.

JOHN. All useless, sir, it's not ended; it's to go on.

DAVID. There's a devil in you, John Shand.

JOHN [who is an unhappy man just now]. I dare say there is. But do you think he had a walk over, Mr. David?

JAMES. Man, I could knock you down!

MAGGIE. There's not one of you could knock John down.

DAVID [exasperated]. Quiet, Maggie. One would think you were taking his part.

MAGGIE. Do you expect me to desert him at the very moment that he needs me most?

DAVID. It's him that's deserting you.

JOHN. Yes, Maggie, that's what it is.

ALICK. Where's your marriage vow? And your church attendances?

JAMES [with terrible irony]. And your prize for moral philosophy?

JOHN [recklessly]. All gone whistling down the wind.

DAVID. I suppose you understand that you'll have to resign your seat.

JOHN [his underlip much in evidence]. There are hundreds of seats, but there's only one John Shand.

MAGGIE [but we don't hear her]. That's how I like to hear him speak.

DAVID [the ablest person in the room]. Think, man, I'm old by you, and for long I've had a pride in you. It will be beginning the world again with more against you than there was eight years ago.

JOHN. I have a better head to begin it with than I had eight years ago.

ALICK [hoping this will bite]. She'll have her own money, David!

JOHN. She's as poor as a mouse.

JAMES [thinking possibly of his Elizabeth's mother]. We'll go to her friends, and tell them all. They'll stop it.

JOHN. She's of age.

JAMES. They'll take her far away.

JOHN. I'll follow, and tear her from them.

ALICK. Your career---

JOHN [to his credit]. To hell with my career. Do you think I don't know I'm on the rocks? What can you, or you, or you, understand of the passions of a man! I've fought, and I've given in. When a ship founders, as I suppose I'm foundering, it's not a thing to yelp at. Peace, all of you. [He strides into the dining-room, where we see him at times pacing the floor.]

DAVID [to JAMES, who gives signs of a desire to take off his coat]. Let him be. We can't budge him. [With bitter wisdom] It's true what he says, true at any rate about me. What do I know of the passions of a man! I'm up against something I don't understand.

ALICK. It's something wicked.

DAVID. I dare say it is, but it's something big.

JAMES. It's that damned charm.

MAGGIE [still by the fire]. That's it. What was it that made you fancy Elizabeth, James?

JAMES [sheepishly]. I can scarcely say.

MAGGIE. It was her charm.

DAVID. HER charm!

JAMES [pugnaciously]. Yes, HER charm.

MAGGIE. She had charm for James.

[This somehow breaks them up. MAGGIE goes from one to another with an odd little smile flickering on her face.]

DAVID. Put on your things, Maggie, and we'll leave his house.

MAGGIE [patting his kind head]. Not me, David.

[This is a MAGGIE they have known but forgotten; all three brighten.]

DAVID. You haven't given in!

[The smile flickers and expires.]

MAGGIE. I want you all to go upstairs, and let me have my try now.

JAMES. Your try?

ALICK. Maggie, you put new life into me.

JAMES. And into me.

[DAVID says nothing; the way he grips her shoulder says it for him.]

MAGGIE. I'll save him, David, if I can.

DAVID. Does he deserve to be saved after the way he has treated you?

MAGGIE. You stupid David. What has that to do with it.

[When they have gone, JOHN comes to the door of the dining-room. There is welling up in him a great pity for MAGGIE, but it has to subside a little when he sees that the knitting is still in her hand. No man likes to be so soon supplanted. SYBIL follows, and the two of them gaze at the active needles.]

MAGGIE [perceiving that she has visitors]. Come in, John. Sit down, Lady Sybil, and make yourself comfortable. I'm afraid we've put you about.

[She is, after all, only a few years older than they and scarcely looks her age; yet it must have been in some such way as this that the little old woman who lived in a shoe addressed her numerous progeny.]

JOHN. I'm mortal sorry, Maggie.

SYBIL [who would be more courageous if she could hold his hand]. And I also.

MAGGIE [soothingly]. I'm sure you are. But as it can't be helped I see no reason why we three shouldn't talk the matter over in a practical way.

[SYBIL looks doubtful, but JOHN hangs on desperately to the word practical.]

JOHN. If you could understand, Maggie, what an inspiration she is to me and my work.

SYBIL. Indeed, Mrs. Shand, I think of nothing else.

MAGGIE. That's fine. That's as it should be.

SYBIL [talking too much]. Mrs. Shand, I think you are very kind to take it so reasonably.

MAGGIE. That's the Scotch way. When were you thinking of leaving me, John?

[Perhaps this is the Scotch way also; but SYBIL is English, and from the manner in which she starts you would say that something has fallen on her toes.]

JOHN [who has heard nothing fall]. I think, now that it has come to a breach, the sooner the better. [His tone becomes that of JAMES when asked after the health of his wife.] When it is convenient to you, Maggie.

MAGGIE [making a rapid calculation]. It couldn't well be before Wednesday. That's the day the laundry comes home.

[SYBIL has to draw in her toes again.]

JOHN. And it's the day the House rises. [Stifling a groan] It may be my last appearance in the House.

SYBIL [her arms yearning for him]. No, no, please don't say that.

MAGGIE [surveying him sympathetically]. You love the House, don't you, John, next to her? It's a pity you can't wait till after your speech at Leeds. Mr. Venables won't let you speak at Leeds, I fear, if you leave me.

JOHN. What a chance it would have been. But let it go.

MAGGIE. The meeting is in less than a month. Could you not make it such a speech that they would be very loth to lose you?

JOHN [swelling]. That's what was in my mind.

SYBIL [with noble confidence]. And he could have done it.

MAGGIE. Then we've come to something practical.

JOHN [exercising his imagination with powerful effect]. No, it wouldn't be fair to you if I was to stay on now.

MAGGIE. Do you think I'll let myself be considered when your career is at stake. A month will soon pass for me; I'll have a lot of packing to do.

JOHN. It's noble of you, but I don't deserve it, and I can't take it from you.

MAGGIE. Now's the time, Lady Sybil, for you to have one of your inspiring ideas.

SYBIL [ever ready]. Yes, yes--but what?

[It is odd that they should both turn to MAGGIE at this moment.]

MAGGIE [who has already been saying it to herself]. What do you think of this: I can stay on here with my father and brothers; and you, John, can go away somewhere and devote yourself to your speech?

SYBIL. Yes.

JOHN. That might be. [Considerately] Away from both of you. Where could I go?

SYBIL [ever ready]. Where?

MAGGIE. I know.

[She has called up a number on the telephone before they have time to check her.]

JOHN [on his dignity]. Don't be in such a hurry, Maggie.

MAGGIE. Is this Lamb's Hotel? Put me on to the Comtesse de la Briere, please.

SYBIL [with a sinking]. What do you want with Auntie?

MAGGIE. Her cottage in the country would be the very place. She invited John and me.

JOHN. Yes, but--

MAGGIE [arguing]. And Mr. Venables is to be there. Think of the impression you could make on HIM, seeing him daily for three weeks.

JOHN. There's something in that.

MAGGIE. Is it you, Comtesse? I'm Maggie Shand.

SYBIL. You are not to tell her that--?

MAGGIE. No. [To the COMTESSE] Oh, I'm very well, never was better. Yes, yes; you see I can't, because my folk have never been in London before, and I must take them about and show them the sights. But John could come to you alone; why not?

JOHN [with proper pride]. If she's not keen to have me, I won't go.

MAGGIE. She's very keen. Comtesse, I could come for a day by and by to see how you are getting on. Yes--yes--certainly. [To JOHN] She says she'll be delighted.

JOHN [thoughtfully]. You're not doing this, Maggie, thinking that my being absent from Sybil for a few weeks can make any difference? Of course it's natural you should want us to keep apart, but--

MAGGIE [grimly]. I'm founding no hope on keeping you apart, John.

JOHN. It's what other wives would do.

MAGGIE. I promised to be different.

JOHN [his position as a strong man assured]. Then tell her I accept. [He wanders back into the dining-room.]

SYBIL. I think--[she is not sure what she thinks]--I think you are very wonderful.

MAGGIE. Was that John calling to you?

SYBIL. Was it? [She is glad to join him in the dining-room.]

MAGGIE. Comtesse, hold the line a minute. [She is alone, and she has nearly reached the end of her self-control. She shakes emotionally and utters painful little cries; there is something she wants to do, and she is loth to do it. But she does it.] Are you there, Comtesse? There's one other thing, dear Comtesse; I want you to invite Lady Sybil also; yes, for the whole time that John is there. No, I'm not mad; as a great favour to me; yes, I have a very particular reason, but I won't tell you what it is; oh, call me Scotchy as much as you like, but consent; do, do, do. Thank you, thank you, good-bye.

[She has control of herself now, and is determined not to let it slip from her again. When they reappear the stubborn one is writing a letter.]

JOHN. I thought I heard the telephone again.

MAGGIE [looking up from her labours]. It was the Comtesse; she says she's to invite Lady Sybil to the cottage at the same time.

SYBIL. Me!

JOHN. To invite Sybil? Then of course I won't go, Maggie.

MAGGIE [wondering seemingly at these niceties]. What does it matter? Is anything to be considered except the speech? [It has been admitted that she was a little devil.] And, with Sybil on the spot, John, to help you and inspire you, what a speech it will be!

JOHN [carried away]. Maggie, you really are a very generous woman.

SYBIL [convinced at last]. She is indeed.

JOHN. And you're queer too. How many women in the circumstances would sit down to write a letter?

MAGGIE. It's a letter to you, John.

JOHN. To me?

MAGGIE. I'll give it to you when it's finished, but I ask you not to open it till your visit to the Comtesse ends.

JOHN. What is it about?

MAGGIE. It's practical.

SYBIL [rather faintly]. Practical? [She has heard the word so frequently to-day that it is beginning to have a Scotch sound. She feels she ought to like MAGGIE, but that she would like her better if they were farther apart. She indicates that the doctors are troubled about her heart, and murmuring her adieux she goes. JOHN, who is accompanying her, pauses at the door.]

JOHN [with a queer sort of admiration for his wife]. Maggie, I wish I was fond of you.

MAGGIE [heartily]. I wish you were, John.

[He goes, and she resumes her letter. The stocking is lying at hand, and she pushes it to the floor. She is done for a time with knitting.]