

II. The Little Nursery Governess

As I enter the club smoking-room you are to conceive David vanishing into nothingness, and that it is any day six years ago at two in the afternoon. I ring for coffee, cigarette, and cherry brandy, and take my chair by the window, just as the absurd little nursery governess comes tripping into the street. I always feel that I have rung for her.

While I am lifting the coffee-pot cautiously lest the lid fall into the cup, she is crossing to the post-office; as I select the one suitable lump of sugar she is taking six last looks at the letter; with the aid of William I light my cigarette, and now she is re-reading the delicious address. I lie back in my chair, and by this time she has dropped the letter down the slit. I toy with my liqueur, and she is listening to hear whether the postal authorities have come for her letter. I scowl at a fellow-member who has had the impudence to enter the smoking-room, and her two little charges are pulling her away from the post-office. When I look out at the window again she is gone, but I shall ring for her to-morrow at two sharp.

She must have passed the window many times before I noticed her. I know not where she lives, though I suppose it to be hard by. She is taking the little boy and girl, who bully her, to the St. James's Park, as their hoops tell me, and she ought to look crushed and faded. No doubt her mistress overworks her. It must enrage the other servants to see her deporting herself as if she were quite the lady.

I noticed that she had sometimes other letters to post, but that the posting of the one only was a process. They shot down the slit, plebeians all, but it followed pompously like royalty. I have even seen her blow a kiss after it.

Then there was her ring, of which she was as conscious as if it rather than she was what came gaily down the street. She felt it through her glove to make sure that it was still there. She took off the glove and raised the ring to her lips, though I doubt not it was the cheapest trinket. She viewed it from afar by stretching out her hand; she stooped to see how it looked near the ground; she considered its effect on the right of her and on the left of her and through one eye at a time. Even when you saw that she had made up her mind to think hard of something else, the little silly would take another look.

I give anyone three chances to guess why Mary was so happy.

No and no and no. The reason was simply this, that a lout of a young man loved her. And so, instead of crying because she was the merest nobody, she must, forsooth, sail jauntily down Pall Mall, very trim as to her tackle and ticketed with the insufferable air of an engaged woman. At first her complacency disturbed me, but gradually it became part of my life at two o'clock with the coffee, the cigarette, and the liqueur. Now comes the tragedy.

Thursday is her great day. She has from two to three every Thursday for her very own; just think of it: this girl, who is probably paid several pounds a year, gets a whole hour to herself once a week. And what does she with it? Attend classes for making her a more accomplished person? Not she. This is what she does: sets sail for Pall Mall, wearing all her pretty things, including the blue feathers, and with such a sparkle of expectation on her face that I stir my coffee quite fiercely. On ordinary days she at least tries to look demure, but on a Thursday she has had the assurance to use the glass door of the club as a mirror in which to see how she likes her engaging trifle of a figure-to-day.

In the meantime a long-legged oaf is waiting for her outside the post-office, where they meet every Thursday, a fellow who always wears the same suit of clothes, but has a face that must ever make him free of the company of gentlemen. He is one of your lean, clean Englishmen, who strip so well, and I fear me he is handsome; I say fear, for your handsome men have always annoyed me, and had I lived in the duelling days I swear I would have called every one of them out. He seems to be quite unaware that he is a pretty fellow, but Lord, how obviously Mary knows it. I conclude that he belongs to the artistic classes, he is so easily elated and depressed; and because he carries his left thumb curiously, as if it were feeling for the hole of a palette, I have entered his name among the painters. I find pleasure in deciding that they are shocking bad pictures, for obviously no one buys them. I feel sure Mary says they are splendid, she is that sort of woman. Hence the rapture with which he greets her. Her first effect upon him is to make him shout with laughter. He laughs suddenly haw from an eager exulting face, then haw again, and then, when you are thanking heaven that it is at last over, comes a final haw, louder than the others. I take them to be roars of joy because Mary is his, and they have a ring of youth about them that is hard to bear. I could forgive him everything save his youth, but it is so aggressive that I have sometimes to order William testily to close the window.

How much more deceitful than her lover is the little nursery governess. The moment she comes into sight she looks at the post-office and sees him.

Then she looks straight before her, and now she is observed, and he rushes across to her in a glory, and she starts--positively starts--as if he had taken her by surprise. Observe her hand rising suddenly to her wicked little heart. This is the moment when I stir my coffee violently. He gazes down at her in such rapture that he is in everybody's way, and as she takes his arm she gives it a little squeeze, and then away they strut, Mary doing nine-tenths of the talking. I fall to wondering what they will look like when they grow up.

What a ludicrous difference do these two nobodies make to each other. You can see that they are to be married when he has twopence.

Thus I have not an atom of sympathy with this girl, to whom London is famous only as the residence of a young man who mistakes her for someone else, but her happiness had become part of my repast at two P.M., and when one day she walked down Pall Mall without gradually posting a letter I was most indignant. It was as if William had disobeyed orders. Her two charges were as surprised as I, and pointed questioningly to the slit, at which she shook her head. She put her finger to her eyes, exactly like a sad baby, and so passed from the street.

Next day the same thing happened, and I was so furious that I bit through my cigarette. Thursday came, when I prayed that there might be an end of this annoyance, but no, neither of them appeared on that acquainted ground. Had they changed their post-office? No, for her eyes were red every day, and heavy was her foolish little heart. Love had put out his lights, and the little nursery governess walked in darkness.

I felt I could complain to the committee.

Oh, you selfish young zany of a man, after all you have said to her, won't you make it up and let me return to my coffee? Not he.

Little nursery governess, I appeal to you. Annoying girl, be joyous as of old during the five minutes of the day when you are anything to me, and for the rest of the time, so far as I am concerned, you may be as wretched as you list. Show some courage. I assure you he must be a very bad painter; only the other day I saw him looking longingly into the window of a cheap Italian restaurant, and in the end he had to crush down his aspirations with two penny scones.

You can do better than that. Come, Mary.

All in vain. She wants to be loved; can't do without love from morning till night; never knew how little a woman needs till she lost that little. They are all like this.

Zounds, madam, if you are resolved to be a drooping little figure till you die, you might at least do it in another street.

Not only does she maliciously depress me by walking past on ordinary days, but I have discovered that every Thursday from two to three she stands afar off, gazing hopelessly at the romantic post-office where she and he shall meet no more. In these windy days she is like a homeless leaf blown about by passers-by.

There is nothing I can do except thunder at William.

At last she accomplished her unworthy ambition. It was a wet Thursday, and from the window where I was writing letters I saw the forlorn soul taking up her position at the top of the street: in a blast of fury I rose with the one letter I had completed, meaning to write the others in my chambers. She had driven me from the club.

I had turned out of Pall Mall into a side street, when whom should I strike against but her false swain! It was my fault, but I hit out at him savagely, as I always do when I run into anyone in the street. Then I looked at him. He was hollow-eyed; he was muddy; there was not a haw left in him. I never saw a more abject young man; he had not even the spirit to resent the testy stab I had given him with my umbrella. But this is the important thing: he was glaring wistfully at the post-office and thus in a twink I saw that he still adored my little governess. Whatever had been their quarrel he was as anxious to make it up as she, and perhaps he had been here every Thursday while she was round the corner in Pall Mall, each watching the post-office for an apparition. But from where they hovered neither could see the other.

I think what I did was quite clever. I dropped my letter unseen at his feet, and sauntered back to the club. Of course, a gentleman who finds a letter on the pavement feels bound to post it, and I presumed that he would naturally go to the nearest office.

With my hat on I strolled to the smoking-room window, and was just in time to see him posting my letter across the way. Then I looked for the little nursery governess. I saw her as woe-begone as ever; then, suddenly--oh, you poor little soul, and has it really been as bad as that!

She was crying outright, and he was holding both her hands. It was a disgraceful exhibition. The young painter would evidently explode if he could not make use of his arms. She must die if she could not lay her head upon his breast. I must admit that he rose to the occasion; he hailed a hansom.

"William," said I gaily, "coffee, cigarette, and cherry brandy."

As I sat there watching that old play David plucked my sleeve to ask what I was looking at so deedily; and when I told him he ran eagerly to the window, but he reached it just too late to see the lady who was to become his mother. What I told him of her doings, however, interested him greatly; and he intimated rather shyly that he was acquainted with the man who said, "Haw-haw-haw." On the other hand, he irritated me by betraying an idiotic interest in the two children, whom he seemed to regard as the hero and heroine of the story. What were their names? How old were they? Had they both hoops? Were they iron hoops, or just wooden hoops? Who gave them their hoops?

"You don't seem to understand, my boy," I said tartly, "that had I not dropped that letter, there would never have been a little boy called David A-- --." But instead of being appalled by this he asked, sparkling, whether I meant that he would still be a bird flying about in the Kensington Gardens.

David knows that all children in our part of London were once birds in the Kensington Gardens; and that the reason there are bars on nursery windows and a tall fender by the fire is because very little people sometimes forget that they have no longer wings, and try to fly away through the window or up the chimney.

Children in the bird stage are difficult to catch. David knows that many people have none, and his delight on a summer afternoon is to go with me to some spot in the Gardens where these unfortunates may be seen trying to catch one with small pieces of cake.

That the birds know what would happen if they were caught, and are even a little undecided about which is the better life, is obvious to every student of them. Thus, if you leave your empty perambulator under the trees and watch from a distance, you will see the birds boarding it and hopping about from pillow to blanket in a twitter of excitement; they are trying to find out how babyhood would suit them.

Quite the prettiest sight in the Gardens is when the babies stray from the tree where the nurse is sitting and are seen feeding the birds, not a grownup near them. It is first a bit to me and then a bit to you, and all the time such

a jabbering and laughing from both sides of the railing. They are comparing notes and inquiring for old friends, and so on; but what they say I cannot determine, for when I approach they all fly away.

The first time I ever saw David was on the sward behind the Baby's Walk. He was a missel-thrush, attracted thither that hot day by a hose which lay on the ground sending forth a gay trickle of water, and David was on his back in the water, kicking up his legs. He used to enjoy being told of this, having forgotten all about it, and gradually it all came back to him, with a number of other incidents that had escaped my memory, though I remember that he was eventually caught by the leg with a long string and a cunning arrangement of twigs near the Round Pond. He never tires of this story, but I notice that it is now he who tells it to me rather than I to him, and when we come to the string he rubs his little leg as if it still smarted.

So when David saw his chance of being a missel-thrush again he called out to me quickly: "Don't drop the letter!" and there were tree-tops in his eyes.

"Think of your mother," I said severely.

He said he would often fly in to see her. The first thing he would do would be to hug her. No, he would alight on the water-jug first, and have a drink.

"Tell her, father," he said with horrid heartlessness, "always to have plenty of water in it, 'cos if I had to lean down too far I might fall in and be drowned."

"Am I not to drop the letter, David? Think of your poor mother without her boy!"

It affected him, but he bore up. When she was asleep, he said, he would hop on to the frilly things of her night-gown and peck at her mouth.

"And then she would wake up, David, and find that she had only a bird instead of a boy."

This shock to Mary was more than he could endure. "You can drop it," he said with a sigh. So I dropped the letter, as I think I have already mentioned; and that is how it all began.