The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman

By

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CHAPTER

THE WIFE OF SIR ISAAC HARMAN

CHAPTER THE FIRST

INTRODUCES LADY HARMAN

§1

The motor-car entered a little white gate, came to a porch under a thick wig of jasmine, and stopped. The chauffeur indicated by a movement of the head that this at last was it. A tall young woman with a big soft mouth, great masses of blue-black hair on either side of a broad, low forehead, and eyes of so dark a brown you might have thought them black, drooped forward and surveyed the house with a mixture of keen appreciation and that gentle apprehension which is the shadow of desire in unassuming natures....

The little house with the white-framed windows looked at her with a sleepy wakefulness from under its blinds, and made no sign. Beyond the corner was a glimpse of lawn, a rank of delphiniums, and the sound of a wheel-barrow.

"Clarence!" the lady called again.

Clarence, with an air of exceeding his duties, decided to hear, descended slowly, and came to the door.

"Very likely--if you were to look for a bell, Clarence...."

Clarence regarded the porch with a hostile air, made no secret that he thought it a fool of a porch, seemed on the point of disobedience, and submitted. His gestures suggested a belief that he would next be asked to boil eggs or do the boots. He found a bell and rang it with the needless violence of a man who has no special knowledge of ringing bells. How was he to know? he was a chauffeur. The bell did not so much ring as explode and swamp the place. Sounds of ringing came from all the windows, and even out of the chimneys. It seemed as if once set ringing that bell would never cease....

Clarence went to the bonnet of his machine, and presented his stooping back in a defensive manner against anyone who might come out. He wasn't a footman, anyhow. He'd rung that bell all right, and now he must see to his engine.

"He's rung so loud!" said the lady weakly--apparently to God.

The door behind the neat white pillars opened, and a little red-nosed woman, in a cap she had evidently put on without a proper glass,

appeared. She surveyed the car and its occupant with disfavour over her also very oblique spectacles.

The lady waved a pink paper to her, a house-agent's order to view. "Is this Black Strands?" she shouted.

The little woman advanced slowly with her eyes fixed malevolently on the pink paper. She seemed to be stalking it.

"This is Black Strands?" repeated the tall lady. "I should be so sorry if I disturbed you--if it isn't; ringing the bell like that--and all. You can't think----"

"This is Black Strand," said the little old woman with a note of deep reproach, and suddenly ceased to look over her glasses and looked through them. She looked no kindlier through them, and her eye seemed much larger. She was now regarding the lady in the car, though with a sustained alertness towards the pink paper. "I suppose," she said, "you've come to see over the place?"

"If it doesn't disturb anyone; if it is quite convenient----"

"Mr. Brumley is hout," said the little old woman. "And if you got an order to view, you got an order to view."

"If you think I might."

The lady stood up in the car, a tall and graceful figure of doubt and desire and glossy black fur. "I'm sure it looks a very charming house."

"It's clean," said the little old woman, "from top to toe. Look as you may."

"I'm sure it is," said the tall lady, and put aside her great fur coat from her lithe, slender, red-clad body. (She was permitted by a sudden civility of Clarence's to descend.) "Why! the windows," she said, pausing on the step, "are like crystal."

"These very 'ands," said the little old woman, and glanced up at the windows the lady had praised. The little old woman's initial sternness wrinkled and softened as the skin of a windfall does after a day or so upon the ground. She half turned in the doorway and made a sudden vergerlike gesture. "We enter," she said, "by the 'all.... Them's Mr. Brumley's 'ats and sticks. Every 'at or cap 'as a stick, and every stick 'as a 'at or cap, and on the 'all table is the gloves corresponding. On the right is the door leading to the kitching, on the left is the large droring-room which Mr. Brumley 'as took as 'is study." Her voice fell to lowlier things. "The other door beyond is a small lavatory 'aving a basing for washing 'ands."

"It's a perfectly delightful hall," said the lady. "So low and wide-looking. And everything so bright--and lovely. Those long, Italian

pictures! And how charming that broad outlook upon the garden beyond!"

"You'll think it charminger when you see the garding," said the little old woman. "It was Mrs. Brumley's especial delight. Much of it--with 'er own 'ands."

"We now enter the droring-room," she proceeded, and flinging open the door to the right was received with an indistinct cry suggestive of the words, "Oh, damn it!" The stout medium-sized gentleman in an artistic green-grey Norfolk suit, from whom the cry proceeded, was kneeling on the floor close to the wide-open window, and he was engaged in lacing up a boot. He had a round, ruddy, rather handsome, amiable face with a sort of bang of brown hair coming over one temple, and a large silk bow under his chin and a little towards one ear, such as artists and artistic men of letters affect. His profile was regular and fine, his eyes expressive, his mouth, a very passable mouth. His features expressed at first only the naïve horror of a shy man unveiled.

Intelligent appreciation supervened.

There was a crowded moment of rapid mutual inspection. The lady's attitude was that of the enthusiastic house-explorer arrested in full flight, falling swiftly towards apology and retreat. (It was a frightfully attractive room, too, full of the brightest colour, and with a big white cast of a statue--a Venus!--in the window.) She backed over the threshold again.

"I thought you was out by that window, sir," said the little old woman intimately, and was nearly shutting the door between them and all the beginnings of this story.

But the voice of the gentleman arrested and wedged open the closing door.

"I----Are you looking at the house?" he said. "I say! Just a moment, Mrs. Rabbit."

He came down the length of the room with a slight flicking noise due to the scandalized excitement of his abandoned laces. The lady was reminded of her not so very distant schooldays, when it would have been considered a suitable answer to such a question as his to reply, "No, I am walking down Piccadilly on my hands." But instead she waved that pink paper again. "The agents," she said. "Recommended--specially. So sorry if I intrude. I ought, I know, to have written first; but I came on an impulse."

By this time the gentleman in the artistic tie, who had also the artistic eye for such matters, had discovered that the lady was young, delightfully slender, either pretty or beautiful, he could scarcely tell which, and very, very well dressed. "I am glad," he said, with remarkable decision, "that I was not out. I will show you the house."

"'Ow can you, sir?" intervened the little old woman.

"Oh! show a house! Why not?"

"The kitchings--you don't understand the range, sir--it's beyond you. And upstairs. You can't show a lady upstairs."

The gentleman reflected upon these difficulties.

"Well, I'm going to show her all I can show her anyhow. And after that, Mrs. Rabbit, you shall come in. You needn't wait."

"I'm thinking," said Mrs. Rabbit, folding stiff little arms and regarding him sternly. "You won't be much good after tea, you know, if you don't get your afternoon's exercise."

"Rendez-vous in the kitchen, Mrs. Rabbit," said Mr. Brumley, firmly, and Mrs. Rabbit after a moment of mute struggle disappeared discontentedly.

"I do not want to be the least bit a bother," said the lady. "I'm intruding, I know, without the least bit of notice. I do hope I'm not disturbing you----" she seemed to make an effort to stop at that, and failed and added--"the least bit. Do please tell me if I am."

"Not at all," said Mr. Brumley. "I hate my afternoon's walk as a prisoner hates the treadmill."

"She's such a nice old creature."

"She's been a mother--and several aunts--to us ever since my wife died. She was the first servant we ever had."

"All this house," he explained to his visitor's questioning eyes, "was my wife's creation. It was a little featureless agent's house on the edge of these pine-woods. She saw something in the shape of the rooms--and that central hall. We've enlarged it of course. Twice. This was two rooms, that is why there is a step down in the centre."

"That window and window-seat----"

"That was her addition," said Mr. Brumley. "All this room is--replete--with her personality." He hesitated, and explained further. "When we prepared this house--we expected to be better off--than we subsequently became--and she could let herself go. Much is from Holland and Italy."

"And that beautiful old writing-desk with the little single rose in a glass!"

"She put it there. She even in a sense put the flower there. It is renewed of course. By Mrs. Rabbit. She trained Mrs. Rabbit."

He sighed slightly, apparently at some thought of Mrs. Rabbit.

"You--you write----" the lady stopped, and then diverted a question that she perhaps considered too blunt, "there?"

"Largely. I am--a sort of author. Perhaps you know my books. Not very important books--but people sometimes read them."

The rose-pink of the lady's cheek deepened by a shade. Within her pretty head, her mind rushed to and fro saying "Brumley? Brumley?" Then she had a saving gleam. "Are you George Brumley?" she asked,--"the George Brumley?"

"My name is George Brumley," he said, with a proud modesty. "Perhaps you know my little Euphemia books? They are still the most read."

The lady made a faint, dishonest assent-like noise; and her rose-pink deepened another shade. But her interlocutor was not watching her very closely just then.

"Euphemia was my wife," he said, "at least, my wife gave her to me--a kind of exhalation. This"--his voice fell with a genuine respect for literary associations--"was Euphemia's home."

"I still," he continued, "go on. I go on writing about Euphemia. I have to. In this house. With my tradition.... But it is becoming

painful--painful. Curiously more painful now than at the beginning. And I want to go. I want at last to make a break. That is why I am letting or selling the house.... There will be no more Euphemia."

His voice fell to silence.

The lady surveyed the long low clear room so cleverly prepared for life, with its white wall, its Dutch clock, its Dutch dresser, its pretty seats about the open fireplace, its cleverly placed bureau, its sun-trap at the garden end; she could feel the rich intention of living in its every arrangement and a sense of uncertainty in things struck home to her. She seemed to see a woman, a woman like herself--only very, very much cleverer--flitting about the room and making it. And then this woman had vanished--nowhither. Leaving this gentleman--sadly left--in the care of Mrs. Rabbit.

"And she is dead?" she said with a softness in her dark eyes and a fall in her voice that was quite natural and very pretty.

"She died," said Mr. Brumley, "three years and a half ago." He reflected. "Almost exactly."

He paused and she filled the pause with feeling.

He became suddenly very brave and brisk and businesslike. He led the way back into the hall and made explanations. "It is not so much a hall as a

hall living-room. We use that end, except when we go out upon the verandah beyond, as our dining-room. The door to the right is the kitchen."

The lady's attention was caught again by the bright long eventful pictures that had already pleased her. "They are copies of two of Carpaccio's St. George series in Venice," he said. "We bought them together there. But no doubt you've seen the originals. In a little old place with a custodian and rather dark. One of those corners--so full of that delightful out-of-the-wayishness which is so characteristic, I think, of Venice. I don't know if you found that in Venice?"

"I've never been abroad," said the lady. "Never. I should love to go. I suppose you and your wife went--ever so much."

He had a transitory wonder that so fine a lady should be untravelled, but his eagerness to display his backgrounds prevented him thinking that out at the time. "Two or three times," he said, "before our little boy came to us. And always returning with something for this place. Look!" he went on, stepped across an exquisite little brick court to a lawn of soft emerald and turning back upon the house. "That Dellia Robbia placque we lugged all the way back from Florence with us, and that stone bird-bath is from Siena."

"How bright it is!" murmured the lady after a brief still appreciation. "Delightfully bright. As though it would shine even if the sun didn't."

And she abandoned herself to the rapture of seeing a house and garden that were for once better even than the agent's superlatives. And within her grasp if she chose--within her grasp.

She made the garden melodious with soft appreciative sounds. She had a small voice for her size but quite a charming one, a little live bird of a voice, bright and sweet. It was a clear unruffled afternoon; even the unseen wheel-barrow had very sensibly ceased to creak and seemed to be somewhere listening....

Only one trivial matter marred their easy explorations;--his boots remained unlaced. No propitious moment came when he could stoop and lace them. He was not a dexterous man with eyelets, and stooping made him grunt and his head swim. He hoped these trailing imperfections went unmarked. He tried subtly to lead this charming lady about and at the same time walk a little behind her. She on her part could not determine whether he would be displeased or not if she noticed this slight embarrassment and asked him to set it right. They were quite long leather laces and they flew about with a sturdy negligence of anything but their own offensive contentment, like a gross man who whistles a vulgar tune as he goes round some ancient church; flick, flock, they went, and flip, flap, enjoying themselves, and sometimes he trod on one and halted in his steps, and sometimes for a moment she felt her foot tether him. But man is the adaptable animal and presently they both became more used to these inconveniences and more mechanical in their efforts to avoid them. They treated those laces then exactly as nice

people would treat that gross man; a minimum of polite attention and all the rest pointedly directed away from him....

The garden was full of things that people dream about doing in their gardens and mostly never do. There was a rose garden all blooming in chorus, and with pillar-roses and arches that were not so much growths as overflowing cornucopias of roses, and a neat orchard with shapely trees white-painted to their exact middles, a stone wall bearing clematis and a clothes-line so gay with Mr. Brumley's blue and white flannel shirts that it seemed an essential part of the design. And then there was a great border of herbaceous perennials backed by delphiniums and monkshood already in flower and budding hollyhocks rising to their duty; a border that reared its blaze of colour against a hill-slope dark with pines. There was no hedge whatever to this delightful garden. It seemed to go straight into the pine-woods; only an invisible netting marked its limits and fended off the industrious curiosity of the rabbits.

"This strip of wood is ours right up to the crest," he said, "and from the crest one has a view. One has two views. If you would care----?"

The lady made it clear that she was there to see all she could. She radiated her appetite to see. He carried a fur stole for her over his arm and flicked the way up the hill. Flip, flap, flop. She followed demurely.

"This is the only view I care to show you now," he said at the crest. "There was a better one beyond there. But--it has been defiled.... Those hills! I knew you would like them. The space of it! And ... yet----. This view--lacks the shining ponds. There are wonderful distant ponds. After all I must show you the other! But you see there is the high-road, and the high-road has produced an abomination. Along here we go. Now. Don't look down please." His gesture covered the foreground. "Look right over the nearer things into the distance. There!"

The lady regarded the wide view with serene appreciation. "I don't see," she said, "that it's in any way ruined. It's perfect."

"You don't see! Ah! you look right over. You look high. I wish I could too. But that screaming board! I wish the man's crusts would choke him."

And indeed quite close at hand, where the road curved about below them, the statement that Staminal Bread, the True Staff of Life, was sold only by the International Bread Shops, was flung out with a vigour of yellow and Prussian blue that made the landscape tame.

His finger directed her questioning eye.

"Oh!" said the lady suddenly, as one who is convicted of a stupidity and coloured slightly.

"In the morning of course it is worse. The sun comes directly on to it. Then really and truly it blots out everything."

The lady stood quite silent for a little time, with her eyes on the distant ponds. Then he perceived that she was blushing. She turned to her interlocutor as a puzzled pupil might turn to a teacher.

"It really is very good bread," she said. "They make it----Oh! most carefully. With the germ in. And one has to tell people."

Her point of view surprised him. He had expected nothing but a docile sympathy. "But to tell people here!" he said.

"Yes, I suppose one oughtn't to tell them here."

"Man does not live by bread alone."

She gave the faintest assent.

"This is the work of one pushful, shoving creature, a man named Harman. Imagine him! Imagine what he must be! Don't you feel his soul defiling us?--this summit of a stupendous pile of--dough, thinking of nothing but his miserable monstrous profits, seeing nothing in the delight of life, the beauty of the world but something that attracts attention, draws eyes, something that gives him his horrible opportunity of getting ahead of all his poor little competitors and inserting--this! It's the

quintessence of all that is wrong with the world;--squalid, shameless huckstering!" He flew off at a tangent. "Four or five years ago they made this landscape disease,--a knight!"

He looked at her for a sympathetic indignation, and then suddenly something snapped in his brain and he understood. There wasn't an instant between absolute innocence and absolute knowledge.

"You see," she said as responsive as though he had cried out sharply at the horror in his mind, "Sir Isaac is my husband. Naturally ... I ought to have given you my name to begin with. It was silly...."

Mr. Brumley gave one wild glance at the board, but indeed there was not a word to be said in its mitigation. It was the crude advertisement of a crude pretentious thing crudely sold. "My dear lady!" he said in his largest style, "I am desolated! But I have said it! It isn't a pretty board."

A memory of epithets pricked him. "You must forgive--a certain touch of--rhetoric."

He turned about as if to dismiss the board altogether, but she remained with her brows very faintly knit, surveying the cause of his offence.

"It isn't a pretty board," she said. "I've wondered at times.... It isn't."

"I implore you to forget that outbreak--mere petulance--because, I suppose, of a peculiar liking for that particular view. There are--associations----"

"I've wondered lately," she continued, holding on to her own thoughts, "what people did think of them. And it's curious--to hear----"

For a moment neither spoke, she surveyed the board and he the tall ease of her pose. And he was thinking she must surely be the most beautiful woman he had ever encountered. The whole country might be covered with boards if it gave us such women as this. He felt the urgent need of some phrase, to pull the situation out of this pit into which it had fallen. He was a little unready, his faculties all as it were neglecting his needs and crowding to the windows to stare, and meanwhile she spoke again, with something of the frankness of one who thinks aloud.

"You see," she said, "one doesn't hear. One thinks perhaps----And there it is. When one marries very young one is apt to take so much for granted. And afterwards----"

She was wonderfully expressive in her inexpressiveness, he thought, but found as yet no saving phrase. Her thought continued to drop from her. "One sees them so much that at last one doesn't see them."

She turned away to survey the little house again; it was visible in

bright strips between the red-scarred pine stems. She looked at it chin up, with a still approval--but she was the slenderest loveliness, and with such a dignity!--and she spoke at length as though the board had never existed. "It's like a little piece of another world; so bright and so--perfect."

There was the phantom of a sigh in her voice.

"I think you'll be charmed by our rockery," he said. "It was one of our particular efforts. Every time we two went abroad we came back with something, stonecrop or Alpine or some little bulb from the wayside."

"How can you leave it!"

He was leaving it because it bored him to death. But so intricate is the human mind that it was with perfect sincerity he answered: "It will be a tremendous wrench.... I have to go."

"And you've written most of your books here and lived here!"

The note of sympathy in her voice gave him a sudden suspicion that she imagined his departure due to poverty. Now to be poor as an author is to be unpopular, and he valued his popularity--with the better sort of people. He hastened to explain. "I have to go, because here, you see, here, neither for me nor my little son, is it Life. It's a place of memories, a place of accomplished beauty. My son already breaks away,--a

preparatory school at Margate. Healthier, better, for us to break altogether I feel, wrench though it may. It's full for us at least--a new tenant would be different of course--but for us it's full of associations we can't alter, can't for the life of us change. Nothing you see goes on. And life you know is change--change and going on."

He paused impressively on his generalization.

"But you will want----You will want to hand it over to--to sympathetic people of course. People," she faltered, "who will understand."

Mr. Brumley took an immense stride--conversationally. "I am certain there is no one I would more readily see in that house than yourself," he said.

"But----" she protested. "And besides, you don't know me!"

"One knows some things at once, and I am as sure you would--understand--as if I had known you twenty years. It may seem absurd to you, but when I looked up just now and saw you for the first time, I thought--this, this is the tenant. This is her house.... Not a doubt. That is why I did not go for my walk--came round with you."

"You really think you would like us to have that house?" she said. "Still?"

"No one better," said Mr. Brumley.

"After the board?"

"After a hundred boards, I let the house to you...."

"My husband of course will be the tenant," reflected Lady Harman.

She seemed to brighten again by an effort: "I have always wanted something like this, that wasn't gorgeous, that wasn't mean. I can't make things. It isn't every one--can make a place...."

§2

Mr. Brumley found their subsequent conversation the fullest realization of his extremest hopes. Behind his amiable speeches, which soon grew altogether easy and confident again, a hundred imps of vanity were patting his back for the intuition, the swift decision that had abandoned his walk so promptly. In some extraordinary way the incident of the board became impossible; it hadn't happened, he felt, or it had happened differently. Anyhow there was no time to think that over now. He guided the lady to the two little greenhouses, made her note the opening glow of the great autumnal border and brought her to the rock garden. She stooped and loved and almost kissed the soft healthy cushions of pampered saxifrage: she appreciated the cleverness of the

moss-bed--where there were droseras; she knelt to the gentians; she had a kindly word for that bank-holiday corner where London Pride still belatedly rejoiced; she cried out at the delicate Iceland poppies that thrust up between the stones of the rough pavement; and so in the most amiable accord they came to the raised seat in the heart of it all, and sat down and took in the whole effect of the place, and backing of woods, the lush borders, the neat lawn, the still neater orchard, the pergola, the nearer delicacies among the stones, and the gable, the shining white rough-cast of the walls, the casement windows, the projecting upper story, the carefully sought-out old tiles of the roof. And everything bathed in that caressing sunshine which does not scorch nor burn but gilds and warms deliciously, that summer sunshine which only northward islands know.

Recovering from his first astonishment and his first misadventure, Mr. Brumley was soon himself again, talkative, interesting, subtly and gently aggressive. For once one may use a hackneyed phrase without the slightest exaggeration; he was charmed...

He was one of those very natural-minded men with active imaginations who find women the most interesting things in a full and interesting universe. He was an entirely good man and almost professionally on the side of goodness, his pen was a pillar of the home and he was hostile and even actively hostile to all those influences that would undermine and change--anything; but he did find women attractive. He watched them and thought about them, he loved to be with them, he would take great

pains to please and interest them, and his mind was frequently dreaming quite actively of them, of championing them, saying wonderful and impressive things to them, having great friendships with them, adoring them and being adored by them. At times he had to ride this interest on the curb. At times the vigour of its urgencies made him inconsistent and secretive.... Comparatively his own sex was a matter of indifference to him. Indeed he was a very normal man. Even such abstractions as Goodness and Justice had rich feminine figures in his mind, and when he sat down to write criticism at his desk, that pretty little slut of a Delphic Sibyl presided over his activities.

So that it was a cultivated as well as an attentive eye that studied the movements of Lady Harman and an experienced ear that weighed the words and cadences of her entirely inadequate and extremely expressive share in their conversation. He had enjoyed the social advantages of a popular and presentable man of letters, and he had met a variety of ladies; but he had never yet met anyone at all like Lady Harman. She was pretty and quite young and fresh; he doubted if she was as much as four-and-twenty; she was as simple-mannered as though she was ever so much younger than that, and dignified as though she was ever so much older; and she had a sort of lustre of wealth about her----. One met it sometimes in young richly married Jewesses, but though she was very dark she wasn't at all of that type; he was inclined to think she must be Welsh. This manifest spending of great lots of money on the richest, finest and fluffiest things was the only aspect of her that sustained the parvenu idea; and it wasn't in any way carried out by her manners, which were as modest

and silent and inaggressive as the very best can be. Personally he liked opulence, he responded to countless-guinea furs....

Soon there was a neat little history in his mind that was reasonably near the truth, of a hard-up professional family, fatherless perhaps, of a mercenary marriage at seventeen or so--and this....

And while Mr. Brumley's observant and speculative faculties were thus active, his voice was busily engaged. With the accumulated artistry of years he was developing his pose. He did it almost subconsciously. He flung out hint and impulsive confidence and casual statement with the careless assurance of the accustomed performer, until by nearly imperceptible degrees that finished picture of the two young lovers, happy, artistic, a little Bohemian and one of them doomed to die, making their home together in an atmosphere of sunny gaiety, came into being in her mind....

"It must have been beautiful to have begun life like that," she said in a voice that was a sigh, and it flashed joyfully across Mr. Brumley's mind that this wonderful person could envy his Euphemia.

"Yes," he said, "at least we had our Spring."

"To be together," said the lady, "and--so beautifully poor...."

There is a phase in every relationship when one must generalize if one

is to go further. A certain practice in this kind of talk with ladies blunted the finer sensibilities of Mr. Brumley. At any rate he was able to produce this sentence without a qualm. "Life," he said, "is sometimes a very extraordinary thing."

Lady Harman reflected upon this statement and then responded with an air of remembered moments: "Isn't it."

"One loses the most precious things," said Mr. Brumley, "and one loses them and it seems as though one couldn't go on. And one goes on."

"And one finds oneself," said Lady Harman, "without all sorts of precious things----" And she stopped, transparently realizing that she was saying too much.

"There is a sort of vitality about life," said Mr. Brumley, and stopped as if on the verge of profundities.

"I suppose one hopes," said Lady Harman. "And one doesn't think. And things happen."

"Things happen," assented Mr. Brumley.

For a little while their minds rested upon this thought, as chasing butterflies might rest together on a flower.

"And so I am going to leave this," Mr. Brumley resumed. "I am going up there to London for a time with my boy. Then perhaps we may travel-Germany, Italy, perhaps-in his holidays. It is beginning again, I feel with him. But then even we two must drift apart. I can't deny him a public school sooner or later. His own road...."

"It will be lonely for you," sympathized the lady. "I have my work," said Mr. Brumley with a sort of valiant sadness.

"Yes, I suppose your work----"

She left an eloquent gap.

"There, of course, one's fortunate," said Mr. Brumley.

"I wish," said Lady Harman, with a sudden frankness and a little quickening of her colour, "that I had some work. Something--that was my own."

"But you have----There are social duties. There must be all sorts of things."

"There are--all sorts of things. I suppose I'm ungrateful. I have my children."

"You have children, Lady Harman!"

"I've four."

He was really astonished, "Your own?"

She turned her fawn's eyes on his with a sudden wonder at his meaning. "My own!" she said with the faintest tinge of astonished laughter in her voice. "What else could they be?"

"I thought----I thought you might have step-children."

"Oh! of course! No! I'm their mother;--all four of them. They're mine as far as that goes. Anyhow."

And her eye questioned him again for his intentions.

But his thought ran along its own path. "You see," he said, "there is something about you--so freshly beginning life. So like--Spring."

"You thought I was too young! I'm nearly six-and-twenty! But all the same,--though they're mine,--still----Why shouldn't a woman have work in the world, Mr. Brumley? In spite of all that."

"But surely--that's the most beautiful work in the world that anyone could possibly have."

Lady Harman reflected. She seemed to hesitate on the verge of some answer and not to say it.

"You see," she said, "it may have been different with you.... When one has a lot of nurses, and not very much authority."

She coloured deeply and broke back from the impending revelations.

"No," she said, "I would like some work of my own."

§3

At this point their conversation was interrupted by the lady's chauffeur in a manner that struck Mr. Brumley as extraordinary, but which the tall lady evidently regarded as the most natural thing in the world.

Mr. Clarence appeared walking across the lawn towards them, surveying the charms of as obviously a charming garden as one could have, with the disdain and hostility natural to a chauffeur. He did not so much touch his cap as indicate that it was within reach, and that he could if he pleased touch it. "It's time you were going, my lady," he said. "Sir Isaac will be coming back by the five-twelve, and there'll be a nice to-do if you ain't at home and me at the station and everything in order again."

Manifestly an abnormal expedition.

"Must we start at once, Clarence?" asked the lady consulting a bracelet watch. "You surely won't take two hours----"

"I can give you fifteen minutes more, my lady," said Clarence, "provided I may let her out and take my corners just exactly in my own way."

"And I must give you tea," said Mr. Brumley, rising to his feet. "And there is the kitchen."

"And upstairs! I'm afraid, Clarence, for this occasion only you must--what is it?--let her out."

"And no 'Oh Clarence!' my lady?"

She ignored that.

"I'll tell Mrs. Rabbit at once," said Mr. Brumley, and started to run and trod in some complicated way on one of his loose laces and was precipitated down the rockery steps. "Oh!" cried the lady. "Mind!" and clasped her hands.

He made a sound exactly like the word "damnation" as he fell, but he didn't so much get up as bounce up, apparently in the brightest of tempers, and laughed, held out two earthy hands for sympathy with a mock

rueful grimace, and went on, earthy-green at the knees and a little more carefully towards the house. Clarence, having halted to drink deep satisfaction from this disaster, made his way along a nearly parallel path towards the kitchen, leaving his lady to follow as she chose to the house.

"You'll take a cup of tea?" called Mr. Brumley.

"Oh! I'll take a cup all right," said Clarence in the kindly voice of one who addresses an amusing inferior....

Mrs. Rabbit had already got the tea-things out upon the cane table in the pretty verandah, and took it ill that she should be supposed not to have thought of these preparations.

Mr. Brumley disappeared for a few minutes into the house.

He returned with a conscious relief on his face, clean hands, brushed knees, and his boots securely laced. He found Lady Harman already pouring out tea.

"You see," she said, to excuse this pleasant enterprise on her part, "my husband has to be met at the station with the car.... And of course he has no idea----"

She left what it was of which Sir Isaac had no idea to the groping

speculations of Mr. Brumley.

§4

That evening Mr. Brumley was quite unable to work. His mind was full of this beautiful dark lady who had come so unexpectedly into his world.

Perhaps there are such things as premonitions. At any rate he had an altogether disproportionate sense of the significance of the afternoon's adventure,--which after all was a very small adventure indeed. A mere talk. His mind refused to leave her, her black furry slenderness, her dark trustful eyes, the sweet firmness of her perfect lips, her appealing simplicity that was yet somehow compatible with the completest self-possession. He went over the incident of the board again and again, scraping his memory for any lurking crumb of detail as a starving man might scrape an insufficient plate. Her dignity, her gracious frank forgiveness; no queen alive in these days could have touched her.... But it wasn't a mere elaborate admiration. There was something about her, about the quality of their meeting.

Most people know that sort of intimation. This person, it says, so fine, so brave, so distant still in so many splendid and impressive qualities, is yet in ways as yet undefined and unexplored, subtly and abundantly--for you. It was that made all her novelty and distinction and high quality and beauty so dominating among Mr. Brumley's thoughts.

Without that his interest might have been almost entirely--academic. But there was woven all through her the hints of an imaginable alliance, with us, with the things that are Brumley, with all that makes beautiful little cottages and resents advertisements in lovely places, with us as against something over there lurking behind that board, something else, something out of which she came. He vaguely adumbrated what it was out of which she came. A closed narrow life--with horrid vast enviable quantities of money. A life, could one use the word vulgar?--so that Carpaccio, Della Robbia, old furniture, a garden unostentatiously perfect, and the atmosphere of belles-lettres, seemed things of another more desirable world. (She had never been abroad.) A world, too, that would be so willing, so happy to enfold her, furs, funds, freshness--everything.

And all this was somehow animated by the stirring warmth in the June weather, for spring raised the sap in Mr. Brumley as well as in his trees, had been a restless time for him all his life. This spring particularly had sensitized him, and now a light had shone.

He was so unable to work that for twenty minutes he sat over a pleasant little essay on Shakespear's garden that by means of a concordance and his natural aptitude he was writing for the book of the National Shakespear Theatre, without adding a single fancy to its elegant playfulness. Then he decided he needed his afternoon's walk after all, and he took cap and stick and went out, and presently found himself surveying that yellow and blue board and seeing it from an entirely new

point of view....

It seemed to him that he hadn't made the best use of his conversational opportunities, and for a time this troubled him....

Toward the twilight he was walking along the path that runs through the heather along the edge of the rusty dark ironstone lake opposite the pine-woods. He spoke his thoughts aloud to the discreet bat that flitted about him. "I wonder," he said, "whether I shall ever set eyes on her again...."

In the small hours when he ought to have been fast asleep he decided she would certainly take the house, and that he would see her again quite a number of times. A long tangle of unavoidable detail for discussion might be improvised by an ingenious man. And the rest of that waking interval passed in such inventions, which became more and more vague and magnificent and familiar as Mr. Brumley lapsed into slumber again....

Next day the garden essay was still neglected, and he wrote a pretty vague little song about an earthly mourner and a fresh presence that set him thinking of the story of Persephone and how she passed in the springtime up from the shadows again, blessing as she passed....

He pulled himself together about midday, cycled over to Gorshott for lunch at the clubhouse and a round with Horace Toomer in the afternoon, re-read the poem after tea, decided it was poor, tore it up and got

himself down to his little fantasy about Shakespear's Garden for a good two hours before supper. It was a sketch of that fortunate poet (whose definitive immortality is now being assured by an influential committee) walking round his Stratford garden with his daughter, quoting himself copiously with an accuracy and inappropriateness that reflected more credit upon his heart than upon his head, and saying in addition many distinctively Brumley things. When Mrs. Rabbit, with a solicitude acquired from the late Mrs. Brumley, asked him how he had got on with his work--the sight of verse on his paper had made her anxious--he could answer quite truthfully, "Like a house afire."