CHAPTER THE TWELFTH

LOVE AND A SERIOUS LADY

§1

The news of Sir Isaac's death came quite unexpectedly to Mr. Brumley. He was at the Climax Club, and rather bored; he had had some tea and dry toast in the magazine room, and had been through the weeklies, and it was a particularly uninteresting week. Then he came down into the hall, looked idly at the latest bulletins upon the board, and read that "Sir Isaac Harman died suddenly this morning at Sta. Margherita, in Ligure, whither he had gone for rest and change."

He went on mechanically reading down the bulletin, leaving something of himself behind him that did not read on. Then he returned to that remarkable item and re-read it, and picked up that lost element of his being again.

He had awaited this event for so long, thought of it so often in such a great variety of relationships, dreamt of it, hoped for it, prayed for it, and tried not to think of it, that now it came to him in reality it seemed to have no substance or significance whatever. He had exhausted the fact before it happened. Since first he had thought of it there had passed four long years, and in that time he had seen it from every

aspect, exhausted every possibility. It had become a theoretical possibility, the basis of continually less confident, continually more unsubstantial day dreams. Constantly he had tried not to think of it, tried to assure himself of Sir Isaac's invalid immortality. And here it was!

The line above it concerned an overdue ship, the line below resumed a speech by Mr. Lloyd George. "He would challenge the honourable member to repeat his accusations----"

Mr. Brumley stood quite still before the mauve-coloured print letters for some time, then went slowly across the hall into the breakfast-room, sat down in a chair by the fireplace, and fell into a kind of featureless thinking. Sir Isaac was dead, his wife was free, and the long waiting that had become a habit was at an end.

He had anticipated a wild elation, and for a while he was only sensible of change, a profound change....

He began to feel glad that he had waited, that she had insisted upon patience, that there had been no disaster, no scandal between them. Now everything was clear for them. He had served his apprenticeship. They would be able to marry, and have no quarrel with the world.

He sat with his mind forming images of the prospect before him, images that were at first feeble and vague, and then, though still in a silly

way, more concrete and definite. At first they were quite petty anticipations, of how he would have to tell people of his approaching marriage, of how he would break it to George Edmund that a new mother impended. He mused for some time upon the details of that. Should he take her down to George Edmund's school, and let the boy fall in love with her--he would certainly fall in love with her--before anything definite was said, or should he first go down alone and break the news? Each method had its own attractive possibilities of drama.

Then Mr. Brumley began to think of the letter he must write Lady Harman--a difficult letter. One does not rejoice at death. Already Mr. Brumley was beginning to feel a generous pity for the man he had done his utmost not to detest for so long. Poor Sir Isaac had lived like a blind thing in the sunlight, gathering and gathering, when the pride and pleasure of life is to administer and spend.... Mr. Brumley fell wondering just how she could be feeling now about her dead husband. She might be in a phase of quite real sorrow. Probably the last illness had tired and strained her. So that his letter would have to be very fine and tender and soothing, free from all harshness, free from any gladness--yet it would be hard not to let a little of his vast relief peep out. Always hitherto, except for one or two such passionate lapses as that which had precipitated the situation at Santa Margherita, his epistolary manner had been formal, his matter intellectual and philanthropic, for he had always known that no letter was absolutely safe from Sir Isaac's insatiable research. Should he still be formal, still write to "Dear Lady Harman," or suddenly break into a new warmth?

Half an hour later he was sitting in the writing-room with some few flakes of torn paper on the carpet between his feet and the partially filled wastepaper basket, still meditating upon this difficult issue of the address.

The letter he achieved at last began, "My dear Lady," and went on to, "I do not know how to begin this letter--perhaps you will find it almost as difficult to receive...."

In the small hours he woke to one of his habitual revulsions. Was that, he asked himself, the sort of letter a lover should write to the beloved on her release, on the sudden long prayed-for opening of a way to her, on the end of her shameful servitude and his humiliations? He began to recall the cold and stilted sentences of that difficult composition. The gentility of it! All his life he had been a prey to gentility, had cast himself free from it, only to relapse again in such fashion as this. Would he never be human and passionate and sincere? Of course he was glad, and she ought to be glad, that Sir Isaac, their enemy and their prison, was dead; it was for them to rejoice together. He turned out of bed at last, when he could lie still under these self-accusations no longer, and wrapped himself in his warm dressing-gown and began to write. He wrote in pencil. His fountain-pen was as usual on his night table, but pencil seemed the better medium, and he wrote a warm and glowing love-letter that was brought to an end at last by an almost passionate fit of sneezing. He could find no envelopes in his bedroom Davenport, and so he left that honest scrawl under a paper-weight, and

went back to bed greatly comforted. He re-read it in the morning with emotion, and some slight misgivings that grew after he had despatched it. He went to lunch at his club contemplating a third letter that should be sane and fine and sweet, and that should rectify the confusing effect of those two previous efforts. He wrote this letter later in the afternoon.

The days seemed very long before the answer to his first letter came to him, and in that interval two more--aspects went to her. Her reply was very brief, and written in the large, firm, still girlishly clear hand that distinguished her.

"I was so glad of your letter. My life is so strange here, a kind of hushed life. The nights are extraordinarily beautiful, the moon very large and the little leaves on the trees still and black. We are coming back to England and the funeral will be from our Putney house."

That was all, but it gave Mr. Brumley an impression of her that was exceedingly vivid and close. He thought of her, shadowy and dusky in the moonlight until his soul swam with love for her; he had to get up and walk about; he whispered her name very softly to himself several times; he groaned gently, and at last he went to his little desk and wrote to her his sixth letter--quite a beautiful letter. He told her that he loved her, that he had always loved her since their first moment of meeting, and he tried to express just the wave of tenderness that inundated him at the thought of her away there in Italy. Once, he said,

he had dreamt that he would be the first to take her to Italy. Perhaps some day they would yet be in Italy together.

§2

It was only by insensible degrees that doubt crept into Mr. Brumley's assurances. He did not observe at once that none of the brief letters she wrote him responded to his second, the impassioned outbreak in pencil. And it seemed only in keeping with the modest reserves of womanhood that she should be restrained--she always had been restrained.

She asked him not to see her at once when she returned to England; she wanted, she said, "to see how things are," and that fell in very well with a certain delicacy in himself. The unburied body of Sir Isaac--it was now provisionally embalmed--was, through some inexplicable subtlety in his mind, a far greater barrier than the living man had ever been, and he wanted it out of the way. And everything settled. Then, indeed, they might meet.

Meanwhile he had a curious little private conflict of his own. He was trying not to think, day and night he was trying not to think, that Lady Harman was now a very rich woman. Yet some portions of his brain, and he had never suspected himself of such lawless regions, persisted in the most vulgar and outrageous suggestions, suggestions that made his soul blush; schemes, for example, of splendid foreign travel, of hotel staffs

bowing, of a yacht in the Mediterranean, of motor cars, of a palatial flat in London, of a box at the opera, of artists patronized, of--most horrible!--a baronetcy.... The more authentic parts of Mr. Brumley cowered from and sought to escape these squalid dreams of magnificences. It shocked and terrified him to find such things could come out in him. He was like some pest-stricken patient, amazedly contemplating his first symptom. His better part denied, repudiated. Of course he would never touch, never even propose--or hint.... It was an aspect he had never once contemplated before Sir Isaac died. He could on his honour, and after searching his heart, say that. Yet in Pall Mall one afternoon, suddenly, he caught himself with a thought in his head so gross, so smug, that he uttered a faint cry and quickened his steps.... Benevolent stepfather!

These distresses begot a hope. Perhaps, after all, probably, there would be some settlement.... She might not be rich, not so very rich.... She might be tied up....

He perceived in that lay his hope of salvation. Otherwise--oh, pitiful soul!--things were possible in him; he saw only too clearly what dreadful things were possible.

If only she were disinherited, if only he might take her, stripped of all these possessions that even in such glancing anticipations begot----this horrid indigestion of the imagination!

But then,----the Hostels?...

There he stumbled against an invincible riddle!

There was something dreadful about the way in which these considerations blotted out the essential fact of separations abolished, barriers lowered, the way to an honourable love made plain and open....

The day of the funeral came at last, and Mr. Brumley tried not to think of it, paternally, at Margate. He fled from Sir Isaac's ultimate withdrawal. Blenker's obituary notice in the Old Country Gazette was a masterpiece of tactful eulogy, ostentatiously loyal, yet extremely not unmindful of the widowed proprietor, and of all the possible changes of ownership looming ahead. Mr. Brumley, reading it in the Londonward train, was greatly reminded of the Hostels. That was a riddle he didn't begin to solve. Of course, it was imperative the Hostels should continue--imperative. Now they might run them together, openly, side by side. But then, with such temptations to hitherto inconceivable vulgarities. And again, insidiously, those visions returned of two figures, manifestly opulent, grouped about a big motor car or standing together under a large subservient archway....

There was a long letter from her at his flat, a long and amazing letter. It was so folded that his eye first caught the writing on the third page: "never marry again. It is so clear that our work needs all my time and all my means." His eyebrows rose, his expression became

consternation; his hands trembled a little as he turned the letter over to read it through. It was a deliberate letter. It began--

"Dear Mr. Brumley, I could never have imagined how much there is to do after we are dead, and before we can be buried."

"Yes," said Mr. Brumley; "but what does this mean?"

"There are so many surprises----"

"It isn't clear."

"In ourselves and the things about us."

"Of course, he would have made some complicated settlement. I might have known."

"It is the strangest thing in the world to be a widow, much stranger than anyone could ever have supposed, to have no one to control one, no one to think of as coming before one, no one to answer to, to be free to plan one's life for oneself----"

* * * * *

He stood with the letter in his hand after he had read it through, perplexed.

"I can't stand this," he said. "I want to know."

He went to his desk and wrote:--

"My Dear, I want you to marry me."

What more was to be said? He hesitated with this brief challenge in his hand, was minded to telegraph it and thought of James's novel, In the Cage. Telegraph operators are only human after all. He determined upon a special messenger and rang up his quarter valet--he shared service in his flat--to despatch it.

The messenger boy got back from Putney that evening about half-past eight. He brought a reply in pencil.

"My dear Friend," she wrote. "You have been so good to me, so helpful. But I do not think that is possible. Forgive me. I want so badly to think and here I cannot think. I have never been able to think here. I am going down to Black Strand, and in a day or so I will write and we will talk. Be patient with me."

She signed her name "Ellen"; always before she had been "E.H."

"Yes," cried Mr. Brumley, "but I want to know!"

He fretted for an hour and went to the telephone.

Something was wrong with the telephone, it buzzed and went faint, and it would seem that at her end she was embarrassed. "I want to come to you now," he said. "Impossible," was the clearest word in her reply. Should he go in a state of virile resolution, force her hesitation as a man should? She might be involved there with Mrs. Harman, with all sorts of relatives and strange people....

In the end he did not go.

§3

He sat at his lunch alone next day at one of the little tables men choose when they shun company. But to the right of him was the table of the politicians, Adolphus Blenker and Pope of the East Purblow Experiment, and Sir Piper Nicolls, and Munk, the editor of the Daily Rectification, sage men all and deep in those mysterious manipulations and wire-pullings by which the liberal party organization was even then preparing for itself unusual distrust and dislike, and Horatio Blenker was tenoring away after his manner about a case of right and conscience, "Blenking like Winking" was how a silent member had put it once to Brumley in a gust of hostile criticism. "Practically if she marries again, she is a pauper," struck on Brumley's ears.

"Of course," said Mr. Brumley, and stopped eating.

"I don't know if you remember the particulars of the Astor case," began Munk....

Never had Mr. Brumley come so frankly to eavesdropping. But he heard no more of Lady Harman. Munk had to quote the rights and wrongs of various American wills, and then Mr. Pope seized his opportunity. "At East Purblow," he went on, "in quite a number of instances we had to envisage this problem of the widow----"

Mr. Brumley pushed back his plate and strolled towards the desk.

It was exactly what he might have expected, what indeed had been at the back of his mind all along, and on the whole he was glad. Naturally she hesitated; naturally she wanted time to think, and as naturally it was impossible for her to tell him what it was she was thinking about.

They would marry. They must marry. Love has claims supreme over all other claims and he felt no doubt that for her his comparative poverty of two thousand a year would mean infinitely more happiness than she had ever known or could know with Sir Isaac's wealth. She was reluctant, of course, to become dependent upon him until he made it clear to her what infinite pleasure it would be for him to supply her needs. Should he write to her forthwith? He outlined a letter in his mind, a very fine and generous letter, good phrases came, and then he reflected that it

would be difficult to explain to her just how he had learnt of her peculiar situation. It would be far more seemly to wait either for a public announcement or for some intimation from her.

And then he began to realize that this meant the end of all their work at the Hostels. In his first satisfaction at escaping that possible great motor-car and all the superfluities of Sir Isaac's accumulation, he had forgotten that side of the business....

When one came to think it over, the Hostels did complicate the problem. It was ingenious of Sir Isaac....

It was infernally ingenious of Sir Isaac....

He could not remain in the club for fear that somebody might presently come talking to him and interrupt his train of thought. He went out into the streets.

These Hostels upset everything.

What he had supposed to be a way of escape was really the mouth of a net.

Whichever way they turned Sir Isaac crippled them....

§4

Mr. Brumley grew so angry that presently even the strangers in the street annoyed him. He turned his face homeward. He hated dilemmas; he wanted always to deny them, to thrust them aside, to take impossible third courses.

"For three years," shouted Mr. Brumley, free at last in his study to give way to his rage, "for three years I've been making her care for these things. And then--and then--they turn against me!"

A violent, incredibly undignified wrath against the dead man seized him. He threw books about the room. He cried out vile insults and mingled words of an unfortunate commonness with others of extreme rarity. He wanted to go off to Kensal Green and hammer at the grave there and tell the departed knight exactly what he thought of him. Then presently he became calmer, he lit a pipe, picked up the books from the floor, and meditated revenges upon Sir Isaac's memory. I deplore my task of recording these ungracious moments in Mr. Brumley's love history. I deplore the ease with which men pass from loving and serving women to an almost canine fight for them. It is the ugliest essential of romance. There is indeed much in the human heart that I deplore. But Mr. Brumley was exasperated by disappointment. He was sore, he was raw. Driven by an intolerable desire to explore every possibility of the situation, full indeed of an unholy vindictiveness, he went off next morning with strange questions to Maxwell Hartington.

He put the case as a general case.

"Lady Harman?" said Maxwell Hartington.

"No, not particularly Lady Harman. A general principle. What are people--what are women tied up in such a way to do?"

Precedents were quoted and possibilities weighed. Mr. Brumley was flushed, vague but persistent.

"Suppose," he said, "that they love each other passionately--and their work, whatever it may be, almost as passionately. Is there no way----?"

"He'll have a dum casta clause right enough," said Maxwell Hartington.

"Dum----? Dum casta! But, oh! anyhow that's out of the question--absolutely," said Mr. Brumley.

"Of course," said Maxwell Hartington, leaning back in his chair and rubbing the ball of his thumb into one eye. "Of course--nobody ever enforces these dum casta clauses. There isn't anyone to enforce them. Ever."--He paused and then went on, speaking apparently to the array of black tin boxes in the dingy fixtures before him. "Who's going to watch you? That's what I always ask in these cases. Unless the lady goes and does things right under the noses of these trustees they aren't going to

bother. Even Sir Isaac I suppose hasn't provided funds for a private detective. Eh? You said something?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Brumley.

"Well, why should they start a perfectly rotten action like that," continued Maxwell Hartington, now addressing himself very earnestly to his client, "when they've only got to keep quiet and do their job and be comfortable. In these matters, Brumley, as in most matters affecting the relations of men and women, people can do absolutely what they like nowadays, absolutely, unless there's someone about ready to make a row. Then they can't do anything. It hardly matters if they don't do anything. A row's a row and damned disgraceful. If there isn't a row, nothing's disgraceful. Of course all these laws and regulations and institutions and arrangements are just ways of putting people at the mercy of blackmailers and jealous and violent persons. One's only got to be a lawyer for a bit to realize that. Still that's not our business. That's psychology. If there aren't any jealous and violent persons about, well, then no ordinary decent person is going to worry what you do. No decent person ever does. So far as I can gather the only barbarian in this case is the testator--now in Kensal Green. With additional precautions I suppose in the way of an artistic but thoroughly massive monument presently to be added----"

"He'd--turn in his grave."

"Let him. No trustees are obliged to take action on that. I don't suppose they'd know if he did. I've never known a trustee bother yet about post-mortem movements of any sort. If they did, we'd all be having Prayers for the Dead. Fancy having to consider the subsequent reflections of the testator!"

"Well anyhow," said Mr. Brumley, after a little pause, "such a breach, such a proceeding is out of the question--absolutely out of the question. It's unthinkable."

"Then why did you come here to ask me about it?" demanded Maxwell Hartington, beginning to rub the other eye in an audible and unpleasant manner.

§5

When at last Mr. Brumley was face to face with Lady Harman again, a vast mephitic disorderly creation of anticipations, intentions, resolves, suspicions, provisional hypotheses, urgencies, vindications, and wild and whirling stuff generally vanished out of his mind. There beside the raised seat in the midst of the little rock garden where they had talked together five years before, she stood waiting for him, this tall simple woman he had always adored since their first encounter, a little strange and shy now in her dead black uniform of widowhood, but with her honest eyes greeting him, her friendly hands held out to him. He would have

kissed them but for the restraining presence of Snagsby who had brought him to her; as it was it seemed to him that the phantom of a kiss passed like a breath between them. He held her hands for a moment and relinquished them.

"It is so good to see you," he said, and they sat down side by side. "I am very glad to see you again."

Then for a little while they sat in silence.

Mr. Brumley had imagined and rehearsed this meeting in many different moods. Now, he found none of his premeditated phrases served him, and it was the lady who undertook the difficult opening.

"I could not see you before," she began. "I did not want to see anyone." She sought to explain. "I was strange. Even to myself. Suddenly----" She came to the point. "To find oneself free.... Mr. Brumley,--it was wonderful!"

He did not interrupt her and presently she went on again.

"You see," she said, "I have become a human being----owning myself. I had never thought what this change would be to me.... It has been----. It has been--like being born, when one hadn't realized before that one wasn't born.... Now--now I can act. I can do this and that. I used to feel as though I was on strings--with somebody able to pull.... There is

no one now able to pull at me, no one able to thwart me...."

Her dark eyes looked among the trees and Mr. Brumley watched her profile.

"It has been like falling out of a prison from which one never hoped to escape. I feel like a moth that has just come out of its case,--you know how they come out, wet and weak but--released. For a time I feel I can do nothing but sit in the sun."

"It's queer," she repeated, "how one tries to feel differently from what one really feels, how one tries to feel as one supposes people expect one to feel. At first I hardly dared look at myself.... I thought I ought to be sorrowful and helpless.... I am not in the least sorrowful or helpless....

"But," said Mr. Brumley, "are you so free?"

"Yes."

"Altogether?"

"As free now--as a man."

"But----people are saying in London----. Something about a will----."

Her lips closed. Her brows and eyes became troubled. She seemed to gather herself together for an effort and spoke at length, without looking at him. "Mr. Brumley," she said, "before I knew anything of the will----. On the very evening when Isaac died----. I knew----I would never marry again. Never."

Mr. Brumley did not stir. He remained regarding her with a mournful expression.

"I was sure of it then," she said, "I knew nothing about the will. I want you to understand that--clearly."

She said no more. The still pause lengthened. She forced herself to meet his eyes.

"I thought," he said after a silent scrutiny, and left her to imagine what he had thought....

"But," he urged to her protracted silence, "you care?"

She turned her face away. She looked at the hand lying idle upon her crape-covered knee. "You are my dearest friend," she said very softly. "You are almost my only friend. But----. I can never go into marriage any more...."

"My dear," he said, "the marriage you have known----."

"No," she said. "No sort of marriage."

Mr. Brumley heaved a profound sigh.

"Before I had been a widow twenty-four hours, I began to realize that I was an escaped woman. It wasn't the particular marriage.... It was any marriage.... All we women are tied. Most of us are willing to be tied perhaps, but only as people are willing to be tied to life-belts in a wreck--from fear from drowning. And now, I am just one of the free women, like the women who can earn large incomes, or the women who happen to own property. I've paid my penalties and my service is over.... I knew, of course, that you would ask me this. It isn't that I don't care for you, that I don't love your company and your help--and the love and the kindness...."

"Only," he said, "although it is the one thing I desire, although it is the one return you can make me----. But whatever I have done--I have done willingly...."

"My dear!" cried Mr. Brumley, breaking out abruptly at a fresh point, "I want you to marry me. I want you to be mine, to be my dear close companion, the care of my life, the beauty in my life.... I can't frame sentences, my dear. You know, you know.... Since first I saw you, talked to you in this very garden...."

"I don't forget a thing," she answered. "It has been my life as well as yours. Only----"

The grip of her hand tightened on the back of their seat. She seemed to be examining her thumb intently. Her voice sank to a whisper. "I won't marry you," she said.

§6

Mr. Brumley leant back, then he bent forward in a desperate attitude with his hands and arms thrust between his knees, then suddenly he recovered, stood up and then knelt with one knee upon the seat. "What are you going to do with me then?" he asked.

"I want you to go on being my friend."

"I can't."

"You can't?"

"No,--I've hoped."

And then with something almost querulous in his voice, he repeated, "My dear, I want you to marry me and I want now nothing else in the world."

She was silent for a moment. "Mr. Brumley," she said, looking up at him, "have you no thought for our Hostels?"

Mr. Brumley as I have said hated dilemmas. He started to his feet, a man stung. He stood in front of her and quivered extended hands at her. "What do such things matter," he cried, "when a man is in love?"

She shrank a little from him. "But," she asked, "haven't they always mattered?"

"Yes," he expostulated; "but these Hostels, these Hostels.... We've started them--isn't that good enough? We've set them going...."

"Do you know," she asked, "what would happen to the hostels if I were to marry?"

"They would go on," he said.

"They would go to a committee. Named. It would include Mrs. Pembrose.... Don't you see what would happen? He understood the case so well...."

Mr. Brumley seemed suddenly shrunken. "He understood too well," he said.

He looked down at her soft eyes, at her drooping gracious form, and it seemed to him that indeed she was made for love and that it was unendurable that she should be content to think of friendship and

freedom as the ultimate purposes of her life....

§7

Presently these two were walking in the pine-woods beyond the garden and Mr. Brumley was discoursing lamentably of love, this great glory that was denied them.

The shade of perplexity deepened in her dark eyes as she listened. Ever and again she seemed about to speak and then checked herself and let him talk on.

He spoke of the closeness of love and the deep excitement of love and how it filled the soul with pride and the world with wonder, and of the universal right of men and women to love. He told of his dreams and his patience, and of the stormy hopes that would not be suppressed when he heard that Sir Isaac was dead. And as he pictured to himself the lost delights at which he hinted, as he called back those covert expectations, he forgot that she had declared herself resolved upon freedom at any cost, and his rage against Sir Isaac, who had possessed and wasted all that he would have cherished so tenderly, grew to nearly uncontrollable proportions. "Here was your life," he said, "your beautiful life opening and full--full of such dear seeds of delight and wonder, calling for love, ready for love, and there came this Clutch, this Clutch that embodied all the narrow meanness of existence, and

gripped and crumpled you and spoilt you.... For I tell you my dear you don't know; you don't begin to know...."

He disregarded her shy eyes, giving way to his gathered wrath.

"And he conquers! This little monster of meanness, he conquers to the end--his dead hand, his dead desires, out of the grave they hold you! Always, always, it is Clutch that conquers; the master of life! I was a fool to dream, a fool to hope. I forgot. I thought only of you and I--that perhaps you and I----"

He did not heed her little sound of protest. He went on to a bitter denunciation of the rule of jealousy in the world, forgetting that the sufferer under that rule in this case was his own consuming jealousy. That was life. Life was jealousy. It was all made up of fierce graspings, fierce suspicions, fierce resentments; men preyed upon one another even as the beasts they came from; reason made its crushed way through their conflict, crippled and wounded by their blows at one another. The best men, the wisest, the best of mankind, the stars of human wisdom, were but half ineffectual angels carried on the shoulders and guided by the steps of beasts. One might dream of a better world of men, of civilizations and wisdom latent in our passion-strained minds, of calms and courage and great heroical conquests that might come, but they lay tens of thousands of years away and we had to live, we had to die, no more than a herd of beasts tormented by gleams of knowledge we could never possess, of happiness for which we had no soul. He grew more

and more eloquent as these thoughts sprang and grew in his mind.

"Of course I am absurd," he cried. "All men are absurd. Man is the absurd animal. We have parted from primordial motives--lust and hate and hunger and fear, and from all the tragic greatness of uncontrollable fate and we, we've got nothing to replace them. We are comic--comic! Ours is the stage of comedy in life's history, half lit and blinded,--and we fumble. As absurd as a kitten with its poor little head in a bag. There's your soul of man! Mewing. We're all at it, the poets, the teachers. How can anyone hope to escape? Why should I escape? What am I that I should expect to be anything but a thwarted lover, a man mocked by his own attempts at service? Why should I expect to discover beauty and think that it won't be snatched away from me? All my life is comic--the story of this--this last absurdity could it make anything but a comic history? and yet within me my heart is weeping tears. The further one has gone, the deeper one wallows in the comic marsh. I am one of the newer kind of men, one of those men who cannot sit and hug their credit and their honour and their possessions and be content. I have seen the light of better things than that, and because of my vision, because of my vision and for no other reason I am the most ridiculous of men. Always I have tried to go out from myself to the world and give. Those early books of mine, those meretricious books in which I pretended all was so well with the world,--I did them because I wanted to give happiness and contentment and to be happy in the giving. And all the watchers and the grippers, the strong silent men and the calculating possessors of things, the masters of the world, they grinned

at me. How I lied to please! But I tell you for all their grinning, in my very prostitution there was a better spirit than theirs in their successes. If I had to live over again----"

He left that hypothesis uncompleted.

"And now," he said, with a curious contrast between his voice and the exaltation of his sentiments, "now that I am to be your tormented, your emasculated lover to the very end of things, emasculated by laws I hate and customs I hate and vile foresights that I despise----"

He paused, his thread lost for a moment.

"Because," he said, "I'm going to do it. I'm going to do what I can. I'm going to be as you wish me to be, to help you, to serve you.... If you can't come to meet me, I'll meet you. I can't help but love you, I can't do without you. Never in my life have I subscribed willingly to the idea of renunciation. I've hated renunciation. But if there is no other course but renunciation, renunciation let it be. I'm bitter about this, bitter to the bottom of my soul, but at least I'll have you know I love you. Anyhow...."

His voice broke. There were tears in his eyes.

And on the very crest of these magnificent capitulations his soul rebelled. He turned about so swiftly that for a sentence or so she did

not realize the nature of his change. Her mind remained glowing with her distressed acceptance of his magnificent nobility.

"I can't," he said.

He flung off his surrenders as a savage might fling off a garment.

"When I think of his children," he said.

"When I think of the world filled by his children, the children you have borne him--and I--forbidden almost to touch your hand!"

And flying into a passion Mr. Brumley shouted "No!"

"Not even to touch your hand!"

"I won't do it," he assured her. "I won't do it. If I cannot be your lover--I will go away. I will never see you again. I will do anything--anything, rather than suffer this degradation. I will go abroad. I will go to strange places. I will aviate. I will kill myself--or anything, but I won't endure this. I won't. You see, you ask too much, you demand more than flesh and blood can stand. I've done my best to bring myself to it and I can't. I won't have that--that----"

He waved his trembling fingers in the air. He was absolutely unable to find an epithet pointed enough and bitter enough to stab into the memory

of the departed knight. He thought of him as marble, enthroned at Kensal Green, with a false dignity, a false serenity, and intolerable triumph. He wanted something, some monosyllable to expound and strip all that, some lung-filling sky-splitting monosyllable that one could shout. His failure increased his exasperation.

"I won't have him grinning, at me," he said at last. "And so, it's one thing or the other. There's no other choice. But I know your choice. I see your choice. It's good-bye--and why--why shouldn't I go now?"

He waved his arms about. He was pitifully ridiculous. His face puckered as an ill-treated little boy's might do. This time it wasn't just the pathetic twinge that had broken his voice before; he found himself to his own amazement on the verge of loud, undignified, childish weeping. He was weeping passionately and noisily; he was over the edge of it, and it was too late to snatch himself back. The shame which could not constrain him, overcame him. A preposterous upward gesture of the hands expressed his despair. And abruptly this unhappy man of letters turned from her and fled, the most grief-routed of creatures, whooping and sobbing along a narrow pathway through the trees.

§8

He left behind him an exceedingly distressed and astonished lady. She had stood with her eyes opening wider and wider at this culminating

exhibition.

"But Mr. Brumley!" she had cried at last. "Mr. Brumley!"

He did not seem to hear her. And now he was running and stumbling along very fast through the trees, so that in a few minutes he would be out of sight. Dismay came with the thought that he might presently go out of sight altogether.

For a moment she seemed to hesitate. Then with a swift decision and a firm large grasp of the hand, she gathered up her black skirts and set off after him along the narrow path. She ran. She ran lightly, with a soft rhythmic fluttering of white and black. The long crêpe bands she wore in Sir Isaac's honour streamed out behind her.

"But Mr. Brumley," she panted unheard. "Mister Brumley!"

He went from her fast, faster than she could follow, amidst the sun-dappled pine stems, and as he went he made noises between bellowing and soliloquy, heedless of any pursuit. All she could hear was a heart-wringing but inexpressive "Wa, wa, wooh, wa, woo," that burst from him ever and again. Through a more open space among the trees she fancied she was gaining upon him, and then as the pines came together again and were mingled with young spruces, she perceived that he drew away from her more and more. And he went round a curve and was hidden, and then visible again much further off, and then hidden----.

She attempted one last cry to him, but her breath failed her, and she dropped her pace to a panting walk.

Surely he would not go thus into the high road! It was unendurable to think of him rushing out into the high road--blind with sorrow--it might be into the very bonnet of a passing automobile.

She passed beyond the pines and scanned the path ahead as far as the stile. Then she saw him, lying where he had flung himself, face downward among the bluebells.

"Oh!" she whispered to herself, and put one hand to her heart and drew nearer.

She was flooded now with that passion of responsibility, with that wild irrational charity which pours out of the secret depths of a woman's stirred being.

She came up to him so lightly as to be noiseless. He did not move, and for a moment she remained looking at him.

Then she said once more, and very gently--

"Mr. Brumley."

He started, listened for a second, turned over, sat up and stared at her. His face was flushed and his hair extremely ruffled. And a slight moisture recalled his weeping.

"Mr. Brumley," she repeated, and suddenly there were tears of honest vexation in her voice and eyes. "You know I cannot do without you."

He rose to his knees, and never, it seemed to him, had she looked so beautiful. She was a little out of breath, her dusky hair was disordered, and there was an unwonted expression in her eyes, a strange mingling of indignation and tenderness. For a moment they stared unaffectedly at each other, each making discoveries.

"Oh!" he sighed at last; "whatever you please, my dear. Whatever you please. I'm going to do as you wish, if you wish it, and be your friend and forget all this"--he waved an arm--"loving."

There were signs of a recrudescence of grief, and, inarticulate as ever, she sank to her knees close beside him.

"Let us sit quietly among these hyacinths," said Mr. Brumley. "And then afterwards we will go back to the house and talk ... talk about our Hostels."

He sat back and she remained kneeling.

"Of course," he said, "I'm yours--to do just as you will with. And we'll work----. I've been a bit of a stupid brute. We'll work. For all those people. It will be--oh! a big work, quite a big work. Big enough for us to thank God for. Only----."

The sight of her panting lips had filled him with a wild desire, that set every nerve aquivering, and yet for all that had a kind of moderation, a reasonableness. It was a sisterly thing he had in mind. He felt that if this one desire could be satisfied, then honour would be satisfied, that he would cease grudging Sir Isaac--anything....

But for some moments he could not force himself to speak of this desire, so great was his fear of a refusal.

"There's one thing," he said, and all his being seemed aquiver.

He looked hard at the trampled bluebells about their feet. "Never once," he went on, "never once in all these years--have we two even--once--kissed.... It is such a little thing.... So much."

He stopped, breathless. He could say no more because of the beating of his heart. And he dared not look at her face....

There was a swift, soft rustling as she moved....

She crouched down upon him and, taking his shoulder in her hand, upset

him neatly backwards, and, doing nothing by halves, had kissed the astonished Mr. Brumley full upon his mouth.

THE END