

XXXI.

It goes to my heart to tell of the end of that day, how the fugitives vanished into Immensity; how there were no more trains how Botley stared unsympathetically with a palpable disposition to derision, denying conveyances how the landlord of the Heron was suspicious, how the next day was Sunday, and the hot summer's day had crumpled the collar of Phipps and stained the skirts of Mrs. Milton, and dimmed the radiant emotions of the whole party. Dangle, with sticking-plaster and a black eye, felt the absurdity of the pose of the Wounded Knight, and abandoned it after the faintest efforts. Recriminations never, perhaps, held the foreground of the talk, but they played like summer lightning on the edge of the conversation. And deep in the hearts of all was a galling sense of the ridiculous. Jessie, they thought, was most to blame.

Apparently, too, the worst, which would have made the whole business tragic, was not happening. Here was a young woman--young woman do I say?

a mere girl!--had chosen to leave a comfortable home in Surbiton, and all the delights of a refined and intellectual circle, and had rushed off, trailing us after her, posing hard, mutually jealous, and now tired and weather-worn, to flick us off at last, mere mud from her wheel, into this detestable village beer-house on a Saturday night! And she had done it, not for Love and Passion, which are serious excuses one may recognise even if one must reprobate, but just for a Freak, just for a fantastic Idea; for nothing, in fact, but the outraging of Common Sense. Yet withal, such was our restraint, that we talked of her still as one

much misguided, as one who burthened us with anxiety, as a lamb astray, and Mrs. Milton having eaten, continued to show the finest feelings on the matter.

She sat, I may mention, in the cushioned basket-chair, the only comfortable chair in the room, and we sat on incredibly hard, horsehair things having antimacassars tied to their backs by means of lemon-coloured bows. It was different from those dear old talks at Surbiton, somehow. She sat facing the window, which was open (the night was so tranquil and warm), and the dim light--for we did not use the lamp--suited her admirably. She talked in a voice that told you she was tired, and she seemed inclined to state a case against herself in the matter of "A Soul Untrammelled." It was such an evening as might live in a sympathetic memoir, but it was a little dull while it lasted.

"I feel," she said, "that I am to blame. I have Developed. That first book of mine--I do not go back upon a word of it, mind, but it has been misunderstood, misapplied."

"It has," said Widgery, trying to look so deeply sympathetic as to be visible in the dark. "Deliberately misunderstood."

"Don't say that," said the lady. "Not deliberately. I try and think that critics are honest. After their lights. I was not thinking of critics. But she--I mean--" She paused, an interrogation.

"It is possible," said Dangle, scrutinising his sticking-plaster.

"I write a book and state a case. I want people to THINK as I recommend, not to DO as I recommend. It is just Teaching. Only I make it into a story. I want to Teach new Ideas, new Lessons, to promulgate Ideas. Then when the Ideas have been spread abroad--Things will come about. Only now it is madness to fly in the face of the established order. Bernard Shaw, you know, has explained that with regard to Socialism. We all know that to earn all you consume is right, and that living on invested capital is wrong. Only we cannot begin while we are so few. It is Those Others."

"Precisely," said Widgery. "It is Those Others. They must begin first."

"And meanwhile you go on banking--"

"If I didn't, some one else would."

"And I live on Mr. Milton's Lotion while I try to gain a footing in Literature."

"TRY!" said Phipps. "You HAVE done so." And, "That's different," said Dangle, at the same time.

"You are so kind to me. But in this matter. Of course Georgina Griffiths in my book lived alone in a flat in Paris and went to life classes and had men visitors, but then she was over twenty-one."

"Jessica is only seventeen, and girlish for that," said Dangle.

"It alters everything. That child! It is different with a woman. And Georgina Griffiths never flaunted her freedom--on a bicycle, in country places. In this country. Where every one is so particular. Fancy, SLEEPING away from home. It's dreadful--If it gets about it spells ruin for her."

"Ruin," said Widgery.

"No man would marry a girl like that," said Phipps.

"It must be hushed up," said Dangle.

"It always seems to me that life is made up of individuals, of individual cases. We must weigh each person against his or her circumstances. General rules don't apply--"

"I often feel the force of that," said Widgery. "Those are my rules. Of course my books--"

"It's different, altogether different," said Dangle. "A novel deals with typical cases."

"And life is not typical," said Widgery, with immense profundity.

Then suddenly, unintentionally, being himself most surprised and shocked of any in the room, Phipps yawned. The failing was infectious, and the gathering having, as you can easily understand, talked itself weary, dispersed on trivial pretences. But not to sleep immediately. Directly Dangle was alone he began, with infinite disgust, to scrutinise his darkling eye, for he was a neat-minded little man in spite of his energy. The whole business--so near a capture--was horribly vexatious. Phipps sat on his bed for some time examining, with equal disgust, a collar he would have thought incredible for Sunday twenty-four hours before. Mrs. Milton fell a-musing on the mortality of even big, fat men with dog-like eyes, and Widgery was unhappy because he had been so cross to her at the station, and because so far he did not feel that he had scored over Dangle. Also he was angry with Dangle. And all four of them, being souls living very much upon the appearances of things, had a painful, mental middle distance of Botley derisive and suspicious, and a remoter background of London humorous, and Surbiton speculative. Were they really, after all, behaving absurdly?