

## THE GREAT CHANGE

My uncle had been hectic all day. I knew and dreaded what was coming, and said nothing that by any chance could lead up to it.

He absent-mindedly tipped the emu sixpence. Then we came to the wart hog.

"A bachelor," he said, meditatively, scratching the brute's back.

I hastily felt for a saving topic in the apprehensive darkness of my mind, and could find none.

"I expect I shall be married in October," said my uncle. Then, sighing: "The idyll of my engagement was short-lived."

It was out. Now, the day--my last idle day with my poor uncle--was a hideous wreck. All the topics he had fluttered round vanished, and, cold and awful, there loomed over us the one great topic.

"What do you think of marriage, George?" said my uncle, after a pause, prodding the wart hog suddenly.

"That's your privilege," said I. "Married men don't dare to think of it. Bigamy."

"Privilege! Is it such a headlong wreck of one's ideals as they say?"  
said my uncle. "Is that dreamland furniture really so unstable in use?"

"Of course," said I, "it's different from what one expects. But it  
seems to be worse for the other party. At least to judge from the  
novels they engender in their agony."

"So far as I can see," he proceeded, "what happens is very similar to a  
thing a scientific chap was explaining to me the other day. There are  
some little beasts in the sea called ascidians, and they begin life as  
cheerful little tadpole things, with waggling tails and big expressive  
eyes. They move freely about hither and thither, and often travel vast  
distances in an adventurous way. Then what he called metamorphosis  
begins. The little tadpole waggles his way to a rock and fixes himself  
head downward. Then he undergoes the oddest changes, becomes indeed a  
mere vegetative excrescence on the stone, secretes a lot of tough muck  
round himself, and is altogether lost to free oceanic society. He  
loses the cheerful tail, loses most of his brain, loses his bright  
expressive eye."

"The bother of it," said I, "is that very often the wandering  
expressive eye is not lost in the human metamorphosis."

"Putting it in another way, one might say that the kind of story that  
Ovid is so fond of describing, the affairs of Daphne and Io, for  
instance, are fables of the same thing: an interlude of sentiment and

then a change into something new and domesticated, rooted, fixed, and bounded in."

"It is certainly always a settling down," said I.

"I don't like this idea of settling down, George." He shuddered. "It must be a dreadful thing to go about always with a house on your mind."

"You get used to it. And, besides, you don't go about so much."

He gave the bachelor wart hog a parting dig, and we walked slowly and silently through the zebra-house towards the elephants. "Of course we do not intend to settle down," he said presently, with a clumsy effort to render his previous remarks impersonal.

"A marriage invalidates all promises," I explained. "The law recognises this in the case of wills."

"That's a new view," he said, evidently uncomfortable about something.

"It follows from your doctrine of metamorphosis. A marries B. Then the great change begins. A gradually alters into a new fixed form, C, while B flattens and broadens out as D. It is a different couple, and they cannot reasonably be held responsible for the vagaries of A and B."

"That ought to be better understood."

"It would perhaps be as well. Before marriage Edwin vows to devote his life to Angelina, and Angelina vows she will devote her life to Edwin. After marriage this leads to confusion if they continue to believe such promises. Marriage certainly has that odd effect on the memory. You remember Angelina's promises and forget your own, and vice versa."

"There is no apparition more distressing than the ghost of a dead promise," said my uncle. "Especially when it is raised in the house of your friends."

We passed through the elephant house in silence.

"I wonder what kind of man I shall be after the change, George. It's all a toss-up," he continued, after an interval. "I have seen some men improved by it. You, for instance. You were a mere useless, indecent aspirant to genius before the thing came upon you. Now you are a respectable journalist and gracefully anxious to give satisfaction to your editor. But my own impression is that a man has to be a bit of an ass before he can be improved by marriage. Most men get so mercenary, they simply work and do nothing a rational creature should. They are like the male ants that shed their wings after the nuptial flight. And their wives go round talking fashion articles, and calling them dear old stupids, and flirting over teacups with the unmarried men, or writing novelettes about the child-man, and living their own lives. I've been an unmarried man and I know all about it. Every intelligent

woman now seems to want to live her own life when she is not engaged in taking the child-man out into polite society, and trying to wean him from alcohol and tobacco. However, this scarcely applies to me."

"Not now," I said. And he winced.

"I wonder how it feels. Most men go into this without knowing of the change that hangs over them. But I am older. It would not be nice for a caterpillar if he knew he was going to rip up all along his back in a minute or so. Yet I could sympathise with such a caterpillar now. Anyhow, George, I hope the change will be complete. I would not like to undergo only a partial metamorphosis, and become a queer speckled monster all spotted with bachelor habits. Yet I sometimes think I am beyond the adolescent stage, and my habits rather deeply rooted. Hitherto, I have always damned a little at braces and collars and things like that. I wish I knew where one could pick up a few admissible expletives. And I loaf about London all day sometimes without any very clear idea of what I am after, telling chaps in studios how to paint, and talking to leisurely barristers, and all that kind of thing."

"She," I said, "will probably help you to conquer habits of that sort."

"Yes, I dare say she will," said my uncle. "I forgot that for the minute."