

THE BEST SAUCE

Eve Hendrie sat up in bed. For two hours she had been trying to get to sleep, but without success. Never in her life had she felt more wakeful.

There were two reasons for this. Her mind was disturbed, and she was very hungry. Neither sensation was novel to her. Since first she had become paid companion to Mrs. Rastall-Retford there had hardly been a moment when she had not been hungry. Some time before Mrs. Rastall-Retford's doctor had recommended to that lady a Spartan diet, and in this Eve, as companion, had unwillingly to share. It was not pleasant for either of them, but at least Mrs. Rastall-Retford had the knowledge that she had earned it by years of honest self-indulgence. Eve had not that consolation.

Meagre fare, moreover, had the effect of accentuating Mrs. Rastall-Retford's always rather pronounced irritability. She was a massive lady, with a prominent forehead, some half-dozen chins, and a manner towards those in her employment which would have been resented in a second mate by the crew of a Western ocean tramp. Even at her best she was no ray of sunshine about the house. And since the beginning of the self-denying ordinance she had been at her worst.

But it was not depression induced by her employer that was disturbing

Eve. That was a permanent evil. What was agitating her so extremely to-night was the unexpected arrival of Peter Rayner.

It was Eve's practice to tell herself several times a day that she had no sentiment for Peter Rayner but dislike. She did not attempt to defend her attitude logically, but nevertheless she clung to it, and to-night, when he entered the drawing-room, she had endeavoured to convey by her manner that it was only with the greatest difficulty that she remembered him at all, and that, having accomplished that feat, she now intended to forget him again immediately. And he had grinned a cheerful, affectionate grin, and beamed on her without a break till bedtime.

Before coming as companion to Mrs. Rastall-Retford Eve had been governess to Hildebrand, aged six, the son of a Mrs. Elphinstone. It had been, on the whole, a comfortable situation. She had not liked Mrs. Elphinstone, but Hildebrand had been docile, and altogether life was quite smooth and pleasant until Mrs. Elphinstone's brother came for a visit. Peter Rayner was that brother.

There is a type of man who makes love with the secrecy and sheepish reserve of a cowboy shooting up a Wild West saloon. To this class Peter belonged. He fell in love with Eve at sight, and if, at the end of the first day, there was anyone in the house who was not aware of it, it was only Hildebrand, aged six. And even Hildebrand must have had his suspicions.

Mrs. Elphinstone was among the first to become aware of it. For two days, frostily silent and gimlet-like as to the eye, she observed Peter's hurricane wooing from afar; then she acted. Peter she sent to London, pacifying him with an invitation to return to the house in the following week. This done, she proceeded to eliminate Eve. In the course of the parting interview she expressed herself perhaps a little less guardedly than was either just or considerate; and Eve, flushed and at war with the whole race of Rayners, departed that afternoon to seek a situation elsewhere. She had found it at the house of Mrs. Rastall-Retford.

And now this evening, as she sat in the drawing-room playing the piano to her employer, in had walked the latter's son, a tall, nervous young man, perpetually clearing his throat and fiddling with a pair of gold-rimmed glasses, with the announcement that he had brought his friend, Mr. Rayner, to spend a few days in the old home.

Eve could still see the look on Peter's face as, having shaken hands with his hostess, he turned to her. It was the look of the cowboy who, his weary ride over, sees through the dusk the friendly gleam of the saloon windows, and with a happy sigh reaches for his revolver. There could be no two meanings to that look. It said, as clearly as if he had shouted it, that this was no accidental meeting; that he had tracked her down and proposed to resume matters at the point where they had left off.

Eve was indignant. It was abominable that he should pursue her in this way. She sat thinking how abominable it was for five minutes; and then it suddenly struck her that she was hungrier than ever. She had forgotten her material troubles for the moment. It seemed to her now that she was quite faint with hunger.

A cuckoo clock outside the door struck one. And, as it did so, it came to Eve that on the sideboard in the dining-room there were biscuits.

A moment later she was creeping softly down the stairs.

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It was dark and ghostly on the stairs. The house was full of noises. She was glad when she reached the dining-room. It would be pleasant to switch on the light. She pushed open the door, and uttered a cry. The light was already switched on, and at the table, his back to her, was a man.

There was no time for flight. He must have heard the door open. In another moment he would turn and spring.

She spoke tremulously.

"Don't--don't move. I'm pointing a pistol at you."

The man did not move.

"Foolish child!" he said, indulgently. "Suppose it went off!"

She uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"You! What are you doing here, Mr. Rayner?"

She moved into the room, and her relief changed swiftly into indignation. On the table were half a chicken, a loaf, some cold potatoes, and a bottle of beer.

"I'm eating, thank goodness!" said Peter, helping himself to a cold potato. "I had begun to think I never should again."

"Eating!"

"Eating. I know a man of sensibility and refinement ought to shrink from raiding his hostess's larder in the small hours, but hunger's death to the finer feelings. It's the solar plexus punch which puts one's better self down and out for the count of ten. I am a large and healthy young man, and, believe me, I need this little snack. I need it badly. May I cut you a slice of chicken?"

She could hardly bear to look at it, but pride gave her strength.

"No," she snapped.

"You're sure? Poor little thing; I know you're half starved."

Eve stamped.

"How dare you speak to me like that, Mr. Rayner?"

He drank bottled beer thoughtfully.

"What made you come down? I suppose you heard a noise and thought it was burglars?" he said.

"Yes," said Eve, thankfully accepting the idea. At all costs she must conceal the biscuit motive.

"That was very plucky of you. Won't you sit down?"

"No, I'm going back to bed."

"Not just yet. I've several things to talk to you about. Sit down.

That's right. Now cover up your poor little pink ankles, or you'll be catching----"

She started up.

"Mr. Rayner!"

"Sit down."

She looked at him defiantly, then, wondering at herself for doing it, sat down.

"Now," said Peter, "what do you mean by it? What do you mean by dashing off from my sister's house without leaving a word for me as to where you were going? You knew I loved you."

"Good night, Mr. Rayner."

"Sit down. You've given me a great deal of trouble. Do you know it cost me a sovereign in tips to find out your address? I couldn't get it out of my sister, and I had to apply to the butler. I've a good mind to knock it off your first week's pin-money."

"I shall not stay here listening----"

"You knew perfectly well I wanted to marry you. But you fly off without a word and bury yourself in this benighted place with a gorgon who nags and bullies you----"

"A nice way to speak of your hostess," said Eve, scornfully.

"A very soothing way. I don't think I ever took such a dislike to a woman at first sight before. And when she started to bullyrag you, it was all I could do--But it won't last long now. You must come away at once. We'll be married after Christmas, and in the meantime you can go and live with my sister----"

Eve listened speechlessly. She had so much to say that the difficulty of selection rendered her dumb.

"When can you start? I mean, do you have to give a month's notice or anything?"

Eve got up with a short laugh.

"Good night, Mr. Rayner," she said. "You have been very amusing, but I am getting tired."

"I'm glad it's all settled," said Peter. "Good night."

Eve stopped. She could not go tamely away without saying a single one of the things that crowded in her mind.

"Do you imagine," she said, "that I intend to marry you? Do you suppose, for one moment----"

"Rather!" said Peter. "You shall have a splendid time from now on, to make up for all you've gone through. I'm going to be awfully good to you, Eve. You sha'n't ever have any more worries, poor old thing." He looked at her affectionately. "I wonder why it is that large men always fall in love with little women. There are you, a fragile, fairy-like, ethereal wisp of a little creature; and here am I----"

"A great, big, greedy pig!" burst out Eve, "who thinks about nothing but eating and drinking."

"I wasn't going to have put it quite like that," said Peter, thoughtfully.

"I hate a greedy man," said Eve, between her teeth.

"I have a healthy appetite," protested Peter. "Nothing more. It runs in the family. At the time of the Civil War the Rayner of the period, who was King Charles's right-hand man, would frequently eat despatches to prevent them falling into the hands of the enemy. He was noted for it."

Eve reached the door and turned.

"I despise you," she said.

"Good night," said Peter, tenderly. "To-morrow morning we'll go for a walk."

His prediction proved absolutely correct. He was smoking a cigarette after breakfast when Eve came to him. Her face was pink and mutinous, but there was a gleam in her eye.

"Are you ready to come out, Mr. Rayner?" she said. "Mrs. Rastall-Retford says I'm to take you to see the view from the golf links."

"You'll like that," said Peter.

"I shall not like it," snapped Eve. "But Mrs. Rastall-Retford is paying me a salary to do what she tells me, and I have to earn it."

Conversation during the walk consisted mainly of a monologue on the part of Peter. It was a crisp and exhilarating morning, and he appeared to be feeling a universal benevolence towards all created things. He even softened slightly on the subject of Mrs. Rastall-Retford, and advanced the theory that her peculiar manner might be due to her having been ill-treated as a child.

Eve listened in silence. It was not till they were nearing home on their return journey that she spoke.

"Mr. Rayner," she said.

"Yes?" said Peter.

"I was talking to Mrs. Rastall-Retford after breakfast," said Eve, "and I told her something about you."

"My conscience is clear."

"Oh, nothing bad. Some people would say it was very much to your credit." She looked away across the fields. "I told her you were a vegetarian," she added, carelessly.

There was a long silence. Then Peter spoke three words, straight from the heart.

"You little devil!"

Eve turned and looked at him, her eyes sparkling wickedly.

"You see!" she said. "Now perhaps you will go."

"Without you?" said Peter, stoutly. "Never!"

"In London you will be able to eat all day--anything you like. You will be able to creep about your club gnawing cold chicken all night. But if you stay here----"

"You have got a wrong idea of the London clubman's life," said Peter.

"If I crept about my club gnawing cold chicken I should have the committee after me. No, I shall stay here and look after you. After all, what is food?"

"I'll tell you what yours will be, if you like. Or would you rather wait and let it be a surprise? Well, for lunch you will have some boiled potatoes and cabbage and a sweet--a sort of light soufflé thing. And for dinner----"

"Yes, but one moment," said Peter. "If I'm a vegetarian, how did you account for my taking all the chicken I could get at dinner last night, and looking as if I wanted more?"

"Oh, that was your considerateness. You didn't want to give trouble, even if you had to sacrifice your principles. But it's all right now. You are going to have your vegetables."

Peter drew a deep breath--the breath of the man who braces himself up and thanks whatever gods there be for his unconquerable soul.

"I don't care," he said. "A book of verses underneath the bough, a jug of wine, and thou----"

"Oh, and I forgot," interrupted Eve. "I told her you were a teetotaller as well."

There was another silence, longer than the first.

"The best train," said Eve, at last, "is the ten-fifty."

He looked at her inquiringly.

"The best train?"

"For London."

"What makes you think that I am interested in trains to London?"

Eve bit her lip.

"Mr. Rayner," she said, after a pause, "do you remember at lunch one day at Mrs. Elphinstone's refusing parsnips? You said that, so far as you were concerned, parsnips were first by a mile, and that prussic acid and strychnine also ran."

"Well?" said Peter.

"Oh, nothing," said Eve. "Only I made a stupid mistake. I told the cook you were devoted to parsnips. I'm sorry."

Peter looked at her gravely. "I'm putting up with a lot for your sake,"

he said.

"You needn't. Why don't you go away?"

"And leave you chained to the rock, Andromeda? Not for Perseus! I've only been here one night, but I've seen enough to know that I've got to take you away from this place. Honestly, it's killing you. I was watching you last night. You're scared if that infernal old woman starts to open her mouth. She's crushing the life out of you. I'm going to stay on here till you say you'll marry me, or till they throw me out."

"There are parsnips for dinner to-night," said Eve, softly.

"I shall get to like them. They are an acquired taste, I expect. Perhaps I am, too. Perhaps I am the human parsnip, and you will have to learn to love me."

"You are the human burr," said Eve, shortly. "I shouldn't have thought it possible for a man to behave as you are doing."

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In spite of herself, there were moments during the next few days when Eve felt twinges of remorse. It was only by telling herself that he had no right to have followed her to this house, and that he was at perfect

liberty to leave whenever he wished, that she could harden her heart again. And even this reflection was not entirely satisfactory, for it made her feel how fond he must be of her to endure these evils for her sake.

And there was no doubt about there being evils. It was a dreary house in which to spend winter days. There were no books that one could possibly read. The nearest railway station was five miles away. There was not even a dog to talk to. Generally it rained. Though Eve saw little of Peter, except at meals and in the drawing-room after dinner--for Mrs. Rastall-Retford spent most of the day in her own sitting-room and required Eve to be at her side--she could picture his sufferings, and, try as she would, she could not keep herself from softening a little. Her pride was weakening. Constant attendance on her employer was beginning to have a bad effect on her nerves. Association in a subordinate capacity with Mrs. Rastall-Retford did not encourage a proud and spirited outlook on life.

Her imagination had not exaggerated Peter's sufferings. Many people consider that Dante has spoken the last word on the post-mortem housing of the criminal classes. Peter, after the first week of his visit, could have given him a few new ideas.

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It is unpleasant to be half starved. It is unpleasant to be cooped up

in a country-house in winter with nothing to do. It is unpleasant to have to sit at meals and listen to the only girl you have ever really loved being bullyragged by an old lady with six chins. And all these unpleasantnesses were occurring to Peter simultaneously. It is highly creditable to him that the last should completely have outweighed the others.

He was generally alone. Mr. Rastall-Retford, who would have been better than nothing as a companion, was a man who enjoyed solitude. He was a confirmed vanisher. He would be present at one moment, the next he would have glided silently away. And, even on the rare occasions when he decided not to vanish, he seldom did much more than clear his throat nervously and juggle with his pince-nez.

Peter, in his boyhood, had been thrilled once by a narrative of a man who got stuck in the Sargasso Sea. It seemed to him now that the monotony of the Sargasso Sea had been greatly exaggerated.

Nemesis was certainly giving Peter his due. He had wormed his way into the Rastall-Retford home-circle by grossly deceitful means. The moment he heard that Eve had gone to live with Mrs. Rastall-Retford, and had ascertained that the Rastall-Retford with whom he had been at Cambridge and whom he still met occasionally at his club when he did not see him first, was this lady's son, he had set himself to court young Mr. Rastall-Retford. He had cornered him at the club and begun to talk about the dear old 'Varsity days, ignoring the embarrassment of the

latter, whose only clear recollection of the dear old 'Varsity days as linking Peter and himself was of a certain bump-supper night, when sundry of the festive, led and inspired by Peter, had completely wrecked his rooms and shaved off half a growing moustache. He conveyed to young Mr. Rastall-Retford the impression that, in the dear old 'Varsity days, they had shared each other's joys and sorrows, and, generally, had made Damon and Pythias look like a pair of cross-talk knockabouts at one of the rowdier music-halls. Not to invite so old a friend to stay at his home, if he ever happened to be down that way, would, he hinted, be grossly churlish. Mr. Rastall-Retford, impressed, issued the invitation. And now Peter was being punished for his deceit. Nemesis may not be an Alfred Shrubbs, but give her time and she gets there.

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It was towards the middle of the second week of his visit that Eve, coming into the drawing-room before dinner, found Peter standing in front of the fire. They had not been alone together for several days.

"Well?" said he.

Eve went to the fire and warmed her hands.

"Well?" she said, dispiritedly.

She was feeling nervous and ill. Mrs. Rastall-Retford had been in one of her more truculent moods all day, and for the first time Eve had the sensation of being thoroughly beaten. She dreaded the long hours to bedtime. The thought that there might be bridge after dinner made her feel physically ill. She felt she could not struggle through a bridge night.

On the occasions when she was in one of her dangerous moods, Mrs. Rastall-Retford sometimes chose rest as a cure, sometimes relaxation. Rest meant that she retired to her room immediately after dinner, and expended her venom on her maid; relaxation meant bridge, and bridge seemed to bring out all her worst points. They played the game for counters at her house, and there had been occasions in Eve's experience when the loss of a hundred or so of these useful little adjuncts to Fun in the Home had lashed her almost into a frenzy. She was one of those bridge players who keep up a running quarrel with Fate during the game, and when she was not abusing Fate she was generally reproaching her partner. Eve was always her partner; and to-night she devoutly hoped that her employer would elect to rest. She always played badly with Mrs. Rastall-Retford, through sheer nervousness. Once she had revoked, and there had been a terrible moment and much subsequent recrimination.

Peter looked at her curiously.

"You're pale to-night," he said.

"I have a headache."

"H'm! How is our hostess? Fair? Or stormy?"

"As I was passing her door I heard her bullying her maid, so I suppose stormy."

"That means a bad time for you?" he said, sympathetically.

"I suppose so. If we play bridge. But she may go to bed directly after dinner."

She tried to keep her voice level, but he detected the break.

"Eve," he said, quickly, "won't you let me take you away from here?"

You've no business in this sort of game. You're not tough enough.

You've got to be loved and made a fuss of and----"

She laughed shakily.

"Perhaps you can give me the address of some lady who wants a companion to love and make a fuss of?"

"I can give you the address of a man."

She rested an arm on the mantelpiece and stood looking into the blaze,

without replying.

Before he could speak again there was a step outside the door, and Mrs. Rastall-Retford rustled into the room.

Eve had not misread the storm-signals. Her employer's mood was still as it had been earlier in the day. Dinner passed in almost complete silence. Mrs. Rastall-Retford sat brooding dumbly. Her eye was cold and menacing, and Peter, working his way through his vegetables, shuddered for Eve. He had understood her allusion to bridge, having been privileged several times during his stay to see his hostess play that game, and he hoped that there would be no bridge to-night.

And this was unselfish of him, for bridge meant sandwiches. Punctually at nine o'clock on bridge nights the butler would deposit on a side-table a plate of chicken sandwiches and (in deference to Peter's vegetarian views) a smaller plate of cheese sandwiches. At the close of play Mrs. Rastall-Retford would take one sandwich from each plate, drink a thimbleful of weak whisky and water, and retire.

Peter could always do with a sandwich or two these days. But he was prepared to abandon them joyfully if his hostess would waive bridge for this particular evening.

It was not to be. In the drawing-room Mrs. Rastall-Retford came out of her trance and called imperiously for the cards. Peter, when he saw his

hand after the first deal, had a presentiment that if all his hands were to be as good as this, the evening was going to be a trying one. On the other occasions when they had played he had found it an extremely difficult task, even with moderate cards, to bring it about that his hostess should always win the odd rubber, for he was an excellent player, and, like most good players, had an artistic conscience which made it painful to him to play a deliberately bad game, even from the best motives. If all his hands were going to be as strong as this first one he saw that there was disaster ahead. He could not help winning.

Mrs. Rastall-Retford, who had dealt the first hand, made a most improper diamond declaration. Her son unfilially doubled, and, Eve having chicane--a tragedy which her partner evidently seemed to consider could have been avoided by the exercise of ordinary common sense--Peter and his partner, despite Peter's best efforts, won the game handsomely.

The son of the house dealt the next hand. Eve sorted her cards listlessly. She was feeling curiously tired. Her brain seemed dulled.

This hand, as the first had done, went all in favour of the two men. Mr. Rastall-Retford won five tricks in succession, and, judging from the glitter in his mild eye, was evidently going to win as many more as he possibly could. Mrs. Rastall-Retford glowered silently. There was electricity in the air.

The son of the house led a club. Eve played a card mechanically.

"Have you no clubs, Miss Hendrie?"

Eve started, and looked at her hand.

"No," she said.

Mrs. Rastall-Retford grunted suspiciously.

Not long ago, in Westport, Connecticut, U.S.A., a young man named Harold Sperry, a telephone worker, was boring a hole in the wall of a house with a view to passing a wire through it. He whistled joyously as he worked. He did not know that he had selected for purposes of perforation the exact spot where there lay, nestling in the brickwork, a large leaden water-pipe. The first intimation he had of that fact was when a jet of water suddenly knocked him fifteen feet into a rosebush.

As Harold felt then, so did Eve now, when, examining her hand once more to make certain that she had no clubs, she discovered the ace of that ilk peeping coyly out from behind the seven of spades.

Her face turned quite white. It is never pleasant to revoke at bridge, but to Eve just then it seemed a disaster beyond words. She looked across at her partner. Her imagination pictured the scene there would

be ere long, unless----

It happens every now and then that the human brain shows in a crisis an unwonted flash of speed. Eve's did at this juncture. To her in her trouble there came a sudden idea.

She looked round the table. Mr. Rastall-Retford, having taken the last trick, had gathered it up in the introspective manner of one planning big coups, and was brooding tensely, with knit brows. His mother was frowning over her cards. She was unobserved.

She seized the opportunity. She rose from her seat, moved quickly to the side-table, and, turning her back, slipped the fatal card dexterously into the interior of a cheese sandwich.

Mrs. Rastall-Retford, absorbed, did not notice for an instant. Then she gave tongue.

"What are you doing, Miss Hendrie?"

Eve was breathing quickly.

"I--I thought that Mr. Rayner might like a sandwich."

She was at his elbow with the plate. It trembled in her hand.

"A sandwich! Kindly do not be so officious, Miss Hendrie. The idea--in the middle of a hand----" Her voice died away in a resentful mumble.

Peter started. He had been allowing his thoughts to wander. He looked from the sandwich to Eve and then at the sandwich again. He was puzzled. This had the aspect of being an olive-branch--could it be? Could she be meaning----? Or was it a subtle insult? Who could say? At any rate it was a sandwich, and he seized it, without prejudice.

"I hope at least you have had the sense to remember that Mr. Rayner is a vegetarian, Miss Hendrie," said Mrs. Rastall-Retford. "That is not a chicken sandwich?"

"No," said Eve; "it is not a chicken sandwich."

Peter beamed gratefully. He raised the olive-branch, and bit into it with the energy of a starving man. And as he did so he caught Eve's eye.

"Miss Hendrie!" cried Mrs. Rastall-Retford.

Eve started violently.

"Miss Hendrie, will you be good enough to play? The king of clubs to beat. I can't think what's the matter with you to-night."

"I'm very sorry," said Eve, and put down the nine of spades.

Mrs. Rastall-Retford glared.

"This is absurd," she cried. "You must have the ace of clubs. If you have not got it, who has? Look through your hand again. Is it there?"

"No."

"Then where can it be?"

"Where can it be?" echoed Peter, taking another bite.

"Why--why," said Eve, crimson, "I--I--have only five cards. I ought to have six."

"Five?" said Mrs. Rastall-Retford "Nonsense! Count again. Have you dropped it on the floor?"

Mr. Rastall-Retford stooped and looked under the table.

"It is not on the floor," he said. "I suppose it must have been missing from the pack before I dealt."

Mrs. Rastall-Retford threw down her cards and rose ponderously. It

offended her vaguely that there seemed to be nobody to blame. "I shall go to bed," she said.

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Peter stood before the fire and surveyed Eve as she sat on the sofa. They were alone in the room, Mr. Rastall-Retford having drifted silently away in the wake of his mother. Suddenly Eve began to laugh helplessly.

He shook his head at her.

"This is considerably sharper than a serpent's tooth," he said. "You should be fawning gratefully upon me, not laughing. Do you suppose King Charles laughed at my ancestor when he ate the despatches? However, for the first time since I have been in this house I feel as if I had had a square meal."

Eve became suddenly serious. The smile left her face.

"Mr. Rayner, please don't think I'm ungrateful. I couldn't help laughing, but I can't tell you how grateful I am. You don't know what it would have been like if she had found out that I had revoked. I did it once before, and she kept on about it for days and days. It was awful." She shivered. "I think you must be right, and my nerves are going."

He nodded.

"So are you--to-morrow, by the first train. I wonder how soon we can get married. Do you know anything about special licenses?"

She looked at him curiously.

"You're very obstinate," she said.

"Firm," he corrected. "Firm. Could you pack to-night, do you think, and be ready for that ten-fifty to-morrow morning?"

She began to trace an intricate pattern on the floor with the point of her shoe.

"I can't imagine why you are fond of me!" she said. "I've been very horrid to you."

"Nonsense. You've been all that's sweet and womanly."

"And I want to tell you why," she went on. "Your--your sister----"

"Ah, I thought as much!"

"She--she saw that you seemed to be getting fond of me, and she----"

"She would!"

"Said some rather horrid things that--hurt," said Eve, in a low voice.

Peter crossed over to where she sat and took her hand.

"Don't you worry about her," he said. "She's not a bad sort really, but about once every six months she needs a brotherly talking-to, or she gets above herself. One is about due during the next few days."

He stroke her hand.

"Fasting," he said, thoughtfully, "clears and stimulates the brain. I fancy I shall be able to think out some rather special things to say to her this time."