ДЖОН ГОЛСУЪРТИ
LATE-299

I

1 §

It was disconcerting to the Governor. The man's smile was so peculiar. Of course, these educated prisoners—doctors, solicitors, parsons—one could never say good-bye to them quite without awkwardness; couldn't dismiss them with the usual "Shake hands! Hope you'll keep straight and have luck." No! With the finish of his sentence a gentleman resumed a kind of equality, ceased to be a number, ceased even being a name without a prefix, to which the law and the newspapers with their unfailing sense of what was proper at once reduced a prisoner on, or even before, his conviction. No. 299 was once more Dr. Philip Raider, in a suit of dark-grey tweeds, lean and limber, with grey hair grown again in readiness for the outer world, with deep-set, shining eyes, and that peculiar smile—a difficult subject. The Governor decided suddenly to say only: "Well, good-bye, Dr. Raider"; and, holding out his hand, he found it remain in contact with nothing.

So the fellow was going out in defiant mood—was he! The Governor felt it rather hard after more than two years; and his mind retraced his recollections of this prisoner. An illegal operation case! Not a good 'mixer'—not that his prisoners were allowed to mix; still, always reassuring to know that they would if not strenuously prevented! Record—Exemplary. Chaplain's report—Nothing doing (or words to that effect). Work—Bookbinding. Quite! But—chief memory—that of a long loose figure loping round at exercise, rather like a wolf. And there he stood! The tall Governor felt at the moment oddly short. He raised his hand from its posture of not too splendid isolation, and put the closure with a gesture. No. 299's lips moved:

"Is that all?"

Accustomed to being 'sirred' to the last, the Governor reddened. But the accent was so refined that he decided not to mention it.

"Yes, that's all."

"Thank you. Good-morning."

The eyes shone from under the brows, the smile curled the lips under the long, fine, slightly hooked nose; the man loped easily to the door. He

carried his hands well. He made no noise going out. Damn! The fellow had looked so exactly as if he had been thinking, ‘You poor devil!’ The Governor gazed round his office. Highly specialised life, no doubt! The windows had bars; it was here that he saw refractory prisoners in the morning, early. And, thrusting his hands into his pockets, he frowned....

Outside, the head warder, straight, blue-clothed, grizzled, walked ahead, with a bunch of keys.

“All in order,” he said to the blue-clothed janitor. “No. 299—going out. Anyone waiting for him?”

“No, sir.”

“Right. Open!”

The door clanged under the key.

“Good-day to you,” said the head warder.

The released prisoner turned his smiling face and nodded; turned it to the janitor, nodded again, and walked out between them, putting on a grey felt hat. The door clanged under the key. “Smiling!” remarked the janitor.

“Ah! Cool customer,” said the head warder. “Clever man, though, I’m told.”

His voice sounded resentful, a little surprised, as if he had missed the last word by saying it....

Hands in pockets, the released prisoner walked at leisure in the centre of the pavement. An October day of misty sunshine, and the streets full of people seeking the midday meal. And if they chanced to glance at this passer-by their eyes would fly away at once, as a finger flies from a too hot iron....

2 §

On the platform the prison chaplain, who had a day off and was going up to town, saw a face under a grey hat which seemed vaguely familiar.

"Yes," said a voice. "Late—299. Raider."

The chaplain felt surprise.

"Oh, ah!" he stammered. "You went out to-day, I think. I hope you —"

"Don't mention it!"

The train came clattering in. The chaplain entered a third-class compartment; Late—299 followed. The chaplain experienced something of a shock. Extremely unlike a prisoner! And this prisoner, out of whom he had, so to speak, had no change whatever these two years past, had always made him feel uncomfortable. There he sat opposite, turning his paper, smoking a cigarette, as if on terms of perfect equality. Lowering his own journal, the chaplain looked out of the window, trying to select a course of conduct; then, conscious that he was being stared at, he took a flying look at his *vis-à-vis*. The man's face seemed saying: "Feel a bit awkward, don't you? But don't worry. I've no ill feeling. You have a devilish poor time."

Unable to find the proper reply to this look, the chaplain remarked:

"Nice day. Country's looking beautiful."

Late—299 turned those shining eyes of his towards the landscape. The man had a hungry face in spite of his smile; and the chaplain asked: "Will you have a sandwich?"

"Thanks...."

"Forgive my enquiring," said the chaplain presently, blowing crumbs off his knees, "but what will you do now? I hope you're going to—" How could he put it? 'Turn over a new leaf?' 'Make good?' 'Get going?' He could not put it; and instead took the cigarette which Late—299 was offering him. The man was speaking too; his words seemed to come slowly through the smoke, as if not yet used to a tongue.

"These last two years have been priceless."

"Ah!" said the chaplain hopefully.

"I feel right on top."

The chaplain’s spirit drooped.

“Do you mean,” he said, “that you don’t regret—that you aren’t—er—?”

“Priceless!”

The man’s face had a lamentable look—steely, strangely smiling. No humility in it at all. He would find Society did not tolerate such an attitude. No, indeed! He would soon discover his place.

“I’m afraid,” he said kindly, “that you’ll find Society very unforgiving. Have you a family?”

“Wife, son, and daughter.”

“How will they receive you?”

“Don’t know, I’m sure.”

“And your friends? I only want to’ prepare you a little.”

“Fortunately I have private means.”

The chaplain stared. What a piece of luck, or was it—a misfortune?

“If I’d been breakable, your prison would have broken me all right. Have another cigarette?”

“No, thank you.”

The chaplain felt too sad. He had always said nothing could be done with them so long as their will-power was unbroken. Distressing to see a man who had received this great lesson still so stiff-necked; so far from profiting by it. And, lifting his journal, he tried to read. Hut those eyes seemed boring through the print. It was most uncomfortable. Most!...

II

1 §

In the withdrawing-room of a small house near Kew Gardens, Mrs. Philip Raider was gazing at a piece of pinkish paper in her hand, as if it had been one of those spiders of which she had so constitutional a horror. Opposite her chair her son had risen; and against the wall her daughter had ceased suddenly to play Brahms' Variations on a theme by Haydn.

"He says to-night!"

The girl dropped her hands from the keys. "To-night? I thought it was next month. Just like father—without a word of warning!"

The son mechanically took out his pipe, and began polishing its bowl. He was fresh-faced, fair, with a small head.

"Why didn't he tell us to meet him in London? He must know we've got to come to an arrangement."

The daughter, too, got up, leaning against the piano—a slight figure, with bushy, dark, short hair.

"What are we to do, Mother?"

"Jack must go round, and put Mabel and Roderick off for this evening."

"Yes, and what then, if he's going to stay here? Does he know that I'm engaged, and Beryl too?"

"1 think I told him in my last letter."

"What are you going to do, Mother?"

"It's come so suddenly—I don't know."

"It's indecent!" said the boy violently.

His sister picked up the dropped telegram. "'Earl's Court, five four.' He may be here any minute. Jack, do hurry up! Doesn't he realise that nobody knows, down here?"

Mrs. Raider turned to the fire.

"Your father will only have realised his own feelings."

"Well, he's got to begin with others. I'll have to make him—!"

"Dr. Raider, ma'am."

Late—299 stood, smiling, in front of the door which the maid had closed behind him.

“Well, Bertha! Ah, Beryl! Well, Jack!”

His daughter alone replied.

“Well, Father, you might have let us know beforehand!”

Late—299 looked from one face to the other.

“Never tell children they’re going to have a powder. How are you all?”

“Perfectly well, thank you. How are you?”

“Never better. Healthy life—prison!”

As if walking in her sleep Mrs. Raider came across the room. She put out her hand with a groping gesture. Late—299 did not take it.

“Rather nice here,” he said. “Can I have a wash?”

“Jack, show your father the lavatory.”

“The bathroom, please.”

The son crossed from the window, glanced at his father’s smiling face, and led the way.

Mrs. Raider, thin, pale, dark, spoke first. “Poor Philip!”

“Oh, Mother! It’s impossible to pity father; it always was. Except for his moustache being gone, I don’t see much change anyway. It’s you I pity. He simply can’t stay here. Why, everybody thinks you’re a widow.”

“People generally know more than they seem to, Beryl.”

“Nobody’s ever given us a hint. Why couldn’t he have consulted us?”

“We must think of *him*.”

“He didn’t think of us when he did that horrible thing. And it was so gratuitous, unless—! Mother, sometimes I’ve thought he had to do it; that he was her—her lover as well as her doctor!”

Mrs. Raider shook her head.

“If it had been that, he’d have told me. Your father is always justified in his own eyes.”

“What am I to do about Roddy?”

“We must just wait.”

“Here’s Jack! Well?”

“He’s having a bath as hot as he can bear it. All he said was: ‘This is the first thing you do when you go in, and the first thing you do when you come out—symmetrical, isn’t it?’ I’ve got to take him a cup of coffee. It’s really too thick! The servants can’t help knowing that a Dr. Raider who gets into the bath the moment he comes to call must be our father.”

“It’s comic.”

“Is it? He doesn’t show a sign of shame. He’ll call it from the house-tops. I thought, of course, he’d go abroad.”

“We all thought that.”

“If he were down in the mouth, one could feel sorry for him. But he looks as pleased as Punch with himself. And it’s such a beastly sort of crime—how am I to put it to Mabel? If I just say he’s been in prison, she’ll think it’s something even worse. Mother, do insist on his going at once. We can tell the servants he’s an uncle—who’s been in contact with smallpox.”

“*You* take him the coffee, Mother—oh, you can’t, if he’s to be an uncle! Jack, tell him nobody here knows, and mother can’t stand it; and hurry up! It’s half-past six now.”

The son passed his fingers through his brushed-back hair; his face looked youthful, desperate.

“Shall I?”

Mrs. Raider nodded.

“Tell him, Jack, that I’ll come out to him, wherever he likes to go; that I always expected him to arrange that; that this is—too difficult—” She covered her lips with her hand.

“All right, Mother! I’ll jolly well make him understand. But don’t launch out about it to the servants yet. Suppose it’s we who have to go? It’s his house!”

“Is it, Mother?”

“Yes; I bought it with his money under the power of attorney he left.”

“Oh, isn’t that dreadful?”

“It’s *all* dreadful, but we must consider *him*.”

The girl shook back her fuzzy hair.

“It does seem rather a case of ‘coldly received.’ But father’s always been shut up in himself. He can’t expect us suddenly to slobber over him. If he’s had a horrible time, so have we.”

“Well, shall I go?”

“Yes, take him the coffee. Be quick, my dear boy; and be nice to him!”

The son said with youthful grimness: “Oh, I’ll be nice!” and went.

“Mother, don’t look like that!”

“How should I look? Smiling?”

“No, don’t smile—it’s like *him*. Cry it off your chest.”

2 §

Late—299 was sitting in the bath, smiling through steam and the smoke of his cigarette at his big toe. Raised just above the level of the water, it had a nail blackened by some weight that had dropped on it. He took the coffee-cup from his son's hand.

"For two years and nine months I've been looking forward to this—but it beats the band, Jack."

"Father—I—ought—"

"Good coffee, tobacco, hot water—greatest blessings earth affords. Half an hour in here, and—spotless, body and soul!"

"Father—!"

"Yes; is there anything you want to add?"

"We've—we've been here two years."

"Not so long as I was there. Do you like it?"

"Yes."

"I didn't. Are you studying medicine?"

"No. Botany."

"Good. You won't have to do with human beings."

"I've got the promise of a job in the Gardens here at the beginning of next year. And I'm—I'm engaged."

"Excellent. I believe in marrying young."

"Beryl's engaged too."

"Your mother isn't, by any chance?"

"Father!"

"My dear fellow, one expects to have been dropped. Why suppose one's family superior to other people's? *Pas si bête!*"

Gazing at that smiling face where prison pallor was yielding to the heat, above the neck whose sinews seemed unnaturally sharp and visible, the boy felt a spasm of remorse.

"We've never had a proper chance to tell you how frightfully sorry we've been for you. Only, we don't understand even now why you did such a thing."

“Should I have done it if I’d thought it would have been spotted? A woman going to the devil; a small risk to oneself—and there we were! Never save anyone, at risk to yourself, Jack. I’m sure you agree.”

The boy’s face went very red. How could he ever get out what he had come to say?

“I have no intention of putting my tail between my legs. D’you mind taking this cup?”

“Will you have another, Father?”

“No, thanks. What time do you dine?”

“Half-past seven.”

“You might lend me a razor. I was shaved this morning with a sort of billhook.”

“I’ll get you one.”

Away from that smiling stranger in the bath, the boy shook himself. He must and would speak out!

When he came back with the shaving gear, his father was lying flat, deeply immersed, with closed eyes. And setting his back against the door, he blurted out: “Nobody knows down here. They think mother’s a widow.”

The eyes opened, the smile resumed control.

“Do you really believe that?”

“I do; I know that Mabel—the girl I’m engaged to—has no suspicion. She’s coming to dinner; so is Roddy Blades—Beryl’s *fiancé*.”

“Mabel, and Roddy Blades—glad to know their names. Give me that big towel, there’s a good fellow. I’m going to wash my head.”

Handing him the towel, the boy turned. But at the door he stopped. “Father—!”

“Quite. These natural relationships are fixed, beyond redemption.”

The boy turned and fled.

His mother and sister stood waiting at the foot of the stairs.

“Well?”

“It’s no good. I simply can’t tell him we want him to go.”

“No, my dear. I understand.”

“Oh! but, Mother—! Jack, you must.”

“I can’t; I’m going to put them off.” Seizing his hat, he ran. He ran among small houses in the evening mist, trying to invent. At the corner of the long row of little villas he rang a bell.

“Can I see Miss Mabel?”

“She’s dressing, sir. Will you come in?”

“No. I’ll wait here.”

In the small dark porch he tried to rehearse himself. ‘Awfully sorry! Somebody had come—unexpectedly—on business!’ Yes! On what business?

“Hallo, Jack!”

A vision in the doorway—a fair head, a rosy, round, blue-eyed face above a swansdown collar.

“Look here, darling—shut the door.”

“Why? What is it? Anything up?”

“Yes; something pretty badly up. You can’t come to-night, Mabel.”

“Don’t squeeze so hard! Why not?”

“Oh! well—there—there’s a reason.”

“I know. Your father’s come out!”

“What? How—?”

“But of course. We all know about him. We must be awfully nice to him.”

“D’you mean to say that Roddy and everybody—We thought nobody knew.”

“Bless you, yes! Some people feel one way and some the other. I feel the other.”

“Do you know what he did?”

“Yes; I got hold of the paper. I read the whole trial.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why didn’t *you*?”

“It was too beastly. Well?”

“I think it was a shame.”

“But you can’t have that sort of thing allowed.”

“Why not?”

“Where would the population be?”

“Well, we’re over-populated. Everybody says so.”

“That’s quite another thing. This is the Law.”

“Look here! If you want to argue, come in. It’s jolly cold.”

“I don’t want to argue; I must go and tell Roddy. It’s an awful relief about you, darling. Only—you don’t know my father.”

“Then I can’t come?”

“Not to-night. Mother—”

“Yes; I expect she’s frightfully glad.”

“Oh! yes—yes! She—yes!”

“Well, good-night. And look here—you go back. *I*’ll tell Roddy. No! Don’t rumple me!”

Running back between small houses, the boy thought: ‘Good God! How queer! How upside-down! She—she—! It’s awfully modern!’

3 §

Late—299 sat in the firelight, a glass beside him, a cigarette between his smiling lips. The cinders clicked, a clock struck. Eleven! He pitched the stump of his cigarette into the ashes, stretched himself, and rose. He went upstairs and opened the first door. The room was dark. A faint voice said:

"Philip?"

"Yes."

The light sprang out under his thumb. His wife was sitting up in bed, her face pale, her lips moving:

"To-night—must you?"

Late—299 moved to the foot of the bed; his lips still smiled, his eyes gazed hungrily.

"Not at all. We learn to contain ourselves in prison. No vile contacts? Quite so. Goodnight!"

The voice from the bed said faintly:

"Philip, I'm so sorry; it's the suddenness—I'm—"

"Don't mention it." The light failed under his thumb. The door fell to...

Three people lay awake, one sleeping. The three who lay awake were thinking: 'If only he made one feel sorry for him! If only one could love him! His self-control is forbidding—it's not human! He ought to want our sympathy. He ought to sympathise with us. He doesn't seem to feel—for himself, for us, for anything. And tomorrow—what will happen? Is life possible here, now? Can we stand him in the house, about the place? He's frightening!'

The sleeper, in his first bed of one thousand and one nights, lay, his eyes pinched up between brows and bony cheeks of a face as if carved from ivory, and his lips still smiling at the softness under him.

Past dawn the wakeful slept, the sleeper awoke. His eyes sought the familiar little pyramid of gear on the shelf in the corner, the bright tins below, the round porthole, the line of distemper running along the walls, the closed and solid smallness of a cell. And the blood left his heart. They weren't there! His whole being struggled with such unreality. He was in a

room staring at light coming through chintz curtains. His arms were not naked. This was a sheet! For a moment he shivered, uncertain of everything; then lay back, smiling at a papered ceiling.

III

1 §

“It can’t go on, Mother. It simply can’t. I feel an absolute worm whenever I’m with him. I shall have to clear out, like Beryl. He has just one object all the time—to make everyone feel small and mean.”

“Remember what he’s been through!”

“I don’t see why *we* should be part of his revenge. We’ve done nothing, except suffer through him.”

“He doesn’t want to hurt us or anyone.”

“Well, whenever people talk to him they dry up at once, as if he’d skinned them. It’s a disease.”

“One can only pity him.”

“He’s perfectly happy, Mother. He’s getting his own back.”

“If only that first night—”

“We tried. It’s no good. He’s absolutely selfsufficient. What about tomorrow night?”

“We can’t leave him on Christmas Day, Jack.”

“Then we must take him to Beryl’s. I can’t stick it here. Look! He’s just going out!”

Late—299 passed the window where they stood, loping easily, a book under his arm.

“He must have seen us. We mightn’t exist!...”

2 §

Late—299, with a book under his arm, entered Kew Gardens and sat down on a bench. A nursery governess with her charges came and settled down beside him.

“Peter, Joan, and Michael,” said Late—299, “quite in the fashion, for names.”

The governess stirred uneasily; the gentleman looked funny, smiling there!

“And what are you teaching them?”

“Reading, writing, and arithmetic, sir, and Bible stories.”

“Intelligent?... Ah! Not very. Truthful?... No! No children are.”

The governess twisted her hands. “Peter!” she said, “where’s your ball? We must go and look for it.”

“But I’ve got it, Miss Somers.”

“Oh, well, it’s too sharp, sitting here. Come along!”

She passed away, and Peter, Joan, and Michael trailed after her.

Late—299 smiled on; and a Pekinese, towing a stout old lady, smelled at his trousers.

“It’s my cat,” said Late—299. “Dogs and cats their pleasure is—”

Picking up the Pekinese, the stout old lady pressed it under her arm as though it were a bagpipe, and hurried on like a flustered goose.

Some minutes passed. A workman and his wife sat down beside him, and gazed at the Pagoda.

“Queer building!” said Late—299.

“Ah!” said the workman. “Japanese, they say!”

“Chinese, my friend. Good people, the Chinese—no regard for human life.”

“What’s that? Good—did you say?”

“Quite!”

“Eh?”

The workman’s wife peered round him.

“Come on, John! The sun gits in me eyes ’ere.”

The workman rose. “‘Good,’ you said, didn’t you? *Good* people?”

“Yes.”

The workman’s wife drew at his arm. “There, don’t get arguin’ with strangers. Come on!” The workman was drawn away....

A clock struck twelve. Late—299 got up and left the Gardens. Walking between small houses, he rang at the side entrance of a little shop.

“If your father’s still blind—I’ve come to read to him again.”

“Please, sir, he’ll always be.”

“So I supposed.”

On a horsehair sofa, below the dyed-red plumes of pampas grass, a short and stocky man was sitting, whittling at a wooden figure. He sniffed, and turned his sightless eyes towards his visitor; his square face in every line and bump seemed saying: ‘You don’t down me.’

“What are you making?” said Late—299.

“Christmas Eve. I’m cuttin’ out our Lord. I make ’em rather nice. Would you like this one?”

“Thank you.”

“Kep’ His end up well, our Lord, didn’t He? ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’—that means you got to love yourself. And He did, I think; not against Him, neither.”

“Easier to love your neighbours when you can’t see them, eh?”

“What’s that? D’you mind lendin’ me your face a minute? It’ll help me a lot with this ’ere. I make ’em lifelike, you know.”

Late—299 leaned forward, and the tips of the blind man’s fingers explored his features.

“’Igh cheekbones, eyes back in the ’ead, supraorbital ridges extra special, rather low forehead slopin’ to thick hair. Cornin’ down, two ’oilers under the cheekbones, thin nose a bit ’ooky, chin sharpish, no moustache. You’ve got a smile, ’aven’t you? And your own teeth? I should say you’d make a very good model. I don’t ’old with ’im always ’avin’ a beard. Would you like the figure ’angin’, or carryin’ the cross?”

“As you wish. D’you ever use your own face?”

“Not for’Im—for statesmen or ’eroes I do. I done one of Captain Scott with my face. Rather pugnacious, my style; yours is sharp, bit acid, suitable to saints, martyrs, and that. I’ll just go over you once more—then I’ll ’ave it all ’ere. Sharp neck; bit ’unchy in one shoulder; ears stick up a bit; tallish thin man, ain’t you, and throw your feet forward when you walk? Give us your ’and a minute. Bite your fingers, I see. Eyes blue, eh—with

pin-points to ’em—yes? Hair a bit reddish before it went piebald—that right? Thank you, much obliged. Now, if you like to read, I’ll get on with it.”

Late—299 opened the book.

... “‘But at last in the drift of time Hadleyburg had the ill-luck to offend a passing stranger, possibly without knowing it, certainly without caring, for Hadleyburg was sufficient unto itself and cared not a rap for strangers and their opinions. Still, it would have been well to make an exception in this one’s case, for he was a bitter man and revengeful.’”

“Ah!” interjected the blind man deeply, “there you ’ave it. Talkin’ of feelin’s, what gave you a fellow-feelin’ for me, if I may ask?”

“I can look at you, my friend, without your seeing me.”

“Eh! What about it with other people, then?”

“They can look at me without my seeing them.”

“I see! Misanthropical. Any reason for that?”

“Prison.”

“What oh! Outcast and rejected of men.”

“No. The other way on.”

The blind man ceased to whittle and scoop.

“I like independence,” he said; “I like a man that can go his own way. Ever noticed cats? Men are like dogs, mostly; only once in a way you get a man that’s like a cat. What were you, if it’s not a rude question. In the taxes?”

“Medico.”

“What’s a good thing for ’eartburn?”

“Which kind?”

“Wind, ain’t it? But I see your meanin’. Losin’ my sight used to burn my ’eart a lot; but I got over that. What’s the use? You couldn’t have any worse misfortune. It gives you a feelin’ of bein’ insured—like.”

“You’re right,” said Late—299, rising to go.

The blind man lifted his face in unison. “Got your smile on?” he said. “Just let me ’ave another feel at it, will you?”

Late—299 bent to the outstretched fingers.

“Yes,” said the blind man, “same with you—touched bottom. Next time you come I’ll ’ave something on show that’ll please you, I think; and thank you for readin’.”

“Let me know if it bores you.”

“I will,” said the blind man, following without movement the footsteps of his visitor that died away.

3 §

Christmas night—wild and windy, a shower spattering down in the street; Late—299 walking two yards before his wife, their son walking two yards behind his mother. A light figure, furred to the ears, in a doorway watching for them.

“Come along, darling. Sorry we had to bring him.”

“Of course you had to, Jack!”

“Look! He can’t even walk with mother. It’s a disease. He went to church to-day, and all through the sermon never took his eyes off—the poor old vicar nearly broke down.”

“What was it about?”

“Brotherly love. Mother says he doesn’t mean it—but it’s like—what’s that thing that stares?”

“A basilisk. I’ve been trying to put myself in his place, Jack. He must have swallowed blood and tears in there—ordered about like a dog, by common men, for three years nearly. If you don’t go under, you must become inhuman. This is better than if he’d come out crawling.”

“Perhaps. Look out—the rain! I’ll turn your hood up, darling.” A spattering shower, the whispering hushed....

A lighted open doorway, a red hall, a bunch of hanging mistletoe, a girl beneath, with bushy hair.

“Happy Christmas, Father!”

“Thanks. Do you want to be kissed?”

“As you like. Well, Mother darling! Hallo, you two! Come in! Roddy, take father’s coat.”

“How are you, sir? Beastly weather!”

“That was the advantage we had in prison. Weather never troubled us. ‘Peace and Goodwill’ in holly-berries! Very neat! They used to stick them up in there. Christianity is a really remarkable fraud, don’t you think?”...

Once again those four in the street; and the bells chiming for midnight service.

“What an evening!”

“Let them get out of hearing, Jack.”

“Worse than ever! My God, he’d turn the milk sour! And I thought liquor might make him possible. He drank quite a lot.”

“Only a few days now, and then!...”

“Do you agree with mother that he doesn’t mean it, Mabel?”

“Oh, yes, I do.”

“The way he sits and smiles! Why doesn’t he get himself a desert to smile in?”

“Perhaps he does...”

4 §

“’Ere you are!” said the blind man. “Best I can do under the circs. ’Ad a bit o’ trouble with the cross; got it too ’eavy, I’m afraid; but thought you’d rather carry it.”

“Quite a masterpiece!”

“Speaking serious?” said the blind man. “You could improve it with a box o’ colours; make it more ’uman-like.”

“I’ll do that.”

“I wouldn’t touch the face, nor the cross—leave ’em wooden; but the hair and the dress, and the blood from the crown o’ thorns might be all the better for a bit o’ brightenin’. How’s the man that corrupted’Adleyburg?”

Late—299 opened the book.

“‘... Goodson looked him over, like as if he was hunting for a place on him that he could despise the most; then he says: “So you are the Committee of Enquiry, are you?” Sawlsberry said that was about what he was. “H’m! Do they require particulars, or do you reckon a kind of general answer will do?” “If they require particulars I will come back, Mr. Goodson; I will take the general answer first.” “Very well, then; tell them to go to hell—I reckon that’s general enough. And I’ll give you some advice, Sawlsberry; when you come back for the particulars, fetch a basket to carry what’s left of yourself home in.’”

The blind man chuckled.

“Ah! I like that Mark Twain. Nice sense o’ humour—nothin’ sickly.”

“Bark and quinine, eh?”

“Bark and bite,” said the blind man. “What do you think of ’uman nature yourself?”

“Little or nothing.”

“And yet there’s a bit of all right about it, too. Look at you and me; we got our troubles; and ’ere we are—jolly as sandboys! Be self-sufficient, or you’ve got to suffer. That’s what you feel, ain’t it? Am I mistook, or did you nod?”

“I did. Your eyes look as if they saw.”

“Bright, are they? You and me could ’ave sat down and cried ’em out any time—couldn’t we? But we didn’t. That’s why I say there’s a bit of all right about us. Put the world from you, and keep your pecker up. When you can’t think worse of things than what you do, you’ll be ’appy—not before. That’s right, ain’t it?”

“Quite.”

“Took me five years. ’Ow long were you about it?”

“Nearly three.”

“Well, you ’ad the advantage of birth and edjucation; I can tell that from your voice—got a thin, mockin’ sound. I started in a barber’s shop; got mine in an accident with some ’air-curlers. What I miss most is not bein’ able to go fishin’. No one to take me. Don’t you miss cuttin’ people up?”

“No.”

“Well, I suppose a gent never gets a passion; I’d a perfect passion for fishin’. Never missed Sunday, wet or fine. That’s why I learned this carvin’—must ’ave an ’obby to go on with. Are you goin’ to write your ’istory? Am I wrong, or did you shake your ’ead?”

“I did. My hobby is watching the show go by.”

“That might ’ave suited me at one time—always liked to see the river flowin’ down. I’m a bit of a philosopher myself. You ain’t, I should say.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I’ve a fancy you want life to come to heel too much—misfortune of bein’ a gent, perhaps. Am I right?”

Late—299 closed the book and rose. “Pride !” he said.

“Ah!” said the blind man, groping with his eyes, “that’s meat and drink to you. Thought as much. Come again, if I don’t worry you.”

“And take you fishing?”

“Reelly? You will? Shake ’ands.”

Late—299 put out his hand. The blind man’s groped up and found it....

5§

“Wednesday again, is it, partner, if I’m not troublin’ you?”

“Wednesday it is.”

At the door of his house, with the ‘catch’ in a straw bag, the blind man stood a minute listening to his partner’s footsteps, then felt his way in to his horsehair sofa under the pampas grass. Putting his cold feet up under the rug, he heaved a sigh of satisfaction, and fell asleep.

Between the bare acacias and lilac-bushes of the little villas Late—299 passed on. Entering his house, he sought his study, and stretched his feet towards the fire, and the cat, smelling him fishy, sprang on to his knee.

“Philip, may I come in?”

“You may.”

“The servants have given notice. I wanted to say, wouldn’t you like to give this up and go abroad with me?”

“Why this sudden sacrifice?”

“Oh, Philip! You make it so hard for me. What do you really want me to do?”

“Take half my income, and go away.”

“What will you do, here, alone?”

“Get me a char. The cat and I love chars.”

“Philip!”

“Yes?”

“Won’t you tell me what’s in your heart? Do you want always to be lonely like this?”

Late—299 looked up.

“Reality means nothing to those who haven’t lived with it. I do.”

“But why?”

“My dear Bertha—that is your name, I think?”

“Oh, God! You are terrible!”

“What would you have me—a whining worm? Crawling to people I despise—squirming from false position to false position? Do you want humility; what is it you want?”

“I want you to be human.”

“Then you want what you have got. I am so human that I’ll see the world damned before I take its pity, or eat its salt. Leave me alone. I am content.”

“Is there nothing I can do?”

“Yes; stand out of my firelight...”

6 §

Two figures, in the dark outside, before the uncurtained window.
“Look, Mabel!”
“Be careful! He may see. Whisper !”
“The window’s shut.”
“Oh, why doesn’t he draw the blinds—if he must sit like that?”

“‘A desert dark without a sound....
And not a drop to eat or drink And a dark desert all around!’

Jack, I pity him.”

“He doesn’t suffer. It’s being fond of people makes you suffer. He’s got all he wants. Look at him.”

The firelight on the face—its points and hollows, its shining eyes, its stillness and intensity, its smile; and on the cat, hunched and settled in the curve of the warm body. And the two young people, shrinking back, pass on between small houses, clutching each other’s hands.

1923.

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