

A Marriage

By Ella D'Arcy

I

IN the upstairs room of a City restaurant two young men were finishing their luncheon. They had taken the corner table by the window, and as it was past two o'clock the room was fairly empty. There being no one at either of the tables next them, they could talk at their ease.

West, the elder of the two, was just lighting a cigarette. The other, Catterson, who, in spite of a thin moustache, looked little more than a boy, had ordered a cup of black coffee. When even a younger man than he was at present, he had passed a couple of years in Paris, and he continued, by the manner in which he wore his hair, by his taste in neckties, and by his preferences in food and drink, to pay Frenchmen the sincerest flattery that was in his power.

But to-day he let the coffee stand before him untasted. His young forehead was pushed up into horizontal lines, his full-lipped mouth was slightly open with anxious, suspended breath. He gazed away, through the red velvet lounges, through the gilt-framed mirrors, to the distant object of his thought.

West, leaning back in his seat, emitting arabesques and spirals
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of brown-grey smoke, watched him with interest rather than with sympathy, and could not repress a smile when Catterson, coming abruptly out of dreamland, turned towards him, to say: "You see, if it were only for the child's sake, I feel I ought to marry her, and the next may be a boy. I should like him to inherit the little property, small as it is. And I've no power to will it."

His voice was half decided, wholly interrogative, and West smiled. There had been a moment in all their conversations of the last six weeks, when some such remark from Catterson was sure to fall. Experience enabled West to anticipate its arrival, and he smiled to find his anticipation so accurately fulfilled.

"My dear chap, I see you're going to do it," he answered, "so it's useless for me to protest any more. But I'll just remind you of an old dictum, which, maybe, you'll respect, because it's in French: 'Ne faites jamais de votre maîtresse, votre femme.'"

West spoke lightly, uttering the quotation just because it happened to flash through his mind; but all the same, it was a fixed idea of his, that if you married a girl of "that sort," she was sure to discover, sooner or later, colossal vices; she was sure to kick over the traces, to take to drink, or to some other form of dissipation.

Catterson shrugged his shoulders, flushed, and frowned; then recovered his temper, and began again, stammeringly, tumultuously, his words tripping over one another in their haste. He always stammered a little in moments of emotion.

"But you d-don't know Nettie. She's not at all—s-she's quite different from what you think. Until she had the misfortune to meet with me, she was as good a girl as you could find."

"No, I don't know her, I admit," observed West, and smoked in silence.

"I have been thinking," Catterson said presently, "that I should like
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like you to come down to see her. I should like you to make her acquaintance, because then I am sure you would agree I am right. I do want to have your support and approval, you know."

West smiled again. It amused him to note the anxiety Catterson exhibited for his approval and support, yet he knew all the time that the young man was bent on marrying Nettie Hooper in spite of anything he could say.

But he understood the springs of the apparent contradiction. He understood Catterson fairly well, without being fond of him. They had been schoolmates. Chance lately, rather than choice on West's side, had again thrown them together; now the luncheon hour saw them in almost daily companionship. And, correcting his earlier impressions of the impulsive, sensitive, volatile little boy by these more recent ones, he read Catterson's as a weak, amiable, and affectionate nature; he saw him always anxious to stand well with his associates, to be liked and looked up to by his little world. To do as others do, was his ruling passion; what Brown, Jones, and Robinson might say of him, his first consideration. It was because at one time Robinson, Jones and Brown had been represented for him by a circle of gay young Frenchmen that he had thought it incumbent upon him, when opportunity offered, to tread in their footsteps. It was because he found his path set now within the respectable circles of British middle-class society, that his anomalous position was becoming a burden; that the double personality of married man and father in his riverside lodgings, of eligible bachelor in the drawing-rooms of Bayswater and Maida Vale, grew daily more intolerable to sustain. He could think of no easier way out of the dilemma than to make Nettie his wife, and let the news gradually leak out, that he had been married for the last two years.

Some

Some of his arguments in favour of the marriage—and he required many arguments to outweigh his consciousness of the *mésalliance*—were that, for all practical purposes, he was as good as married already. He could never give Nettie up; he must always provide for her and the child as long as he lived. And his present mode of life was full of inconveniences. He was living at Teddington under an assumed name, and it is not at all pleasant to live under an assumed name. At any moment one may be discovered, and an awkward situation may result.

These were some of his arguments. But then, too, he had developed the domestic affections to a surprising degree, and if his first passion for Nettie were somewhat assuaged, he had a much more tender feeling for her now than in the beginning. And he was devoted to his little daughter; a devotion which a few months ago he would have sworn he was incapable of feeling for any so uninteresting an animal as a baby. He reproached himself bitterly for having placed her at such a disadvantage in life as illegitimacy entails; he felt that he ought at least to give the expected child all the rights which a legal recognition can confer.

His chief argument, however, was that he had sinned, and that in marriage lay the only reparation; and let a man persuade himself that a certain course of action is the one righteous, the one honourable course to take—more particularly if it jumps with his own private inclinations—and nothing can deter him from it.

“Not even French proverbs,” laughed West into his beard.

“Come down and see her,” Catterson urged, and West, moved by a natural curiosity, as well as by a desire to oblige his friend, agreed to meet him that evening at Waterloo, that they might go down together.

His soul being eased through confession, Catterson regained at once the buoyant good spirits which were natural to him, but
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which, of late, secret anxieties and perturbation of mind had overshadowed completely. For when depressed he touched deeper depths of depression than his neighbour, in exact proportion to the unusual height and breadth of his gaiety in his moments of elation.

Now he enlivened the journey out from town, by cascades of exuberant talk, filling up the infrequent pauses with snatches of love-songs : the music-hall love-songs of the day.

Yet as the train approached Teddington, he fell into silence again. A new anxiety began to dominate him : the anxiety that West should be favourably impressed by Nettie Hooper. His manner became mere nervous, his stammer increased ; a red spot burned on either cheek. He could not keep his thoughts or his speech from the coming interview.

"She doesn't talk much," he explained, as they walked along the summer sunset roads ; "she's very shy ; but you mustn't on that account imagine she's not glad to see you. She's very much interested in you. She wants to meet you very much."

"Of course she's not what's called a lady," he began again ; "her people don't count at all. She, herself, wants to drop them. But you would never discover she wasn't one. She has a perfect accent, a perfect pronunciation. And she is so wonderfully modest and refined. I assure you, I've known very few real ladies to compare to her."

He eulogised her economy, her good management. "My money goes twice as far since she has had the spending of it. She's so clever, and you can't think how well she cooks. She has learned it from the old lady with whom we lodge. Mrs. Baker is devoted to Nettie, would do anything for her, thinks there's no one like her in the world. And then she makes all her own clothes, and is better dressed than any girl I see, although they only cost her a few shillings."

He sang the praises of her sweetness, of her gentleness, of her domesticity. "She's so absolutely unselfish; such a devoted mother to our little girl; and yet, she's scarcely more than a child herself. She won't be nineteen till next April."

All which encomiums and dozens more wearied West's ear, without giving him any clear conception of their subject. He was thankful when Catterson suddenly broke off with, "Here we are, this is Rose Cottage."

West saw the usual, creeper-covered, French-windowed, sham-romantic, and wholly dilapidated little villa, which realises the ideal of all young lovers for a first nest. To more prosaic minds it suggested earwigs and spiders in summer, loose tiles and burst pipes in winter, and general dampness and discomfort all the year round.

It stood separated from the road by a piece of front garden, in which the uncut grass waved fairy spear-heads, and the unpruned bushes matted out so wide and thick, as to screen off completely the sitting-room from the passers-by.

The narrow gravel path leading up to the door was painted with mosses, the little trellis-work porch was giving way beneath the weight of vine-wood and rose-stem which lay heavy upon it; the virginia-creeper over the window-top swayed down to the ground in graceful diminishing tresses; the bed-room windows above blinked tiny eyes beneath heavy eyelids of greenery. An auctioneer would have described the place as a bijou bower of verdure, and West's sense of humour was tickled by the thoroughly conventional background it provided for the conventional *solitude à deux*.

Catterson rang that he might give notice of West's arrival, and a thin bell responded to his pull from the interior of the house. It was succeeded by the tapping of high heels along the oilcloth, the

the door opened, and a very little woman, in a dark woollen gown, stood within the threshold.

The nurse, the landlady, the servant, perhaps? West told himself that *this* could not be Nettie Hooper, this plain little creature, who was surely so much older than the girl Catterson had described.

But the next instant Catterson said, "Nettie, this is my great friend, West," and the little woman had given him a lifeless hand, while she welcomed him in curious, drawling tones, "I'm so glad to see you; Jack is always talking about you; do come in."

He was certain she was plain, but he had no time to localise her plainness—to decide whether it lay in feature, complexion, or expression, for her back was towards him; he was following her into the sitting-room, and he looked down upon a dark head of hair, a meagre figure, a dowdy home-made gown.

"I hope you've got a good dinner for us," Catterson began at once, stammering over every consonant. "I don't know how West may be feeling, but I'm uncommonly hungry myself."

"You didn't give me much time," she answered; "your wire only came at four. I've got you some fish, and a steak."

"And a salad? good! Nettie's steaks are ripping, West, you'll see."

"Oh, but Mrs. Baker is going to cook the dinner to-night; I didn't think you'd wish me to leave you and Mr. West, like that."

During these not very illuminating remarks, West was revising his first impressions. He confessed that the girl had nice features, regular, well-proportioned; that, though she lacked colour, her complexion was of a healthy paleness; that her expression could hardly be called disagreeable, for the difficulty lay in deciding whether she had any expression at all. All the same, she was plain; flat-chested, undeveloped, with clumsy feet and hands.

"You

"You have a—quiet little place here," he said to her to make conversation. He had been going to say "a charming, little place," but a glance round the dark, musty-smelling room was too much for his powers of unverbatim.

"Yes, it's almost too quiet, while Jack is away. Don't you think, Mr. West, I'm very good to stay here by myself all day long?"

She had the oddest voice, very drawling, measured, inanimate. It said nothing at all to the listener beyond the mere actual words.

"Come, you've got baby," said Catterson, laughing, "let alone Mrs. Baker."

"As though one's landlady and a baby of seventeen months were all the companionship one could require!" She laughed too.

She was almost pretty when she laughed, and West began to perceive that after all she might be no older than Catterson had said. She had the abundant crisp-growing hair, the irreproachable smoothness of skin found only in youth's company. Her eyes were really remarkable eyes, large, of a bluish-grey, clear as water, with the pupils very big.

Yes, she was exceedingly pretty. It took you some time to see it perhaps, but once you had seen it you wondered you could have overlooked it before. Yet West had no sooner admitted the fact than he began to qualify it. He said there was absolutely nothing in her face that appealed to your imagination; that such very limpid eyes go with a cold or a shallow nature, that such very large pupils denote either want of intelligence or want of strength.

And there was undeniably something common in her physiognomy, though at first he could not decide in which particular trait it lay. Was it in the cut of the nostril, the line of the mouth? No, he thought it was to be found, rather, in a
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certain displeasing shininess of surface. Her cheek had less of the velvety texture of the peach, than the glaze of the white-heart cherry. The wings of the nose, its slightly aquiline bridge, reflected the light in little patches.

If her hair was unusually thick, it was coarse too, and of a uniform dark-brown colour. The front, cut short, seemed to rebel against the artificial curling to which it was subjected. Instead of lying on her forehead in rings as was no doubt intended, here was an undistinguishable fuzz, while there a straight mesh stood out defiantly.

She had pretty ears and execrably ugly hands, in the thick fingers of which, with squat nails broader than they were long, in the tough and wrinkled skin, the want of race of her ancestors was easily to be read. On the left hand she wore a plain gold ring.

So soon as the first fillip or greeting was spent, she became noticeable for her silences; had a way of letting every subject drop; and expressed no opinions, or only those universal ones which every woman may express without danger of self-revelation. For instance, when West asked whether she cared for reading, she said she was passionately fond of it; but when pressed as to what she liked best to read, she mentioned, after considerable hesitation, *East Lynne* and *Shakespeare*.

As Catterson had said, there was no fault to find with her pronunciation or her accent; or what faults there were, were faults he himself was guilty of. West realised that she was quick in imitation, and, up to a certain point, receptive. She had carefully modelled her deportment on Catterson's, held her knife and fork, lifted her glass, and used her table napkin in precisely the same way he did. When, later on, West had occasion to see her handwriting he found it a curiously close copy of Catterson's own.

Women,

Women, whose characters are still undeveloped, and whose writing therefore remains unformed, almost invariably do adopt, for a time, the handwriting of their lovers.

There was nothing in her manners or appearance, to indicate her precise social origin, nor did West, by-the-by, ever learn anything definite concerning it. Catterson was very sensitive on the point, and only once made the vaguest, the most cursory reference to how he had met her.

Still less was there anything about Nettie Hooper to fit in with West's preconceived theories. As she sat there, placid, silent, quiet, he had to admit that as Catterson had said, she was not at all the sort of girl he had imagined her to be. And yet

He made the above mental notes during the course of the dinner, while Catterson's nervousness gradually wore off, and his gaiety returned. His infatuation for Nettie, led him, when in her presence, to the conviction that every one else must be equally infatuated too.

The dining-room was small, and like the parlour looked out through a French window over a tangled slip of garden. The furniture consisted chiefly of Japanese fans, but there was also a round table, and at least three chairs. The arrangements, generally, were of a picnic character, and when Mrs. Baker, a stout and loquacious old body, brought in the dishes, she stayed awhile to join in the conversation, addressing them all impartially as "My dear," and Nettie in particular as "My dear Life."

But the meal, if simple, was satisfying, and Nettie herself left the table to make the coffee, as Catterson had taught her to do, in French fashion. He brought out from the chiffoniere a bottle of green Chartreuse, and Nettie handed cigarettes and found an ash-tray. She was full of ministering attentions.

While they smoked and talked, and she sat silent, her limpid eyes

eyes fixed mostly on Catterson, although every now and then, West knew they were turned upon him, wails were heard from upstairs.

"It's baby, poor little soul," said Nettie, rising. "Please Jack, may I go and bring her down?"

She presently returned with a flannel-gowned infant in her arms. The child had just the same large, limpid, blue-grey eyes as the mother, with just the same look in them. She fixed West with the relentless, unswerving stare of childhood, and not all her father's blandishments could extract a smile.

Nettie, kissing the square-toed, pink feet, addressed her as "Blossom," and "Dear little soul," then sat tranquilly nursing her, as a child might nurse a doll.

She had really many of a child's ways, and when Catterson, at the end of the evening, put on his hat to accompany West to the station, she asked in her long, plaintive drawl, "May I come, too, Jack?" exactly as a child asks permission of parent or master. She put her head back again into the dining-room a moment after leaving it. "What shall I put on, my cloak or my cape?" she said; "and must I change my shoes?"

Catterson turned to West with a smile, which asked for congratulations. "You see how docile she is, how gentle? And it's always the same. It's always my wishes that guide her. She never does anything without asking my opinion and advice. I don't know how a man could have a better wife. I know I should never find one to suit me better. But now you've seen her for yourself, you've come over to my opinion, I feel sure? You've got nothing further to urge against my marrying her, have you?"

West was saved the embarrassment of a reply by the reappearance of Nettie in outdoor things, and Catterson was too satisfied

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in his own mind with the effect she must have produced, to notice the omission.

He talked gaily on indifferent matters until the train moved out of the station, and West carried away with him a final vignette of the two young people standing close together beneath the glare of a gas-lamp, Catterson with an arm affectionately slipped through the girl's. His thin, handsome face was flushed with excitement and self-content. The demure little figure beside him, that did not reach up to his shoulder, in neat black coat and toque, stared across the platform up to West, from limpid, most curious eyes.

What the devil was the peculiarity of those eyes, he asked himself impatiently? and hammered out the answer to the oscillations of the carriage, the vibration of the woodwork, the flicker of the lamp, as the train rumbled through the night and jerked up at flaring stations.

Beautiful as to shape and colour, beautiful in their fine dark lashes, in their thinly pencilled brows, these strange eyes seemed to look at you and ostentatiously to keep silence; to thrust you coldly back, to gaze through you and beyond you, as if with the set purpose of avoiding any explanation with your own.

It was this singularity which in the shock of first sight had repelled, which had shed over the face an illusory plainness, which had suggested age and experience, so that it had taken West an appreciable time to discover that Nettie Hooper was in reality quite young, and exceedingly pretty. But he had learned on a dozen previous occasions, that the first instantaneous, unbiased impression is the one to be trusted. Especially in so far as concerns the eyes. The eyes are very literally the windows of the soul.

II

Three years later, West and two men who don't come into this story at all, were spending the month of August up the river. An ill-advised proceeding, for the weather, so far, had proved deplorably wet, as the weather in August too often does, and of all sad places in wet weather, the river is incomparably the saddest.

But they had hired their boat, they had made their arrangements, dates were fixed, and places decided on. With the thoroughly British mental twist that to change your plans is to show inconsistency, and therefore weakness, West's companions were determined to carry these plans out to their prearranged end.

He scoffed at their mulishness, but submitted nevertheless; and following their example he rowed with bent head and set teeth through the continually falling rain, or sat, in their society during interminable hours waiting for it to cease, in an open boat beneath a dripping elm-tree. And as he gazed out over the leaden sheet of pock-marked water, he found amusement in telling himself that here at least was a typically national way of taking a holiday.

Nor, after all, did it always rain. There were occasional days of brilliant, if unstable sunshine, when the stream ran dimpling between its banks of sweet flag and loose-strife; when the sand-martins skimmed over the water with their pittering cry; when the dabchick, as the boat stole upon her, dived so suddenly, remained under for so long, and rose again so far off, that but for a knowledge of her habits, you would pronounce it a genuine case of bird suicide.

It was on one such a sunny, inspiring Saturday, that a twenty
mile

mile pull from Maidenhead brought them by afternoon in sight of the picturesque old bridge at Sonning. Here, in Sonning, they were to pass the night and stay over till Monday. For here one of the men had an aunt, and he was under strict maternal orders to dine with her on Sunday.

There was the usual difference of opinion as to which of the two inns they should put up at, the White Hart being voted too noisy, the French Horn condemned as too swagger. But the question was settled by the White Hart, which you reach first on the Berkshire bank, proving full; they accordingly pulled round the mill-water on the right, to try their luck at the French Horn.

For those who do not know it, this may be described as one of the prettiest of riverside inns; a cosy-looking, two-storied house, with a wide verandah, and a lawn sloping down to the water's edge. Beneath the trees on either side, tea was set out on wicker tea-tables, and each table had its encircling group of gay frocks and scarlet sunshades. It presented a Watteau-like picture of light and shadow and colour, the artistic value of which was increased by three conspicuous figures, which took the spectator's eye straight to the centre of the foreground.

A man, a girl, and a little child stood together, just above the wooden landing-steps, and a Canadian canoe, brilliant with newness and varnish, flaring with flame-coloured cushions, rocked gently on the water at their feet.

The young man held the painter in his hand; was dressed in immaculate white flannel, wore a pink and white striped shirt, and a waist-handkerchief of crimson silk.

The girl was the boating-girl of the stage. Where the rushes fringed the lawn you looked instinctively for footlights. The open-work silk stockings, the patent leather evening shoes, the silver belt

belt compressing a waist of seventeen inches, were all so thoroughly theatrical. So was her costume of pale blue and white; so was the knot of broad ribbon fastening her sailor collar; so was the Jack Tar cap, with its blue and silver binding, set slightly on one side of her dark head. The child by her side was dressed in white embroidered muslin and a sunbonnet.

"I say, West," cried the man who steered, "you who know all the actresses, tell us who's that little girl there, with the kid."

West, who was sculling, turned his head.

"Oh, damn! it's Mrs. Catterson," he said, with the emphasis of a surprise, which is a disagreeable one.

Since the marriage, he had not seen very much of Nettie Catterson, although he was godfather to the boy. For one thing, it is difficult to see much of people who live in the suburbs; and though Catterson had moved twice, first from Teddington to Kingston, then from Kingston to Surbiton Hill, where he was now a householder, Surbiton remained equally out of West's way.

But there was another reason for the evasion of the constant invitations which Catterson pressed upon him in the City. It had not taken him long to perceive that he was far from being *persona grata* to Mrs. Catterson. Whether this was to be accounted for by the average woman's inevitable jealousy of her husband's friends, whether it was she suspected his opposition to her marriage, or whether she could not forgive him for having known her while she was passing as Mrs. Grey, he could not determine. Probably her dislike was compounded of all three reasons, with a preponderance, he thought, in favour of the last.

For with marriage, the possession of a semi-detached villa at Surbiton, and the entrance into such society as a visit from the clergyman's wife may open the door to, Nettie had become of an amazing conventionality, and surpassing Catterson himself

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in the matter of deference to Mrs. Grundy, she seemed to have set herself the task of atoning for irregularity of conduct in the past, by the severest reprobation of all who erred in the present, and West's ribaldry in conversation, his light views on serious subjects, and his habitual desecration of the Sunday were themes for her constant animadversions and displeasure.

It was the rapid *résumé* of these, his demerits with Mrs. Catterson, which had called forth his energetic "Damn!"

At the same moment that he recognised her, Catterson recognised him, and sung out a welcome. The boat was brought alongside, and he was received by Nettie with a warmth which surprised him. His companions, with hasty cap-lifting, escaped across the lawn to get drinks at the bar, and secure beds for the night.

He looked after them with envy; and had to accept Nettie's invitation to tea.

"We were just quarrelling, Jack and I," she said, "where to have it. He wants to go down to Marlow, and I want it here. Now you've come, that settles it. We'll have it here."

Catterson explained his reason: as Nettie wished to go out in the canoe again, they ought to go now while it was fine, as it was sure to rain later.

Nettie denied the possibility of rain with an asperity which informed West that he had arrived on the crest of a domestic disagreement, and he understood at once the cordiality of his reception.

She had developed none of the tempestuous views which his theories had required; on the contrary she appeared to be just the ordinary wife, with the ordinary contempt for her husband's foibles and wishes. She could talk of the trials of housekeeping and the iniquities of servants as to the manner born, and always
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imitative had lately given back the ideals of Surbiton with the fidelity of a mirror. But there were curious undercurrents beneath this surface smoothness, of which West now and then got an indication.

He renewed his acquaintance with Gladys, the little girl, who periodically forgot him, and asked after his godson. But the subject proved unfortunate.

Nettie's mouth took menacing lines. "Cyril, I'm sorry to say, is a very naughty boy. I don't know what we're going to do with him, I'm sure."

West couldn't help smiling. "It's somewhat early days to despair of his ultimate improvement, perhaps? How old is he? Not three till December, I think?" He told himself that the open-hearted, sensitive, impulsive little fellow ought not to be very difficult to manage.

"He's old enough to be made to obey," she said, with a glance at Catterson, which suggested some contentious background to the remark.

"Oh, well, one doesn't want to break the child's spirit," Catterson protested.

"I think his spirit will have to be broken very soon," asserted Nettie, "if he goes on being as troublesome as he has been lately."

Gladys, sitting by her mother's side, drank in everything that was said. She was now five years old, and a little miniature of Nettie. She turned her clear and stolid eyes from one to another.

"Cyril's a naughty little boy," she observed in a piping drawl, a thin exaggeration of Nettie's own, and making impressive pauses between the words. "He's never going to be tooked up the river like me. Is he, mother?"

"If you want to be a good little girl," observed Catterson, "you'll

“you’ll put your bread and jam into your mouth, instead of feeding your ear with it as you are doing at present.”

“Cyril don’t have no jam for *his* tea,” she began again, “’cos he’s so naughty. He only has dry bread an’——”

“Come, come, don’t talk so much, Gladys,” said her father impatiently, “or perhaps you won’t get ‘tooked’ up the river again either.”

Nettie put an arm round her.

“Poor little soul! Mother’ll take her up the river always, won’t she? We don’t mind what Papa says, do we?”

“Silly old Papa!” cried the child, throwing him one of Nettie’s own looks, “we don’t mind what he says, we don’t.”

All the same, when tea was over, and they prepared to make a start in the canoe, West their still somewhat unwilling guest, Catterson put his foot down and refused to take Gladys with them for various reasons. Four couldn’t get into the canoe with safety or comfort; the child had been out all day, and had already complained of sickness from the constant swaying motion; but chiefly because it was undoubtedly going to rain. Nettie gave in with a bad grace, and the little girl was led off, roaring, by her maid.

Nettie had complained that the tea was cold, and that she could not drink it. She had insisted on Catterson having a second brew brought. Then when this came had pushed away her cup, and pronounced it as unpalatable as before. But no sooner were they some way down stream, than she said she was thirsty, and asked for ginger beer.

West remembered Catterson telling him long ago, how Nettie would suddenly wake up thirsty in the middle of the night, and how he would have to get up and go down to forage for something to quench her thirst. It had seemed to Catterson, in
those

those days, very amusing, pathetic, and childlike, and he had told of it with evident relish and pride. But the little perversity which is so attractively provoking in the young girl, often comes to provoke without any attractiveness in the wife and mother.

Catterson turned the canoe when Nettie spoke, saying they had best go and get what she wanted at the White Hart, but West fancied he looked annoyed and slightly ashamed.

After this little episode, because of the ominous appearance of the sky, it was agreed to keep up stream towards the lock. But before they reached it the first great drops of rain were splashing into the water about them. The lock-keeper made them welcome. He and Catterson were old acquaintances. Having set out for them, and dusted down three Windsor chairs, he went to spread a tarpaulin over the canoe.

The darkness of the little room grew deeper every instant. Then came an illuminating flash followed by a shattering thunder-peal. The ear was filled with the impetuous downrush of the rain.

"There! Why wouldn't you let me bring Gladys?" cried Nettie. "Poor little soul, she's so terrified of thunder, she'll scream herself into fits."

"She's right enough with Annie," said Catterson, somewhat too confidently.

Nettie replied that Annie was a perfect fool, more afraid of a storm than the child herself. "Jack, you'll have to go back and comfort her. Jack, you *must* go!"

"My dear, in this rain!" he expostulated. "How can you want me to do anything so mad?"

But Nettie had worked herself up into a paroxysm of maternal solicitude, of anguish of mind. West asked himself if it were entirely genuine, or partly a means of punishing Catterson for his self-assertion a while ago.

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"Since you're so afraid of a little rain," she concluded contemptuously, "I'll go myself. I'm not going to let the child die in hysterics."

She made a movement as though to leave the house. Catterson drew her back, and turning up the collar of his coat, went out. But before the canoe was fairly launched, West knew he must be wet to the skin. He stood and watched him paddling down against the closely serried, glittering lances of the rain, until lost in a haze of watery grey.

Then, for his life, he could not refrain from speaking. "I think it's very unwise for Jack to get wet like that. It's not as though he were particularly strong. He comes of a delicate, short-lived family, as you probably know?"

But Nettie only stared silently before her as though she had not heard.

And there, in silence, they remained for another twenty minutes, while the rain flooded earth and river, and the thunder rumbled to and fro over the sky.

Nettie maintained an absolute silence, and West, leaning against the window-frame, beguiled the time in studying her with fleeting, inoffensive glances. He again noted the ugliness of her hands, to which, as they lay folded in her lap, the flashing of a half-hoop of fine diamonds, now worn above the wedding-ring, carried first his attention. But when he raised his eyes to her small, pale face, he decided she was prettier than she used to be, more strikingly pretty at first sight. She had learned, perhaps, to bring out her better points. He thought she dressed her hair more becomingly; three years steady application of curling irons had at last induced it to lie in softer curls. Five years of married life had in no wise dimmed the transparency of her skin. Not a line recorded an emotion whether of pleasure or of pain. If she had

had lived through any psychic experiences, they had not left the faintest mark behind. And it was partly the immobility of countenance by which this smoothness of surface was maintained, which led West again to qualify his favourable verdict, just as he had done before.

He began to think that the predominant note in her character was coldness, heartlessness even. He remembered, not so long ago, hearing her relate as though it were a good story, how meeting old Mrs. Baker one day in Kingston Market, she had passed her by with an unrecognising stare. Yet the old woman had been devoted to Nettie, as she herself used to boast; a certain feeling of gratitude, of kindness might have been looked for in return.

But there must have been others, West told himself, to whom she owed a greater debt—the relations, or friends, who had brought her up, clothed her and fed her until the day she had met with Catterson. She never referred to these others, she never let slip the smallest illusion to her early life; she held her secrets with a tenacity which was really uncommon; but it was evident that she had turned her back on all who had ever befriended her with the same cold ease she had shown to Mrs. Baker.

She was fond, apparently, of her little girl, but this particular affection was no contradiction to her general want of it; she saw in the child a reduplication of herself. For Gladys was the image of her mother, just as the little boy was Catterson over again; very nervous, sensitive, and eager for love and approval.

West mused over the curious want of sympathy Nettie had always displayed for the boy. It amounted almost to dislike. He had never been able to win her good word from the day of his birth, and his natural timidity was greatly augmented by her

severe treatment. West was inclined to believe the reason to be a sort of jealousy for Gladys ; that she resented the fact that Cyril was legitimate ; that he would inherit under his grandfather's will, while the little girl, the first born, the preferred child, could not.

Catterson had never alluded to the subject, but for all that, West knew that he was profoundly hurt by the difference Nettie made between the children. If he himself made any in his heart, and West said it would be only natural if he loved Cyril most, who adored his father and impulsively showed it, rather than Gladys who always coldly repulsed his overtures of affection, at least in his conduct towards them he never let it appear. He even seemed to overlook Cyril a little, having learned by experience probably, what were the consequences of paying him too much attention. Cyril was always left at home, while Gladys accompanied her parents everywhere.

Studying Nettie's physiognomy, tracing the lines of the mouth, the slightly backward drawn nostrils, the hard insensitive hands, West found himself rejoicing he did not stand in his poor little godson's shoes.

The storm was over, the sun was out again, and Nettie rising, suggested they should go. They crossed over the top of the lock-gates, picked their way between the puddles of the towing-path, and so back over Sonning Bridge to the hotel.

Catterson was in his room changing his wet clothes, and Nettie went up to him. West found Gladys sitting in the verandah beside her nurse, tranquilly playing with a doll.

"Well, babe," said he, in friendly tones, "were you very much frightened by the thunder and lightning just now?"

But she did not answer, she merely fixed her limpid eyes on his, thrusting him back with their coldly negative stare. Then, ostentatiously, she re-absorbed herself in her game.

The next morning kept Catterson in bed with a bad cold and West sooner than pass the day in the vicinity of Nettie, persuaded the nephew to abandon the aunt and the dinner, and both men into the extraordinary inconsistency of pushing on to Streatley.

III

One black morning in December, West remembered, for no reason at all, that it was the birthday of Cyril his godson Cyril to-day entered on his fifth year, and West found himself making the usual "damned silly reflections" on the flight of time. Dismissing these as stale and unprofitable, he began to wonder what present he could take the boy. He tried to remember what he himself had liked at the age of four, but he could recall nothing of that antediluvian period. He thought of a book, a paint-box, a white fur rabbit, but the delights of painting and reading were surely beyond Cyril's years, while the Bunny was perhaps too infantile. Finally, he set his face westward, trusting to find inspiration in the windows of the shops he passed. The heavenly smell of chocolate which greeted him at Buszard's made him decide on a big packet of bon-bons. He knew from previous experience with the Catterson children, that chocolates were sure to be appreciated.

The Cimmerian morning had dragged its course through brown, orange, and yellow hours, to an afternoon of misty grey. But West nevertheless felt inclined for walking. As he crossed the park diagonally from the Marble Arch to Queen's Gate, his thoughts outran his steps, and were already with the Cattersons.

They had moved again, and now lived in South Kensington.

Nettie

Nettie had become very intimate with a certain Mrs. Reade, whose acquaintance she owed to a week spent in the same hotel. The two young women had struck up an effusive friendship, based on a similarity of taste in dress and amusement, Mrs. Reade supplying the model for Nettie's faithful imitation. She copied her manners, she adopted her opinions and ideas. Mrs. Reade had declared it was impossible to live so far out of town as Surbiton. The Cattersons therefore disposed of the lease of their house, and took one close to Mrs. Reade's in Astwood Place.

Catterson had left his pretty suburban garden with the more reluctance that he disliked the Reads, considered the husband common, the wife loud, vulgar, bad style. But he had told West at the time, there was no price too high to pay for the purchase of domestic peace.

He was peaceably inclined by nature, but of late, any nervous energy which might have been contentiously employed was used up in fighting off the various trifling ailments that continuously beset him. He was always taking cold; now it was lumbago, now a touch of congestion, now a touch of pleurisy. He spent half his days at home in the doctor's hands. Nettie made his bad health the ostensible reason for quitting Surbiton. The damp air rising from the river didn't suit him.

Town suited her, as she expressed it, "down to the ground," and following in Mrs. Reade's wake, she became one of the immense crowd of smartly-gowned nobodies, who, always talking as if they were somebodies, throng fashionable shops, cycle in the Park, and subscribe to Kensington Town Hall dances. It was far away from the days when she lived in lodgings at Teddington, made her own clothes, and cooked her own dinner.

Now she kept four maids, whom she was constantly changing. West seldom found the door opened by the same girl thrice.

Nettie

Nettie was an exacting mistress, and had no indulgence for the class from which presumably she had sprung. Her servants were expected to show the perfection of angels, the capacity for work of machines, and the servility of slaves. And she was always detecting imperfections, laziness, or covert impertinence of manner or speech. Every six weeks or so there was a domestic crisis, and Mary or Jane left in tears, and without a character.

West could generally guess from the expression of Jane's or Mary's face how long she had been in Astwood Place. Disappointment, harassment, and sullen discontent were the stages through which each new comer passed before reaching the tearful catastrophe.

From the serene appearance of the young person who to-day let him in, West judged she was but recently arrived. "Mrs. Catterson was out," for which he was not sorry; but "the Master was at home," which he had expected, having heard in the City that Catterson had not been at his office for some days.

He found him huddled up over the drawing-room fire, spreading out his thin hands to the blaze. Half lost in the depths of the armchair, sitting with rounded shoulders and sunken head, he seemed rather some little shrunken sexagenarian than a man still under thirty.

Gladys, with a picture-book open on her knee, sat on a stool against the fender. She did not move as West came in, but raising her eyes considered him, as was her wont, with a steadfast neutrality.

Catterson, turning, jumped up to greet him with something of his old buoyancy of manner; but the change which a few weeks had made in his face gave West a fresh shock. Nor could he disguise it sufficiently quickly—the painful impression.

"You

"You think I'm looking ill, eh?" asserted Catterson, but with an eagerness which pleaded for a denial.

West lied instantly and heartily, but Catterson was not taken in.

"You think it's all U P with me, I see," he said, returning to the chair, and his former attitude of dejection.

This was so exaggerated a statement of his thoughts that West tried absolute candour.

"I don't think you're looking very fit," he said; "but what you want is change. This dark, damp, beastly weather plays the deuce with us all. You should run down to Brighton for a few days. A man was telling me only last night that Brighton all this week has been just a blaze of sunshine."

"Oh, Brighton!" Catterson repeated, hopelessly, "I'm past that." With the finger-tip of one hand he kept probing and pressing the back of the other as it lay open upon his knee, searching for symptoms of the disease he most dreaded.

To change the channel of his thoughts, West turned to the little girl who still mutely envisaged him.

"Well, Gladys, have you forgotten, as usual, who I am?"

"No, I haven't . . . you're Mithter Wetht," she told him, the piping drawl now complicated by a lisp, due to the fact that she had lost all her front teeth.

"Where's Sonny?" he asked her. "I've got something for him," and he put the packet of sweets down on the table by his elbow.

She reflected a moment as to who Sonny might be; then, "Thyril's a naughty boy," she said. "He'th had a good . . . whipping . . . and hath been put to bed."

"Oh poor old chap!" West exclaimed, ruefully, "and on his birthday too. What has he done?"

But Gladys only repeated, "He'th a . . . very . . . naughty boy,"

boy," in tones of dogmatic conviction. She seemed to detect the guest's sympathy with the culprit, and to resent it.

Voices and laughter were heard on the stairs. Nettie entered in her bonnet and furs, preceded by a big, overdressed woman, whom West easily identified as Mrs. Reade. They had been shopping, and both were laden with small, draper's parcels.

Nettie did not seem pleased to find the drawing-room occupied. She gave West a limp hand without looking at him, which was one of her exasperating habits when put out, and then she attacked her husband for keeping up so big a fire. The heat of the room was intolerable, she said ; it was enough to make any one ill. She threw off her wraps with an exaggeration of relief, peevishly altered the position of a chair which West had pushed aside inadvertently, and began to move about the room, in the search, as he knew well, of some fresh grievance. Catterson followed her for a second or two with tragic eyes. Then he turned to the fire again. "To me it seems very cold," he murmured ; "I've not been warm all day."

Mrs. Reade declared he should take to "byking." That would warm him ; there was nothing in the world like it. "Indeed unless it maims you for life, it cures every evil that flesh is heir to.

"But I suppose the chances are in favour of the maiming?" West asked her.

She laughed hilariously at this, and though she was certainly vulgar, as Catterson had complained, West couldn't help liking her. He always did like the women who laughed at his little jokes ; (Mrs. Catterson never laughed at them). Besides, she was so obviously healthy and good-natured ; handsome too, although you saw that in a few years, she would become too fat.

Nettie wondered why on earth Jack couldn't have had tea ready,

ready, pulled violently at the bell, and began to examine some patterns of silk she had brought home with her for the selection of an evening gown. Her lap was presently filled with little oblong pieces of black and coloured brocades.

"The green is exquisite, isn't it, Mimi?" she appealed to her friend, "but do you think it would suit me? Wouldn't it make me look too pale? The heliotrope is sweet too, but then I had a gown last year almost that very shade. People would say I had only had it cleaned or turned. Perhaps, after all, I had better have black? I've not had a black frock for a long time, and it's always so smart-looking, isn't it?"

Mrs. Reade thought that in Nettie's place she should choose the green, and have it made up with myrtle velvet and cream guipure. An animated discussion of dressmaking details began, during which the men sat, perforce, silent.

Gladys, meanwhile, had come over to the table on which the chocolates lay, where she stood, industriously picking open the paper.

Catterson presently caught sight of this.

"Gladys!" he exclaimed, with the sharp irritability of ill-health.

She had just popped a fat bon-bon into her mouth, and she remained petrified for a moment by so unaccustomed a thing as a rebuke. Then for convenience sake, she took the sweet out again in her thumb and finger, and burst into sobs of anger and surprise.

Nettie was equally surprised and angry. "What are you thinking of, Jack, frightening the poor child by shouting at her like that?"

"But did you see what she was doing, my dear, meddling with West's property?"

"Mr. West

"Mr. West shouldn't leave his sweets about on the table if he doesn't want the child to have them. Naturally, she thought they were for her."

"Not at all. She knew they were for Cyril. She heard West say so."

"After Cyril's behaviour to me this morning I certainly shall not allow him to have them. And I don't approve of sweets anyway. It ruins the children's teeth. I wish Mr. West wouldn't bring them so often."

This was sufficiently ungracious, and West's answer was sufficiently foolish; "Perhaps you wish I wouldn't bring myself so often either?" said he.

"I've no doubt we could manage to get on just as well without you," she retorted, and there were worlds of insult concentrated in the tone.

The only effectual answer would have been immediate departure, but consideration for Catterson held West hesitant. It is always because of their affection for the husband that the wife finds it so particularly easy, and perhaps so agreeable, to insult his friends. She offers them their choice between perpetual banishment and chunks of humble-pie.

Catterson put an end to the situation himself.

"Let's get away out of this, West," he said, with flushed cheeks and shaking voice, "come down to my study."

Here, the change of atmosphere brought on a fit of coughing, to which West listened with a *serrement de cœur*. In his mind's eye he saw Catterson again, vividly, as he had been a few years back; very gay and light-hearted, full of pranks and tricks. Always restless, always talking, always in tip-top spirits; when he fell in love, finding expression for the emotion in the whistling and singing of appropriate love-ditties, the music-hall love-ditties of the day.

The

The foolish refrain of one of these recurred to West, ding-dong, pertinaciously at his ear :—

“ They know me well at the County Bank,
Cash is better than fame or rank,
Then hey go lucky ! I'll marry me ducky,
The Belle of the Rose and Crown.”

And now Catterson, with pinched features, sunken eyes, and contracted chest, sat there pouring out a flood of bitterness against himself, life, and the gods for the granting of his prayer.

“ You remember Nettie before I married her ? Did she not appear the gentlest, the sweetest, the most docile girl in the world ? Who would ever have imagined she could have learned to bully her husband and insult his friends like this ?

“ But the moment her position was assured she changed ; changed completely. Why, look here, West, the very day we were married—you remember we went down to Brighton, and were married there—as we walked back along the King's Road, she stopped me before a shop and said, ‘ You can just come in here and buy me some furs. Now I'm your wife you needn't suppose I'm going through another winter in my wretched, little, old coat of last year.’ It was her tone ; the implication of what she had had to endure at my hands, before she had the right to command me. It was the first lifting of the veil on her true character.

“ Perhaps if I had never married her—who knows ? Women require to be kept under, to be afraid of you, to live in a condition of insecurity ; to know their good fortune is dependent on their good conduct.

“ I did the right thing ? Yes, . . . but we are told, be not righteous overmuch ; and there are some virtues which dig their own graves.”

He

He spoke in a disconnected manner ; but his domestic misery was the string which threaded the different beads. Of West's interjected sympathy and well-meant efforts to turn his thoughts he took no heed.

" 'Marriage is the metamorphosis of women.' Where did I read that lately ? It's odd ; but everything I now read relates to marriage. In every book I take up I find an emphatic warning against it. Why couldn't these have come in my way sooner ? Why couldn't some one tell me ?" Marriage is the metamorphosis of women—the Circe wand which changes back all these smiling, gentle, tractable, little girls into their true forms.

" Oh, but after all, you say ? . . . No, my wife does none of those things ; but she has made my life miserable, miserable . . . and that's enough for me. And if I were to try and explain how she does it, I daresay you would only laugh at me. For there's nothing tragic in the process. It's the thousand pin-pricks of daily life, the little oppositions, the little perversities, the faint sneers. At first you let them slip off again almost indifferently, but the slightest blow repeated upon the same place a thousand times draws blood at last.

" No, she doesn't care for me, and sometimes I almost think she hates the boy. Poor boy . . . it seems monstrous, incredible ; but I've caught her looking at him with a hardness, a coldness. . . ."

He sat silent, looking wistfully away into space. West traced the beginning of a pleasanter train of ideas in the relaxed corners of his mouth, in the brightening of his sunken eyes.

" He's the dearest little chap, West ! And so clever ! Do you know, I believe he'll have the most extraordinarily logical and mathematical mind. He has begun to meditate already over what seems to him the arbitrariness of names. He wanted to know the

other

other day, for instance, how a table had come to be called a table, why it wasn't called a chair, or anything else you like. And this morning, when we were talking, he and I, over the present I had given him, he posed me this problem: Supposing two horses harnessed to a cart were galloping with it, just as fast as ever they could go, how much faster could ten horses gallop with it? Shows he thinks, eh? Not bad for a child of four?"

He began to forecast Cyril's career; he would put his name down at Harrow, because to Harrow he could get out to see him every week. He should have the advantages of Oxford or Cambridge, which Catterson had not had. He should enter one of the liberal professions, the Bar for choice.

And then his face clouded over again.

"But he shall never marry. He shall do anything else in life he pleases: but he shall never marry. For it's no matter how well a man may be born, it's no matter how fortunate he may be in life, if he's unfortunate in his marriage. And it seems to me, that one way or another, marriage spells ruin."

He was back again in the unhappy present, and West felt his heart wrung. Yet there was no help to be given, no consolation possible. The one door of deliverance which stood open, was the one door which Catterson could not face, although his reluctant feet drew nearer to it every day.

But West had already observed that when life becomes impossible, when a man's strength is inadequate to the burdens imposed upon it, when the good he may yet accomplish is outweighed by the evils he may have to endure, then the door opens, the invisible hand beckons him through, and we know no further of his fate.

Though Catterson could not face it, and with an ominous spot burning on either cheek, tried to reabsorb himself again in plans for the future, West saw in it the only possible escape, and told himself

himself it was better, even though it proved an eternal sleep, than what he daily had to endure.

The wife's cold heart, her little cruelties, her little meannesses, all her narrowness, her emptiness of mind rose before him. What a hell upon earth to have to live in daily companionship with her, even if unrelated to her in any way! But for her husband she was the constant living reminder of his dead illusions. He could not look at her without seeing the poor, thin ghosts of his lost youth, of his shattered faith, hope, and happiness, gathered round her. Every indifference of hers, every neglect, must call up the memory of some warm protestation, of some dear attention in the past. And these were less hard to bear than the knowledge that those had never been genuine.

It is life as you anticipated it, brought still fresh and palpitating into contrast with the bleak reality, which is so intolerably hard to bear.

The contemplation of Catterson's position became so painful to West, that he felt he must get away even at the cost of brutality. He gave warmly the asked for assurance to come again soon, and knew in his heart as he uttered it, that he would not soon find the courage to return.

In the hall he looked about him mechanically; then let slip a hot and vigorous word on discovering he had left his hat up in the drawing-room and must go back.

The tea-table now stood by Nettie's elbow. She insisted that he should take a cup of tea, pressing it on him as a sort of peace-offering, so that without actual rudeness he could not refuse. She was again gracious as far as she knew how to be. Possibly Mrs. Reade, who studied the suavities of life, had been remonstrating with her.

Gladys lay on the hearthrug, her face in her hands, her elbows
planted

planted on the open book. The packet of sweets in a very knock-kneed and depleted condition stood beside her. She sucked a chocolate in her cheek, had kicked off her shoes, and drummed with her black-stockinged feet upon the floor.

West made a pretence of drinking his tea, but it was tepid, it was weak, and Nettie had put sugar into it without enquiring his tastes.

She and Mimi Reade were still discussing the patterns of the brocade.

"I do think the green perfectly sweet, Mimi," she repeated, holding the scrap up at arm's length, so that the lamplight might slant over it; "and yet the black is a softer, richer silk, and would make up awfully well with jet trimmings, as you say. I don't know which I had better have."

The two women turned and returned the problem, considered it again in all its bearings. They appeared to have forgotten West, which was but natural, he had sat silent for so long. To himself, his brain seemed mesmerised by the vapidness of their talk, so that an imbecile point of interest grew up within it, as to which colour, eventually, Nettie would choose.

Meanwhile the study door opened, and Catterson's cough, which carried such poignant suggestions to West, was heard again upon the stairs. It seemed to speak suggestively to Nettie too.

"After all," she said in her curious, drawling voice, "it would be more prudent I suppose to decide on the black."