The Elsingfords

By Robert Shews

I

It was a marriage of which everybody augured ill. When a rumour of the engagement first obtained currency, everybody scoffed. It was impossible. And even after it had received official confirmation, people couldn't shake off a sort of dazed incredulity. It must be some mistake. That any one in his senses should voluntarily espouse Hennie Bleck was a proposition which the mind refused to grasp, like a contradiction in terms; and of Herbert Elsingford it had always been felt that he was peculiarly in his senses. He gave you the impression of a man who, fastidious in all things, would be overwhelmingly so in his choice of a wife. He was an artist, and he was a man of the world; he had travelled, he had knocked about; he must have had a varied experience of women, he must have had successes. With that, and with his humour, his saving touch of cynicism, one would have thought him the least likely of subjects for a woman to make a fool of. One would have supposed that he cultivated an unattainable feminine standard, that he would require a combination of qualities such as never was on land or sea—the qualities of a Grecian urn united to those of a rosebud. One would

would have imagined that in looking for a wife he would meet with the fortune of those who look for the absolute—and remain a bachelor. It was hard to believe that he was going to marry Hennie Bleck.

The Blecks, mother and daughter, had descended upon London, out of their native New England, some two years before. They had taken a furnished house near Portman Square, and proceeded, to the wonder of all beholders, to wriggle themselves into rather a decent set. Physically, they resembled each other as closely as two halfpence, with a difference of twenty years in their dates. Mamma Bleck was undersized and thin, with a nose like a scimitar, little staring grey eyes, a high forehead, and scanty grey hair. Miss Bleck was simply her newer replica. They were both addicted to odd, weasel-like motions, walked sinuously, and squirmed a good deal when seated. But their methods in conversation were antipodal. Mrs. Bleck was humble, distressingly so; talked but little, and that little under her breath, in a weary, low-spirited nasal. She deferred constantly to your opinion, and called you *sir*: "Oh, yes, sir," "No, sir," etc., with the funniest upward intonation. You would have thought she was trying, in a hopeless way, to sell you something; and, from her timidity of attack, you might have suspected a guilty consciousness that the thing wasn't worth your money, that the goods were damaged, and a terror lest you should discover it and denounce her. Then she was prone to long melancholic lapses of silence, during which, by imperceptible degrees,—by a sort of drifting process,—she would edge away, abstract herself, till by-and-by you perceived that she was far from you, silent in a corner. But through her humility you felt a kind of truculence, of sly fierceness, as if she were lying low, and would presently seize her chance to give you a dab, and escape before you could make sure who had

done

done it. In her corner, with her dull little eyes fixed steadfastly on nothing, she had the air of hatching a conspiracy—laying a mine. She was possibly only fatigued, and wondering when you would go. Mrs. Bleck was retiring; but Miss Bleck was forward enough for two—most affable, most condescending. She talked in a shrill little voice, and at the top of it, so that you could follow her observations from the other end of the room. She laid down the law, and kept twisting her neck like a swan's. She patronised everybody: she would have patronised the Duke of Plaza-Toros, the Bank of England; and her eyes had a sinister little glitter, and her thin, straight lips a malicious little smile that made one really afraid of her.

It was a wonder what had brought them to England (they assured you that everything was better in America); it was a wonder how well they got on here. They were unattractive, undistinguished, unconnected, and they weren't rich. They lived pretentiously but shabbily, driving their income very hard—forcing a thousand a year to do the work of two or three. They spread their gilding out so thin that the plaster showed through. You were sure they starved their servants—a conviction that was strengthened by the circumstance that they were perpetually changing them. The same butler never answered your knock twice. Then they gave awful dinners, and kept a watch on you lest you should eat and drink too heartily; viands were whisked before your eyes, and you went away with the sense of a lost opportunity. Their afternoons at home were the painfullest functions in London. They were lavish with weak tea, but sparing of the milk and sugar, the bread and butter; and the little dish of sweetmeats lurking behind the tea-urn was never put into circulation unless a star arrived, and even then (I don't know how they managed it) nobody but the star got any. Everybody disliked

liked them, everybody said nasty things about them, yet everybody visited and invited them. It was partly, I dare say, mere inertia. Push, and it shall be opened unto you. They pushed : Mamma silently,—furtively, as it were ; Hennie aggressively, with an effect of asperity : both persistently—and people made way for them. It was partly mere inertia, it was partly a sort of dim fear. One dimly feared that if one resisted them they would *do* something. One divined in them latent resources, hidden potentialities for mischief. They could blast one's reputation by some particularly insidious slander, or even throw vitriol. So people received them and visited them, and took it out in saying nasty things—of them and to them. These they never resented, though it was conceivable that they noted them down.

One of their stars was the Dowager Lady Stoke, whose house they had rented—always a conspicuous figure on their day, having journeyed up from remote South Kensington, whither she had withdrawn into lodgings. It was suggested that her attendance might be a part of the lease ; but *brooms* apparently were not, for on one occasion her ladyship was heard somewhat heatedly expostulating : "New brooms! But, my dears, brooms are never included in a furnished house. If I left my brooms it was through good nature. If you need new brooms, you'll have to buy 'em, or do without. Brooms, indeed ! " Then there were the Wetherleighs, the Burtons, the Cavely-Browns. It was by Mrs. Burton that Hennie was presented ; and at the Wetherleighs' one scarcely knew who was the hostess, Hennie was so much and so actively in the foreground—the first to hail your arrival, the last to speed your departure. Yet Mrs. Wetherleigh quite frankly detested her.

It was at the Wetherleighs' in an evil hour that she made the acquaintance of Herbert Elsingford, then in the flower of his

sudden

sudden short-lived fame—the lion of the moment. He had come home from the East in February, and in April an exhibition of his pictures had been opened at a dealer's in Bond Street. The next one knew, his name was in all men's mouths. The critics, the painters, the connoisseurs, had begun it, and the public carried it on. The explanation was obvious—he had matter as well as manner. The connoisseurs admired his manner, which was original and effective; his light touch, his avoidance of all but the salient, his clever brushwork. The public were captivated by the glimpses he gave them into an exotic civilisation, by his pretty Japanese ladies, his splendid temples, his bright delicate colours. He had an instant and extremely unusual success. He sold everything, and got no end of orders. This was well, for in his long apprenticeship he had eaten up his short patrimony. His father had been a rural dean in Shropshire. Herbert himself had set out to read for the Bar, but in his second term he thought better of it, and went to Paris to study art. We never really heard much of him again till he burst upon us in his sudden celebrity.

He was run after a good deal, I suppose; but he spent a surprising amount of his time at the Wetherleighs', with whom he was distantly, loosely, connected. He met Hennie Bleck there in June or July. One would have predicted that he would go beyond us all in disliking her. He had humour; he had experience; he had a *petit air moqueur;* he was the last man in the world to be taken in. At the same time, he had sensibilities—old-fashioned sensibilities. He justified the proverb that every artist is a bit of a woman. At the vulgar, the meretricious, he couldn't smile, he couldn't even shrug his shoulders; his humour, which had helped him to detect it, abandoned him when it came to supporting it; he shuddered and hurried away. He would be sure to know pinchbeck from gold, and to hate it. He would be

sure to dislike Hennie. In the autumn people began to say they were engaged. People said it and repudiated it as impossible in the same breath. After the banns were published, people groped helplessly for a theory. All sorts of wild surmises were launched. Could it be hypnotism? There was something uncanny about the Blecks. Could it be hypnotism, *envoûtement*, some nefarious magic? One could fancy them, the grey old mother, the tallow-faced little daughter, brewing a witch's broth and crooning murky incantations over it. Or blackmail? They had been staying in the same country houses, and Elsingford, perhaps, had secrets. He had lived so much abroad, and travelled in the East; and even those of us who stop at home sometimes have secrets. If Hennie had been rich—but she wasn't rich. It passed the limits of the human understanding. It had to be given up as one of the ultimate mysteries. Elsingford was eight-and-twenty. Hennie couldn't be a day under thirty.

Nobody felt it more keenly than Arthur Harvard, Hennie's Londonised compatriot. He had been as nearly as any one the discoverer of Elsingford. He had written articles about him in the Reviews, and preached his cult by word of mouth wherever he could find a listener. Then the two men, for all that there was a score of years between them, became tremendous friends. Everybody liked Elsingford: he was gentle, modest and amusing. Harvard had a genius for friendship; he put it all into his friendship for Elsingford. They were together a great deal, took long walks together, dined and lunched together, talked together till late into the night.

Harvard couldn't believe it, but it troubled him. Mrs. Cavely-Brown whispered it to him: "They say, you know, that Herbert Elsingford is going to marry Hennie Bleck." He never smiled again, for at least a fortnight. It couldn't be true, of course; and

yet

yet it might be. It is the impossible that usually happens. And in that case something ought to be done; *he* ought to do something. Harvard was a man who took things seriously, and felt his responsibilities. We used to laugh at him a little and call him "fussy"; but I think we should have hit nearer the mark if we had called him conscientious. For a fortnight he wore a perplexed frown. At last Elsingford set his doubts at rest. He arrived in town from Selfield, the Wetherleighs' place in Derbyshire, and drove straight to Harvard's chambers.

"I want you to congratulate me," he said. "Miss Bleck has done me the honour to accept my hand."

Harvard pulled himself up.

"Ah? Indeed? Ah, yes, yes. I—I've heard something about this," he responded: there he paused. He felt his responsibilities—the responsibilities of friendship. It was, then, true. Therefore something must be done—something must be said. But the situation had its delicacies. Whatever he did, whatever he said, must be well considered. Now, to gain time, he asked: "Er—have you fixed a date?"

"Monday, the sixth of January, at St. George's, Hanover Square."

In the choice of a tabernacle Harvard felt Hennie's touch: it was characteristic.

"You're the first person I've told," Elsingford went on. "You see, we want you to lend a hand. We want you to give the bride away. Henrietta and her mother are very anxious. Of course, this is unofficial. Mrs. Bleck will ask you. You're their fellow-countryman and my especial friend."

"If I'm to take part in the ceremony, I'd much rather forbid the banns," it was on the tip of Harvard's tongue to answer, but he lacked nerve. "My dear fellow, it's—it's too great a compliment.

pliment. They ought—if they want an American—they ought to have the Ambassador," was what he did answer.

"They don't like the Ambassador ; they're not on terms with the Embassy."

"Well, but then—but then—the Consul," suggested Harvard, losing his head.

"Oh, the Consul's impossible. The Consul's not a . . . . Nobody knows the Consul. Besides, anyhow, we want you. You're the most distinguished American here. And we're such chums."

So poor Harvard, who had begun by saying that he must do something, ended by giving the bride away. For months afterwards he felt as if he had picked a pocket and couldn't lay a haunting dread of the consequences.

The whole affair was inexplicable ; and not the least inexplicable feature of it was the departure, immediately after the ceremony, of Elsingford, with his wife and mother-in-law, for dear old Amurica. We had never understood the Blecks' presence in London ; now we were equally at a loss to understand their absence. One would have expected Hennie to stop and enjoy her triumph. She had hooked a lion—*the* lion of the season. One would have thought she would wish to parade him up and down a little before an envious public. But no, she led him straight away into another hemisphere. Everybody boded ill of the marriage, and particularly of this hegira. Elsingford, with his sensibilities, would be sure not to like America. The clash, the hurry, the hard atmosphere, the raw colouring, the ding of the dominant dollar would give on his nerves. And how long would he be able to stand Hennie ? "We'll have him back some fine morning when we least expect him," people said. From time to time Harvard or Mrs. Wetherleigh received a letter from him. These

These became rarer and rarer, and at last stopped altogether. One ceased to hear of him or from him. If he still painted, he contrived to conceal his results from his admirers in England.

It was a comfort, though, to be rid of the Blecks. We breathed freely; a menace had been removed. Elsingford had been immolated to the public good. It was a high price; but, after all, the deliverance was worth it.

II

Harvard would have found it difficult to explain how he had come by such a complete impression of the way matters stood, or why he felt so little doubt of its correctness. He hadn't been able to ask many questions. Elsingford hadn't been able to tell him very much; a man can't complain of his wife. But Harvard had instincts, intuitions. One can reconstruct a mastodon from a tooth and a claw. A word here, a look, a gesture there, and Elsingford's very reticence, had made it all horribly clear.

Elsingford was certainly very ill. It had begun the winter before, at New York, with an attack of what he and Hennie called the "grip"—probably the influenza. This had left him with a cough, which he couldn't succeed in throwing off. In the spring the doctors had insisted that he must stop work and go abroad. Change, rest, recreation would set him up. He wanted to come to England, but Hennie objected. When they had left England on their honeymoon Elsingford had understood that they were to return in the autumn: they had really stopped in New York upwards of four years. Hennie, little by little, had opened her heart to him. With consternation he had discovered in it a violent hatred of his country and his country-people. She hated their very names, she said. England was a sink of iniquity and stodginess.

stodginess. The English were all that is corrupt, perfidious, ill-mannered, and dull. He tried to reason with her—to argue the question. But Hennie was in some respects a woman. It precipitated quarrels, which ended in her weeping, and his having to beg her pardon. She entertained her American friends with a thousand shrill little anecdotes, comparisons, sarcasms, at England's expense. She was paying off old scores; she had possibly not been ignorant of her unpopularity. Her English husband hovered in the background, conscious that her auditors, through all their delight and laughter, were compassionating him for his loss in not being an American. He always meant to put his foot down; he always meant to go home next spring. But when he broached the subject Hennis would put *her* foot down literally; she would stamp her foot and scold and cry, and he would have to make his peace and comfort her, and talk of something else. Besides, from a pecuniary point of view, he was doing very well. The Americans bought his pictures and paid American prices for them.

When the doctors ordered him abroad, he thought his chance had come. But Hennie wouldn't hear of England. She was very glad "to go to Europe," but she wouldn't hear of England. They had debates and scenes, tears, truces, and a reconciliation, the terms of which were that they should avoid England. They landed at Havre, accordingly, and spent the summer in Germany and Austria, "doing" the Rhine and the Tyrol. They would pass the winter, Hennie decided, in Paris. She had never had a whole winter in Paris; it was of all things what she most desired. She had heard of a very good *pension*, kept by an American lady. Then he could take a studio, and get to work again. And, if he liked, he might run over to London for a visit, for ten days or a fortnight. She couldn't spare him longer than a fortnight; she was

was too dependent upon him ; she would be too miserable without him.

To the idea of a very good *pension*, kept by an American lady, he opposed the idea of a furnished flat. But Hennie said they would have no "society." He suggested that in the *pension* they might have no solitude. Hennie replied that this was only his selfishness, and they established themselves in the *pension*. But his cough, which had hung on in an obstinate little fashion all summer, began now to go from bad to worse. The cold weather that came early in November seemed to irritate it. Hennie administered hot drinks and applied extra flannels. She discouraged his seeing a doctor. He had seen doctors enough last winter, and what good had they done him? Doctors always made people worse by alarming them. Herbert had too much imagination, anyhow ; he thought too much of his health. If he would pay less attention to it, and take a studio and go to work, he would be as well as anybody. His real trouble was nervous. Indeed, she would go so far as to say that all disease was merely nervousness—a bad state of the mind. "If people wouldn't *think* themselves sick they wouldn't *be* sick." He complained of general lassitude, of pains in his chest, of fever at night. He didn't believe it was anything serious, but it prevented his working, it prevented his enjoying life. He was getting frightfully thin ; he could count his ribs. Then he had a hæmorrhage, and Hennie, in spite of herself, was obliged to call in a doctor to stop the bleeding. The doctor stopped the bleeding, and said that Elsingford ought not to be in Paris ; he ought to go South. He oughtn't to expose himself to the rigours, the changes of a Parisian winter ; he ought to go to the Riviera, to Sicily, to Algiers—it didn't matter where, if he could escape the cold and be in the open air. Hennie scouted this as "nonsense." It confirmed her theory that doctors always exaggerated

exaggerated things and frightened people. The doctor talked of "indurations" and "pneumonias." Hennie reiterated her conviction that it was all nerves and imagination. As for the hæmorrhage, it came from the throat: Herbert smoked too much. To pull up stakes and go to the Riviera, after they had got so comfortably settled down at Mrs. Slipwell's, would be a dreadful bother, a hideous expense. Well, the doctor concluded, if they remained in Paris, Elsingford must stay in the house; he mustn't go out till spring; that was the only way of ensuring an even temperature. Hennie derided this *régime* as "crazy," and was angry with her husband for following it, as he stubbornly insisted upon doing. "Be a *man!* Get up and go out. Don't stick at home molly-coddling yourself like an old woman." Elsingford was for peace at any price, and two or three times he tried it. He found that his outings aggravated his cough, produced shortness of breath, added a couple of degrees to his evening fever. After that he insisted upon obeying the doctor. Hennie made his conduct the object of endless little ironies. She treated it, and indeed his whole illness, as a personal grievance—a thing perversely fostered to the end of vexing her—a sort of luxury that he permitted himself. "You'll get no sympathy from *me*. What can a man expect who keeps stuck up in the house, enfeebling and enervating his whole system?"

Meanwhile he was losing his constitutional cheerfulness. Little things that formerly would at most have annoyed him, began to exasperate him. Formerly he had had his work, he had had the streets to walk in; now he was a prisoner in Mrs. Slipwell's *pension*, condemned to idleness. He didn't like the *pension*; he didn't like the "society" which had attracted Hennie. There were twenty-five American women and one American man. He had to meet them at table twice a day. Their talk exasperated him, their strident

strident voices, their queer intonations. After four years of New York he still winced at certain intonations. They talked a good deal about England ; they made the most astounding revelations. If he ventured to protest, to doubt, they were too many for him. There was a big, young girl with suspicious-looking yellow hair—a Miss Mackle, from Chicago. She had lived in England, for two years, at the Hôtel Métropole. Her popper had been "promoting a Company" in the City. What she didn't know about English things and English ways wasn't worth knowing. She described the domestic manners of the aristocracy, and her audience roared. Hennie backed her up. They couldn't let England alone ; they had an Englishman always with them. Elsingford's humour, as I have intimated, deserted him at a certain point ; and he had sensibilities ; and now he was feverish and in pain. Sometimes he would retort—he would abuse America ; then there would be trouble. The ladies felt that he had insulted them ; he had been "ungentlemanly." Hennie would cry, and reproach him for offending her friends.

The one American man was a journalist—Paris correspondent for a "syndicate" of American newspapers. Elsingford did not admire the American newspaper press, and this representative of it, he thought, was highly representative. He was a stout, squat, shiny little man, and Elsingford, who was coming to see all things *en noir*, felt that be looked like a toad. He used to tell awful stories of his methods, his achievements, how he ferreted out people's secrets, beguiled them into giving him their confidence, bribed servants to listen at keyholes, and thus "got a beat" on his rival correspondents. Mr. Hickey might have amused one at a distance, or from time to time. But Elsingford had him in the same house, met him at breakfast and dinner. Hennie liked him immensely, and made all sorts of explanations. Elsingford complained

plained that an explanation wasn't necessarily an excuse. Hickey's idioms were surprising, incredible. He took no interest "into" certain events; he couldn't do this or that as he "used to could." Elsingford was ill; he couldn't smile as he used to could.

Sometimes he would revolt. He would declare that he couldn't stand it any longer; they must move. "Let's take a flat." Hennie would wonder at his selfishness. Wasn't it bad enough to have a *malade imaginaire* for a husband? to be alone with him in a foreign land? How could he propose anything so cruel as to take her away from a house where she was comparatively happy; where she was surrounded by congenial people? Well, anyhow, then, he said, he wouldn't go to table; he would have his meals in his room. "*Il ne manquerait plus que ça*," she cried. "Are you trying to kill yourself? You begin by staying in the house; you end by staying in your room. It's suicidal. I'm fairly ashamed of you. How a *man* can be so morbid!" Elsingford, from constantly being told so, had ended by believing that he was frightfully selfish. He knew that he was perpetually making his wife cry. He continued to go to table.

Harvard had received a letter from him towards the end of January. He read the letter a second time, to glean the wisps of personal information that were scattered through it. These were few. It was chiefly about his book. All that he had gathered at the end of his second reading amounted to this, that Elsingford was in Paris, in a "*pension de famille*—the queerest place," and that he was ill. *How* ill, in what manner and degree, the writer did not say. Not ill in bed, at any rate, for he spoke of sitting before his fire. "I sat with my heels kicked up on the fender, and read and read till there was no more to read." Harvard would trust that it was nothing serious, nothing constitutional; and, meanwhile, he must answer the letter.

This

This he did with the warmest feeling, in the warmest language. "My dear, dear fellow! . . . To hear from you after so many years—they must run close upon a hundred—has made glad my heart like wine, has shaken my faith in the vanity of things. There *are* real satisfactions. . . . And what you say of my book —of the pleasure it was fortunate enough to give you—is very sweet to hear. . . . Why do you tell me so little about yourself? I will not believe that your illness is more than trifling; yet I could have wished for an affirmative reassurance. . . . And your work? . . . . However, these and all other questions (not least among them that of your return to London, which I hope is a matter of the early future—and you may be sure we shan't let you give us the slip again!), all these questions we shall shortly have an opportunity to settle by the living voice. I shall be in Paris next week on my way to Egypt. My own health is a little troublesome—the throat—a local irritation and a pain that drive me towards the sun. But at my time of life one must expect things. I was a dashing youth of forty something when we parted, now I have turned fifty, and begin to consider myself middle-aged. I shall arrive on Wednesday evening; I shan't let the grass grow under my feet. On Thursday morning we shall be embracing." Elsingford had wound up with a statement that his wife joined him in love. Harvard, softened by a glow of joy and old affection, was able to think charitably even of Hennie. So the words, "Pray convey my best regards to Mrs. Elsingford," did not stick in his pen.

Elsingford had mentioned that his boarding-house was the "queerest place." And from the address at the top of his letter Harvard learned that it was in the Rue François-Premier. He found a small *hôtel particulier*, very new looking, and adorned with many flourishes in stucco. The hall, into which he was admitted

by

by a man-servant, rather dazzled him ; he had not prepared himself for so much marble and stained glass and wainscoting—for so much ducal splendour. It was scarcely a relief to discern that the wainscoting, though simulating the grandeur of carved oak, was really only *papier maché*. As the man-servant opened the door of the salon Harvard was conscious, for an instant, of a flight of female figures in loose, light-coloured, morning-gowns, escaping in all directions, which bewildered him a little, and led him to bow apologetically. But when he looked up he was alone. The salon smelt of perfumes and upholstery. It was big and stuffy, and very gorgeous. He got a suffocating sense of red plush, of heavy carpets, of gilding and embroidery, of crystal gasaliers, and broken-backed French novels lying open. It was heated by a spiteful little *choubersky*, black, with nickel trimmings.

Harvard was a man who took things seriously—felt things deeply. It was in a serious, even a solemn condition of mind that he awaited his meeting with his friend. He sat on the edge of a red plush sofa, and was conscious of a sort of hush within his soul. A hundred currents of emotion were temporarily halting, ready to rush out at Elsingford's appearance. Presently the door opened, and he found himself grasping Elsingford's two hands and uttering broken ejaculations. Elsingford pressed his hands, and laughed : "Dear old Harvard ! It's awfully good of you to come."

They held each other off at arm's length for a minute, and smiled communications. But Harvard was shocked at what he saw. Elsingford had always been tall and thin ; now he looked attenuated—drawn out. His skin had a bluish tinge ; his eyes seemed too big and brilliant ; there were dark circles under them. He had allowed his beard to grow ; it added ten years to his apparent age. His laughter terminated in a fit of coughing.

Harvard's smile faded to a look of concern. He drew Elsingford down

down upon the sofa and demanded : "But what is this about your health ?"

Elsingford assured him that it was nothing. "A nasty little cough—a cold that I can't get rid of. I shall be all right in the spring."

Then Hennie came in and shook hands very condescendingly. She had not cast her patronising manner ; she evidently meant to put him at his ease. She developed *her* theory of the case—nerves and imagination. Her exposition had the tone of an arraignment. Her husband was determined to be ill. She blamed him, and pitied herself. "We had a stupid doctor here a month or two ago who put it into Herbert's head that he mustn't go out of doors. Of course it weakens him staying in the house, and makes him morbid. I hope you will be able to get him out to walk with you."

III

In the course of two or three days Harvard had obtained his view of the situation. He had seen a little, heard a little, and divined the rest. It struck him that the situation was deplorable. Elsingford was manifestly unhappy. Harvard believed that he was gravely ill—much more gravely so than he himself seemed to suspect. Elsingford called it a cold ; Hennie treated it as pure perversity and self-indulgence. Harvard feared—he did not like to give his fear a name—but his friend's wasted form, his pallor, the unnatural brightness of his eyes suggested appalling possibilities.

It amazed him to learn that he was not receiving regular medical attendance ; that he had only once seen a doctor. He perceived that Hennie (he must do her justice) was fond of her husband

husband—after her fashion ; fond of him as one is fond of a piece of property. If she could have kept him in a box, to take out when she wanted him, and put back when she was tired, all would have been well. As she couldn't quite do this, she did the next best thing—she bullied him, henpecked him, reproached him, turned on the waterworks, and was only amiable when he effaced himself and let her have her way. If you can't get what you want, *nag* for it. She was an indefatigable nagger. In a letter to Mrs. Wetherleigh, Harvard summed up his observations thus: "All Hennie asks is to be allowed to call Elsingford's soul her own."

A dinner or two at the *table d'hôte* had shown him a good deal. It would be unendurable to a man in the vigour of health. How Elsingford in his illness lived under it passed Harvard's comprehension. The twenty-five women were as disagreeable as twenty-five vulgar, empty-headed women, with nothing to do, could be. Harvard's humour had even narrower limitations than Elsingford's. They talked, they gossiped, they cackled ; they talked of fashions, and "gentlemen" (they reserved "man" as a term of opprobrium), and the prices of things ; they all talked at once. With their uncultivated voices, their eagerness to be heard, the place sounded like a stock exchange transposed an octave higher. Then there were jealousies and internecine feuds. Some of the ladies "didn't speak ;" and the seat of war was constantly shifting. This couple would make it up to-day, that couple would fall out to-morrow. And they all bragged—every blessed one of the twenty-five bragged of something. Harvard imagined that they spent many hours of each day stretched on sofas in overheated rooms, reading trashy novels and munching sweetmeats, to the detriment of their digestions, their complexions, and their dispositions. They were all nervous and violent ; they all powdered a lot ; they all

languished

languished and complained of headaches. There was a tendency to call one another by their Christian names, and "dears" were promiscuous. The whole house reeked of scents.

The presence of Harvard brought their conversation back to England. Most of them had heard of him; some of them had read his books. Mr. Hickey claimed him as a *confrère*, and offered to "show him around" Paris. But a notion prevailed that he was an Anglomaniac—that, an American by birth, he did not love his country. So they began about England; they assailed the "English accent." It was a sheer affectation. *Nice* English people (they were few) talked just like Amuricans.

"Now, Mr. Harvard, you can't deny it!"

Hennie threw herself into the breach—led the van. She had moved in the very best English Society; she named the titled personages with whom she had been intimate. Well, she had never known an English-woman who wasn't—immoral. Oh, some of them concealed it, put on airs of virtue, but they were wolves in sheep's clothing. They were all *pourries au fond.*

Miss Mackle applauded and corroborated. She had lived two years at the Hôtel Métropole; she ought to know. Her popper had been organising a Company in the City; he got an English lord to sit as chairman and to introduce him to people; and "*he paid him money for it!*" "That's your English lord for you!" Then she shook her yellow locks at Elsingford, and cried, "If you were *my* husband I'd have you naturalised."

Harvard, as a man who felt his responsibilities, told himself that he must do something. He couldn't go on to Egypt and leave Elsingford to the tender mercies of Hennie and the twenty-five. Elsingford well, would have been big enough to take care of himself; but Elsingford ill, needed a champion. Harvard saw, however, that he must proceed with circumspection, with tact; he

he mustn't "rile" Hennie. He had already done so once—at their first meeting, when he had learnt that they weren't seeing a doctor.

"But, my dear fellow, I think you ought to see a doctor; I really think you ought to see a doctor."

Elsingford had laughed a little constrainedly. Hennie had given the speaker a look. Afterwards she caught him alone and warned him.

"For mercy's sake, Mr. Harvard, whatever you do don't tell Herbert that he ought to see a doctor. Don't encourage him to think that he's sick. The doctors have already done him harm enough. We had three doctors last winter in America. I assure you I understand the case—I understand my husband. He's a hypochondriac. There's nothing in the world the matter with him except his *idea*. If you want to do him good you'll help me to persuade him to go out—to go about. It's his staying in the house that hurts him."

Harvard felt his responsibilities. He went back to his hotel with knitted brows, wondering what to do. "I'm glad to be able to record that they've left Mamma Bleck in America. But he ought to have a rest from Hennie. She worries and terrifies him. If he opposes her, she scolds; if he resents her scolding, she makes a noise about his temper. She has confided it to me: 'Herbert has a perfectly fiendish temper.' I gave her away; I wish to goodness I could take her back." This from his letter to Mrs. Wetherleigh.

"It's awfully good to see you; you don't know how I've longed for the sound of a Christian tongue. It will be a bore to let you go," Elsingford said.

"My dear fellow, come with me. Come with me to Egypt. The South was recommended to you. We'll lie in the sun beside the Pyramids and talk of art."

"I should

"I should like it immensely; but my wife wants to stop in Paris."

"We can leave her here. I'll take charge of you; I'll chaperon you, and hand you back in the spring."

"Oh, I can't leave her alone; that's impossible."

Harvard argued the matter. "A little independence will do her good. She's happy here. You mustn't fancy yourself indispensable." He painted the pleasures that would await them. Elsingford looked wistful. "I should like it immensely. I'll speak to Hennie," he said. Harvard hammered while the iron was hot; dilated upon Egyptian starlight, the picturesqueness of the Arabs, the sentiment of the flat, far-reaching landscape. Elsingford was won. "It would be delightful! A tremendous lark! I really don't see why I shouldn't do it."

Then Hennie came into the room. "My dear lady," Harvard began, "I have been urging your husband to come with me to Egypt. I hope you will send us off with your benediction—unless you can be moved to come too."

Hennie looked from Harvard to Elsingford, from Elsingford to Harvard.

"What do you think of it, my dear?" Elsingford inquired.

"Think? Oh, go, of course. Go, if you wish—of course."

But she gave it an inflection. The light departed from Elsingford's face. "It would be very jolly, but I'm afraid it's scarcely practicable," he said.

The next morning from his haggard mien Harvard knew that she had made him a scene over night. She had taken the will for the deed, and made him a scene. "If I could foment a rebellion, alienate his affections, induce him to elope with me," he thought. He was at his wits' ends. He was eager to defy all danger—to put his fingers between the bark

and the tree and abide the consequences—but he could not see his way.

Hennie harped eternally upon her single string: "Be a *man!* Brace up and go out." It wearied Elsingford. "Some day I'll get to the bottom of my resistance. I'll take you at your word and *do* it, to purchase silence on the subject."

It was a lovely day, soft and sunny, the 15th of February. "I'd be ashamed to pass such a day pent up in the house," had been her refrain since morning. "Go out and take a walk with Mr. Harvard."

"Where's my overcoat? Where are my hat and stick?" he demanded suddenly. "I can't be bothered any longer."

He and Harvard, arm in arm, strolled gently along the quays. The sun was bright, the air was soft, yet it had a treacherous little edge, like the bitter after-taste of something sweet. The effects of colour, of light and shade and atmosphere, were delicious. The Trocadéro melted with the sky in a purple blur; the *bateaux-mouches* puffed busily backwards and forwards, breaking the yellow water into iridescent foam; the leafless trees etched themselves like lace against the luminous blue of the sky. They prolonged their walk as far as the middle of the Pont de la Concorde, whence they gazed up and down the river. The *cité*, pink and grey, divided the current like the prow of some grotesque gigantic galley; the towers of Notre Dame loomed darkly over it. Elsingford was in ecstasies. "It's the finest town view in the world," he said. "Hennie was right. My walk has done me good." They hadn't walked more than half a mile. They took a cab home. That night Elsingford seemed immensely exhilarated. He talked a great deal, and very cheerfully. "To-morrow we'll try it again. It has done me good."

But when Harvard arrived the next day Hennie greeted him with

with the intelligence that her husband was in bed. "He thinks he has caught a cold. He won't get up."

Harvard found him flushed and drowsy. He roused himself to say, "Hello! old Harvard," and then closed his eyes and appeared to doze.

"Come, come, Herbert; it's time to get up; it's nearly twelve o'clock," said Hennie.

Harvard begged her to step with him into the next room. "My dear lady, we must have a doctor."

She began to deprecate, but he cut her short. "You don't know what you're doing. I'm going for a doctor. I'll bring him back with me."

Harvard gave the doctor such data of the case as he possessed. "If he had fever at night my colleague who advised him to stop in the house was very wise," said the doctor. "I don't like the fever at night. With that, he ought not to have tried to winter in Paris: or, if he was bound to stay here, he ought to have stopped in the house. However, we'll see, we'll see." They found Elsingford breathing hard. He looked at them with dull eyes, and did not speak. Harvard went down to the salon to wait. The doctor joined him there, shaking his head. "Your friend's in a bad way. He ought to have gone South at the beginning of the winter. Your walk yesterday has finished the business; it has fanned a smouldering fire into flame. You'd better go upstairs and look after his wife. I'll come back in an hour."

Hennie was seated at the foot of the bed with hands clasped. She raised a white, agonised face to Harvard as he entered the room.

"If I had dreamed—if I had dreamed that it was anything serious!" she said.

She

She was quite prostrated. Harvard attended to everything, and afterwards accompanied her to Havre and saw her installed in her cabin aboard the steamer. "If I had dreamed—if I had dreamed that it was anything serious!" that was almost all she ever said, except to answer questions.

Harvard hadn't the heart to go on to Egypt. He came back to town and buried himself in his work.