

A New Poster

By Evelyn Sharp

I

IT was the first of Mrs. Angelo Milton's original dinner-parties. Mrs. Angelo Milton had the reputation of being the most original hostess, if not in London, certainly in South Kensington where she lived. Such a reputation, in such a neighbourhood, was not perhaps difficult of acquisition, and Mrs. Milton had managed to acquire it by the simple though unusual method of being mildly eccentric within the limits of conventionality. She was thus characteristic neither of Bohemia nor of South Kensington; she amused the one, puzzled the other, and received them both on the third Wednesday in the month. She was daring in her selection of guests, clever in the way she made them entertain one another, and commonplace in her own conversation. The object of her life was to be distinguished, and in a great measure she succeeded in it; the only thing that was wanting was Mrs. Angelo Milton herself. Her house, her receptions, her friends all bore the mark of distinction; as a drama, the scenic effect was superb and the company far above the average, but the principal player remained mediocre. She had none of the elements of individuality; her dress was perfect and of the fashionable type, her features were

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intrinsically good, yet their whole effect was unsatisfactory; her very hair was abundant and ordinary. Yet she was clever—clever enough to know her own defects and to play them off upon other people, clever enough to have begun a fresh career at the age of twenty-six and to have followed it with perseverance and success. She belonged to the few who know how to invest the little capital Nature has given them; and none of the brilliant frequenters of her house who came and talked about themselves to their sympathetic hostess ever suspected that they were really there to establish her personality and not to advertise their own.

A perfectly new dinner-party was the luckiest inspiration that ever came to a tired hostess. To see her guests grouped at small tables, to make them all co-operate in the labour of conversation, to enjoy the triumphant consciousness of having combined them in the happiest manner possible, and to have reduced her own responsibility to the entertaining of three people only, was the highest consummation Mrs. Angelo Milton had ever attained. She sat in complete satisfaction, bathed in the becoming rose-coloured light shed by numerous shaded candles; and she even allowed herself under the influence of the prevailing ease of manner to become almost natural. She had selected her own party with scrupulous care; a pretty *débutante* for her *vis-à-vis*, who neither eclipsed nor reflected her; a black and white artist, very new, for herself; and an ugly boy to play with the *débutante*, which he was doing very charmingly.

“Such an improvement on the ordinary dinner-party,” said little Margaret Cousins, with the experience of a first season in her voice.

“Awfully neat idea, is really; no need to listen to what the other chaps are saying, don’t you know,” said the ugly boy, who was still young, though he had left Cambridge a year ago.

“Do

"Do you ever listen to what the other chaps are saying, Mr. Askew?" asked the *débutante*.

"This is daring of you," the artist was saying in a lowered tone, not because he had anything confidential to say, but because it suited his style to be impressive.

"Since it proclaims my choice of companions?" asked his hostess, rather clumsily.

"I am more than sensible of the honour. But that was not my meaning; no. I meant because——"

"Because it gives my other guests the opportunity of criticising my new French *chef*?" she interrupted again, but with all the assurance of success.

"Say rather the opportunity of discussing their charming hostess," rejoined the artist, relieved from the necessity of finding his own reply.

"A new poster? Really?" said Margaret Cousins.

The artist turned round with a scarcely perceptible show of interest.

"What, another?" he asked carelessly.

The ugly boy said it was the same old thing, and then explained that it was one of the new things, a scarlet background with a black lady in one corner and a black tree with large roots in another corner, and some black stars scattered about elsewhere.

"Ah, yes," said the artist indifferently, "it is an advertisement for the Shakespeare Fountain Pen, or something to that effect. I saw it this morning."

"The Milton Fountain Pen," corrected his hostess with the smile of conversation; "I have noticed it on the placards sometimes; it bears my name you see."

The artist said the coincidence had not struck him at the time,
but

but that he should in future use no other pen on that account. The ugly boy, who was occupied with his savoury, said nothing; the *débutante*, who had passed it, asked a simple question as though she wished for information.

“What has a black lady or a black tree got to do with Milton or a fountain pen?”

“Oh, nothing. It has got to advertise it, that’s all,” said the artist, smiling indulgently.

The ugly boy, who was now at liberty, said it was howling cheek of the painter chap to stick different things on a scarlet sheet and call it an advertisement for something that wasn’t there.

“Perhaps,” said his *vis-à-vis* with his irritating amiability. “I suppose you would have a penholder and a fountain with no background at all? That would be quite obvious of course.”

“What is a fountain pen?” asked Mrs. Milton, who had an idea that the general conversation was not being a success. There were three more or less inaccurate definitions at once; she selected Margaret’s, and smiled across at her.

“Margaret always knows these things,” she told the others. “Margaret is literary, and makes one feel dreadfully frivolous sometimes.”

Dicky Askew looked sad and felt that he could not talk any more about the comic papers. The ugly boy’s literature was mainly pink. Margaret blushed and looked pleased, and said, “Oh, no,” and added something irrelevant about Milton and the Puritan movement which suggested Macaulay.

“Margaret is still so deliciously young,” sighed Mrs. Angelo.

“How nice to be at the age of local examinations when one hasn’t forgotten all about Milton and those improving people! Really, it is as much as one can do now to get through the books

of

of the people one has to meet in society. By the way," she added exclusively to the artist, "Brindley Harrison is here to-night: do you know him? He is over there, just under the Burne-Jones, talking to—yes, that one. Have you read his last?"

After that the conversation remained particular and interesting until the hostess had to give the signal for retreat, upon which conventionality again claimed its victims, and there was no further evidence of innovation either in the music or the conversation that occupied the rest of the evening.

When the last carriage had rolled away, Mrs. Angelo Milton rang the bell and ordered something to eat. Then she walked round the room and extinguished all the wax lights herself, and turned the gas low, and sat down in the firelight. She was silent for a long time after the servants had left her, and she was terribly lonely. It was not a loneliness that comes as a natural result of departed company, but the much more subtle solitude of one who is anticipating a new companionship. When she had eaten her sandwiches mechanically, one by one, she stood up and leaned her head on the cold marble of the mantel-shelf, and something like an angry sob broke from her lips in the darkness.

"After seven years," she murmured, "to lose it all by loving Adrian Marks!"

She turned up the gas again with an impatient movement, then lighted a candle and held it up to a picture on the wall, a portrait of a middle-aged man with a bald head.

"Jim!" she cried involuntarily, "what would you say if you were to meet him?"

The idea struck her as so incongruous that she gave way to a nervous spasm of laughter and returned hurriedly to her seat by the fire. Her husband had been a successful commercial man, and the source of his wealth had been the invention of the Milton

Fountain

Fountain Pen. When he died in America, seven years ago, his widow came to England with his fortune, assuring herself against detection by prefixing an old family name to his notorious one, and began the career for which she had pined through the whole of her short married life. Those seven years in South Kensington had given her what she wanted, position, association with artistic circles, a certain measure of happiness; she had worked hard for all of these, and yet she was on the point of renouncing them as the price of her attachment to Adrian Marks, the new black and white artist. It seemed very paltry to her as she sat in the empty drawing-room, away from his influence, and she shivered involuntarily, although the fire had responded to her touch and had broken into a cheerful blaze.

"What if I do marry him?" she said, beginning to take down her hair slowly. "I lose my money—Jim's money; that means that I lose my house, my position, my friends, all the fabric I have built up with the labour of seven whole years. And the gain is the passing love of a man. What fools women are!"

Yet she sat down and wrote to him then, in the great half-lighted drawing-room, with her long brown hair falling round her face—wrote him a pretty playful letter such as women love to write to the men who admire them: a word about Ascot, something about the late spring, and something somebody had told her about him.

At that moment her lover and the ugly boy were having supper at the club. The original dinner-party did not seem to have satisfied the hunger of any of its guests.

"I should go for her and chance it," said the ugly boy.

"No you wouldn't, Dicky, you would come across a pretty girl on the way and never get any further."

The ugly boy seemed rather proud than otherwise of this
tribute

tribute to his inconstancy, and ate the rest of his oysters with a pleased smile.

"Margaret Cousins is a seemingly maiden, passing fair, and of a goodly wit," he said reflectively.

"You could say that of any of them. That's the oddest thing about women; the essentials are always the same in the ones we fall in love with," said Adrian, "but do keep to the point, little boy. I'll rave about Margaret after, if you'll only talk about Mrs. Angelo now."

"What's her first name? I can't talk about a woman in confidence and call her by her surname, especially when she's a widow."

"I don't know that she's got one. Heard from her this morning though, let's see what she signs herself; ah, here we are—Cynthia."

"That's a bit off," said Dicky in parenthesis, "never heard of a horse called Cynthia."

"You see," continued Adrian with a slightly worried air, "she doesn't know I twigged all about the Fountain Pen long ago, and she doesn't even know that I did the very poster we were talking about this evening. Shut up, Dicky, any blind idiot could have guessed that!—and she hasn't an idea how hard up I am, nor how many reasons there are for my marrying her."

"Play lightly," objected Dicky, "even for a woman that's an amazing amount of ignorance. And she's in love with you, too."

"Yes," sighed Adrian, "she *is* in love with me. Do you know, Dicky, it makes me almost hate myself sometimes when a sweet unsuspecting woman like that takes me on trust and thinks such an awful lot of me. I should have gone to the dogs long ago if it had not been for my women friends."

"Do

"Do you really think," asked Dicky, lighting up a cigar, "they have made any difference?"

Adrian looked across at his plain, shrewd little countenance and shook his head slowly.

"Dicky, you are very young. But if you don't mind we will stick to the subject."

Dicky said he was quite willing, and that women friends was as far as they had got. Adrian went on rather more gloomily than before:

"So you see it's all right as far as she is concerned. And as for myself—well, I suppose that's settled too. I never meant to get married at all, as you know, but I think it's not a bad thing for a man after all, and I don't see why I shouldn't marry Cynthia—do you? And of course I am extremely lucky to get such a good and sympathetic woman to marry me at all."

"At your age, and with your tailoring, it is wonderful," said the irrepressible Dicky. "By the way, how old is Cynthia?"

"From calculation I make it about thirty-two. She looks less. I am thirty-eight, though of course you wouldn't think it. There is really everything to make our union a happy one. But then, there's the governor."

"There always is," assented Dicky sadly.

"And he has sworn to disinherit me if I marry into commerce. He means it too, worse luck."

"What a played-out idea! Every decent chap marries into dollars nowadays; it's the thing to do. But that needn't matter; she's got fifteen thousand a year—must have—couldn't run that show on less, eh?"

"I haven't seen the will; she may lose it all if she marries again. I'm hanged if that would make any difference though, Dicky. I declare I'm fairly gone on her. I believe," continued

Adrian

Adrian in a glow of sentiment, "I really believe I should propose if neither of us had a penny! I should like to know about that will, though."

"What a set of stale old properties you are inventing, Marks: irate father, inconvenient will, beautiful lady. You might be writing a novel in the last century."

"You might remember, Dicky," said Adrian impressively, "that I have nothing to do with the spirit of any other century than this one. Now, what's your advice? Shall I propose or not?"

Dicky Askew blinked his small eyes at him and considered for a moment.

"You'll never have a better chance of being accepted, I should say. Given a woman who on your own showing adores you so much that she doesn't see your imperfections, and to whom you are so attached that her fortune does not matter a jot—well, there doesn't seem anything else to do."

"Thanks awfully, little boy, you've helped me no end. I'll propose to-morrow, hanged if I don't. Not sure if I don't go down to Somerset House first, though; think about it in the morning. After all, you must remember Cynthia is not the only woman friend I've got who—I mean, the world is packed with good unselfish women who are ready to give us sympathy and affection and——"

"Fifteen thousand a year," added Dicky maliciously.

Adrian paused before he strolled away.

"If there should be anything wrong about that will, there's always dear little Margaret Cousins," he said thoughtfully.

"No, there isn't," shouted Dicky wrathfully; "you can leave Margaret out of this show anyhow. *She* wouldn't join anybody's army of women friends, so don't you make any mistake about it.

You

You wouldn't catch *her* wanting to save you from the clutches of all the other women, which is what your women friends are mostly engaged in doing for you. Besides, she funks you no end—says she can't make you out, or something."

"Really?" said Adrian with a gratified smile, "that's excellent material to go upon. I must cultivate her. See you again soon, little boy."

Margaret Cousins was lunching with Mrs. Angelo Milton the next day when the man-servant brought in a visiting card. She had come round to gossip over the dinner-party, to eat up the remains, and to find out all there was to know about Dicky Askew; so she had a valid reason to grumble when her hostess said she must go into the drawing-room at once.

"But make yourself at home, child, and have what you want and ring for what you don't," she said rather absently as she arranged her lace at the glass. "It is an old friend; I have not seen him for years. You can play with the poodle till I come back, can't you, darling?"

A sun-browned man, with an expectant smile on his face and rather a nervous consciousness of the hat and stick in his hand, was standing on the rug in the drawing-room when she went in. There was no diffidence in his greeting, however, and no doubt of a welcome in the hard hand he put out to her, though the one she laid in it was cold and passive. They had nothing to say for a minute or two, and when they had settled on two chairs rather far apart, and he had deposited his belongings on the floor, the few remarks they made were necessary and usual.

"So you have come to England after all, Willis? You always said you would."

"Yes, Cynthia. It is an old promise of eight years' standing, isn't it?"

"When

"When did you arrive?"

"This morning only. I crossed in the night boat from Dieppe. There was a fog in the Channel."

"Was there? I believe there always is by the night boat. Have you had lunch?"

"I had a chop in the City: chose it myself, and saw it cooked. Not your style, eh? Well, and how long have you lived here?"

"Oh, how did you find out my address?"

"I went to your agents, of course. I saw that new poster of yours at Victoria, though what it means the Lord only knows, and that brought you back to my mind."

"So it needed a new poster to do that? Oh, Willis, how you must have altered!"

It was the first human note in the conversation, and Willis Ruthven broke into a relieved laugh.

"You haven't altered much, Cynthia, in spite of your dandy house," he said, and brought his chair closer to hers.

"I don't know. I fancy I must have. Or else it is you," she replied, meeting the kindly gaze of his keen eyes with something like discomfort.

"Why?"

"Well, you look so—so physical," she said, and laughed.

"In the old days, when Jim was there, you used to tell me I was the intellectual one."

"Ah yes, when Jim was there. You seemed so by contrast to the commercial element."

There was distaste, almost contempt, in her voice, and he noticed it.

"Don't be hard on the commercial element; it has treated you well enough," he said gently, with a swift glance round the room.

"Oh

"Oh yes, I know all that," she cried impatiently, "you have dinned it into my ears so often. It has made England what it is, and so on. I must say that it has not much to be proud of! I *loathe* the commercial spirit."

"Yet you have so much of it yourself," said Willis with a smile.

"I? The commercial spirit?"

"Surely. Do you not trade with every bit of resource at your command, and very profitably too? It is your commercial spirit that has made you use up that old Italian ancestor of yours for a second name. You trade with your beauty, your wits, your position; Jim traded with the Milton Fountain Pen. Where is the difference?"

"I have always noticed," said Cynthia, biting her lip, "that men who have travelled about alone for eight years become intolerably prosy."

Margaret Cousins was very tired of playing with the poodle long before her friend was at liberty. It was not until tea-time that the front door banged and Mrs. Angelo called down the stairs to her to come up to the boudoir.

"It is so much cosier to have tea here when we are alone," she said cheerfully. "I hope you have not been dull, dear. Do you mind bringing the kettle? Such an old friend, I have not seen him for eight years."

"He must be rather ancient," said Margaret candidly. The poodle had made her cross.

But Mrs. Angelo Milton did not hear her remark: she was leaning back in her chair, smiling at her thoughts.

"Tell me, Margaret, she said suddenly, "what do you think women admire most in men? Is it good looks?"

"No," said Margaret, thinking of the ugly boy.

"I am

"I am not sure," said Cynthia, thinking of Adrian Marks ; "if not, what is it ?"

"Good tailoring perhaps," suggested Margaret, still thinking of Dicky.

"Oh no," said Mrs. Angelo, remembering the cut of Willis's frock-coat, "I think it is temperament."

"Conversation I should say," corrected Margaret.

Cynthia put down her cup with decision.

"We are all wrong, Margaret. I have it. We like them to be masterful. It doesn't matter what they are if they know how to master us. Let them do it by their looks, or their brains, or their qualities ; but if they do it, we are theirs. And it isn't a flattering reflection for either sex."

Margaret pouted, and recalled Dicky Askew, and refused to agree. But Cynthia was convinced. She was thinking only of Willis Ruthven.

II

Cynthia felt very unsettled during the next few days. When a woman has half-unwillingly made up her mind to an action that repels while it enthrals her, she can be easily deterred from it by a very small disturbing element. And the disturbing element in this case was the reappearance of Willis Ruthven. It was not only that the revival of an old friendship had blunted the edge of a new and untried one, nor wholly because the effete and decadent culture of Adrian Marks suffered by contrast with the frank and healthy personality of Willis. For she was affected on the other hand by the dread of being again absorbed in the old atmosphere she had hated, and this dread was kept alive by the knowledge that her

her early history was no longer her own secret, but was shared by some one else who saw no reason for concealing it. She had a real and strong friendship for Willis Ruthven, one of many years' growth, and she chafed at the influence it still had over her, now that she wanted to turn her back for ever upon all that it recalled to her mind. Willis represented the whole spirit of that time she wished to forget; he knew every detail of the past she had tried to blot out of her life with a persistence that was almost morbid. There was something pathetic in the way this woman, who had lived two different lives, feared lest the first one should claim her again for its own, something pitiful in the unconscious comparison she drew between the two men who competed for her thoughts, between the one who by his presence dragged her down to the old level, and the one who dwelt only in the surroundings she loved.

It is probable that she would not have thought so much about Adrian had not Willis gone out of town directly after his first interview with her, and only testified his existence to her by a refusal of a dinner invitation which annoyed her as much by its brevity and curtness as by the business-like paper on which it was written. Nor would she have bestowed so much notice on this trifling occurrence had not Adrian Marks also piqued her, about the same time, by neither calling upon her nor otherwise seeking her society; and although she made a point of frequenting the houses where there was a possibility of meeting him, all her efforts were attended with failure, as such conscious efforts always are.

She met Dicky Askew one hot day in June at an afternoon reception. It was a great crush, and he was not looking particularly happy on the crowded landing where the stream of people coming upstairs had imprisoned him.

"Let's sit out on the balcony," he proposed; "I'm fairly played
with

with this awful crush—aren't you? I had to offend millions of decent people by getting the mother into a chair, and I don't suppose she will be able to move until I go and dig her out again."

The ugly boy, although he cultivated a pose of selfishness like the others in his set, had a great devotion for his mother, which was so unusual a phenomenon among his friends that they never quite took him seriously about it, and had to suspect him of ulterior motives before they felt in a position to admire him for it. Nobody ever did take the ugly boy seriously about anything, but Cynthia was in the mood this afternoon to be touched by any sign of natural affection, and she followed him outside the window with more graciousness than she usually showed to any one so unimportant.

"Have you seen your friend Mr. Marks lately?" she asked him. She felt that it was not necessary to lead up to the subject with Dicky Askew. He looked steadily across the street at the house opposite, and hesitated.

"Marks? Not for millions of days. Have you?"

"I? Oh no. I don't know why I asked you. I thought you were such friends, that's all. You always suggest Mr. Marks, you know."

Dicky glanced doubtfully at her.

"The fact is," he said with an impulse of confidence, "we've had a beastly row; I'm afraid it's really all up this time. I haven't seen him once since Sunday."

Cynthia murmured something and waited eagerly for more. The ugly boy grew expansive.

"The fact is," he said again, leaning over the balustrade, "Adrian is so beastly rotten. And she's an awfully decent little girl, don't you see?"

"Ah,"

"Ah," said Cynthia, also leaning over the balustrade and counting the paving-stones feverishly.

"It's all tommy when a man talks about his women friends. It won't wash," continued the ugly boy in a tone of disgust; "it only means he likes to ring the changes like all the other boys, and won't own to it. The worst of it is that he does it so well. *She* doesn't care a jot for him, of course."

"She doesn't?" said Cynthia joyfully.

Dicky looked at her reproachfully.

"What do you think? I never meant she would chuck me over for *him*. A fresh little nipper like that isn't likely to go nuts on a played-out painter chap. That *would* be common. All the same, it isn't fair on a fellow, is it?"

"No," said Cynthia sadly, "it is not fair on a fellow."

Something in her tone recalled Dicky for an instant from his own absorbing interests.

"I say, you know," he said with a smile, "if you cared to help me I don't know why you shouldn't. You may if you like, you know—really."

Cynthia failed to express any gratitude, and Dicky wandered on.

"If you weren't playing so poorly with Adrian he wouldn't be fooling around with Margaret, and if you'd only just be decent to him again, don't you know——"

Here he was really obliged to stop, for he found Cynthia staring at him coldly.

"Oh, hang," he said impetuously, "I'm fairly gone on Margaret, don't you see."

"Margaret?"

"Yes, of course. There isn't anybody else, is there?" said Dicky, a little sulkily.

"Oh," said Cynthia, with a slight curl of her lip, "I don't think

think you need be jealous. Margaret is a dear child, but she is not at all the sort of girl Mr. Marks would be likely to admire."

"Wouldn't he, though?" cried Dicky fiercely. "He couldn't help it—nobody could help it; she's the decentest little brick of a girl——"

"Oh, very well; I thought you didn't want him to admire her."

"No more I do, confound him! But he can't help admiring her, for all that."

"Then I don't see how I am to help you. Supposing we change the subject; I am dreadfully tired of discussing other people's love affairs."

"That sounds like a challenge to discuss your own," said Dicky, with a shrewd smile. He was an obstinate little fellow when he had an object in view.

"Mr. Askew!" said Cynthia, rising with great dignity.

"Oh, I say, don't," he said, anxiously, and placed himself in front of her; "I'm an awful ass, of course; but I do know that Adrian was right on you a week ago, and—what the dickens has happened to everybody since?"

She nodded to him enigmatically and disappeared in the crowd, and he went to extricate his mother. They met again in the hall as every one was leaving.

"I shall bring Adrian in to call to-morrow evening, may I?" he said.

"If it will tend to a reconciliation between you, I shall be delighted," she answered blandly.

So she sent a note round the next day to ask Margaret to drop in to dinner, and assured herself that she was going through the whole tiresome business in order to bring about the child's

engagement with the ugly boy. Margaret's chaperon was an aunt who did not look after her much; and the ugly boy was getting on well in his profession and had good connections; so Mrs. Angelo felt she was only being virtuous when she put on her most becoming demi-toilette and laid herself out to be amusing the whole of dinner-time.

"By the way, Mr. Askew said he might come in to coffee," she said casually in the drawing-room afterwards; "that was why I asked you to dinner."

"I know; so is Mr. Marks. I met them both in the park to-day. That is why I put on my yellow dress. Mr. Marks likes me in yellow—I look peculiarly distinguished in it, he says!"

"Mr. Marks says a variety of extravagant things to his lady friends."

"Oh, Cynthia, are there really such a lot of them? Dicky is always dinning Mr. Marks' lady friends into my ears till I cease to believe in them at all. There aren't any, are there?"

"Who is Dicky, dear?"

"Dicky Askew, of course," laughed Margaret. "Is there another Dicky?"

"Apparently not for you; but it is difficult to believe that you met him for the first time only a fortnight ago."

"Ah!" said little Margaret wisely, "but that was at your original dinner-party, and that counted for six ordinary meetings with auntie. Besides, you didn't give me a chance of talking to any one else that evening; I never spoke to Mr. Marks at all except about that hideous new poster. Did you see it noticed in the morning paper, by the way?"

"What poster?" asked Mrs. Angelo Milton.

"The Fountain Pen poster," don't you remember? Why we talked ever such a lot about it, and——"

"Oh,

"Oh, I can't recall it, then. Posters don't interest me in the least ; they are a vulgar form of art, I never think of looking at them. Are you getting on at the Slade, Margaret ?"

"Yes—no—I don't know. But why don't you like posters, Cynthia ?" persisted Margaret. "Mr. Marks doesn't call them vulgar ; Mr. Marks paints them himself."

"Mr. Marks didn't paint that one, anyhow ; it is a hideous piece of affectation——"

"Then you do remember it ?" cried Margaret triumphantly.

"No, I don't. How you do bother, child," said Cynthia crossly. "You've got posters on the brain. Mr. Marks has evidently been making you one of his disciples."

"Mr. Marks ?" said Margaret proudly. "Oh yes, he has taught me such a lot about pictures——"

She paused abruptly as the door opened, and the two men were announced.

"Yes, very pretty, isn't it ? A present from a friend in America," said Cynthia, and rose to receive them.

Poor Margaret did not learn any more about posters that evening, for Mr. Marks spent it in the boudoir with his hostess. It is true that the door between the two rooms was left half-open, and that Cynthia sometimes raised her voice in the interests of propriety to make a remark to the couple on the drawing-room sofa, but the conversation could not, on the whole, be termed a general one. Nor was it altogether fluent at first. Nobody but Cynthia had really mastered the situation, and she was almost too nervous to play her part. The ugly boy was quite happy at having planned the whole meeting, and felt quite sure it was going to settle the future of every one present, and he had consequently plenty to say, but he found a curious difficulty in saying it, and Margaret, to whom he said it, was an unwilling listener. She was cross at being supposed

supposed to be in love with Dicky, and at having to endure his conversation all the evening ; while Adrian Marks, who was far older and more interesting, dismissed her with a hand-shake and strolled after Cynthia into the other room.

Adrian Marks himself was full of pleasing sensations. A comfortable chair in a softly lighted, pretty room, and a clever woman to talk to, represented his favourite form of diversion ; and the gratifying suspicion of having piqued her slightly by his remissness in calling added a zest to the situation.

But he had read the will at Somerset House, and he did not mean it to be more than a pleasant evening.

“Do you mind the window being open ? It is hot in here, and besides, I like to see the trees in the square—don't you ?” said Cynthia, settling herself in the low window-seat.

“I like anything that affords an excuse for a good pose,” he said, and looked at her and not at the trees.

It was a favourable opening, and Mrs. Angelo Milton followed it up well. She had her own game to play this evening, and she was going to stake her happiness to win it. All the thralldom of her American life, all its sordidness and its gilded opulence, lay clearly before her mind and tortured her with its vividness ; it only needed a decided action on her part to put it away from her for ever. And the man who could save her from its haunting memories was Adrian, whom she thought she loved sufficiently to marry because she had felt hurt when he neglected her. She knew he loved her too in his narrow, selfish way. And she felt tolerably sure she could win him if she tried ; and, ignoble process though it was, she did try.

“You have been out of town ?” she asked him when they had touched on various indifferent topics.

“Since

"Since I saw you? I hardly remember; I think not—no. Why do you ask?"

She laughed.

"How absurd of me! For the moment I forgot that of course you did not pay conventional calls after dinner-parties like every one else."

He paused just long enough to give weight to his answer.

"I should not so far dishonour a charmingly unconventional dinner-party. When I have made a friendship with a woman I never spoil it by afternoon calls."

"That sounds rather interesting. But staying away altogether is an odd kind of substitute, don't you think?"

"It is the only substitute for a man who is afraid of what may result from an interview."

"Afraid? You? After all your experience? I often wonder whether you have the same formula of conversation for all your lady friends, Mr. Marks."

"Well, no. There is the attractive formula for the timid and the reticent for the bold; the intellectual for the young and the playful for the old; the decorous for the matron and the indecorous for the maiden; and so on."

"And to which class do I belong?"

"To no class, my dear lady. You are unique."

"You said that so fluently that I shall suspect you of a common formula after all."

"True fluency is never the result of study, and my remark was a spontaneous one. Won't you acknowledge that you gave me an excuse for spontaneity?"

Cynthia looked into the depths of the plane-tree across the road, and yawned lazily.

"We are being dreadfully brilliant, and I am always afraid of
you

you when you are brilliant. Won't you smoke? I have always noticed that when a man has nothing to do with his hands he becomes frankly untruthful."

"You will join me, I hope?"

"For the same reason?"

"Oh no," he said, taking a cigarette from the box she handed over to him. "But I have always noticed that when a woman begins to smoke she becomes dangerously confidential."

"You are quite safe," she said drily. "I never smoke. Mr. Askew, will you have a cigarette? Margaret doesn't mind."

The two from the drawing-room made a diversion by coming in and fetching the cigarettes. There was a search for matches, a few remarks about the beauty of the evening and the size of the plane-tree, and then a gravitation towards the former arrangement. This time, Adrian was sitting on the window-ledge, and Mrs. Angelo had slipped into a low chair close by.

"Life is very full of stupid arrangements," said the artist presently. He was thinking of the amazing selfishness of the first husband when he made his will.

"For example?" she murmured. She was thinking of the small flat they would have to take when they were living on his earnings alone, and she had sacrificed her fortune for the artistic atmosphere.

"The distribution of—people," said the artist. He had almost said—of wealth.

"Yes," said Cynthia dreamily, "the wrong ones have to be for ever together, and if we try to sort ourselves differently the old influences go on tugging at us until they prove strongest after all and absorb us again. It is horrible."

"It is merely the planetary system," said Adrian, looking up at the stars, "and it gives the clever people lots of copy."

"I don't

"I don't see why we should be sacrificed to the clever people, they have so many compensations. It is the stupid people who can only feel things, who are the really important factors of life, and they have all the suffering," cried Cynthia bitterly. She was forgetting the part she had planned for herself.

"What are we talking about?" said Adrian suddenly.

"You were being brilliant again," she said, collecting herself with an effort.

"And my cigarette has gone out," he laughed, and went across to a candle to light it.

They listened mechanically to the voices through the open door.

"It's no use, it won't draw, I tell you. Nobody could make it draw, it's got stuffed up with something. I am quite sure the strings I have been eating are not tobacco at all. It's the stupidest cigarette I ever smoked."

"It looks a bit played, doesn't it? You've used all my matches and the spills hang out in the other room. Stick to it a moment while I freeze on to a coal, will you?"

Margaret evidently had no difficulty in sticking to the cigarette, and Dicky must have achieved the extraordinary feat of freezing on to a coal, for there was no more conversation in the drawing-room for the next few moments, and when it began afresh a piano-organ in the street below completely drowned it.

"That's a good effect," said Adrian, leaning over the window-box, "the lamps and the background of bushes, and the weird light on that man's face—awfully fine, isn't it?"

She came and looked out with him.

"Very," she said; "have you been painting much lately?"

"No. I've been literally off colour. Weather, I suppose."

"Or a new lady friend?" she suggested, under cover of the clanging music in the street.

Her

Her eyes had a fascinating light in them when she looked mischievous, and Adrian mentally included his old father and the late Mr. Milton in the same big curse. It was hard, and it grew harder as the evening wore on, that every one should put obstacles in the way of his marrying one of the few women he had ever really liked. He felt quite sorry, too, for her, and wished magnanimously he could do something to lessen her evident infatuation. But he felt most sorry for himself.

"Possibly," he replied gaily; "it is generally that. I am a bad lot, you know, Mrs. Milton."

He looked at her narrowly, but she only laughed and ran her fingers through the lobelia in the window-box.

"You don't think I am very bad, do you?" he asked, bending a little towards her.

"I think you would be exceedingly disappointed if I didn't think so," she retorted, without looking at him. The organ had moved on, and the strains of a popular air came faintly round the corner and mingled with the rustle of the plane-trees and the passing footfall of the policeman. The conversation in the drawing-room was no longer distinguishable, and the only distractions came from outside. Adrian drew in his head and stood a little behind her.

"I should like to know what you do think about me," he said curiously; "is it something very bad?"

"It is something quite formless," she replied indifferently.

"Do you think about me at all?" he asked, putting his hands in his pockets and keeping them there with an effort.

"As much, possibly, as you think about me."

"And do you know how much that is?"

"Just so much thought as a man is likely to bestow on one woman when there are twenty others."

She

She was acting now, not to gain her point, but to hide her real feelings. And unconsciously she won her game, as it must always be won.

"Why do you say that?" he asked, coming nearer to her.

"It is not I who say it. I am merely repeating what you have said to me dozens of times. What nonsense we are talking! Shall we go in to the others?"

Ten o'clock struck slowly from a neighbouring church tower, and they stood and counted the strokes in silence as though the slight mental effort was a sort of relief to their constraint. Then she moved a little and felt his touch on her bare arm.

"Don't go, Cynthia."

He crushed her hand against his lips and pulled her almost roughly towards him.

"There are not twenty others," he whispered.

When the two men left the house together half an hour later Adrian uttered an exclamation in an unduly loud tone.

"I say, that's rather strong, isn't it?" said Dicky, whose reflections were of a peculiarly happy nature.

"It's not nearly strong enough for the fools who make wills," replied Adrian, and drove off alone in a hansom.

III

For a woman who has staked everything and won the game sooner than she expected, Mrs. Angelo Milton wore a singularly dissatisfied appearance when she came downstairs the next morning. She wrote letters in her boudoir until the smell of the window flowers became intolerable and she had to take refuge in the drawing-room; and there she had two separate quarrels with
the

the maid over the dusting of the ornaments and the arrangement of the flowers, and ended with the inevitable threat that she would in future do them both herself. This she began at once to carry into effect by walking about the room with a duster and making herself very hot and cross. When she had broken a valuable Venetian glass, and made the startling discovery that all the dust she dissipated settled somewhere else directly afterwards, she hid the duster under a sofa cushion, collected all the flowers out of all the vases and piled them in a heap in the fender. Then she sat down on the hearth-rug and looked at them helplessly, and felt very foolish, when Margaret came in without being announced and laughed at her.

“My dear Cynthia, what *is* the matter, and whatever are you doing on the floor?” cried the girl.

“I’m doing the flowers,” cried Cynthia briskly; “how jolly you look. Did you trim that hat yourself?”

“Yes, it’s my old Louise, don’t you remember? But what’s the matter?”

“Matter?” cried Mrs. Angelo in a tone of amazement, “what should be the matter? I am particularly happy this morning. Something very nice that I wanted very much indeed has happened to me, and I never felt more pleased about anything in my life.”

“You’ve got a very funny way of looking pleased,” said Margaret candidly, “and it’s more than I feel myself. I’ve come round to tell you something, Cynthia, something very important and not at all pleasant to either of us. But hadn’t you better get off the floor first?”

“Well, what is it, child?” asked Mrs. Angelo when she had limped with two cramped legs to the nearest chair.

“I only wish you to understand quite clearly that I am not in
love

love with Dicky Askew, whatever Dicky Askew may be with me, and that I won't be left alone with Dicky Askew until I have heard all his stories twice over and he is obliged to propose for the sake of more conversation. I never want to speak to Dicky Askew again ; I should like him to be—obliterated."

"My dear," said Cynthia, "I don't keep Dicky Askew on the premises. Did you really put on a new hat on purpose to come and tell me something that doesn't concern me at all ?"

"Doesn't concern you ?" cried Margaret. "I should like to know whom it does concern then."

"Dicky Askew, I should say. Really, my dear child, I am very sorry I mistook your feelings ; I won't make up a party for you again."

"It was not," said Margaret with great dignity, "the party that I objected to. It was only Dicky Askew."

"I did it out of kindness," replied Cynthia, ignoring her insinuation.

"Then I hope you will never ask me to dinner again out of kindness, or if you do, please shut me in here with the man I am *not* in love with," responded Margaret. "I should not have minded at all if I had spent the evening with the man I was *not* in love with, last night."

"I think you are right," said Cynthia quietly, and she stroked the child's hot cheek soothingly as she spoke, "passing the evening with the man you are in love with is very exhausting indeed. We will try the opposite arrangement next time. Will you come out with me this afternoon ?"

"Where to?" asked Margaret suspiciously.

"Hurlingham, of course."

"It's too bad," cried the girl indignantly, "you *knew* he was going

going to be there! One would think there was no one in the world but Dicky Askew."

"One would, to hear you talk," said Cynthia.

When she was alone again, she went to the writing-table and tried to write a letter. She made two rough copies and tore them up, began a third and burst into tears in the middle. The anticipation of the artistic atmosphere for the rest of her life did not seem to be exhilarating.

"Mr. Ruthven," announced the man-servant.

"Oh, how do you do?" said Cynthia with desperate composure.

"What's the matter?" he asked bluntly, just as Margaret had done, "and what are all those flowers on the floor for? It looks like a funeral."

"It isn't—they're not—oh don't," said Cynthia with an hysterical sob.

Willis had hold of her hand still and drew her on to the sofa beside him.

"Something seems to have disturbed you," he said, and cleared his throat sympathetically; "what is it, eh?"

"I can't very well tell you," she replied with an effort to be calm.

"Then don't," said Willis, in the tone he might have used in soothing a child; "we'll talk about something else instead. I was down at Johnson's just now——"

"Johnson's? Whatever did you go to my agent's for?" she asked in a surprised tone.

"To ask him if your affairs were in a satisfactory condition," he replied frankly.

"Why did you want to know!"

"For reasons I will tell you presently."

"And

"And pray, what did he say about my affairs?"

"Oh, excellent report, never been selling better, largely owing to that new poster he says; it just wanted that to freshen up the sale a bit. Bless me, what have I said now, Cynthia?"

"Oh, nothing. I am sick of that new poster. Margaret was full of it yesterday. Everybody is full of it. Why did they want a new poster to freshen up the sale just now? I don't want the horrible money."

She wondered why he looked so pleased.

"Don't you really, Cynthia? Would you give it up willingly if—if you, well, if the terms of the will had to be fulfilled?"

She turned and looked at him with a hunted look in her eyes.

"How did you know? What makes you ask me that?" she burst out.

"Of course I knew, my dear," he answered with his genial smile; "why, I made Jim add that codicil myself."

"You? *You* made him? Willis, I don't understand. Why did you?"

"For the same reason that I have come here this morning, Cynthia. Is it so difficult to understand, then?"

There was a slight tremble in the bluff tones, but she did not notice it. She was so absorbed in her own engrossing affairs this morning that her faculties had grown incapable of receiving any impression from outside. She continued to look at him questioningly.

"What reason?" she asked.

"Because I knew what you didn't know then, poor child—that Jim was dying. And I meant to come back for you after seven years and take you for my own—if you would come. We were such good friends, Cynthia, and—I thought perhaps you would
come

come. So I made Jim put in that clause about the property. You see, I meant your love for me to stand the test of a sacrifice, and I wanted mine to be free from a suspicion of self-interest. Do you blame me very much, dear ? ”

She let him finish his speech without interruption. Her first impulse was to laugh hysterically ; every nerve and every instinct she possessed seemed alive ; it almost hurt her to think ; and the main impression she gathered from his words was the humorous aspect of them in the confidence of success that underlay their humility. Why was every one so sure of being accepted by her ?

She did not speak for an instant or two. She sat and stared stupidly in front of her. He came a little closer to her with a smile on his face, and then she broke away from him with a distracted cry. It seemed to his slowly awakening comprehension as though the air he was breathing were shivered by the pain of that cry.

“ Oh, Willis, don't ! Go away, leave me, hate me, can't you ? Oh, don't you see ? I can't, I can't. Take your eyes away, they hurt me so. I cannot marry you now. What evil power sent you here this morning ? Why couldn't you wait until everybody knew ? Don't you understand, I—I have promised some one else ? There, go.”

It was his turn now to be silent, and to stare in complete stupefaction. She bore it as long as she could, and then with a bitter sense of the comedy of the situation she stammered out a trembling supplication :

“ Oh, Willis, do scold me—or something. Don't be so ridiculously unlike yourself ! ”

She crouched away from him in the far corner of the sofa, and buried her face in the cushions. There was no sound except the
rushing

rushing in her ears for several minutes. When he spoke again it seemed as though a wave were receding slowly and unwillingly on the sea-shore.

"I am very sorry, Cynthia. Of course I am going—to be sure, yes."

She was conscious that he rose from the sofa and stood a little away from her.

"I suppose you wouldn't mind my knowing his name? Don't tell me if you would sooner not," said his voice, grown gentler still.

A woman rarely finds it difficult to pronounce the name of her lover, and Cynthia recovered some of her self-possession in the effort.

"I don't suppose you have ever heard of him. His name is Marks—Adrian Marks."

There was one of those rapid transitions from artificial composure to natural display of feeling, and Cynthia, listening dully to his movements, heard the springs of the sofa suddenly creak again as Willis dropped back heavily on to his seat.

"Bless my soul!" he said in his own voice and manner.

Cynthia raised herself and looked coldly at him.

"Adrian Marks?" he repeated, smoothing his hair with a large white handkerchief. "Adrian Marks?"

"Do you know him?" asked Cynthia curtly.

"Know him? Rather think I do! Little unphysical bit of a man—eh? Hair getting thin on the top, sallow complexion, no hands to speak of—should think I did know him, that's all. Do you really mean Adrian Marks? Impossible!"

"He is an artist. I don't expect you to understand what that means. And I am going to marry him, which I think ought to spare him your jeers. And I really think we had better end this useless discussion."

"Bless

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Willis again, "but we are only at the beginning of it. My poor Cynthia, you must have wanted to marry very badly."

Mrs. Angelo made a struggle to retain her dignity.

"I don't think you have at all grasped that I am engaged to Mr. Marks——"

"Well, it is a bit difficult," acknowledged Willis; "why, I could wipe the floor with him in one—— Does he know about the will?"

"He did not know until I told him," said Cynthia proudly, making the most of her one advantage, "and then he said my poverty only made me more precious to him: Mr. Marks, also, is ready to take me for myself."

The insinuation in her last words was meant to impress her hearer, but he only thrust his hands into his pockets and nodded at his boots, and made a vulgar exclamation.

"You bet he is, quite ready," he muttered incredulously. "That sounds like Mr. Adrian Marks, doesn't it? Oh yes, of course."

Cynthia sat with burning cheeks and said nothing. Willis got up with a sigh and looked down at her searchingly.

"Do you really think you are in love with Adrian Marks, Cynthia? Do you really?"

It was the question she had put to herself doubtingly for many weeks, but to hear it from the lips of another destroyed her last remnant of composure.

"It is easy for you to sneer," she cried angrily, "you who never had a thought apart from commerce, and the making of gold, and the heartless game of getting on in the world. What right have you to depreciate a man behind his back because he lives by his intellect and his talent, and because he moves in a
world

world you have no suspicion of? It is mean and unmanly of you."

Willis by no means showed himself disconcerted at this outburst. She was in the mood that was most familiar to him, the one in which he had seen her most often before, and he brightened considerably at the opportunities it offered him.

"Doesn't he get paid for his pictures then, eh?" he asked with a chuckle.

"I don't mind how much you laugh," cried Cynthia, "I have heard all those stale arguments before, and they are quite fruitless, every one. I am glad I never need listen to them any more; I am glad there is some one who can lift me out of my old miserable surroundings, and who can't allude to them either because he never knew anything about them. Adrian will never know any more of my history than I choose to tell him, never! I am glad I am going to throw away my ill-gotten fortune, the price of trade and robbery and everything I loathe. I am glad, glad, glad!"

Willis Ruthven gave a long whistle and strode over to the window before he spoke.

"Who told you that Marks didn't know anything about you?" he asked sharply.

"What do you mean?" she said, with a vague feeling of alarm.

"Well, my dear girl, I suppose that the fool who painted that nonsensical poster of yours must have known what he was painting it for, eh? Not that the poster itself proves it, to be sure."

Cynthia did not speak. The artistic atmosphere was being slowly dissipated.

"All I know is," went on Willis from the window, "that when I was down at Johnson's this morning, this dandy artist

you mention happened to descend from a world of his own in order to look in about the payment for that particular poster. Do you mean to tell me he doesn't know who you are? Bless my soul, Cynthia, it's time you had some one to look after you."

The delusion in which she had been living was shattered at one blow. Cynthia cowered for a moment beneath it, and then collected herself again with an instinct of self-preservation. She rose and walked over to the fireplace and began picking up the flowers. Her face was quite white, but she kept it turned away from him, and when she spoke it was in a tone of exaggerated composure.

"If you have said all you want to say, Willis, we will drop the subject. You have given me a good deal of gratuitous information about my private affairs, and I don't find it very amusing. I am rather busy this morning, too."

But Willis had no intention of taking the hint to leave. He came away from the window and spoke to her instead.

"You poor little woman, to think that I should have to be the one to tell you what any man would have twigged in a brace of shakes," he said in a sympathetic tone as he rubbed his hat with his coat sleeve, "I always did have to look after you, didn't I, Cynthia?"

Cynthia nearly choked in an attempt to tell him to leave her, but he stood up in the middle of the room and went on speaking, quite unconscious of the storm that was raging in her mind.

"But there, of course it was only a fancy freak on your part. Lord, what inexplicable creatures women are, to be sure. However a fine woman like you, Cynthia, with your taste and your head could have—but there, of course you didn't care about him really, how could you? Poor child, poor child. I won't bother
you

you any more now ; you'll like to think it over a bit—women like to think things over, eh ?”

And he really went that time, without the farewell greeting she was dreading and yet longed for ; and she sat up and listened to his retreating footstep on the stairs, and felt she would have done anything in her power to make him come back and scold and comfort her all at once for her foolishness. Yet she did not make an effort to recall him, but sat on the floor instead and wept hot tears of shame and disappointment over his stick and gloves. And Willis walked away down the street with his arms swinging and his hat at the back of his head.

How he spent the day never transpired, but to Cynthia it was the longest day of her life. She rang for the maid to clear up the confusion of the drawing-room, and went upstairs to put powder on her face.

Then she gave herself up to the consideration of her misfortunes, and went without her lunch. She countermanded the carriage and issued the mandate of “Not at home,” passed the afternoon in her bedroom where she persuaded herself she was going to be very ill, and took anti-pyrine, which she had heard was a preventive against something. About five o'clock she changed her dress, and made rather a substantial tea on finding to her disgust that she was healthily hungry, and then she sat on the balcony without a vestige of a headache left, and envied the cheerful people who passed in their carriages, and wished somebody would call.

Somebody did call about an hour before dinner-time, but he sent his card up first with a pencilled message upon it.

“You can show Mr. Ruthven up, and tell cook not to make a second entrée to-night,” she said, making herself effective on a couch near the window. She had decided that her attitude was to be smiling indifference, but she never thought of it again when

Willis

Willis burst into the room in front of the stately footman, seized both her hands in a friendly grasp and straightway burlesqued her studied pose.

"My dear silly little woman," he said, and looked at her and laughed mirthfully.

"Willis, I'm not, I won't be ——"

"You'll have to be," he said, laughing more than ever, and kissing the tips of her fingers on both hands.

"Let me go," cried Cynthia fiercely.

"Do you mean that?" he said, loosening his clasp and looking directly at her.

Cynthia turned away from him, and stamped her foot.

"I don't know," she muttered sulkily.

"Of course you don't," said Willis jovially, "women never do. We always have to make up their minds for them. You're as bad as any of them, Cynthia."

"You talk as though I had nothing to do but to listen to you," cried Cynthia angrily.

"You don't look to me as though you had done much else since you got up this morning," replied Willis bluntly.

"Is that my fault?" she exclaimed with burning cheeks. "Can I help your coming and wasting all my time? When I tell you to go, you don't."

"Tell me to go? But you don't," said Willis.

"I—I do," said Cynthia, looking down.

"When? Now?" he demanded.

"Yes, now," she said, with her back to him and her hands clenched.

"If I go," she heard him say slowly and deliberately behind her, "it will be for always, Cynthia."

"I don't care," was her reply.

"For

"For always, Cynthia," he repeated doggedly.

She shrugged her shoulders and turned a little towards him.

"You know you couldn't keep away," she said scornfully.

"You know you couldn't do without me," he rejoined, and began humming a tune.

"I have done without you for seven years."

"And a pretty mess you've got yourself into at the end of them," cried Willis.

"I haven't—it's you. It would have been all right if you had not interfered," she said, facing him again.

"Would it? Then I'm to go, is that it?" he said, and took no notice of her change of expression as he picked up his hat.

"It is for always, Cynthia," he said, and held out his hand.

Cynthia burst into tears.

"There, I *knew*," said Willis, coughing violently for no reason whatever.

"What did you know?" sobbed Cynthia, swaying towards him.

"That you would have to give in," he laughed, coming nearer to her.

"Why?" said she, struggling to free herself as he put his arms round her.

"Because I said so, of course. Bless me, is that going to displease you too?"

"I *hate* you for saying that, but—I'm glad you did," she whispered.—"I suppose I must ask you to dinner," she said presently.

"They will be all my dinners in the future," he said with exultation in his voice. "How will it please you to come to me for all your pocket-money, eh?"

"As much, possibly, as it will please you to find out how much pocket-money I require," retorted Cynthia.

"To think," continued Willis, "that I owe all my happiness to that ridiculous poster——"

"You don't," cried Cynthia; "you owe it all to coming in this morning! I was writing to Adrian when you arrived. I should never have listened to him at all if you had not gone out of town. I am perfectly certain I shouldn't," she added firmly, in the hope of convincing herself of this comfortable conclusion. Willis had always been convinced of it, and kissed her with a proud sense of victory.

"Do you want me to go and finish him off, or anything?" he asked cheerfully.

Cynthia was alarmed at the vision of her late lover being murdered in his studio by one blow from a heavy walking-stick, and said she thought she would be meeting him herself at Lady Houghton's dance that evening. And she wondered vaguely at the same moment why he had not been to see her all day.

The reason for his absence was quite simple. He had woken up in the morning in a mood that strangely resembled Cynthia's, though it probably showed itself differently in him, and arose from another cause. He stayed in bed and blamed himself until mid-day; and he tried to paint and blamed his model until sunset. He called himself a fool in no measured terms for having allowed his feelings to run away with him, and he considered carefully every possible way of extricating himself from his predicament. The day wore on, and he arrived at no satisfactory solution of the difficulty. A letter did not commend itself to him because he could not write letters; women always had the best of it, he reflected, when it came to letter-writing. Besides, what had he
to

to say except that he found he had made a mistake on the previous evening? It was not a graceful admission to make in any case, but to say it in his best manner and in carefully chosen surroundings, satisfied his sense of the fitness of things more than the idea of seeing it baldly represented in black and white. Besides, he had really persuaded himself that he loved her very deeply, and he had a lingering hope that an interview might present some pathetic though compensating features that could never arise from an exchange of letters. Yet the evening came and he had not fixed a time nor a place for it.

He dined with Dicky Askew at his favourite restaurant; and the dinner was not so good as usual, and Dicky's conversation related entirely to Hurlingham and had a vagueness and an absence of particulars about it which, at any other time, would have aroused his suspicions, but which only succeeded this evening in irritating him more than before. He dressed for Lady Houghton's dance in a dejected frame of mind, and he went forth in a hansom like a victim who knows that his doom is awaiting him.

Margaret, with whom he had his first dance, found him astonishingly dull. She was full of conversation herself, and she rallied him on his mood as he led her into the conservatory after one or two turns round the crowded room.

"Why weren't you at Hurlingham this afternoon?" she said.

"Is it necessary to go to Hurlingham?" he asked with his weary smile. It struck him that she was looking very pretty and well-dressed.

"Of course. Everybody does," said Margaret conclusively, "it is bright and amusing, and the best-dressed people go there. There is polo too, I believe."

"But I am not interested in polo," objected Adrian.

"Oh, that doesn't matter. Nobody is. I didn't dream or
looking

looking at the polo to-day. But it was perfectly thrilling," she added with a glow on her face.

"How young and fresh you are," said the artist involuntarily. "Is it only Hurlingham that can bring that look on to your face, Margaret?"

"Mr. Marks! what have I said? I only meant that I enjoyed myself rather," said Margaret, looking confused and blushing furiously; "the drive and the air, you know, and—and the polo of course——"

Adrian was silently rejoicing that she was, to the best of his knowledge, completely untrammelled by any will.

"Don't let me frighten you," he murmured in his softest tones; "I was thinking that the man who could make you look like that would be the happiest man in the world."

Margaret was a little bewildered at first; then her face cleared up and she smiled up at him happily. She remembered that Dicky had been dining with him.

"Do you think so really?" she said, "do you think he *is*?"

"Well," said Adrian, slightly startled, "that of course depends on whether you will make him so."

The words escaped his lips without reflection. The intoxicating scent of the hothouse plants, the swing of the music in the next room, his own dissatisfaction—all combined to make him seize the opportunity that she evidently meant to give him.

"Why of course I will!" cried Margaret, turning to him with another blush and smile.

Adrian hardly allowed himself to breathe.

"Do you really mean that, darling?" he said, bending towards her.

"Dicky!" cried the astonished girl, springing up to meet the ugly boy who was coming to claim her, "Dicky, tell him!

him! I thought you had; he doesn't understand! Where's auntie?"

And she fled across the tessellated floor and left the two friends face to face.

The ugly boy laughed exultantly.

"Thought you'd guess, old man, after what I said at dinner. Has she been trying to tell you, the little brick? She knows we're pals, you see, that's why."

"Yes," said Adrian faintly, "I expect that's why. Congratulate you, Dicky."

"Thanks awfully, old chap. I knew you'd be glad," laughed Dicky, shaking his hand vigorously; "I am beastly lucky, eh? See you for a drink after this dance."

Adrian stood irresolute for a moment when the ugly boy had gone. He picked one or two flowers to pieces, ground his heel savagely into them as they lay on the floor, and then strolled aimlessly round the edge of azalea under which he had been sitting with Margaret.

On the opposite side of it he found Mrs. Angelo Milton sitting alone.

There were only two constructions to be placed on the situation and he desperately assumed the happiest.

"Oh, here you are," he began, with a wretched attempt at composure; "I have been looking for you everywhere."

Cynthia looked him from head to foot without moving.

"I don't think I have the pleasure," she said, with a calm smile; "there seems to be some mistake."

And Adrian took his dismissal and his departure simultaneously.

"Well, how did your puny little wall-painter take it?" asked Willis Ruthven the next day.

"He seemed surprised," said Cynthia, and concealed a smile.