At Twickenham

By Ella D'Arcy

WHEN John Corbett married Minnie Wray, her sister Lœtitia, their parents being dead, came to live under his roof also, which seemed to Corbett the most natural arrangement in the world, for he was an Irishman, and the Irish never count the cost of an extra mouth. "Where there's enough for two, there's enough for three," is a favourite saying of theirs, and even in the most impecunious Irish household no one ever dreams of grudging you your bite of bread or sup o' th' crathur.

But Corbett was not impecunious. On the contrary, he was fairly well off, being partner in and traveller for an Irish whiskey house, and earning thus between eight and nine hundred a year. In the Income Tax returns he put the figure down as five hundred, but in conversation he referred to it casually as over a thousand; for he had some of the vices of his nationality as well as most of its virtues, and to impress Twickenham with a due sense of the worth of John Corbett was perhaps his chief preoccupation out of business hours.

He lived in an imitation high art villa on the road to Strawberry Hill; a villa that rejoiced in the name of "Braemar," gilded in gothic letters upon the wooden gate; a villa that flared up into pinnacles, blushed with red-brick, and mourned behind sad-tinted glass.

glass. The Elizabethan casements let in piercing draughts, the Brummagen brass door-handles came off in the confiding hand that sought to turn them, the tiled hearths successfully conducted all the heat up the chimneys to disperse it generously over an inclement sky. But Corbett found consolation in the knowledge that the hall was paved with grey and white mosaic, that "Salve" bristled at you from the door-mat, that the dining-room boasted of a dado, and that the drawing-room rose to the dignity of a frieze.

Minnie Corbett, whose full name was Margaret but who preferred to be called Rita, although she could not teach her family to remember to call her so, and Lœtitia, who had recently changed the "Tish" of her childhood to the more poetical Letty, dressed the windows of "Braemar," with frilled Madras muslin, draped the mantel-pieces with plush, hung the walls with coloured photographs, Chinese crockery, and Japanese fans. They made expeditions into town in search of pampas grass and bulrushes, with which in summer-time they decorated the fireplace, and in winter the painted drain-pipes which stood in the corners of the room.

Beyond which labours of love, and Minnie's perfunctory ordering of the dinner every morning, neither she not Lœtitia found anything to do, for Corbett kept a cook, a house-parlourmaid, and a nurse to look after Minnie's three children, in whom her interest seemed to have ceased when she had bestowed on them the fine-sounding names of Lancelot, Hugo, and Guinevere. Lœtitia had never pretended to feel any interest in the children at all.

The sisters suffered terribly from dulness, and one memorable Sunday evening, Corbett being away travelling, they took first-class tickets to Waterloo, returning by the next train, merely to pass the time.

When Corbett was not travelling, his going to and fro between Twickenham

Twickenham and the city lent a spice of variety to the day. He left every morning by the 9.15 train, coming home in the evening in time for a seven o'clock dinner. On Saturdays he got back by two, when he either mowed the lawn, in his shirt-sleeves, or played a set of tennis with Lœtitia, or went with the girls for a row on the river. Or, if Minnie made a special point of it, he escorted them into town again, where he treated them to a restaurant *table d'hôte* and a theatre afterwards. On Sundays he rose late, renewed his weekly acquaintance with the baby, read through the *Referee* from first line to last, and accompanied by his two little boys, dressed in correct Jack Tar costume, went for a walk along the towing-path, whence they could watch the boating.

Humanly speaking, he would have like to have followed the example of those flannel-shirted publicans and sinners who pushed off every moment in gay twos and threes from Shore's landing-stage, but consideration for the susceptibilities of Providence and of Twickenham held him in check.

It is true he did not go to church, although often disquieted by the thought of the bad effect this omission must produce on the mind of his next-door neighbour ; but he salved his conscience with the plea that he was a busy man, and that Sunday was his only day of home life. Besides, the family was well represented by Minnie and Lœtitia, who when the weather was fine, never missed morning service. When it was wet they stayed away on account of their frocks.

Sunday afternoons were spent by them sitting in the drawing-room awaiting the visitors who did not come. The number of persons in Twickenham with whom they were on calling terms was limited, nor can it be maintained that "Braemar" was an amusing house at which to call. For though Corbett was one of the most cordial, one of the most hospitable of young men, his women-folk

folk shone rather by their silences than by their conversational gifts.

Minnie Corbett was particularly silent. She had won her husband by lifting to his a pair of blankly beautiful eyes, and it did not seem to her requisite to give greater exertion to the winning of minor successes.

Lœtitia could talk to men, provided they were unrelated to her, but she found nothing to say to members of her own sex. Even with her sister she was mostly silent, unless there was a new fashion in hats, the cut of a sleeve, or the set of a skirt to discuss. There was, however, one other topic which invariably aroused her to a transitory animation. This was the passing by the windows in his well-appointed dog-cart, of a man who, because of his upright bearing, moustache, and close-cut hair, she and Minnie had agreed to call "the Captain."

He was tall, evidently, and had a straight nose. Lœtitia also was straight-nosed and tall. She saw in this physical resemblance a reason for fostering a sentimental interest in him.

"Quick, Minnie, here's the Captain!" she would cry, and Minnie would awake from the somnolency of Sunday with a start, and skip over to the window to watch a flying vision of a brown horse, a black and red painted cart, and a drab-coated figure holding the reins, while a very small groom in white cords and top-boots maintained his seat behind by means of tightly folded arms and a portentous frown.

"He's got such a pretty horse," observed Minnie on one occasion, before relapsing back into silence, the folding of hands, and a rocking-chair.

"Yes," Lœtitia agreed pensively, "it has such a nice tail."

Although she knew nothing concerning the Captain, although it did not seem probable that she ever would know anything, although

although it was at least a tenable supposition that he was married already and the father of a family, she saw herself, in fancy, the wife of the wearer of the drab coat, driving by his side along the roads of Twickenham, up the High Street of Richmond. She wore, in fancy, a sealskin as handsome as Minnie's and six inches longer, and she ordered lavishly from Gosling and the other tradesmen, giving the address of Captain Devereux of Deepdene, or Captain Mortimer of the Shrubberies. The names were either purely imaginary, or reminiscent of the novels she constantly carried about with her and fitfully read.

She sat nearly always with an open book upon her knee, but neither Hall Caine nor Miss Marie Corelli even in their most inspired moments could woo her to complete self-forgetfulness. She did not wish to forget herself in a novel. She wished to find in it straw for her own brick-making, bricks for her own castle-building. And if a shadow fell across the window, if a step was heard along the hall, she could break off in the most poignant passage to lift a slim hand to the better arrangement of her curls, to thrust a slim foot in lace stocking and pointed shoe to a position of greater conspicuousness.

On Sunday evenings at "Braemar" there was cold supper at eight, consisting of the early dinner joint, eaten with a salad scientifically mixed by Corbett, the remains of the apple or gooseberry pie, cheese, and an excellent Burgundy obtained by him at trade price. When the cloth was removed he did not return to the drawing-room. He never felt at ease in that over-furnished, over-ornate room, so darkened by shaded lamps and pink petticoated candles that it was impossible to read. The white, untempered flames of three gas-burners in the dining-room suited him better, and here he would sit on one side of the hearth in an arm-chair grown comfortable from continual

 use,

use, and read over again the already well-read paper, while Minnie, on the other side of the hearth, stared silently before her, and Lœtitia fingered her book at the table.

Sometimes Corbett, untaught by past experience, would make a hopeful appeal to one or the other, for an expression of opinion concerning some topic of the day: some new play, some new book. But Minnie seldom took the trouble to hear him at all, and Lœtitia would answer with such superficial politeness, with so wide an irrelevance to the subject, that discouraged, he would draw back again into his shell. At the end of every Sunday evening he was glad to remember that the next day was Monday when he could return to his occupations and his acquaintances in the City. In the City men were ready to talk to him, to listen to what he said, and even to affect some show of interest in his views and pursuits.

The chief breaks in his home life, its principal excitements, were the various ailments the children developed, the multifarious and unexpected means they found of putting their lives in jeopardy and adding items to Dr. Payne's half-yearly accounts. Corbett would come home in the happiest mood, to have his serenity roughly shattered by the news that Lancelot had forced a boot-button down his ear, and was rolling on the floor in agony; that Hugo had bolted seventeen cherry-stones in succession and obstinately refused an emetic; that the baby had been seized with convulsions, that the whole family were in for chicken-pox, whooping-cough, or mumps.

On such occasions Minnie, recovering something of her antenuptial vivacity, seemed to take a positive pleasure in unfolding the harrowing details, in dwelling on the still more harrowing consequences which would probably ensue.

When, on turning into Wetherly Gardens on his way from the

the station, Corbett perceived his wife's blonde head above the garden gate, he knew at once that it betokened some domestic catastrophe. It had only been in the very early days of their married life that Minnie had hurried to greet his return for the mere pleasure it gave her.

The past winter had brought rather more than the usual crop of casualties among the children, so that it had seemed to Corbett that the parental cup of bitterness was already filled to overflowing, that Fate might well grant him a respite, when, returning from town one warm May Saturday, his thoughts veering riverwards, and his intention being to invite the girls to scull up and have tea at Tagg's, his ears were martyrised by the vociferous howls of Hugo, who had just managed to pull down over himself the kettle of water boiling on the nursery fire.

While the women of the household disputed among themselves as to the remedial values of oil, treacle, or magnesia, Corbett rushed round to Payne's to find him away, and to be referred to Dr. Matheson of Holly Cottage, who was taking Payne's cases. At the moment he never noticed what Matheson was like, he received no conscious impression of the other's personality. But when that evening, comparative peace having again fallen upon the Villa, Lœtitia remarked for the twentieth time, "How funny that Dr. Matheson should be the Captain, isn't it?" he found in his memory the picture of a tall fair man, with regular features and a quiet manner, he caught the echoes of a pleasantly modulated voice.

The young women did not go to service next morning, but Lœtitia put on her best gown nevertheless. She displayed also a good deal of unexpected solicitude for her little nephew, and when Matheson looked in, at about 10 A.M., she saw fit to accompany him and Corbett upstairs to the night-nursery, where Minnie, in a white

a white wrapper trimmed with ribbons as blue as her eyes and as meaningless, sat gazing into futurity by her son's bedside.

Hugo had given up the attempt to obtain illuminating answers to the intricate social and ethical problems with which he wiled away the pain-filled time. For when by repeated interrogatives of "Mother?" "Eh, mother?" "Well, mother?" he had induced Minnie at least to listen to him, all he extracted from her was some unsatisfying vagueness, which added its quota to the waters of contempt already welling up in his young soul for the intelligence of women.

He rejoiced at the appearance of his father and the doctor, despite some natural heart-sinkings as to what the latter might not purpose doing to him. He knew doctors to be perfectly irresponsible autocrats, who walked into your bedroom, felt your pulse, turned you over and over just as though you were a puppy or a kitten, and then with an impassive countenance ordered you a poultice or a powder, and walked off. He knew that if they condemned you to lose an arm or a leg they would be just as despotic and impassible, and you would have to submit just as quietly. None of the grown-ups about you would ever dream of interfering in your behalf.

So he fixed Matheson with an alert, an inquiring, a profoundly distrustful eye, and with a hand in his father's awaited developments. Lœtitia he ignored altogether. He supposed that the existence of aunts was necessary to the general scheme of things, but personally he hadn't any use for them. His predominate impression of Auntie Tish was that she spent her day heating curling-irons over the gas-bracket in her bedroom, and curling her hair, and although he saw great possibilities in curling-irons heated red-hot and applied to reasonable uses, he was convinced that no one

one besides herself ever knew whether her hair was curled or straight. But women were such ninnies.

The examination over, the scalds re-dressed and covered up again, Matheson on his way downstairs stopped at the staircase window to admire the green and charming piece of garden, which ending in an inconspicuous wooden paling, enjoyed an illusory proprietorship in the belt of fine old elm trees belonging to the demesne beyond.

Corbett invited him to come and take a turn round it, and the two young men stepped out upon the lawn.

It was a delicious blue and white morning, with that Sunday feeling in the air which is produced by the cessation of all workaday noises, and heightened just now by the last melodious bell-cadences floating out from the church on the distant green. The garden was full of flowers and bees, scent and sunshine. Roses, clematis, and canariensis tapestried the brick unsightlynesses of the back of the house. Serried ranks of blue-green lavender, wild companies of undisciplined sweet pea, sturdy clumps of red-hot poker shooting up in fiery contrast to the wide-spreading luxuriance of the cool white daisy bushes, justled side by side in the border territories which were separated from the lawn by narrow gravel paths.

While Corbett and his guest walked up and down the centre of the grass, Minnie and Lœtitia watched them from behind the curtains of the night nursery window.

"He's got such nice hands," said Lœtitia, "so white and well kept. Did you notice, Minnie?" Lœtitia always noticed hands, because she gave a great deal of attention to her own.

But Minnie, whose hands were not her strong point, was more impressed by Matheson's boots. "I wish Jack would get brown boots, they look so much smarter with light clothes," she remarked,

remarked, but without any intensity of desire. Before the short phrase was finished, her voice had dropped into apathy, her gaze had wandered away from Matheson's boots, from the garden, from the hour. She seemed not to hear her sister's dubious "Yes, but I wonder he wears a tweed suit on Sundays!"

Lœtitia heard herself calling him Algernon or Edgar, and remonstrating with him on the subject. Then she went into her bedroom, recurled a peccant lock on her temple, and joined the men just as the dinner gong sounded.

Matheson was pressed to stay and share the early dinner. "Unless," said Corbett, seeing that he hesitated, "Mrs. Matheson . . . perhaps . . . is waiting for you?"

"There is no Mrs. Matheson, as yet," he answered smiling, "although Payne is always telling me it's my professional duty to get married as soon as possible."

Lœtitia coloured and smiled.

* * * * *

From that day Matheson was often at "Braemar." At first he came ostensibly to attend to Hugo, but before that small pickle was on his feet again and in fresh mischief, he was sufficiently friendly with the family to drop in without any excuse at all.

He would come of an evening and ask for Corbett, and the maid would show him into the little study behind the dining-room, where Corbett enjoyed his after-dinner smoke. He enjoyed it doubly in Matheson's society, and discovered he had been thirsting for some such companionship for years. The girls were awfully nice, of course, but . . . . and then, the fellows in the City . . . he compared them with Matheson, much to their disadvantage. For Matheson struck him as being amazingly clever—a pillar of originality—and his fine indifference to the most cherished opinions of Twickenham made Corbett catch his breath,

breath. But the time spent with his friend was only too short. Minnie and Lœtitia always found some pretext to join them, and they would reproach Matheson in so cordial a manner for never coming into the drawing-room, that presently, somewhat to Corbett's chagrin, he began to pay his visits to them instead.

Then as the summer advanced, the fine weather suggested river picnics, and the young women arranged one every week. They even ventured under Matheson's influence to go out on a Sunday, starting in the forenoon, getting up as far as Chertsey, and not returning till late at night. Corbett, half delighted with the abandoned devilry of the proceeding, half terrified lest Wetherly Gardens should come to hear of it, Providence deal swift retribution, was always wholly surprised and relieved when they found themselves again ashore, as safe and comfortable as though the day had been a mere Monday or Wednesday. And if this immunity from consequences slightly shook Corbett's respect for Providence, it sensibly increased his respect for his friend.

Corbett would have enjoyed this summer extremely, but for the curious jealousy Minnie began to exhibit of his affection for Matheson. It seemed to him it could only be jealousy which made her intrude so needlessly on their *tête-à-têtes*, interrupt their conversation so pointedly, and so frequently reproach Corbett, in the privacy of the nuptial chamber, for monopolising all the attention of their guest.

"You're always so selfish," Minnie would complain.

Yet, reviewing the incidents of the evening—Matheson had been dining perhaps at "Braemar"—it seemed to Corbett that he had hardly had a chance to exchange a word with him at all. It seemed to Corbett that Lœtitia had done all the talking ; and her light volubility with Matheson, so different to the tongue-tiedness of her ordinary hours, her incessant and slightly meaningless laugh,

laugh, echoed in his ears at the back of Minnie's scoldings, until both were lost in sleep.

But when the problem of Minnie's vexation recurred to him next morning, he decided that the key to it could only be jealousy, and he was annoyed with himself that he could find no excuses for a failing at once so ridiculous and so petty. The true nature of the case never once crossed his mind, until Minnie unfolded it for him one day, abruptly and triumphantly.

"Well, it's all right. He's proposed at last."

"What do you mean? Who?" asked Corbett bewildered.

"Why, Jim Matheson, of course! Who else do you suppose? He proposed to Tish last night in the garden. You remember how long they were out there, after we came in? That was why."

Corbett was immensely surprised, even incredulous, although when he saw that his incredulity made his wife angry, he stifled it in his bosom.

After all, as she said with some asperity, why shouldn't Matheson be in love with Lœtitia? Lœtitia was a pretty girl . . . a good girl . . . yet somehow Corbett felt disappointed and depressed.

"You're such a selfish pig," Minnie told him; "you never think of anybody but yourself. You want to keep Tish here always."

Corbett feared he must be selfish, though scarcely in respect to Lœtitia. In his heart he would have been very glad to see her married. But he didn't want Matheson to marry her.

"Jim's awfully in love," said Minnie, and it sounded odd to Corbett to hear his wife call Matheson "Jim." "He fell in love with her the very first moment he saw her. That's why he's been here so often. You thought he came to see you, I suppose!"

Her

Her husband's blank expression made her laugh.

"You *are* a pig!" she repeated. "You never do think of any one but yourself. Now hurry up and get dressed, and we'll go into town and dine at the Exhibition, and after dinner we'll go up in the Big Wheel."

"Is Letty coming too?" Corbett asked

"Don't be so silly! Of course not. She's expecting Jim. That's why I'm taking you out. You don't imagine they want your society, do you? Or mine?" she added as an afterthought. and with an unusual concession to civility.

Henceforward Corbett saw even less of Matheson than before. He was as fond of him as ever, but the friendship fell into abeyance.

It seemed too that Matheson tried to avoid him, and when he offered his congratulations on the engagement, the lover showed himself singularly reticent and cold. Corbett concluded he was nervous. He remembered being horribly nervous himself in the early days of his betrothal to Minnie Wray, when her mother had persisted in introducing him to a large circle at Highbury as "My daughter Margaret's *engagé*."

On the other hand, Corbett could not enough rejoice at the genial warmth which the event shed over the atmosphere of "Braemar." Both young women brightened up surprisingly, nor was there any lack of conversation between them now. Corbett thankfully gathered up such crumbs of talk as fell to his share, and first learned that the wedding was to take place in October when Minnie informed him she must have a new frock. She rewarded him for his immediate consent by treating him to a different description of how she would have it made, three nights in the week.

Lœtitia thought of nothing but new frocks, and set about making

making some. A headless and armless idol, covered in scarlet linen, was produced from a cupboard, and reverentially enshrined in the dining-room. Both sisters were generally found on their knees before it, while a constant chattering went on in its praise. Innumerable yards of silk and velvet were snipped up in sacrifice, and the sofas and chairs were sown with needles and pins, perhaps to extract involuntary homage from those who would not otherwise bow the head. The tables were littered with books of ritual having woodcuts in the text and illuminated pictures slipped between the leaves.

There were constant visits to Richmond and Regent Street, much correspondence with milliners and dressmakers, a long succession of drapers' carts standing in the road, of porters laden with brown paper parcels passing up and down the path. Lœtitia talked of Brighton for her wedding tour, and of having a conservatory added to the drawing-room of Holly Cottage. Friends and acquaintances called to felicitate her, and left to ask themselves what in the world Dr. Matheson could have seen in Letty Wray. Presents began to arrive, and a transitory gloom fell upon "Braemar" when Lœtitia received two butter dishes of identical pattern from two different quarters, neither of which, on examination by the local clockmaker, proved to be silver.

In this endless discussion of details, it did occasionally cross Corbett's mind that that which might perhaps be considered an essential point, namely, Matheson's comfort and happiness, was somewhat lost sight of. But as he made no complaint, and maintained an equable demeanour, Corbett supposed it was all right. Every woman considered the acquisition of fallals an indispensable preliminary to marriage, and it was extravagant to look for an exception in Lœtitia.

Matters

Matters stood thus, when turning into Wetherly Gardens one evening at the end of August, Corbett perceived, with a sudden heart-sinking, Minnie awaiting him at the gate. He recited the litany of all probable calamities, prayed for patience, and prepared his soul to endure the worst.

"What *do* you think, Jack," Minnie began, with immense blue eyes, and a voice that thrilled with intensity. "The most dreadful thing has happened——"

"Well, let me get in and sit down at least," said Corbett, dispiritedly. He was tired with the day's work, weary at the renewal of domestic worry. But the news which Minnie gave him was stimulating in its unexpectedness.

"Jim Matheson's been here to break off the engagement! He actually came to see Tish this afternoon and told her so himself. Isn't it monstrous? Isn't it disgraceful? And the presents come and everything. She's in a dreadful state. She's been crying on the bed ever since."

But Lœtitia, hearing her brother-in-law's return, came down, her fringe, ominous sign, out of curl, her eyes red, her face disfigured from much weeping.

And when she began, brokenly, "He's thrown me over, Jack! He's jilted me, he's told me so to my face! Oh, it's *too* hard. How shall I ever hold up my head again?" then, Corbett's sympathy went out to her completely. But he wanted particulars. How had it come about! There had been some quarrel, surely some misunderstanding!

Lœtitia declared there had been none. Why should she quarrel with Jim when she had been so happy, and everything had seemed so nice? No, he was tired of her, that was all. He had seen some one else perhaps, whom he fancied better, some one with more money. She wept anew, and stamped her foot upon the

the floor. "I wish you'd kill him, Jack, I wish you'd kill him!" she cried. "His conduct is infamous!"

Matheson's conduct as depicted by the young woman did seem infamous to Corbett, and after the first chaotic confusion of his mind had fallen into order again, his temper rose. His Irish pride was stung to the quick. No one had a right to treat a woman belonging to him with contumely. He would go up, at once, to Matheson, this very evening, and ask him what he meant by it. He would exact ample satisfaction.

He swallowed a hurried and innutritious meal, with Lœtitia's tears salting every dish, and Minnie's reiterations ringing dirges in his ears. She and Lœtitia wanted him to "do something" to Matheson; to kill him if possible, to horsewhip him certainly. Corbett was in a mood to fall in with their wishes, and the justice of their cause must have seemed unimpeachable to them all, since neither he nor they reflected for a moment that he could not have the smallest chance in a tussle with the transgressor, who overlooked him by a head and shoulders, and was nearly twice his size.

This confidence in righteousness is derived from the story-books, which teach us that in personal combat the evil-doer invariably succumbs, no matter what the disparity of physical conditions may be, although it must be added that in every properly written story-book it is always the hero who boasts of breadth of muscle and length of inches, while the villain's black little soul is clothed in an appropriately small and unlovely body.

Corbett, however, set off without any misgivings.

He found Matheson still at table, reading from a book propped up against the claret-jug. He refused the hand and the chair Matheson offered him, and came to the point at once.

"Is this true what I hear at home? That you came up this afternoon to break off your engagement with Lœtitia?"

Matheson,

Matheson, who had flushed a little at the rejection of his handshake, admitted with evident embarrassment that it was true.

"And you've the—the cheek to tell me that, to my face?" said Corbett, turning red.

"I can't deny it, to your face."

"But what's your meaning, what's your motive, what has Letty done? What has happened since yesterday? You seemed all right yesterday," Corbett insisted.

"It's not Letty's—it's not Miss Wray's fault at all. It's my mistake. I've made the discovery we're not a bit suited to each other, that's all. And you ought to be thankful, as I am, that I've discovered it in time."

"Damn it!" exclaimed Corbett, and a V-shaped vein rose in the centre of his forehead, and his blue eyes darkened. "You come to my house, I make a friend of you, my wife and sister receive you into their intimacy, you ask the girl to be your wife. . . . . I suppose you admit doing that?" Corbett interpolated in withering accents, "and now you throw her away like an old glove, break her heart, and expect me to be thankful? Damn it all, that's a bit steep."

"I shouldn't think I've broken her heart," said Matheson embarrassed again. "I should hope not." There was interrogation in his tone.

"She feels it acutely," said Corbett. "Any woman would. She's very——" he stopped, but Matheson had caught the unspoken word.

"Angry with me? Yes. But anger's a healthy sign. Anger doesn't break hearts."

"Upon my soul," cried Corbett amazed at such coolness, "I call your conduct craven, I call it infamous!" he added, remembering Lœtitia's own word.

"Look

"Look here Jack," appealed the other, "can't you sit down? I want to talk the matter over with you, but it gets on my nerves to see you walking up and down the room like that."

Corbett, all unconscious of his restlessness, now stood still, but determined he would never sit down in Matheson's house again. Then he weakly subsided into the chair his friend pushed over to him.

"You call my conduct craven? I assure you I never had to make so large a demand upon my courage as when I called upon Lœtitia to-day. But I said to myself, a little pluck now, a bad quarter of an hour to live through, and in all probability you save two lives from ruin. For we should have made each other miserable."

"Then why have engaged yourself?" asked Corbett with renewed heat.

"Yes . . . why . . . do you know, Jack, that the very morning of our engagement, five minutes even before the fateful moment, I'd no more idea . . . you know how such things can come about. The garden, the moonlight, a foolish word taken seriously. And then the apparent impossibility of drawing back, the reckless plunging deeper into the mire. . . . I don't deny I was attracted by Letty, interested in her. She is a pretty girl, an unusually pretty girl. But like most other girls she's a victim to her upbringing. Until you are all in all to an English girl you are nothing at all. She never reveals herself to you for a moment; speaks from the lips only; says the things she has been taught to say, that other women say. You've got to get engaged to a woman in England it seems, if you're ever to know anything about her. And I engaged myself, as I told you, in a moment of emotion, and then hopefully set to work to make the best

best of it. But I didn't succeed. I didn't find in Letty the qualities I consider necessary for domestic happiness."

"But Letty is a very good——"

Matheson interrupted with "In a way she's too good, too normal, too well-regulated. I could almost prefer a woman who had the capacity, at least, for being bad! It would denote some warmth, some passion, some soul. Now, I never was able to convince myself that Lœtitia was fond of me. Oh, she liked me well enough. She was satisfied with my position, modest as it is, with my prospects. My profession pleased her, principally as she confessed to me, because it necessitates my keeping a carriage. But *fond* . . . do you think she is capable of a very passionate affection, Jack?

"Of course, I know this is going to do me a lot of harm. Twickenham, no doubt, will echo your verdict, and describe my conduct as infamous. I daresay I shall have to pull up stakes and go elsewhere. But for me, it has been the only conduct possible. I discovered I didn't love her. Wouldn't it be a crime to marry a woman you don't love? I saw we could never make each other happy. Wouldn't it be a folly to rush open-eyed into such misery as that?"

Which was, practically, the end of the matter, although the friends sat long over their whiskey and cigarettes, discussing all sublunary things. Corbett enjoyed a most delightful evening, and it had struck twelve before he set off homewards, glowing outside and in with the warmth which good spirits and good fellowship impart. He reaffirmed to his soul the old decision that Matheson was undoubtedly the cleverest, the most entertaining, the most lovable of men—and suddenly he remembered the mission on which he had been sent nearly four hours ago, simultaneously he realised its preposterous failure. All his happy self-complacency

self-complacency radiated off into the night. Chilled and sobered and pricked by conscience, he stood for a moment with his hand upon the gate of "Braemar," looking up at the lighted windows of Minnie's room.

What was he going to say to her and to Lœtitia? And, more perturbing question still, what when they should hear the truth, were his womenfolk going to say to him?