

The Haseltons

By Hubert Crackanthorpe

I

SHE sat in a corner of a large London drawing-room, and the two men stood before her—Hillier Haselton, her husband, and George Swann, her husband's cousin ; and, beyond them, the mellow light of shaded candles, vague groupings of black coats, white shirt-fronts, and gay-tinted dresses, and the noisy hum of conversation.

The subject that the two men were discussing—and more especially Swann's blunt earnestness—stirred her, though throughout it she had been unpleasantly conscious of a smallness, almost a pettiness, in Hillier's aspect.

“Well, but why not, my dear Swann? Why not be unjust : man's been unjust to woman for so many years.”

Hillier let his voice fall listlessly, as if to rebuke the other's vehemence ; and to hint that he was tired of the topic, looked round at his wife, noting at the same time that Swann was observing how he held her gaze in his meaningly. And the unexpectedness of his own attitude charmed him—his hot defence of an absurd theory, obviously evoked by a lover-like desire to please her. Others, whose admiration he could trust, would, he surmised, have reckoned

reckoned it a pretty pose. And she, perceiving that Swann seemed to take her husband's sincerity for granted, felt a sting of quick regret that she had ever come to understand him, and that she could not still view him as they all viewed him.

Hillier moved away across the room, and Swann drew a stool beside her chair, and asking her for news of Claude, her little boy, talked to her of other things—quite simply, for they were grown like old friends. He looked at her steadily, stroking his rough fair beard, as if he were anxious to convey to her something which he could not put into words. She divined ; and, a little startled, tried to thank him with her eyes ; but, embarrassed by the clumsiness of his own attempt at sympathetic perception, he evidently noticed nothing. And this obtuseness of his disappointed her, since it somehow seemed to confirm her isolation.

She glanced round the room. Hillier stood on the hearth-rug, his elbow on the mantel-piece, busily talking, with slight deferential gestures, to the great English actress in whose honour the dinner had been given. The light fell on his smooth glistening hair, on his quick sensitive face ; for the moment forcing herself to realise him as he appeared to the rest, she felt a thrill of jaded pride in him, in his cleverness, in his reputation, in his social success.

Swann, observing the direction of her gaze, said, almost apologetically, "You must be very proud of him."

She nodded, smiled a faint, assumed smile ; then added, adopting his tone, "His success has made him so happy."

"And you too ?" he queried.

"Of course," she answered quickly.

He stayed silent, while she continued to watch her husband absently.

II

Success, an atmosphere of flattery, suited Hillier Haselton, and stimulating his weaknesses, continually encouraged him to display the handsomer portion of his nature. For though he was yet young—and looked still younger—there was always apparent, beneath his frank boyish relish of praise, a semblance of serious modesty, a strain of genuine reserve. And society—the smart literary society that had taken him up—found this combination charming. So success had made life pleasant for him in many ways, and he rated its value accordingly ; he was too able a man to find pleasure in the facile forms of conceit, or to accept, with more than a certain cynical complacency, the world's generous judgment on his work. Indeed, the whole chorus of admiration did but strengthen his contempt for contemporary literary judgments, a contempt which—lending the dignity of deliberate purpose to his indulgence of his own weakness for adulation—procured him a refined, a private, and an altogether agreeable self-satisfaction. When people set him down as vastly clever, he was pleased ; he was unreasonably annoyed when they spoke of him as a great genius.

Life, he would repeat, was of larger moment than literature ; and, despite all the freshness of his success, his interest in himself, in the play of his own personality, remained keener, and, in its essence, of more lasting a nature, than his ambition for genuine achievement. The world—people with whom he was brought into relation—stimulated him so far as he could assimilate them to his conception of his own attitude ; most forms of art too, in great measure—and music altogether—attracted him in the proportion

portion that they played upon his intimate emotions. Similarly, his friendships ; and for this reason he preferred the companionship of women. But since his egoism was uncommonly dexterous, he seemed endowed with a rare gift of artistic perception, of psychological insight, of personal charm.

It had always been his nature to live almost exclusively in the present ; his recollection of past impressions was grown scanty from habitual disuse. His sordid actions in the past he forgot with an ever-increasing facility ; his moments of generosity or self-sacrifice he remembered carelessly, and enjoyed a secret pride in their concealment ; and the conscious embellishment of subjective experience for the purpose of "copy," he had instinctively disdained.

Since his boyhood, religion had been distasteful to him, though, at rare moments, it had stirred his sensibilities strangely. Now, occasionally, the thought of the nullity of life, of its great unsatisfying quality, of the horrid squalor of death, would descend upon him with its crushing, paralysing weight ; and he would lament, with bitter, futile regret, his lack of a secure stand-point, and the continual limitations of his self-absorption ; but even that, perhaps, was a mere literary melancholy, assimilated from certain passages of Pierre Loti.

But now he had published a stout volume of critical essays, and an important volume of poetry, and society had clamorously ratified his own conception of himself. Certainly, now, in the eyes of the world, it was agreed beyond dispute that she, his wife, was of quite the lesser importance. "She was nice and quiet," which meant that she seemed mildly insignificant ; "she had a sense of humour," which meant that an odd note of half-stifed cynicism sometimes escaped her. He was evidently very devoted to her, and on that account women trusted him—all the more
because

because her personality possessed no obvious glamour. Perhaps, now and then, his attentions to her in public seemed a little ostentatious ; but then, in these modern uncourtly days, that in itself was distinctive. In private too, especially at the moments when he found life stimulating, he was still tactful and expansive with sympathetic impulse ; from habit ; from pride in his comprehension of women ; from dislike to cheap hypocrisy. How could he have divined that bitter suppressed seriousness, with which she had taken her disillusionment ; when not once in three months did he consider her apart from the play of his own personality ; otherwise than in the light of her initial attitude towards him ?

And her disillusionment, how had it come ? Certainly not with a rush of sudden overwhelming revelation ; certainly it was in no wise inspired by the tragedy of *Nora Helmer*. It had been a gradual growth, to whose obscure and trivial beginnings she had not had the learning to ascribe their true significance. To sound the current of life was not her way. She was naïve by nature ; and the ignorance of her girlhood had been due rather to a natural inobservance than to carefully managed surroundings. And yet, she had come to disbelieve in Hillier ; to discredit his clever attractiveness : she had become acutely sensitive to his instability, and, with a secret, instinctive obstinacy, to mistrust the world's praise of his work. Perhaps, had he made less effort in the beginning to achieve a brilliancy of attitude in her eyes, had he schooled her to expect from him a lesser loftiness of aspiration, things might have been very different ; or, at least, there might have resulted from the process of her disillusionment a lesser bitterness of conviction. But she had taken her marriage with so keen an earnestness of ideal, had noted every turn in his personality with so intense an expectation. Perhaps, too, had he detected

detected the first totterings of her ideal conception of him, had he aided her, as it were, to descend his figure from that pedestal where he himself had originally planted it, together they might have set it uninjured on a lower and less exposed plane. But he had never heeded her subtle indications of its insecurity ; alone, she had watched its peril, awaiting with a frightened fascination the day when it should roll headlong in the dust. And, at intervals, she would vaguely marvel, when she observed others whose superior perspicacity she assumed, display no perception of his insincerity. Then the oppressive sense that she—she, his wife, the mother of his child—was the only one who saw him clearly, and the unsurmountable shrinking from the relief of sharing this sense with any one, made her sourly sensitive to the pettiness, the meanness, the hidden tragic element in life.

A gulf had grown between—that was how she described it to herself. Outwardly their relations remained the same ; but, frequently, in his continuance of his former attitude, she detected traces of deliberate effort ; frequently when off his guard, he would abandon all pretension to it, and openly betray how little she had come to mean to him. There were, of course, moments also, when, at the echo of his tenderness, she would feverishly compel herself to believe in its genuineness ; but a minute later he would have forgotten his exaltation, and, almost with irritation, would deliberately ignore the tense yearning that was glowing within her.

And so, the coming of his success—a brilliant blossoming into celebrity—had stirred her but fitfully. Critics wrote of the fine sincerity of his poetry ; while she clung obstinately to her superstition that fine poetry must be the outcome of a great nobility of character. And, sometimes, she hated all this success of his, because it seemed to emphasise the gulf between them, and in

some inexplicable way to lessen her value in his eyes: then again, from an impulse of sheer unselfishness, she would succeed in almost welcoming it, because, after all, he was her husband.

But of all this he noted nothing: only now and then he would remind himself vaguely that she had no literary leanings.

The little Claude was three years old. Before his birth, Hillier had dilated much on the mysterious beauty of childhood, had vied with her own awed expectation of the wonderful coming joy. During her confinement, which had been a severe one, for three nights in succession he had sat, haggard with sleepless anxiety, on a stiff-backed dining-room chair, till all danger was passed. But afterwards the baby had disappointed him sorely; and later she thought he came near actively disliking it. Still, reminding herself of the winsomeness of other children at the first awakening of intelligence, she waited with patient hopefulness, fondly fancying a beautiful boy-child; wide baby eyes; a delicious prattle. Claude, however, attained no prettiness, as he grew: from an unattractive baby he became an unattractive child, with lanky, carrotty hair; a squat nose; an ugly, formless mouth. And in addition, he was fretful, mischievous, self-willed. Hillier at this time paid him but a perfunctory attention; avoided discussing him; and, when that was not possible, adopted a subtle, aggrieved tone that cut her to the quick. For she adored the child; adored him because he was hers; adored him for his very defects; adored him because of her own suppressed sadness; adored him for the prospect of the future—his education, his development, his gradual growth into manhood.

From the house in Cromwell Road the Haseltons had moved to a flat near Victoria Station: their means were moderate; but now, through the death of a relative, Hillier was no longer dependent upon literature for a living.

George

III

George Swann was her husband's cousin ; and besides, he had stood godfather to the little Claude. He was the elder by eight years ; but Hillier always treated him as if their ages were reversed, and, before Ella, used to nickname him the "Anglo-Saxon," because of his loose physical largeness, his flaxen hair and beard, his strong simplicity of nature. And Swann, with a reticent good-humour, acquiesced in Hillier's tone towards him ; out of vague regard for his cousin's ability ; out of respect for him as Ella's husband.

Swann and Ella were near friends. Since their first meeting, the combination of his blunt self-possession and his uncouth timidity with women, had attracted her. Divining his simplicity, she had felt at once at her ease with him, and, treating him with open cousinly friendliness, had encouraged him to come often to the house.

A while later, a trivial incident confirmed her regard for him. They had been one evening to the theatre together—she and Hillier and Swann—and afterwards, since it was raining, she and Hillier waited under the door-way while he sallied out into the Strand to find them a cab. Pushing his way along the crowded street, his eyes scanning the traffic for an empty hansom, he accidentally collided with a woman of the pavement, jostling her off the kerb into the mud of the gutter. Ella watched him stop, gaze ruefully at the woman's splashed skirt, take off his hat, and apologise with profuse, impulsive regret. The woman continued her walk, and presently passed the theatre door. She looked middle-aged : her face was hard and animal-like.

One Sunday afternoon—it was summer-time—as she was crossing the park to pay a call in Gloucester Square, she came across him sauntering alone in Kensington Gardens. She stopped and spoke to him: he seemed much startled to meet her. Three-quarters of an hour later, when she returned, he was sitting on a public bench beside her path; and immediately, from his manner, she half-guessed that he had been waiting for her. It was a fortnight after Claude's christening: he started to speak to her of the child, and so, talking together gravely, they turned on to the turf, mounted the slope, and sat down on two chairs beneath the trees.

Touched by his waiting for her, she was anxious to make friends with him; because he was the baby's godfather; because he seemed alone in the world; because she trusted in his goodness. So she led him, directly and indirectly, to talk of himself. At first, in moody embarrassment, he prodded the turf with his stick; and presently responded, unwillingly breaking down his troubled reserve, and alluding to his loneliness confidently, as if sure of her sympathy.

Unconsciously he made her feel privileged thus to obtain an insight into the inner workings of his heart, and gave her a womanly, sentimental interest in him.

Comely cloud-billows were overhead, and there was not a breath of breeze.

They paused in their talk, and he spoke to her of Kensington Gardens, lovingly, as of a spot which had signified much to him in the past—Kensington Gardens, massively decorous; ceremoniously quiet; pompous, courtly as a king's leisure park; the slow, opulent contours of portly foliage, sober-green, immobile and indolent; spacious groupings of tree-trunks; a low ceiling of leaves; broad shadows mottling the grass. The Long Water, smooth

smooth and dark as a mirror ; lining its banks, the rhododendrons swelling with colour, cream, purple, and carmine. The peacock's insolent scream ; a silently skimming pigeon ; the joyous twitterings of birds ; the patient bleating of sheep. . . .

At last she rose to go. He accompanied her as far as the Albert Memorial, and when he had left her, she realised, with a thrill of contentment, that he and she had become friends.

IV

That had been the beginning of George Swann's great love for her. His was a slowly-moving nature : it was gradually therefore that he came to value, as a matter of almost sacred concern, the sense of her friendship ; reverencing her with the single-hearted, unquestioning reverence of a man unfamiliar with women ; regarding altogether gravely her relations with him—their talks on serious subjects, the little letters she wrote to him, the books that he had given to her—Swinburne's *Century of Roundels* ; a tiny edition of Shelley, bound in white parchment ; Mrs. Meynell's *Rhythm of Life*. He took to studying her intellectual tastes, the topics that were congenial to her, her opinions on men and women, with a quiet, plodding earnestness ; almost as if it were his duty. Thus he learned her love of simple country things ; gained a conception of her girlhood's home ; of her father and mother, staid country folk. He did not know how to him alone she could talk of these things ; or of the warm, deep-seated gratitude she bore him in consequence ; but he reverted constantly to the topic, because, under its influence, she always brightened, and it seemed to ratify the bond of sympathy between them.

How

How much, as the months went by, she came to mean to him, he had not in the least realised : he had never thought of her as playing a part in his own life ; only as a beautiful-natured woman, to whom he owed everything, because, by some strange chance, she had made him her friend.

Not even in his moments of idle vagrant reverie, did he think to ask more of her than this. To intrude himself further into her life, to offer her more than exactly that which she was expecting of him, naturally never occurred to him. Yet, in a queer uncomfortable way, he was jealous of other men's familiarity with her—vaguely jealous lest they should supplant him, mistrustful of his own modesty. And there was no service which, if she had asked it of him, he would not have accomplished for her sake ; for he had no ties.

But towards Hillier, since he belonged to her, Swann's heart warmed affectionately : she had loved and married him ; had made him master of her life. So he instinctively extended to his cousin a portion of the unspoken devotion inspired by Ella. Such was the extent of his reverence for her, and his diffidence regarding himself, that he took for granted that Hillier was an ideal husband, tender, impelled by her to no ordinary daily devotion : for, that it should be otherwise, would have seemed to him a monstrous improbability. Yet latterly, since the coming of Hillier's success, certain incidents had disconcerted him, filled him with ill-defined uneasiness.

From the first, he had been one of Hillier's warmest admirers ; praising, whenever an opportunity offered, out of sheer loyalty to Ella, and pride in his cousin, the fineness of form that his poetry revealed. To her, when they were alone, he had talked in the same enthusiastic strain : the first time she had seemed listless and tired, and afterwards he had blamed himself for his want of
tact ;

tact ; on another occasion, he had brought her a laudatory article, and she had turned the conversation brusquely into another channel. And, since his love for her—of which as yet he was himself unconscious—caused him to brood over means of pleasing her (he lived alone in the Temple), this indication that he had jarred her sensibilities was not lost upon him.

Hillier's attitude towards the little Claude, and the pain that it was causing her, would in all probability have escaped him, had she not alluded to it once openly, frankly assuming that he had perceived it. It was not indeed that she was in any way tempted to indulge in the transitional treachery of discussing Hillier with him ; but that, distressed, yearning for counsel, she was prompted almost irresistibly to turn to Swann, who had stood godfather to the child, who was ready to join her in forming anxious speculations concerning the future.

For of course he had extended his devotion to the child also, who, at Hillier's suggestion, was taught to call him Uncle George. Naturally his heart went out to children : the little Claude, since the first awakening of his intelligence, had exhibited a freakish, childish liking for him ; and, in his presence, always assumed something of the winsomeness of other children.

The child's preference for Swann, his shy mistrust of his father, were sometimes awkwardly apparent ; but Hillier, so it seemed to Ella, so far from resenting, readily accepted his cousin's predominance. "Children always instinctively know a good man," he would say ; and Ella would wince inwardly, discerning, beneath his air of complacent humility, how far apart from her he had come to stand.

Thus, insensibly, Swann had become necessary to her, almost the pivot, as it were, of her life : to muse concerning the nature of his feelings towards her, to probe its sentimental aspects, to accept his

his friendship otherwise than with unconscious ease, that was not her way.

But Hillier noted critically how things were drifting, and even lent encouragement to their progress in a way that was entirely unostentatious ; since so cynical an attitude seemed in some measure to justify his own conduct.

V

For he was unfaithful to his wife. It was inevitable that the temptation, in the guise of a craving for change, should come—not from the outside, but from within himself. And he had no habit of stable purpose with which to withstand it. Not altogether was it a vagrant, generalised lusting after women other than his wife ; not a mere harking back to the cruder experiences of his bachelorhood ; though, at first it had seemed so to manifest itself. Rather was it the result of a moody restlessness, of a dissatisfaction (with her, consciously, no ; for the more that he sinned against her, the more lovable, precious her figure appeared to him) kindled by continual contact with her natural goodness. It was as if, in his effort to match his personality with hers, he had put too severe a strain upon the better part of him.

He himself had never analysed the matter more exhaustively than this. The treacherous longing had gripped him at certain moments, holding him helpless as in a vice. He had conceived no reckless passion for another woman : such an eventuality, he dimly surmised, was well-nigh impossible. In his case brain domineered over heart ; to meet the first outbursting of his adoration for his wife, he had drained every resource of his sentimentality.

Was it then an idle craving for adventure, a school-boy curiosity
clamouring

clamouring for fresh insight into the heart of women? Mere experience was unnecessary for the attainment of comprehension: "to have lived" did not imply "to have understood": the most pregnant adventures, as he knew, were those which entailed no actual unfaithfulness.

And for these—subtle, psychological intimacies—ample occasion offered. Yet the twist in his nature led him to profess to treat them heedlessly; and, in reality, to prosecute them with no genuine strenuousness. They would have been obvious lapses; Ella would have been pained, pitied perhaps: from that his vanity and his sham chivalry alike shrank.

His unfaithfulness to her, then, had been prompted by no evident motive. Superficially considered, it seemed altogether gratuitous, meaningless. The world—that is, people who knew him and her—would probably have discredited the story, had it come to be bruited. And this fact he had not omitted to consider.

She, the other woman, was of little importance. She belonged to the higher walks of the demi-monde: she was young; beautiful, too, in a manner; light-hearted; altogether complaisant. She was not the first: there had been others before her; but these were of no account whatsoever: they had but represented the bald fact of his unfaithfulness. But *she* attracted him: he returned to her again and again; though afterwards, at any rate in the beginning, he was wont to spare himself little in the matter of self-reproach, and even to make some show of resisting the temptation. The discretion of her cynical camaraderie, however, was to be trusted; and that was sufficient to undermine all virtuous resolution. She had the knack, too, of cheering him when depressed, and, curiously enough, of momentarily reinstating him in his own conceit, though later, on his return to Ella, he would suffer most of the pangs of remorse.

There

There was something mannish about her—not about her physiognomy, but about her mind—derived, no doubt, from the scantiness of her intercourse with women. Her cynicism was both human and humorous: she was a person of little education, and betrayed none of the conventionality of her class: hence her point of view often struck him as oddly direct and unexpected. He used to talk to her about himself, candidly discussing all manner of random and intimate matters before her, without shyness on his part, without surprise on hers—almost at times as if she were not present—and with an assumption of facile banter, to listen to which tickled his vanity. Only to Ella did he never allude; and in this, of course, she tacitly acquiesced. She possessed a certain quality of sympathetic tact; always attentive to his talk, never critical of it; mindful of all that he had previously recounted. He could always resume his attitude at the very point where he had abandoned it. Between them there was never any aping of sentimentality.

That she comprehended him—with so fatuous a delusion he never coquetted: nor that she interested him as a curious type. She saw no subtle significance in his talk: she understood nothing of its complex promptings: she was ordinary, uneducated, and yet stimulating—and that was the contrast which attracted him towards her. Concerning the course of her own existence he did not trouble himself: he accepted her as he found her; deriving a sense of security from the fact that towards him her manner varied but little from visit to visit. But, as these accumulated, becoming more and more regular, and his faith in her discretion blunted the edge of his remorse, he came to notice how she braced him, reconciled him to his treachery (which, he argued, in any case was inevitable); lent to it a spice almost of pleasantness. Neither had he misgivings of the future, of how it would
end.

end. One day she would pass out of his life as easily as she had come into it. His relations with her were odd, though not in the obvious way. About the whole thing he was insensibly coming to feel composed.

And its smoothness, its lack of a disquieting aspect, impelled him to persevere towards Ella in cheerfulness, courteous kindness, and a show of continuous affection ; and to repent altogether of those lapses into roughness which had marred the first months of their marriage.

VI

The hansoms whirled their yellow, gleaming eyes down West : hot, flapping gusts went and returned aimlessly ; and the mirthless twitterings of the women fell abruptly on the sluggishly shuffling crowd. All the sin of the city seemed crushed to listlessness ; vacant wistful, the figures waited by the street corners.

Then the storm burst. Slow, ponderous drops : a clap of the thunder's wrath ; a crinkled rim of light, unveiling a slab of sky, throbbing, sullen and violet ; small, giggling screams of alarm, and a stampede of bunchy silhouettes. The thunder clapped again, impatient and imperious ; and the rain responded, zealously hissing. Bright stains of liquid gold straggled across the roadway ; a sound of splashing accompanied the thud of hoofs, the rumble of wheels, the clanking of chains, and the ceaseless rattle of the drops on the hurried procession of umbrellas.

Swann, from the corner of a crowded omnibus, peered absently through the doorway, while the conductor, leaning into the street, touted mechanically for passengers.

The vehicle stopped. A woman, bare-headed and cloaked, escorted by the umbrella of a restaurant official, hurried to the shelter

shelter of a cab, across the wet pavement. A man broke the stream of the hastening crowd; halted beside the wheel to stare. The woman laughed in recognition, noisily. The man stepped rapidly on to the foot-board, and an instant stood there, directing the driver across the roof. The light from a lamp-post caught his face: it was Hillier. The next moment he was seated beside the woman, who was still laughing (Swann could see the gleaming whiteness of her teeth): the driver had loosened the window strap, the glass had slid down, shutting them in. The omnibus jolted forward, and the cab followed in its wake, impatiently, for the street was blocked with traffic.

Immediately, with a fierce vividness, Ella's image sprang up before Swann's eyes—her face with all its pure, natural, simple sweetness. And there—not ten yards distant, behind the obscurity of that blurred glass, Hillier was sitting with another woman—a woman concerning whose status he could not doubt.

He clenched his gloved fists. The wild impulse spurted forth, the impulse to drag the cur from the cab, to bespatter him, to throw him into the mud, to handle him brutally, as he deserved. It was as if Hillier had struck him a cowardly blow in the face.

Then the hansom started to creep past the omnibus. Swann sprang into the roadway. A moment later he was inside another cab, whirling in pursuit down Piccadilly hill.

The horse's hoofs splashed with a rhythmical, accelerated precision: he noticed dully how the crupper-strap flapped from side to side, across the animal's back. Ahead, up the incline, pairs of tiny specks, red and green, were fitting.

"It's the cab with the lady what come out of the restaurant, ain't it, sir?"

"Yes," Swann called back through the trap.

The reins tightened: the horse quickened his trot.

Hyde Park Corner stood empty and resplendent with a glitter of glamorous gold. The cab turned the corner of Hamilton Place, and the driver lashed the horse into a canter up Park Lane.

“That’s ’im—jest in front——”

“All right. Follow.” Swann heard himself answering. And, amid his pain, he was conscious that’s the man’s jaunty tone seemed to indicate that this sort of job was not unfamiliar.

He struggled to tame the savageness of his indignation; to think out the situation; to realise things coolly, that he might do what was best for her. But the leaping recollection of all her trustfulness, her goodness, filled him with a burning, maddening compassion. . . . He could see nothing but the great wrong done to her. . . .

Where were they going—the green lights of that cab in front—that woman and Hillier? . . . Where would it end, this horrible pursuit—this whirling current which was sweeping him forward. . . . It was like a nightmare. . . .

He must stop them—prevent this thing . . . but, evidently, this was not the first time. . . . Hillier and this woman knew one another. He had stopped, on catching sight of her, and she had recognised him. . . . The thing might have been going on for weeks—for months. . . .

. . . Yet he must stop them—not here, in the crowded street (they were in the Edgware Road), but later, when they had reached their destination—where there were no passers—where it could be done without scandal. . . .

. . . Yes, he must send Hillier back to her. . . . And she believed in him—trusted him. . . . She must know nothing—at all costs, he must spare her the hideous knowledge—the pain of it. . . . And yet—and yet? . . . Hillier—the blackguard—she would

have

have to go on living with him, trusting him, confiding in him, loving him. . . .

And for relief he returned wearily to his indignation.

How was it possible for any man—married to her—to be so vile, so false? . . . The consummate hypocrisy of it all. . . .

Swann remembered moments when Hillier's manner towards her had appeared redolent of deference, of suppressed affection. And he—a man of refinement—not a mere coarse-fibred, sensual brute—he who wrote poetry—Swann recalled a couplet full of fine aspiration—that he should have done this loathsome thing—done it callously, openly—any one might have seen it—deceived her for some common vulgar, public creature. . . .

Suddenly the cab halted abruptly.

"They're pulled up, across the street there," the driver whispered hoarsely, confidentially; and for his tone Swann could have struck him.

It was an ill-lit street, silent and empty. The houses were low, semi-detached, and separated from the pavement by railings and small gardens.

The woman had got out of the cab and was pushing open the swing-gate. Hillier stood on the foot-board, paying the cabman. Swann, on the opposite side of the street, hesitated. Hillier stepped on to the pavement, and ran lightly up the door-step after the woman. She unlocked the door: it closed behind them. And the hansom which had brought them turned, and trotted away down the street.

Swann stood a moment before the house, irresolute. Then recrossed the street slowly. And a hansom, bearing a second couple, drew up at the house next door.

"You

VII

"You can go to bed, Hodgson. I will turn off the light."

The man retired silently. It was a stage-phrase that rose unconsciously to her lips, a stage-situation with which she was momentarily toying.

Alone, she perceived its absurd unreality. Nothing, of course, would happen to-night: though so many days and nights she had been waiting. The details of life was clumsy, cumbersome: the simplification of the stage, of novels, of dozing dreams, seemed, by contrast, bitterly impossible.

She took up the book again, and read on, losing herself for a while in the passion of its pages—a passion that was all glamorous, sentimental felicity, at once vague and penetrating. But, as she paused to reach a paper-knife, she remembered the irrevocable, prosaic groove of existence, and that slow drifting to a dreary commonplace—a commonplace that was *hers*—brought back all her aching listlessness. She let the book slip to the carpet.

Love, she repeated to herself, a silken web, opal-tinted, veiling all life; love, bringing fragrance and radiance; love with the moonlight streaming across the meadows; love, amid summer-leaved woods, a-sparkle in the morning sun; a simple clasping of hands; a happiness, child-like and thoughtless, secure and intimate. . . .

And she—she had nothing—only the helpless child; her soul was brave and dismantled and dismal; and once again started the gnawing of humiliation—inferior even to the common people, who could be loved and forget, in the midst of promiscuous squalor. Without love, there seemed no reason for life.

Away

Away her thoughts sailed to the tale of the fairy-prince, stepping to shore in his silver armour, come to deliver and to love. She would have been his in all humility, waited on him in fearful submission; she would have asked for nought but his love.

Years ago, once or twice, men had appeared to her like that. And Hillier, before they were married, when they were first engaged. A strange girl she must have been in those days! And now—now they were like any husband and any wife.

“It happened by chance,” the old tale began. Chance! Yes, it was chance that governed all life; mocking, ironical chance, daintily sportive chance, hobbled to the clumsy mechanism of daily existence.

Twelve o'clock struck. Ten minutes more perhaps, and Hillier would be home. She could hear his tread; she could see him enter, take off his coat and gloves gracefully, then lift her face lightly in his two hands, and kiss her on the forehead. He would ask for an account of her day's doings; but he would never heed her manner of answering, for he would have begun to talk of himself. And altogether complacently would he take up the well-worn threads of their common life.

And she would go on waiting, and trifling with hopelessness, for in real life such things were impossible. Men were dull and incomplete, and could not understand a woman's heart. . . .

And so she would wait till he came in, and when he had played his part, just as she had imagined he would play it, she would follow him, in dumb docility, up-stairs to bed.

* * * * *

It was past one o'clock when he appeared. She had fallen asleep in the big arm-chair: her book lay in a heap on the carpet beside her. He crossed the room, but she did not awake.

One

One hand hung over the arm of the chair, limp and white and fragile ; her head, bent over her breast, was coyly resting in the curve of her elbow ; her hair was a little dishevelled ; her breathing was soft and regular, like a child's.

He sat down noiselessly, awed by this vision of her. The cat, which had lain stretched on the hearth-rug, sprang into his lap, purring and caressing. He thought it strange that animals had no sense of human sinfulness, and recalled the devotion of the dog of a prostitute, whom he had known years and years ago. . . .

He watched her, and her unconsciousness loosed within him the sickening pangs of remorse. . . . He mused vaguely on suicide as the only fitting termination. . . . And he descended to cheap anathemas upon life. . . .

* * * * *

By-and-by she awoke, opening her eyes slowly, wonderingly. He was kneeling before her, kissing her hand with reverential precaution.

She saw tears in his eyes : she was still scarcely awake : she made no effort to comprehend ; only was impulsively grateful, and slipping her arms behind his head, drew him towards her and kissed him on the eyes. He submitted, and a tear moistened her lips.

Then they went up-stairs.

And she, passionately clutching at every memory of their love, feverishly cheated herself into bitter self-upbraiding, into attributing to him a nobility of nature that set him above all other men. And he, at each renewed outburst of her wild straining towards her ideal, suffered, as if she had cut his bare flesh with a whip.

It was his insistent attitude of resentful humility that finally wearied her of the fit of false exaltation. When she sank to sleep, the old ache was at her heart.

VIII

Swann strode into the room. Hillier looked up at him from his writing-table in unfeigned surprise; greeted him cordially, with a couple of trite, cheery remarks concerning the weather, then waited abruptly for an explanation of this morning visit; for Swann's trouble was written on his face.

"You look worried. Is there anything wrong?" Hillier asked presently.

"Yes."

"Well, can I do anything? If I can be of any service to you, old fellow, you know I——"

"I discovered last night what a damned blackguard you are." He spoke savagely, as if his bluntness exulted him: his tone quivered with suppressed passion.

Hillier, with a quick movement of his head, flinched as if he had been struck in the face. And the lines about his mouth were set rigidly.

There was a long, tense silence. Hillier was drawing circles on a corner of the blotting-pad; Swann was standing over him, glaring at him with a fierce, hateful curiosity. Hillier became conscious of the other's expression, and his fist clenched obviously.

"I saw you get into a cab with that woman," Swann went on. "I was in an omnibus going home. I followed you—drove after you. I wanted to stop you—to stop it—I was too late."

"Ah!" An exasperated, sneering note underlined the exclamation. Hillier drove the pen-point into the table. The nib curled and snapped.

The

The blood rushed to Swann's forehead. In a flash he caught a glimpse of the thought that had crossed Hillier's mind. It was like a personal indignity; he struggled desperately to control himself.

Hillier looked straight into his cousin's distorted face. At the sight the tightness about his own mouth slackened. His composure returned.

"I'm sorry. Forgive me," he said simply.

"How can you be such a brute?" Swann burst out unheeding. "Don't you care? Is it nothing to you to wreck your wife's whole happiness—to spoil her life, to break her heart, to deceive her in the foulest way, to lie to her. Haven't you any conscience, any chivalry?"

The manly anguish in his voice was not lost upon Hillier. He thought he realised clearly how it was for Ella, and not for him, that Swann was so concerned. Once more he took stock of his cousin's agitation, and a quick glitter came into his eyes. He felt as if a mysterious force had been suddenly given to him. Still he said nothing.

"How could you, Hillier? How came you to do it?"

"Sit down." He spoke coldly, clearly, as if he were playing a part which he knew well.

Swann obeyed mechanically.

"It's perfectly natural that you should speak to me like that. You take the view of the world. The view of the world I accept absolutely. Certainly I am utterly unworthy of Ella" (he mentioned her name with a curious intonation of assertive pride). "How I have sunk to this thing—the whole story of how I have come to risk my whole happiness for the sake of another woman, who is nothing—absolutely nothing—to me, to whom I am nothing, I won't attempt to explain. Did I attempt to do so,
I see

I see little probability of your understanding it, and little to be gained even if you did so. I choose to let it remain for you a piece of incomprehensible infamy : I have no wish to alter your view of me."

"You don't care . . . you've no remorse . . . you're callous and cynical. . . . Good God ! it's awful."

"Yes, Swann, I care," Hillier resumed, lowering his voice, and speaking with a slow distinctness, as if he were putting an excessive restraint upon his emotions. "I care more than you or any one will ever know."

"It's horrible. . . . I don't know what to think. . . . Don't you see the awfulness of your wife's position ? . . . Don't you realise the hideousness of what you've done ?"

"My dear Swann, nobody is more alive to the consequences of what I've done than I am. I have behaved infamously—I don't need to be told that by you. And whatever comes to me out of this thing" (he spoke with a grave, resigned sadness) "I shall bear it."

"Good God ! Can you think of nothing but yourself ? Can't you see that you've been a miserable, selfish beast—that what happens to you matters nothing ? Can't you see that the only thing that matters is your wife ? You're a miserable, skulking cur—— . . . She trusted you—she believed in you, and you've done her an almost irreparable wrong."

Hillier stood suddenly erect.

"What I have done, Swann, is more than a wrong. It is a crime. Within an hour of your leaving this room, I shall have told Ella everything. That is the only thing left for me to do, and I shall not shirk it. I shall take the full responsibility. You did right to come to me as you did. You are right to consider me a miserable, skulking cur" (he brought the words out

out with an emphasised bravery). "Now you can do no more. The remainder of the matter rests between me and my wife——"

He paused.

"And to think that you——" Swann began passionately.

"There is no object to be gained by our discussing the matter further," Hillier interrupted a little loudly, but with a concentrated calm. "There is no need for you to remain here longer." He put his thumb to the electric bell.

"The maid will be here in a moment to show you out," he added.

Swann waited, blinking with hesitation. His personality seemed to be slipping from him.

"You are going to tell her?" he repeated slowly.

The door opened: he hurried out of the room.

The outer door slammed: Hillier's face turned a sickly white; his eyes dilated, and he laughed excitedly—a low, short, hysterical laugh. He looked at the clock: the whole scene had lasted but ten minutes. He pulled a chair to the fire, and sat staring at the flames moodily. . . . The tension of the dramatic situation snapped. Before his new prospect, once again he thought weakly of suicide. . . .

IX

He had told her—not, of course, the whole story—from that his sensitivity had shrunk. Still he had besmirched himself bravely; he had gone through with the interview not without dignity. Beforehand he had nerved himself for a terrible ordeal; yet, somehow, as he reviewed it, now that it was all over, the scene seemed to have fallen flat. The tragedy of her grief, of his

own

own passionate repentance, which he had been expecting, had proved unaccountably tame. She had cried, and at the sight of those tears of hers he had suffered intensely ; but she had displayed no suppressed, womanish jealousy ; had not, in her despair, appeared to regard his confession as an overwhelming shattering of her faith in him, and so provoked him to reveal the depth of his anguish. He had implored her forgiveness ; he had vowed he would efface the memory of his treachery ; she had acquiesced dreamily, with apparent heroism. There had been no mention of a separation.

And now the whole thing was ended : to-night he and she were dining out.

He was vaguely uncomfortable ; yet his heart was full of a sincere repentance, because of the loosening of the strain of his anxiety ; because of the smarting sense of humiliation, when he recollected Swann's words ; because he had caused her to suffer in a queer, inarticulate way, which he did not altogether understand, of which he was vaguely afraid. . . .

X

When at last he had left her alone, it was with a curious calmness that she started to reflect upon it all. She supposed it was very strange that his confession had not wholly prostrated her ; and glancing furtively backwards, catching a glimpse of her old girlish self, wondered listlessly how it was that, insensibly, all these months, she had grown so hardened. . . .

* * * * *

By-and-by, the recent revelation of his unfaithfulness seemed to recede slowly into the misty past, and, fading, losing its sharpness

ness of outline, its distinctness of detail, to resemble an irreparable fact to which familiarity had inured her.

And all the uneasiness of her mistrustfulness, and pain of her fluctuating doubtings ceased; her comprehension of him was all at once clarified, rendered vivid and indisputable; and she was conscious of a certain sense of relief. She was eased of those feverish, spasmodic gaspings of her half-starved love; at first the dulness of sentimental atrophy seemed the more endurable. She jibed at her own natural artlessness; and insisted to herself that she wanted no fool's paradise, that she was even glad to see him as he really was, to terminate, once for all, this futile folly of love; that, after all, his unfaithfulness was no unusual and terrible tragedy, but merely a commonplace chapter in the lives of smiling, chattering women, whom she met at dinners, evening parties, and balls. . . .

* * * * *

There were some who simpered to her over Hillier as a model of modern husbands; and she must go on listening and smiling. . . .

. . . And the long years ahead would unroll themselves — a slow tale of decorous lovelessness. . . .

He would be always the same—that was the hardest to face. His nature could never alter, grow into something different . . . never, never change . . . always, always the same. . . .

Oh! it made her dread it all—the restless round of social enjoyments; the greedy exposure of the petty weaknesses of common acquaintance; the ill-natured atmosphere that she felt emanating from people herded together. . . . All the details of her London life looked unreal, mean, pitiful. . . .

And she longed after the old days of her girlhood, of the smooth, staid country life; she longed after the simple, restful companionship

ship of her old father and mother ; after the accumulation of little incidents that she had loved long ago. . . . She longed too—and the straining at heart-strings grew tenser—she longed after her own lost maidenhood ; she longed to be ignorant and careless ; to see life once again as a simple, easy matter ; to know nothing of evil ; to understand nothing of men ; to trust—to trust unquestioningly. . . . All that was gone ; she herself was all changed ; those days could never come again. . . .

And she cried to herself a little, from weakness of spirit, softly. . . .

* * * * *

Then, gradually, out of the weary turmoil of her bitterness, there came to her a warm impulse of vague sympathy for the countless, unknown tragedies at work around her ; she thought of the sufferings of outcast women—of loveless lives, full of mirthless laughter ; she thought of the long loneliness of childless women. . . .

She clutched for consolation at the unhappiness of others ; but she only discovered the greater ugliness of the world. And she returned to a tired contemplation of her own prospect. . . .

* * * * *

He had broken his vows to her—not only the solemn vow he had taken in the church (she recalled how his voice had trembled with emotion as he had repeated the words)—but all that passionate series of vows he had made to her during the spring-time of their love. . . .

. . . Yes, that seemed the worst part of it—that, and not the making love to another woman. . . . What was she like ? . . . What was it in her that had attracted him ? . . . Oh ! but what did that matter ? . . . —only why were men's natures so different from women's ? . . .

Now,

. . . Now, she must go on—go on alone. Since her marriage she had lost the habit of daily converse with Christ : here in London, somehow, He had seemed so distant, so difficult of approach. . . .

. . . She must just go on. . . . She had the little Claude. . . . It was to help her that God had given her Claude. . . . Oh ! she would pray to God to make him good—to give him a straight, strong, upright, honest nature. And herself, every day, she would watch over his growth, guide him, teach him. . . . Yes, he *must* grow up good . . . into boyhood . . . different from other boys . . . into manhood, simple, honourable manhood. . . . She would be everything to him : he and she would come to comprehend each other, to read into each other's hearts. . . . Perhaps, between them, would spring up perfect love and trust. . . .

XI

Swann had written to her :

“You are in trouble : let me come.”

Gradually, between the lines of the note, she understood it all—she read how his love for her had leapt up, now that he knew that she was unhappy ; how he wanted to be near her, to comfort her, and perhaps . . . perhaps . . .

She was filled with great sorrow for him—and warm gratitude, too, for his simple, single-hearted love—but sorrow, that she could give him nothing in return, and because it seemed that, somehow, he and she were about to bid one another good-bye ; she thought she dimly foresaw how their friendship was doomed to dwindle. . . .

So she let him come.

* * * * *

And

. . . And all this she fancied she read again in the long, grave glance of his greeting, and the firm clasp of his big hand.

When he spoke, his deep, steady voice dominated her : she knew at once that he would do what was right.

“Ella, my poor Ella, how brave you are !” She looked up at him, smiling tremulously, through her quick-starting tears. . . . The next moment it was as if the words had escaped him—almost as if he regretted them.

He sat down opposite her, and, lightening his voice, asked—just as he always did—for news of the little Claude.

And so their talk ran on.

After awhile, she came to realise that he meant to say no more : the strength of his great reserve became apparent, and a sense of peace stole over her. He talked on, and to the restful sound of his clear, strong voice, she abandoned herself dreamily. . . . This he had judged the better course. . . . that he should have adopted any other now seemed inconceivable. Beside him she felt weak and helpless : she remembered the loneliness of his life : he seemed to her altogether noble ; and she was vaguely remorseful that she had not perceived from the first that it was from him that her help would come. . . .

She divined, too, the fineness of his sacrifice—that manly, human struggle with himself, through which he had passed to attain it—how he had longed for the right to make her his . . . and how he had renounced. The sureness of his victory, and the hidden depths of his nature which it revealed awed her . . . now he would never swerve from what he knew to be right. . . . And on, through those years to come, she could trust him, always, always. . . .

. . . At last he bade her good-bye : even at the last his tone remained unchanged.

It

It was close upon seven o'clock. She went upstairs to dress for dinner, and kneeling beside the bed, prayed to God with an outburst of passionate, pulsing joy. . . .

Ten minutes later Hillier came in from his dressing-room. He clasped his hands round her bare neck, kissing her hair again and again.

"I have been punished, Nellie," he began in a broken whisper. "Good God! it is hard to bear. . . . Help me, Nellie, . . . help me to bear it."

She unclasped his fingers, and started to stroke them; a little mechanically, as if it were her duty to ease him of his pain. . . .