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A WHITE UMBRELLA

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A WHITE UMBRELLA.

A WHITE UMBRELLA.

I.

 REXFORD consists of a prim-looking little inn, built partly of wood and partly of grey stone, standing on the rough, shingly shore, facing the sea, and a collection of four or five fishermen's cottages, with tarred boat huts, dilapidated fences, and general rubbish of broken boats, nets, and empty tins scattered about them—toned down by wind and weather to look as if they had grown on the shore by some process of nature

instead of having been planted there by the hand of man. Further inland is a double row of crazy-looking cottages, facing each other and forming a kind of street. Some of them display tallow candles and sweets in their windows. A little way off along the shore the river Wrex flows muddily into the sea, and forms a harbour for fishing smacks. The inn stands a little apart from its shabby relations, the cottages, and towers above them, for it has two storeys. Being comparatively new, it stands erect, and has not the appearance which the cottages present of having been blown a little to one side by the wind. It has, however, a whitened, clean look, as if every speck of dust had been blown off it by repeated storms

—which is indeed the case, for Wrexford is a stormy, windy, bare, unsheltered spot.

A bleak, desolate spot, too, it looked to a visitor, a woman of about thirty, who arrived there one evening in June, walking from the station in the drizzling rain and mist beside an aged and bent railway porter who trundled her luggage on a barrow.

The cottagers eyed her askance from their windows, and wondered what she had come for. And, indeed, she asked herself the same question as the grey, unbroken dreariness of the shore spread itself out before her. When she arrived at the inn she was greeted by a rather mournful-looking landlady, who led her upstairs into the inn parlour—a large, low room, with

a bow window looking out at the sea.

The visitor threw open the window, and, leaning on her hands, looked out, straining her eyes to catch some glimpse of light or life. But the distance was completely shrouded in misty, drizzling rain, and sky and everything else was grey—grey—one monotonous and unmitigated grey, without relief. She shut the window, and turned and looked at the room. It was a bare, cheerless-looking apartment, with stiff, horsehair furniture, crotchet antimacassars, and glass cases of stuffed fish—a room not calculated to enliven. She rang for some tea, and then, feeling that she should suffocate if she did not have some air, threw on a shawl, and, stumbling down the narrow, dark

staircase, went out on to the shingles.

It had grown almost dark since she arrived, but the rain had stopped. A white transparency in one part of the sky betokened a moon behind the clouds, strong enough to cast a faint reflection on the sea, and a hesitating light over the landscape. The mist had cleared, and a slight breeze from the sea chilled her face. She walked along the shore, past the cottages, stumbling in the dark over the rough shingles, and the rubbish strewed around them. There was not a sign of life in any of them—not even a light from a window. They looked to her like sleeping cats huddled together and leaning against each other, their heavy thatch falling over tightly closed eyes.

Beyond was nothing but blackness, and, fearing that she might stumble into some hole, she turned and walked back, past the inn, in the other direction, till she came to a high bank stretching right and left, and barring her way. She stumbled through soft sand to the top, and looked down on the dark water of the river flowing out to sea with a gurgling, swishing sound. Along the banks were blinking and moving lights, and she could distinguish faintly in the gloom the outlines of ships and fishing boats at anchor for the night. Inland stretched a flat plain, covered with a low ground mist, and in the distance, perched on a hill, a little town rose out of the mist, like an island out of the sea, black and silent, with a few scattered lights. The black-

ness and silence gave her such a feeling of unreality that she wondered as she walked back to the inn if she were in a dream.

She let herself in, and went quietly up to her sitting-room, and, by way of giving a touch of reality to her surroundings, removed a green paper and tinsel cascade from the grate, and lit the fire. Then she drew up the horsehair chair, and, resting her feet on the fender, gazed at the darting flames and thought.

She had had a long, tiring railway journey. The heat and the noise and the shaking had fatigued her body and worried her nerves. They were all awake and excited. All her senses were drawn to their most sensitive pitch. The smell of the room, with its fusty furni-

ture and paraffin lamp, mingled with a fishy, seaweedy smell from the open window, and seemed to saturate her. Her hearing was like some super-sensitive blank substance, on which every sound made a mark. The tick, tick, tick of the clock seemed to puncture holes in it, the crackling of the fire to make deep scratches. Underneath, the rushing of trains and the roar of the London streets, seemed to have been bottled up, and were rumbling like thunder. Beneath all this worry of smells and noise her imagination was busy with pictures that flashed and dashed past as if projected out of space by some frenzied showman.

Margaret Lindsay was a widow. Her husband had been a man of genius who had made

a discovery or two in the scientific world, and was destined, so the world said, to make more. Doubtless he would have done so if he had had time, but his inquiries and investigations were cut short with the irony of Fate. He died after a few days' illness before he had reached the age of thirty-five.

It was one of those marriages that prove that two people can look at the universe from completely different standpoints and through different coloured spectacles, and yet be happy in each other's companionship.

Each lived apart, in a world of thought of their own. His was the world of facts—the hard, definite facts of the material world; hers was the world of the imagination—the vague imaginings of the unseen world.

He was always trying to look into things to see what they were made of; she was always trying to look beyond them to see what they meant. Curiosity led her to peep into his world sometimes, to make an attempt to understand his attitude towards the universe. But she never got further than wondering at the queerness of his tastes, the oddness of his pursuits.

"I wonder what makes you care so much to know what stones are made of," she said one day, when he was looking at some specimens under a microscope; "it seems to me to matter so little."

He took his eye away from the microscope to look at her and laugh. But all he said was—

"They are trees, not stones."

On another occasion she was with him in his laboratory when her eyes fell upon a tall cabinet standing in a corner. She opened it, and found that it contained tiers of little drawers all the way down. She pulled the top one out. It was full of butterflies—rows of butterflies—stuck neatly on pins, with outspread wings. The next and the next and the next she pulled out, right down to the bottom. They were all full of butterflies and moths, of every size and every colour, all arranged in the most exquisite order, according to their size and kind, and all neatly labelled with their names. The discovery gave her quite a shock. That he should have done all this before he married her and never mentioned it! It was as if she had suddenly come

upon a large and unexpected vista in his past.

"What queer habits men have," she said to him, as he came up and stood beside her.

He laughed, and proceeded to show her some of the finest specimens, telling her where he found this chap, and how he caught that, and waxing quite enthusiastic over the exploits of his youth.

"I think I prefer them on bushes," she said meditatively, at the end; "not in rows, and without pins."

But the universe is large, there are many worlds in it, and they had plenty of common ground to walk together on. And they were both content and happy in each other's companionship. They had one child, and their sky was serene and clear, when

suddenly one day it was overshadowed with a black cloud, a desperate struggle went on for a few days, and then she found that he was gone, and she was left standing alone in a busy world that scarcely seemed to have noticed what was going on.

She was a woman made for human companionship, one who lived on affection and sympathy, and when he was torn abruptly from her, a sense of loneliness and desolation settled down on her soul and overpowered it. The newspapers were full of eulogies of her husband's work, of regrets that the world had lost him so early. She had hardly realised the important position he had occupied in the world of science. It gave her a feeling of regret for not having

better understood and appreciated his genius—for having lived, so to speak, outside his world. She determined that his son, a child of five, should understand and appreciate him, and in a sort of passionate fervour she dedicated herself to the work of educating him as his father would have wished.

She was told that she had a bare £150 a year to live upon, and realised that in order to educate him she must work. She was a good linguist, and soon obtained some translation —dull, uninteresting work, at which she plodded with an energy that threatened to interfere with her health. She moved into a little house in one of the suburbs near a common, where the child could have fresh air, and for two years lived a

secluded life there, seeing no one, and working hard. Then she got behind hand with her work, and felt her health giving way. She had a longing for change of scene and air. Once in her happy days she and her husband had passed by Wrexford. She had been taken with the quaint primitiveness of the place, and had exacted a promise from him that they should spend a holiday there some day when he had time and money to spare. She was seized with a longing to go there, and, sending the child to his grandmother, who begged to have the charge of him, wrote and engaged rooms at the inn and set off.

And now, as she sat in front of the fire, her body wearied, her nerves excited, and her brain working feverishly, the Present

and the Past forced their hideous contrast upon her. The dreary loneliness of the place she had come to terrified her. She cast round wildly in her mind for support, and in her sense of helpless isolation almost cried aloud to God for help.

A step scrunching on the shingles beneath the window broke in upon the excited, turbulent silence, and roused her suddenly from the depths of her reveries. The outer door opened, and a man's step sounded in the room below her own. It seemed like an answer to her passionate call, and brought with it a sudden, reassuring calm. She roused herself and went to bed.

At eight o'clock the next morning, as she looked out upon the same grey, sunless scene, a young man came out of the door

beneath and walked off down the shingles to the sea. He was tall and fair, a well-built young man, with broad shoulders, and a youthful swing in his gait. He wore a baggy, grey, knicker-bocker suit, and a flannel shirt, with an "artistic" tie tied in an untidy knot, the ends flopping loosely, and carried a bath towel over his arm. She judged him by his appearance to be an artist.

"I see you have another lodger, Mrs. Taylor," she said to the landlady, who brought in her breakfast.

"Yes'm. He occupies the downstairs rooms; a young artis' he is by profession. He's come here these three years to paint pictures. I'm told 'e's what they call a Impressionis' artis'." She paused, and then

smiled a little deprecating smile. "My 'usband 'e do laugh at 'is paintings. He don't seem to have no notion of painting what you'd call a *picture*. It's like as if 'e only dabbed the paint on, the way a child would. And though 'e works very 'ard, poor gen'leman, 'e don't seem to improve not a bit. Only last night my 'usband says to me, 'Why, 'e paints worst than ever this year.' And I assure you'm, you'd think it to look at 'is pictures. It do seem a pity—such a nice, civil-spoken young gen'leman as 'e is, too, and not a bit o' trouble. But, as I says to my 'usband, as long as 'e's satisfied with 'is pictures it don't matter what *we* think of them."

And the landlady pulled herself up as if she was afraid she might be going too far, and

changing the subject by asking if there was anything more she required, withdrew silently, leaving her lodger to reflect on the philosophy of her last remark and her information generally. As she looked out of her window at the eternal, unbroken greyness, she wondered what an artist could find to paint in such a spot.

She saw him come back half an hour later, with his hair all standing on end after his bathe. He was a good-looking young fellow, with strong, well-cut features, and a healthy, sun-bronzed complexion. He glanced up at her window as he neared the inn, and caught her eye for a moment, and she withdrew as if she had been found spying.

She spent most of the day unpacking her things, and try-

ing with some rugs and knick-knacks she had brought to give a more home-like appearance to the room. She had resolved to rest, and do no work, and with this object had brought a pile of light literature in the shape of yellow-backed novels. These she scattered about the room, on the tables, by way of giving a more cheerful look.

But even these efforts were not enough to shake off the feeling of gloom that oppressed her. In her early married life she had developed a taste for versification, and had written one or two little poems. He husband had liked them, and had encouraged her to write more. But it was a phase, and had not lasted long. Now she felt an impulse to try and express the sense of dreariness and desolation the place

had inspired in her. She succeeded in putting it into a little set of verses which she called "Alone." And the exercise and unburdening of her mind gave her relief from the monotony of her thoughts.

It rained most of the day—a steady, relentless drizzle. But towards five o'clock it grew weary and stopped. The mist cleared up, and there was a pink glow in the sky—a reflection from the sun, which was setting inland behind the town.

The tide had come in, and some fishermen were casting a net from a boat not far from land. She watched the boat rocking gently on the smooth, shining water, and then put on her hat and went down to the beach to see the drawing-in.

As she was standing behind

the little group of men, women, and children who were waiting for the net, some one came and stood beside her. She gave a half-glance round and saw it was the artist. He was standing with his hands in his pockets, gazing at the net which was now being drawn slowly and surely towards the shore, and apparently unconscious of her presence.

As the fish, feeling themselves entrapped, began to leap out of the water, he ejaculated half to himself, "Poor things! what a beastly shame it is!"

She looked round at him. There was no one else near, so the remark was obviously intended for her.

"Yes," she said. "And yet it is such a pretty sight, that one almost forgets how cruel it is."

His only reply was, "Stunning!" He was gazing at the scene in a sort of ecstasy of enjoyment. Then he turned to his companion and said half apologetically, "It's the first bit of colour I've seen for three days. It's perfectly sickening. I've wasted hours upon hours watching for the mist to clear and the sun to come out."

"Yes, I should think it has been a bad three days for artists," was all she could think of to say. And then she added, "But I should not have thought there was much to paint here even when it was fine. It looks to me a dreary, uninteresting sort of place."

"Ah, you should see it when the sun shines. You would not say that. Wait till to-morrow. It's going to be fine, I know, by

the look of the sky. Besides, that old fellow in the boat says it is, and he always knows."

They had drawn in the net, and were pitching the leaping fish into baskets.

"Don't look at them any more," he said, and turned away with a gesture as if he expected her to come with him. No reason why she should not go with him occurred to her at the moment, so they walked together up the shingles.

"You are staying at the inn," he said. "So am I. I saw you at the window this morning when I came in from my bathe. Besides, Mrs. Taylor told me you were coming. She's awfully pleased at having another lodger. She very seldom has any one but me, poor old thing!"

"She seems a nice woman,"

she said, by way of answering this information.

"They're dear old souls," he said, "both of them. They look upon me as a sort of harmless lunatic, but they are very good to me."

She laughed, and, looking up, saw that he was leading her towards a little painting encampment he had established under shelter of one of the boat huts—an easel, a camp-stool, and a general mess of paints, palettes, brushes, and portfolios strewed round them on the ground. She looked at the canvas on the easel. It was washed all over with various shades of grey, in a streaky way, preparatory, she supposed, to beginning a picture.

"What is this going to be?" she hazarded.

"Oh, that's finished. I shall not be able to do any more to it. It's just a little sketch of the shore and sea.

She looked at it incredulously, and then glanced at him, wondering if it was a joke; but he looked quite serious.

"Where's the fishing boat?" she asked, for the sake of saying something.

"It wasn't there when I painted it. But I'll put it in," he said eagerly. And, picking up his palette and brushes, without sitting down, he glanced at his canvas and then at the boat, which was now drawn on to the shore, and with his brush made a dab of a darker grey, with a few spots near it, in the middle of his canvas, and said "There!" much in the voice in which one says it to a child who has asked one to draw something.

"I should prefer a little more detail," she said, with slight sarcasm.

"But you can't see more detail from here," he said, "in this light."

She looked at him again, and again saw that he was quite serious.

"Perhaps you'll like some of these better," he said. And, taking up a portfolio from the ground, he began pulling out the sketches one after the other, showing each one for a moment, while he watched her expression, and then putting it back and pulling out another. As they passed rapidly before her she strove to catch some meaning in any of them in vain—they were nothing to her but confused, unintelligible mazes of colour, splashed and dashed higgledy-

piggledy on the canvas, till, to her relief—for she was beginning to feel bewildered—he turned up a painting of a fisherman in a blue jersey leaning against a boat hut, with a pipe in his mouth. It seemed to her vivid and clever.

"Oh, that's good!" she exclaimed, glad to see something she understood. He had been about to fling it back into the portfolio with the others, but he held it for a moment looking at it.

"You don't mean to say you like that!" he said, looking at it and then at her with an expression of rueful disgust. "Beastly thing! The old fellow asked me to paint his picture. I knew he wouldn't appreciate a sketch, so I wasted several hours on this abomination, and of course he

was delighted. I'm sorry you like it."

"But what's the matter with it?" she said, making an effort to stick to her guns.

"Oh, it's so vilely painted. It's like the outside of a chocolate box. I've promised to have it framed for him," he said with disgust; "so I suppose I must."

She was accustomed to eccentrics in the literary world, but the Impressionist Artist type was one she had not come across before. She felt distinctly interested, and, being a broad-minded woman, and accustomed to the queer ways in which genius shows itself, she forbore to judge, knowing, besides, that in Art she was out of her element.

His frankness of manner seemed to compel her to be

frank also. "I know nothing about painting," she said. "Artistic perception has been entirely left out of my composition. I have never been able to distinguish a good painting from a bad one. So you will not be surprised when I say that most of those sketches are quite unintelligible to me. I can no more see their meaning than I can the meaning of a piece of Hebrew. I don't even know which way up to hold them. I feel as much out of my element as those poor fish did."

"Not quite," he said laughing. "Let us hope at least that the result won't be as fatal." He began to pick up his things, and she turned as if to go.

"Oh, wait a minute," he said. "I am just coming."

What a strange fellow he was,

she thought. He talked to her as if they had known each other for years instead of half an hour. She felt amused, and wondered that she was not annoyed.

As they walked up together, it occurred to her that while he had been trying to convey the bleak dreariness of the day on to canvas, she had been trying to express it in verse. They had something in common after all.

They paused at the foot of the inn staircase, and he removed his cap, and with a friendly look which seemed to say, "Of course we shall meet frequently, so I needn't say good-bye," went into his room, while she mounted the steps to hers. Then she heard him open an inner door and roar, "Tea please, Mrs. Taylor!" which was responded to by a

cheerful "Yes, sir!" in a much higher key.

"What a curious being!" Margaret said to herself. "I wonder if he is mad."

II.

THE artist had prophesied rightly. The next day was fine, and Mrs. Lindsay looked out of her window on a different world. It was still early, but the sun was beating down almost fiercely on the shingles and the cottages; on the sea too, though the tide was so far out that all that could be seen of this was a silver band flecked with gulls in the far, far distance, making a sort of rim to a large expanse of grey, seaweedy sand. The cottages were all awake

and giving signs of movement and life. Some children were playing in front of one, and an untidy, picturesque-looking woman kept going in and out about her work, occasionally addressing expostulatory remarks to the children. Down the river the fishing smacks were racing out to sea, their brown sails shining in the sun, and beyond, the grassy wind-blown sand-dunes stretched in coast curves as far as she could see. As she looked, a wave of something like content passed through her soul, like the sea breeze that fanned her cheek, and, so to speak, aired it.

Below the window, near a black boat lying on its side, stood a group of lazy-looking sailors, with their hands in their pockets and pipes in their mouths, discussing things in

general in a grumbling seaman's dialect, unintelligible to any one but themselves—a moody-looking group contrasting with the bright sunshine they were standing in. Her eyes rested on them for a moment, and then wandered away to the sand-dunes on the left, separated from the village by the muddy river, and settled on a figure slowly moving towards her—a grey figure carrying something white. As it came nearer it turned out to be the artist carrying his bathing towel. He neared the river and was hidden for a few minutes by a bank on the opposite side; but he soon appeared at the top hailing the ferry. A sailor pushed off in a boat and rowed across to meet him. In a few minutes he had landed and was walking towards the inn.

"Hullo!" he shouted familiarly, when he was within speaking distance. "Isn't this gorgeous?"

His friendliness was irresistible. "Have I known this man for a year, or only a day?" she asked herself.

"Yes, isn't it?" she said aloud. "How early you are!"

"I wanted to catch the tide before it was too far out. Aren't you coming out? It's a sin to stay indoors on a day like this."

"When I've had my breakfast, perhaps," she said, after a moment's hesitation. "Where are you going?"

"Same place," he said, indicating the beach by a backward jerk of his head. "But I'm going to have my breakfast first too," he added, and disappeared into the inn.

She lingered over her breakfast, reading a novel as she sat, and then began to think about going out. The sun was blazing down, and the glare from the shingles hurt her eyes. She put on a broad-brimmed hat, took a large white umbrella and her novel, and went forth down on to the beach. She sat for some time on the shingles idly watching the waves and the fishing smacks, and then walked along the shore till she came upon the artist in a hole in the shingles, near the hull of a broken boat, painting away quite happily, and surrounded by pallettes, paint-boxes, brushes, canvases, and portfolios.

"What a ridiculous amount of paraphernalia you have to carry about with you in order to pursue your craft!" she said.

"Yes," he said, looking rue-

fully at the heaps of things scattered round him on the ground. "It is a considerable handicap, especially on a hot day. But it's not worse than many other crafts. The musician, for instance, may have to cart about a piano."

"The writer's is a much less cumbersome trade," she said, sitting down on a little mound just above him. "He wants nothing but a few sheets of paper and a pencil—and an idea," she added as an afterthought. "Yes, you have the advantage of him there."

"You don't suppose the painter can get along without ideas, do you? What ridiculous notions you have about Art!"

She felt a momentary inclination to resent this frank mode of address, till she looked at his

face which was positively beaming with good-humour. "And, after all," she said to herself, "I began it."

"Anyhow, you have your subject spread out before you and have nothing to do but to put it down. The writer has to evolve his subject out of his inner conscience."

He clicked impatiently with his tongue, and dabbed rather viciously at his canvas.

"For a woman of intelligence," he said, "you talk greater nonsense than any one I ever came across."

She laughed aloud at this vehement outburst.

He stopped painting for a moment and turned to address her, using his paint-brush as a gesticulator.

"Don't try to explain anything

to me this morning," she said. "I am far too stupid to understand; go on painting."

He laughed and turned back to his canvas. He was painting a view of some rocks that ran out into the sea and formed a little sheltered bay. The waves were rippling round them on to the grey-yellow sand.

"Just look at the colour of the sea near those rocks. Isn't it perfectly delicious?" His face glowed. His whole soul seemed to be revelling in the sunshine and colour. His enjoyment was infectious. She felt a little rush of her soul towards the sea and the sky, as if it took a little plunge into them, and let them flow over and through it, as a bird lets the water under and through its feathers. The colour in the rocks, sand, and sea seemed

to strike her with a new vividness. She looked at the artist. He stooped down and chose some paints and made a little mixture on his palette, which he tried on the corner of his canvas. He seemed to be quite absorbed and oblivious of everything but what he was doing. She watched him with a mixture of curiosity and something like awe. But when she looked at the canvas she felt merely bewildered. She was unable to distinguish rocks, sea, sand, or sky. It was a confused maze of colour and conveyed not even an impression to her mind. She asked, "Where is the sea? which is the sky? where are the rocks? which is the sand?" But even after he had pointed them out to her, she failed to see any resemblance between the blots and streaks of paint and

what they were intended to represent.

"I believe," she said at last, "that Impressionism is merely a thing of the imagination."

"Of course it is," he interpolated.

"A form of hysteria," she went on, not heeding the interruption. "You imagine you see all sorts of things on your canvas that really exist only in your own brain. They no more exist in your picture, than they exist on that blank canvas. And I believe that by dint of telling me they were there and pointing them out to me, you would, so to speak, mesmerise me, so that I should begin to see them too. It is perfectly natural. Why, if one were to upset an inkpot on the floor and gaze at the black splash long enough, one would

begin to see a picture in it, especially if one had a suggestive friend at hand to tell one what to see. What you are painting now conveys absolutely no meaning to me. It is quite as intelligible upside down as it is the right way up. But I have no doubt that if I gazed long enough, my imagination would supply a meaning. Or even if you were to say what you mean one to see I might succeed in seeing it."

He looked at her with a momentary shade of disappointment, then surveyed his picture at arm's length.

"Are you disappointed with *me* or the picture?" she asked.

"Both," he said tragically.

"More with me, I suppose?"

"No; more with the picture."

It was impossible to offend him, he was so impersonal. Only a slight gloom settled on him, and he painted silently for some minutes. She had a little prick of remorse. The sun was beating down on his head. With a sudden impulse she held the white umbrella over him.

"Thank you," he said, and his cheerfulness returned at once. "That was just what I wanted."

She sat watching him till the pangs of hunger reminded her that it was time for lunch. She got up and said she must be going in, and asked him if he were superior to such carnal considerations as food.

"I never have any lunch," he said. "It is a bad habit and interferes with one's morning's work."

"What an enthusiast!" she

thought to herself as she walked up the banks of shingles to the inn. "What a power of misdirected enthusiasm! and what a pity it cannot be turned into some more profitable channel than the painting of crazy sketches that no one can understand but himself!" She turned round to have another look at him, and at the same moment he turned round to have another look at her. Their eyes met, and they both laughed, sympathetically, as friends laugh who know each other well. "All the same there is something very attractive about him," she said.

The next few days she only caught glimpses of him as he left the inn in the morning and came back in the evening. He was painting some way off

the coast. It was so hot that she felt disinclined to walk much, and spent most of the day reading, under the shade of an old boat, not far from the inn.

There one morning, while she was sitting, half reading, half in a brown study, a step scrunched beside her, and looking up she saw the artist laden with all his painting apparatus.

"I am coming to paint here," he said; "do you mind?"

"No," she said. "On the contrary; I am very glad of some distraction, for I am feeling bored."

She was sitting under the shade of the boat, and the umbrella lay unused beside her.

"You must have this," she said, taking it up and handing it to him. He protested. "But I insist," she said; "I can't have

you dying of sunstroke before my very eyes."

He took it up and opened it. "I don't know how to fix it up," he said. "The handle is not long enough."

"I am too comfortable to offer to hold it over your head," she said. "You must find something to tie it to. There's an old oar in the bottom of the boat."

He leaned over the side of the boat and drew out the oar, and holding the two ends together, looked at her inquiringly.

"So far, so good. But how am I to tie them together?"

She pointed to a piece of rope that he used to tie round his various boxes and things.

"There! Tie them together with that. Really you are not very clever this morning," she said, looking at him, and provoking a reluctant smile.

He tied them firmly together with neat fingers.

"That is very skilfully done," she said, as she watched him. "You are cleverer than I thought."

Then he drove the oar into the ground beside his camp-stool, and seated himself under the umbrella.

"There! will that do?" he said, looking at her from beneath it.

"Beautifully!" she laughed. "Now I am happy."

"So am I; perfectly happy."

"There is nothing so pleasant," she said, "as to lie in the sun and absorb heat till one becomes drowsy. I feel at this moment like a bumble bee, stupified with sunshine and honey. Too stupid even to take in the sense of this stupid book."

"One absorbs Nature into one's body," he said; "but Nature repays herself by absorbing one's soul. She draws it out of one till it loses itself in her colour and beauty."

She had a quick feeling of sympathy with him. Her mind seemed to take a little rapid flight together with his—out through the hot palpitating atmosphere to somewhere beyond the shining sea and the blue sky with its soft little clouds.

He began his sketch, and as he painted he talked about his work, explained what he was doing, and why he was doing it, and pointed out the different effects of light, shade, and colour. She found herself growing interested, and, putting down her book, watched him. She felt half amused, half attracted by his

naïve and, as it were, impersonal belief in his own work, and the assurance with which he expressed his views, as if there could be no question as to their truth, as opposed to the views of all those who might differ. His egoism was so unconscious, and he expressed his convictions so forcibly that he almost compelled her acquiescence — not, however, by suppressing or overpowering her imagination, but by leading it along with him by a sort of magnetism.

Whether it was mesmerism, or awakening intelligence, she began to catch a glimmer of meaning in what he was saying, and to see a faint suggestion of Soul in his picture. Whereas the canvas had been flat, the paint opaque—nothing in fact but canvas and paint—and her

eyes had wandered vaguely on the surface, striving to connect the scratches and blotches into a resemblance to something, now she experienced a momentary quickening of her perception. The canvas and paint became, as it were, transparent, and she caught a vista, a passing glimpse of a world in which he lived, of whose very existence she had been unaware; a glimpse that suggested vague possibilities that thrilled her with a new excitement. The feeling was vague and elusive, and she shrank from attempting to put it into words; but it was one of those little steps forward that mark an epoch in the Soul's history, as when one turns a corner suddenly and comes upon an unexpected view.

From this day she began to

watch him with a sort of fascination, trying hard to see things through his eyes. His passionate love of his work, and the power it had of absorbing him, taking him completely out of himself, inspired her with something like awe. He would paint on, hour after hour in the blazing sun, his whole soul possessed by the beauty of colour and line in the scene before him. Sometimes a shade of perplexity would come over him as he gazed at his work, as if he felt something was wanting and knew not what. Then, with a light in his eye, of satisfaction, as if the key to a puzzle had struck him, he would put in the missing note an utterly irrelevant spot or meaningless blob it often seemed to her at first, though it gained the importance of a corner-stone

when its *raison d'être* in the composition was explained to her.

She went out to post some letters one afternoon, and as she walked up the street caught sight of his little encampment near a sunk fence on the marsh. He was sketching the town. She made up her mind that she would ask him in to tea, and looked round the grocer's shop, which was also the post-office, to see if she could find anything that would make the meal more attractive to a man who had had no lunch. She could see nothing better than a large pot of jam, which she bought and carried home under her arm. She gave it to the landlady, and told her to get tea ready for two, and then walked out on to the marsh to find him. He glanced

round as he saw her coming, smiled his usual, friendly smile—it was one of those smiles that would drag a response from a stone wall—turned again to his canvas, and, bending over it in a loving and careful way, put in a microscopic dot of apparently unspeakable value. He was, as usual, surrounded with a vast paraphernalia of canvases, portfolios, and paints, and the disproportion between the means and the end achieved struck her as so quaint, that she stood and laughed for some minutes before speaking.

"You must stop painting now," she said. "Come in and have some tea. The sun will begin to go down soon. The mist is beginning to rise. You will have rheumatic fever if you stay out any longer."

"Wait five minutes," he said, "till I have finished this. It will be too dark afterwards."

She stood for a minute watching him. He seemed to take it quite as a matter of course that she should ask him to come in to tea. In fact, his manner might have implied that it was a thing of daily occurrence. Soon he stopped and began putting away his things.

"It's been a gorgeous day, and I've had a splendid day's work," he said, as he wiped his brushes on a filthy old painting rag, and shot them into a long black tube.

"These last few days have been delicious," she said. "Only they have made me wish I had my boy with me. He would be so happy playing on the beach in the sun."

"Where is he?" he asked.

"He's with his grandmother in the country. She idolises him, and I am sure he is as happy as the day is long, but I miss him. They thought I should rest better if I came away without him, but I am not sure. Look at the funny little letter I had from him this morning."

She handed him a sheet of paper ruled with double lines, and filled with crooked capitals. "Darling Mummy,—I like being here. There are two dogs and some chickens. One is called Colin. I ride the pony. I send my love. Your JACK."

He stood and read it through, slowly, with a look of sympathetic interest in his face, and then handed it back to her without saying anything. Her little

confidence had been quite spontaneous, and he had accepted it naturally with silent sympathy. But it seemed to draw them a step nearer. She helped him to put his things together. He had a paint-brush in his mouth, and only thanked her with a quiet look of recognition. They began to walk towards the inn.

"I have spent a day of complete idleness," she said, "and it has done me a great deal of good. Except for two poetic effusions and some letters this afternoon my mind has been perfectly idle since I came."

"What are the poetic effusions?" he asked, looking interested.

"The last one was written from a sense of justice," she said. "The day I arrived here, I was feeling very lonely—it was

the first time I had ever gone away by myself—I thought it was the bleakest, most desolate spot I had ever been in. It was raining, and everything was covered with mist, and I vented my feelings in a set of dismal verses, as grey and dreary as that picture I found you painting. Then that evening the sun came out, and the tide came in, and after I had watched the drawing in of the net I felt a little more cheerful, and thought perhaps I had been hard on the place. So I wrote some more verses in a slightly more cheerful strain, and tried to give an impression of the smooth, glassy sea, and the sunset, to make up for my abuse of the day before."

"Ah, I knew we had something in common," he said; "and I

have been wondering when I should find out what it was. And now you must write some more to-day, and call them 'The Fishing Smack's Race,' and fill them with sunshine and sea-breezes."

They walked to the inn and upstairs into the sitting-room, where they found the tea-table spread. He deposited his painting things against the wall, and then sank into a chair at the table with a sigh of relief.

"It's not to say *warm*—it's *hot*," he said, quoting a sailor he had met on the beach that morning."

"Well, this will make you considerably hotter, I am afraid," she said, as she handed him his tea.

He fell to, like a hungry schoolboy, and demolished the

greater part of a loaf and, to her satisfaction, most of the jam, besides drinking several cups of tea.

"I feared from your scornful remark about lunch the other day," she said, "that you were one of those æsthetes who live and grow thin on air and sunshine; I am glad to see I was mistaken."

"You make me feel quite ashamed of myself," he said, eyeing the fragments that remained. But if you provide a fresh loaf, fresh butter, and a pot of my favourite jam, what can you expect?"

He went to his portfolio and got out the sketch he had been doing that day, and laid it before her.

"That is what your poem for to-day must be about," he said. "'Sunshine and a fair wind.'"

It was a sketch of the fishing smacks gliding down the river and swinging out to sea full sail. It was crude and immature, but even to her untaught perception full of life and play. Sunshine and wind seemed to be rioting with the sails and with the glistening spray cast up as the boats cleaved their way and raced madly out—swept out like caged birds just released. She felt a glow of intellectual sympathy, as when any expression of feeling strikes one forcibly with its aptness.

"I like that," she said. "I can even see what it is meant for. I don't think it wants any verses to explain it. It speaks itself."

He flushed with pleasure, and asked her to read her verses. She hunted among some papers

on the table, and found them scribbled in pencil on half-sheets. She handed them to him, then took them back, saying, "No, give them to me, they are so badly written, you won't be able to make them out," and read them aloud, one after the other, without pausing for his comments.

"They are charming," he said, when she had finished—"perfectly charming. You have caught the spirit of the scene in each exactly. You are a poet! Why didn't you tell me you were a poet?"

She coloured slightly and laughed.

"Because I am not," she said.

He searched among his drawings till he found the two scenes illustrating her verses. "Let

me have them," he said. "I must copy them on to the corner of the sketch. I have found my vocation," he added, as he was doing it; "it is to illustrate your poems."

"Perhaps it is mine to explain your pictures," she laughed. "You must admit they sometimes need it."

The suggested prospect was vaguely pleasing to her. There was a conscious pause for a second or two. She began to turn over his sketches to cover a slight feeling of embarrassment. In doing so she came upon a sheet of drawing paper covered with water-coloured sketches of a head—a woman's head it appeared to be—though it would be difficult to say. She looked at it absently for several minutes —the consciousness of their last

laughing remarks still upon her —till she was roused by his saying, "What's that you are looking at?"

She turned it round to him.

"Who is it?" she asked.

He looked slightly embarrassed for a moment, and then said, "Can't you see?"

"No," she said. "How should I? It is not a libel on Mrs. Taylor, is it?"

"No. It's meant for you."

"Me!" she ejaculated. And then, after a pause, "Am I as funny as that?" The expression of one of the faces struck her as inexpressibly comic, and she began to laugh. She glanced at him, and saw for the first time that he looked a little hurt. But her laughter had got beyond her control. Every glance at the drawing with the thought that it

was intended for her provoked her mirth afresh. The effort to overcome it in deference to his feelings made her quite hysterical.

As if in spite of himself he was obliged to yield, and joined for a minute in the laugh against himself. But he looked mortified, and the next minute he flushed deeply, and saying "Give it to me," took it and tore it across and across, and threw the bits in the fender.

She was sobered at once.

"Why did you do that," she said.

He was silent for a minute. And then, as if ashamed of himself for having shown so much temper, made an effort, and said gently—

"I know they were very bad, and I did not mean you to see

them. Will you let me try and do a better one some day?"

"I couldn't," she answered, making a desperate effort to avoid going off into a fit of laughter again.

"Why not?" he asked, looking at her.

"I don't know why, but I know I couldn't."

He turned away, and for the next few minutes neither of them said anything. He was depressed and moody, and, though she made an effort to cheer him up, he did not recover his spirits again, and soon picked up his sketches and went downstairs. His face only once relaxed into a reluctant smile when she said—

"You see I am like the old sailor, I like to look like the outside of a chocolate box—I can understand it better."

After he had gone she felt an unwonted tenderness for him, and wished she had not been so disagreeable, and a longing to make it up in some way. All the evening she hoped he might make some excuse to come up again. And every time she heard his door open, she thought, "Here he comes!" But he didn't. And she went to bed, resolved that she would be very friendly and sympathetic the next day.

III.

IT rained steadily all the next day, and was chilly and damp. She lit a fire and spent the morning writing letters and doing accounts. She wondered what he was doing with himself downstairs. He was very quiet. She could not even hear him moving about. He did not come up, and she began to wonder if he was really offended with her. It was really silly of him if he was.

"Towards tea-time his door opened, and he came up the

stairs with heavy, lazy footsteps and knocked at her door. "May I come in?" he asked, and did so before she had time to answer.

She was reassured at once. His ill-humour had entirely disappeared. His infectiously friendly smile seemed to establish them at once on the footing of old friends.

"Hullo! you've got a fire! what extravagance! And I have been economically shivering downstairs all day."

"Well, come and be warm now," she said, pointing to an arm-chair. He drew it up to the fire and sank into it.

"May I stay to tea?" he said, looking round, as the landlady followed him in with the tray.

"Mrs. Taylor seems to have settled that by bringing in two cups," said Mrs. Lindsay.

Mrs. Taylor murmured something apologetic about a fire and withdrew.

They had a cosy little tea together. Their eyes met as she was handing him a cup of tea, and melted together into laughter.

"Have you forgiven me?" she asked.

"I am afraid I was very rude," he said.

"You were rather cross," she said, taking the advantage he offered.

After tea they sat over the fire and talked. There was a warm feeling of peace and understanding between them in the room, thrown into relief by the chilly, persistent rain outside. They talked about books, and found that they were at one in their feeling for certain poets. He

was delighted to find this sympathetic note in her, and said he must read her some of his favourite bits. He went downstairs, and brought up a little pile of volumes, and, picking out bits here and there, read them aloud with a sort of melodious vehemence that half amused, half fascinated her.

While he read, she watched him and marvelled at the power he had of throwing himself heart and soul into all he did—of getting the utmost enjoyment out of everything. Everything about him—his gestures, his attitude, his bronzed, healthy skin, warmed to a ruddy glow by the firelight—seemed to breathe vitality, health of body and soul. As his voice hammered the rhythm, and emphasised the meaning of the lines, she felt

that poetry had never spoken so directly to her soul before.

They had a sudden impulse to shake hands with each other over a particular sonnet that gave them both an intense intellectual emotion. When they had yielded laughingly to the impulse she found that she had tears of excitement in her eyes.

"Come for a walk," he said, a day or two later, when they had again had tea together, "I positively *must* have some exercise." She agreed, put on her hat, and they set off.

The rain had given place to wind and a fitful sun—a pleasant wind that cooled their cheeks and warmed their bodies. They crossed the ferry and walked along the top of the sand-dunes. There is something particularly

pure about the atmosphere of a sand-dune. The smooth curves seem to invite the sea-breezes to sweep them clean, and the wind, delighting in the vast tracts of sand, where there is no obstacle but the short stubbly grass, races up and down to its heart's content. And as they scrunched the coarse bents, full of little crackling shells, beneath their feet, and felt the sea breeze blowing salt on their cheeks, they found themselves talking with that freedom and unrestraint that human beings sometimes feel when out under the open sky, away from the circumstances of their material existence, not about art or poetry, but about themselves and each other. He told her something of the circumstances of his life : that he had a young school-boy brother

dependent on him, so that he could not devote himself entirely to Art, but that he hoped to be able to do so some day, as it was the only thing he cared about. At present he held a post as teacher of classics in a boys' private school, and owed this extra holiday to an outbreak of illness. She, in her turn, talked simply of her husband's death and of her boy, and made him understand the life's work she had before her. She felt in him that curious receptive faculty that some people have that makes them draw one's confidence from one without asking questions. The evenness of his sympathetic interest was not disturbed by any aggressive curiosity. At the same time she had that feeling of assurance that a woman often feels when giving

her confidence to a man, that it would be as safe in his keeping as if confided to the depths of the sea.

They reached a little height on the sand-dunes, looking down on the sea at one side and on the flat, grassy plain on the other, and stood for a moment enjoying the silence and the evening air. The tide was creeping in over the soft sand with gentle rippling waves, and inland the sun was beginning to set. As it sank slowly the sky glowed up into a rich flame-coloured background, against which the little perched-up town stood out distinct and vivid. Their faces were dyed with the crimson light as they watched it. They felt small and isolated as they stood together on the top of the sand-dune, in the midst of the vastness

and splendour of Nature, and had another of those moments of quick silent sympathy that draw human beings suddenly close together. They watched the light die away, and then turned and walked home, talking very little as they went. When they parted at the foot of her staircase they shook hands without speaking.

From that day it seemed to both of them natural that they should spend a great part of each day together. They were drawn together by numerous little threads of sympathy. She felt more and more the charm of his utter unconsciousness and impersonalness—his keen enthusiasm, his mere animal spirits and power of enjoyment, his sensitive love of beauty. What attracted him in her it would be

more difficult to say, and certainly he did not trouble to analyse it. Anyhow they were drawn into constant companionship. Each found the other comfortable to be with, restful to the nerves, and quick to understand. They had, moreover, the same taste in jokes, one of the strongest bonds of union that exists, and a stimulating effect on each other's intellects, so that they had always plenty to say, and were eager to say it. In their walks along the shore, or inland to the various villages, they discussed men and women, philosophy, art and life, with an enthusiasm that she for one had not known herself capable of. He got into the habit of shouting "good morning" up at her window as he started for his work, and would wait till she appeared,

when he would tell her where he was going. If the weather tempted she would take a novel and go off in the direction he had indicated, and sit beside him, sometimes reading, but more often watching him paint. She had insisted on his taking possession of the white umbrella, though he protested a good deal.

"It makes it so much easier for me to see where you are, and saves me a great deal of unnecessary walking about."

"If you put it that way, I suppose I must give in," he said.

It formed, indeed, a very conspicuous landmark, so that she had no difficulty at all in discovering his whereabouts. He was generally on the look out for her, and if she dawdled about coming, and was later than usual, would greet her with, "I began

to think you were not coming at all," in an aggrieved tone.

Sometimes they talked eagerly the whole time. At other times he would work silently, and she would read or gaze at the scene he was painting, while her book lay idly in her lap.

As she sat beside him day after day and watched him paint, the beauty of the landscape seemed to penetrate her, and as it were paint itself on her soul, so that she had pictures of it painted all through her—pictures of the sky, the sea, the ships, the little town, the waving sand-dunes and the muddy river at evening with the boats and ships at rest. Of this latter the artist never seemed to tire. He would spend hours sitting in the marsh gazing at an old black hulk stranded on its side in the mud

of the river, with its masts and ropes stretched motionless against the sky, the very picture of mournful desolation it had seemed to her at first. Its weird gloom had terrified her the first night, as she looked down upon it from the sand-bank. But now it seemed to her the emblem of Peace—of well-earned rest after a life spent in nobly toiling. As she gazed through the delicate tracery of ropes and masts at the tender blue of the evening sky she felt herself wafting, wafting far away into Infinity.

* * * * *

The fortnight drew to a close, and she realised that she must go home—that she could not afford to stay away from her work any longer. She was rested in body and mind, there was no need for

any more holiday. Something told her she was a different being. She hardly dared ask herself what had changed her, but with the suggestion came the feeling that she must go at once.

She told him this one evening after they had spent most of the day together. They had had supper at the inn, and had wandered out into the cool night air. They crossed the ferry, and followed the river up on the other side towards the town. It had been a beautiful day—they had talked a great deal, and now they walked along in silence. Little points of light were beginning to appear on the boats, unsteady lights swaying with the motion of the river. The water flowing past them looked black and shiny in the

darkness, instead of muddy and dull.

He seemed to expect what she was going to say, for he said nothing when she broke the silence by saying she must be going home the next day, but walked on in moody thought. Then she said something with forced lightness about their having had a delightful fortnight away from smoky London; but still he said nothing. Then she hazarded a question.

"How long are you going to stay?"

"I shall go to-morrow too," he said in a hard, unnatural voice.

They came to a little bridge crossing the river, and leaning over the rails stood silently watching the water rushing beneath. Her heart began to

beat rapidly, with great thumps, so that she felt he must hear it. She forced herself to say something.

"Have you exhausted all the subjects?" she asked unsteadily

For answer he turned to her suddenly, and said—

"Don't go. Don't put an end to it. It has been so perfect, this fortnight together. Why should it come to an end?"

"All pleasant things come to an end," she said a little sadly, "sooner or later. It is better for some of us when it is sooner."

"No, don't say that," he said earnestly. "It is worse for every one when it is sooner. Happiness is never too long. It is wicked to turn away from it."

"It depends upon where it is leading us to," she said. "This is a complicated world, and very

few of us are in a position to seize all the happiness we can without taking it from other people."

He leaned his elbows on the railing and hid his face in his hands. He seemed not to be listening to her. There was a few minutes' silence. Then he said, without looking at her—

"You don't know what this fortnight has been to me!"

She wondered if he realised in the smallest degree what it had been to her, and had a wild impulse to tell him, but she checked it, and said—

"If it has done anything for either of us, let us be grateful and not spoil its memory by any folly. We human beings are so greedy of happiness. If we are given an inch we always try to grab an ell. Let us be content

with the inch, for we cannot have the ell." She tried to speak lightly, but a quiver in her voice betrayed her.

He turned to her, and some passionate words fell from his lips. She tried to check them with a hand on his arm. When he would listen to her she said—

"You and I have our life's work cut out. You have a brother to educate and I a son. We are both poor, and have to work like slaves to do it. How can we either of us afford to make new ties? No, our paths run, and must run, in different directions. They have crossed by accident, and now they must part again."

He tried to reason with her, but she was obdurate, and he felt as if he was beating himself

helplessly against a brass wall of her resolution.

"Let us go back," she said at last, almost with impatience. "It is getting cold."

They turned and walked back side by side in the dark. She made an effort, and talked about any indifferent subject that occurred to her. At first he made no response, but she persisted till she broke through his silence and abstraction, and he began to talk about his plans. He thought he would go to Cornwall for the few remaining days of his holiday to stay with a friend, then back to his post till the school broke up. She asked why he did not stay a few days longer, instead of going so far as Cornwall for a few days only.

"I could not stay after you had gone; the place would be

beastly," he said simply, and she said no more.

He came up to her rooms to consult a Bradshaw, and they puzzled out trains together for some minutes. He looked into her eyes for a few moments when they said "good-night," and seemed on the point of saying something, but checked himself and went.

The next morning he left by an early train, and she walked to the station with him and saw him off. He looked pale, but neither of them alluded to what had passed. She stood talking for a few minutes, waiting for the train to move. He asked if he might come and see her in London when he got back, and she said "of course he might!" Then the train moved off, and she was left alone on the platform.

She turned to walk back to the inn alone. The light, life, and colour seemed to have gone suddenly out of the place. The shore looked bleak, desolate, unutterably lonely, the sea hopeless, the sky and sunshine hard and cruel. She made a round over the sand-dunes to avoid passing the spot near the boat-hut where he used to have his little encampment, and hurried back to the inn. What a mournful, God-forsaken, desolate abode it looked, planted on the dreary, wind-swept shingles! and how the wind howled round it!

She spent the morning packing and trying to think of nothing but her work and her boy, and left by the afternoon train.

The meeting with her child was a distraction for a time, but

the taking up of her old life and interests just where she had left them gave her the feeling of having emerged suddenly from a beautiful dream where all was colour and light, where life had been a clear, placid, gently flowing stream between green bushes and flowers, into the grey, humdrum monotony of stone walls and dirty streets. Gradually the central figure of the dream seemed to focus her mind, and the fourteen peaceful days faded into a background for his vivid personality. She was worried by a persistent wish to see him again, and when he came felt angry with herself for the happiness she felt in being with him. She told herself that she would not see him often; but in spite of this, during the fortnight they both remained in town they met

frequently. It seemed to her that they were continually being drawn together by little elastic bands of sympathy that pulled harder the wider they were stretched. When they were apart the bands were taut to the verge of pain; when they met the relaxation produced a feeling of relief rather than of pleasure, and she told herself that the wish to see him had been only imagination. On one occasion only he alluded to that last evening at Wrexford, and tried again to make her listen to him. But he found her even more obdurate than she had been on that occasion, more fixed in her resolution to stick to the path in life which she conceived to be the right one for her, and he came at last to feel the hopelessness of trying to make her see it from his point of view.

It was a relief to her when the holidays came and they went their ways—he abroad, and she to her relations in the country.

She threw herself heart and soul into the dull monotony of life in a country village, where rectors, squires, Sunday-school teachers, and maiden ladies were the only people she met, and forced that fortnight by the sea back into its proper position, as a fleeting dream full of bright colours that had no part in her widowed life.

When they met the following spring they had drifted to mere pleasant acquaintances.

It was at a picture gallery where some of his Wrexford sketches were being exhibited. They walked round together, looking at the pictures, till she paused at a little sketch in a

corner marked "Sold." It was a picture of blue sea, with a foreground of grey shingly shore. On the sea a single sail made a white spot in the blue, and a white umbrella shading a figure reading, near an old boat, was the only relief in the grey streaks of the shore. There was a delicacy and *naïveté* about it that charmed her.

"When did you do this?" she asked.

"When I was abroad in the summer."

"Who have you sold it to?"

"To myself. I want to keep it—it has associations."

"Give it to me," she said.

He hesitated for a few moments, and then—

"Very well; it is yours."

After this their paths diverged more, and they saw very little of

each other. He took a post as lecturer in one of the northern universities, and spent most of his holidays abroad. Then she heard that he had taken a studio in London, and was devoting a good deal of his time to Art.

A year afterwards they met at an evening party. They sat on a sofa and talked. She asked about his painting.

"I did my masterpieces that year at Wrexford. I have never done anything as good since. During that fortnight I was inspired."

"I wonder why," she said vaguely."

He looked at her reproachfully, as if to say, "How can you?"

"I think the white umbrella had something to do with it," he said.

"Perhaps it had," she said.

"Think what I might have done if you had married me," he said.

"Hush! you must not say that." But there was a vaguely troubled look in her eyes as she looked away from him across the room.

When she went home that night, instead of going straight to bed, she went into her sitting-room, and, seated at her writing-table, gazed for a long time at a little picture of a white sail on the sea and a white umbrella on the shore. Then she rested her arms on the table and buried her face in them.

What was she crying about? Heaven knows.

A BALLET IN THE SKIES.

A BALLET IN THE SKIES.

THE sky was crimson streaked with deep purple. From behind one of the purple streaks peeped the top of the flame-coloured sun. First half of it could be seen; but it was sinking rapidly, and soon there was only a quarter, then a golden line, then a spot, then it had disappeared. But the sky still remained a beautiful crimson flame-colour for a long way up above the purple wall behind which the sun had sunk. Up

higher it faded to a delicate apricot with streaks of the palest blue, and the clouds, instead of being purple, were pink. The pond looked red and the boat black. A little headland that ran out into the water with a clump of trees upon it looked black too.

I unmoored the boat that lay idle under the trees, got into it, pushed off from the shore, and paddled among the water-lilies to the middle of the pond. Here I let the oars lie, and sat and watched the sky.

At first the beautiful red glow seemed a long way off, but gradually the whole atmosphere about me seemed to turn red, and I felt myself and my boat bathed in rosiness. Suddenly a little pink cloud whisked over my head, and looking up, I saw

that all the clouds were down quite close to me and were moving about rapidly, as though blown by the wind. Some of them came so close that my forehead was brushed by something that felt like cool, silken gauze.

All at once a large cloud swooped down towards me. I felt myself caught, and, before I knew where I was, was drawn rapidly up into the air—caught prisoner by something that looked and felt like masses of pink azalea blossoms. There was such a cloud of it that I could see nothing else, and the air was full of the most delicious fragrance. Then there was a little musical laugh, and a voice said—

"Ha! ha! We have caught you at last! And now we will

show you something you have never dreamed of. For, though you know a good deal about our life in the garden, and have a great many friends growing in the ground, you don't know that when we shake off our blossoms we come up here into the sky. You think we are dead; and it is because you grieved when the tall, white lily 'died' the other day that I made up my mind to show you there was nothing to grieve for. It did not die. It merely threw off its withered dress and came up here. Soon you will see it. But now come on with me." And I found myself sweeping through the air in a cloud of salmony pink azaleas, one of whom held me by the hand.

We were wafted up—I felt as if I were flying—till I found

myself right up among the clouds in a sort of palace of the skies. All around me were whirling masses of living flowers. Streams of them were rushing past and whirling round so swiftly that they looked like great waves of colour sweeping through the air.

As some of them passed near me I could see that each flower was a most beautiful fairy-like being, with graceful limbs, silken hair that tossed and waved about them in every shade from soft rich black to palest gold, and garments made of the gorgeous petals of flowers.

Every sort of flower seemed to be there—deep red poppies with crimson, silken petticoats with black velvet spots; pale convolvuli with long flowing robes; roses of every shade;

tall lilies and cherub-like daisies and buttercups.

"They are watching for the moon," said the Azalea. "To-night is the new moon, so the ballet will be grander than usual. We dance every night when the sun sets, and every morning when it rises. That is what makes the colour in the skies But when the new moon comes we have a regular ballet in honour of it. We will get up on the moon, and then you will see it beautifully. Come on, or we shall be too late! See, there she comes!"

I looked, and not very far off a golden tip was appearing. There was a rush of all the Flowers towards it. They crowded round it and seemed to be helping it up. I was hurried along with the throng, and

suddenly found myself mounted on the golden crescent. I was tired and out of breath, so I leaned back against something that felt deliciously soft, supporting and restful, and looked about me.

I was not the only person on the moon. Besides the Azalea, there were a Buttercup, a Sweet Pea, and a Marigold. The Buttercup was a cheerful-looking little person with pink cheeks and a bright smile, and short yellow petticoats. She was rather inquisitive. She sat herself down beside me and asked a great many questions, and chatted in a very friendly way.

"I came up here," she said, "because I saw you, and wanted to talk to you. Generally only the tired Flowers come up to rest. The others like dancing.

The Sweet Pea and the Marigold were picked yesterday, and left to die out of water, so they are tired, poor things."

I looked at the Marigold and Sweet Pea. They looked tired indeed! The Sweet Pea was leaning back pale and half asleep, and the Marigold was sitting with her arms clasped round her knees, and a far-away, tired look in her eyes. The Azalea was leaning back against the moon, fanning herself with a leaf, for she was flushed and hot after her long journey down to fetch me from the boat. How beautiful she was, and what a delicious colour her petals were!

All around, overhead, underneath, and as far as we could see, were the Flowers: some clustering round the clouds, and dying

them the most exquisite colours, others rushing through the air and painting it with glorious red, blue, and golden streaks.

Suddenly a whiff of the most delicate and delicious scent was wafted toward us.

"Snowdrops!" I cried. "But I did not know Snowdrops smelt so sweet. Indeed I did not know that they had any scent at all."

"Of course they have, the Buttercup answered. "All Flowers have; you may not be able to perceive it, but that is only because your senses are blunt. Here they come!"

As she spoke, from all sides came rushing towards us millions and millions of Snowdrops. On they came, till the air above, below, and all round was full of them. Round and round the

moon they whirled, running hand in hand, twisting and turning in and out in a perfect maze, dancing to music that seemed to come from thousands of sweet musical bells.

I looked round, wondering where the music came from.

"They are singing," said the Azalea, answering my inquiring look.

"*Can* they sing?" I said, again surprised.

"Yes, of course. Didn't you know that?" said the Buttercup. "You might hear them often if you listened, for they sing down below too, very early in the morning when the sun is rising, and in the evening when it sets."

"Yes, I forgot. I once learnt a poem about it." And I murmured to myself.

"As I wandered in the forest,
The wild plants among;
I heard a wild flower
Singing a song."

"But who invents the music for them to sing?" I asked.

"No one invents it," said the Sweet Pea, who had waked up and was looking at the Snowdrops. "They make it up as they go on."

"But they all sing the same tune, and all together," I persisted.

"That is because they are all Snowdrops." Tunes grow wild just like Flowers, and each Flower has its own tune, just as it has its own scent."

All this time I was gazing at the wonderful dancing of the Snowdrops, which was more pretty and graceful than anything I had ever seen. Their

petals were of the purest, most dazzling whiteness bordered with fresh young green. They wore little green peaked caps, and whirled to and fro in time to the music—which was sweet and rhythmical—with graceful light movements, round and round, in and out, forming circles and curves of every kind.

They danced for some minutes, and then the music died away, and they all withdrew, and clustered with the other Flowers round the clouds.

Then in wafted rows of little Crocuses of all colours, heralded, like the Snowdrops, by the most delicious scent of fresh spring Flowers. Their dance was a little more formal than that of the Snowdrops, but very pretty. They sang in harmonies—music that reminded me of Mozart—

and twirled about forming variegated patterns all around us, and finally twirled themselves away among the clouds, their dance only having lasted a few minutes.

Then came every kind of spring Flower, one after the other. Daisies with their fluffy white petticoats tipped with pink, sticking straight out, hopped and skipped and tripped about, and sang funny little tinkly polkas, in which mingled ripples of laughter, for they were smiling and laughing the whole time.

The Lilies curved and swayed like dreams, and sang pretty sentimental ballads. The Roses sang passionate, tumultuous love songs, and rushed and whirled as if blown by a storm wind.

Some of the hot-house Flowers sang queer wild music that was

difficult to understand. "They have been very highly educated in hot-houses," said the Azalea.

The Chrysanthemums were the last to dance, and when they had finished their complicated and very beautiful dance to wild Hungarian tunes, there was a rush of all the Flowers toward us, and the most wonderful ballet began.

The moon by this time had reached the middle of the sky. We had to lean over to see what was going on below us, and all around. What a sight it was! How they danced, and what wonderful music filled the air! Not only was the cloud-floor beneath covered with rushing, twirling, ever-varying streaks of colour—now a rainbow-like circle with rings of every hue, and a milky-white centre, the

colours merging into each other—now a great variegated star with streaks out from a deep-coloured centre, but the air about us was full of them. Columns of Flowers rushed up to the moon and down again.

At one time we were smothered in Roses, at another blinded with Daffodils, at another overpowered with Lilies.

When this wild dance had begun, the Marigold, the Sweet Pea and the Buttercup had slipped from their couch and joined it, and now and then I caught sight of them madly dancing with the others. The Azalea, however, stayed with me, holding me by the hand.

"Oh, I must dance too!" I said at last. And, pulling the Azalea with me, I floated off the moon.

"You cannot," I heard the Azalea murmur, "for you are not really a Flower."

A faint, drowsy feeling came over me. My cheeks felt icy, my clothes hung floppily. I felt myself falling, falling, falling, through the air.

Suddenly I felt a bump, and found myself lying in my boat, which had drifted up against the bank. The sun had quite disappeared, and there was only a red streak to show that he had not been very long gone.

What was that lying at the bottom of the boat? I picked it up. It was a half-withered Azalea blossom, with a faint hot-house smell clinging to it. Surely it had not been there when I pushed off from the shore.

"It is only a withered dress," I said to myself. And I threw

it into the pond, and watched it drift out towards the water-lilies.

THE PLAYERS.[n]

"THE PLAYERS."

"But helpless Pieces of the game he plays,
Upon this Chequer-board of Nights and Days,
Hither and thither moves, and checks and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays."

Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám. lxix. *4th ed.*

AS a youth I believed firmly in the saying, "Man is master of his Fate." I believed that he could shape his destiny according to his liking. And up to my twenty-first year all things combined to foster my belief. My career at school was

one triumphant march. I carried everything before me: walked through the forms to the head of the school, taking everything in the shape of a prize; was a powerful athlete, and a brilliant orator in the debating club to boot—a hero to my school-fellows, beloved by my tutors, and a credit to the whole school. At the University my career was no less brilliant, till the last term of my residence there. On the 3rd of May, 189—, without warning, and, as far as I could see, without cause, my luck suddenly changed. On that day began a series of mishaps and disasters, which have continued without intermission or relief up to the present day, which have soured and crushed me, and turned my once happy existence into a sort of nightmare.

It began with an attack of typhoid fever, which had disastrous consequences, which it would take long to detail, and ended with an unfortunate love affair. These two landmarks in my path of ill-luck were linked together by a chain of petty misfortunes and disappointments occasionally relieved by a severe blow, leading up, as it now seems to me, with malicious forethought to the climax.

I fell in love. I will not describe my goddess. I need only say that from the first day I saw her she held my whole being in thrall. Her image, her gestures, her voice, so possessed my soul that I thought of no one else; and I made up my mind to win her or die in the attempt. From the first I felt that she too was drawn to me by a strong and

subtle sympathy. But from the first Fate opposed my suit. Petty obstacles were put in the way of our meeting. If I went to a party with the expectation of seeing her, something would occur to prevent her coming. If she went, something called me imperatively elsewhere. I comforted myself, however, with the saying, "the course of true love never did run smooth," and became each day more determined in my suit. I resolved to speak to her, and for a whole month I persistently sought an opportunity without succeeding in finding her five minutes alone. I was driven at last, in face of the utter impossibility of effecting an interview, to write and beg for one, and was looking forward to a satisfactory end to my wooing, when I was peremptorily called

away from town upon urgent family business. As if that were not enough, a pretty little flirt staying in the house to which I went fell in love with me, and seemed determined that I should propose to her. I was obliged, from mere civility, to pay her a certain amount of attention. This gave rise to a certain amount of gossip, which by a cursed fate reached the ears of the woman I worshipped. The result was that she greeted me when next we met with a coldness of manner that drove me nearly mad. Passionately eager to clear up any misunderstanding that my behaviour had caused, I sent a note begging that she would let me see her the following day, and received a somewhat stiff reply, saying that she would be at home. At last, I thought

my troubles would have an end. The evening before my projected visit I received a telegram from the friends with whom I had stayed before, saying that my youngest brother—a barrister in the same town—was dangerously ill in their house, and begging me to start by the night train. I had not a moment to lose. I scribbled a note to Miss B., and tore off to the train. My brother hovered between life and death for five weeks, and then began slowly to recover. As soon as I could leave him I went back to London. On my table when I arrived I found two letters—my own note returned through the Dead Letter Office—some fiend had persuaded the Post Office official that he could not read the address—written in haste—and another from a lady friend informing me,

among other things, that Miss B. was engaged to H., a personal friend of my own. I refused to believe it, and, seizing my hat, went round to see the writer of the note, who was a great friend of Miss B.'s. I found her at tea, and there learnt, in a very painful interview, that it was only too true. And not only that. She told me that Miss B. had been deeply in love with me, and had believed at one time that I cared for her. But that my behaviour during the last few months had been so unlike that of a lover, that she was convinced she had been mistaken. A report that I was engaged to Miss F. (the little flirt) had confirmed the conviction. She was deeply hurt, and suffered a great deal, though she was too proud to show it. Then when K., who had been in

love with her for years, and had frequently proposed to her before, begged her to marry him, she consented. They were to be married in three weeks, and his friends and her friends were delighted at the engagement.

As for me, I took my hat and walked out, out into the open air, for I felt that I should go mad or suffocate. I walked on and on, without knowing where I was going, till the pavements dwindled away, and the houses disappeared, and I found myself walking along country roads with green fields on either side. It was not six o'clock, and the midsummer sun had not yet begun to think about setting, when I turned into a green field, and flung myself, hot and tired out, on the grass beside a little running brook. I was filled with

bitter feelings of rage against the whole world, while the image of the woman I loved was shaking my soul with passionate regret. What had I done, I cried, that the world should suddenly turn against me? I reviewed my past. I went over the incidents of the last few years again and again. I could remember the very hour in which my luck had changed. Up till then I had been Fortune's darling. If I breathed a wish for anything it forthwith dropped into my lap. Then suddenly, without warning and without cause, everything changed. It was as if, through no fault of mine, Fortune had conceived a sudden hatred of me, a hatred as vindictive as her love had been indulgent. Every scheme I made was opposed; everything I wished for snatched

from me. I had borne up in the face of a series of checks and disasters enough to have made me lose heart; but before this last blow I felt something like despair, with a wild longing to know what I had done—what was the cause of the change—and a thirst for revenge against I knew not whom.

As I lay fiercely chewing my rage into little bits of grass, my eyes were caught by a ladder standing on end, without any apparent support, in the field, not many paces from where I lay. It struck me as odd that I had not noticed it before, and still odder that it should stand there erect and without anything to lean against. I walked up to it, felt it, and tried to shake it. To my great surprise, though the end merely rested lightly on the

ground, it stood quite firm, and was seemingly attached somewhere above. I pushed and kicked it, to make sure it would not give way, and then, feeling that I did not much care what became of me, began to mount. When I had gone about eight steps up, and was, as I thought, near the top, I bumped my head against something. Looking up I could see nothing to account for it. I put up my hand and felt. Yes, there was certainly something there — something smooth and transparent, like glass, which stretched as far as I could feel. I paused for a moment much puzzled, when a trap-door opened over my head, and a voice said, " Come on."

I at once mounted a few steps higher, through the trap-door, and found myself standing on a

transparent polished floor, so transparent that I should have thought I was standing in mid-air, on nothing at all, but that I felt it under my feet. Above me were the sky and the clouds, below the green fields I had just been walking in, while to one side stretched the great town of London—a grey mass of confused buildings, with here and there a spire sticking up—all rendered indistinct by a cloud of smoke that hung over it.

After gazing in wonder at the scene for a few minutes I raised my eyes and looked about me. I experienced suddenly the feeling of having shrunk to about the size of a pin; for all around me, as far I could see, were groups of colossal men, seated at colossal tables, and gazing down in an absorbed kind of way as if

they were playing some game. Each group consisted of two of these giants seated opposite each other, and a third standing beside them, and occasionally noting something in blue or yellow chalk on an enormous board that stood beside them. The group nearest to me towered above me like mountains whose tops were lost in the skies.

"What *are* they doing?" I exclaimed involuntarily.

Some one answered beside me, "They are playing."

The voice was familiar, and I turned to see where it came from, and saw standing beside me a man, also the size of a pin, with whom I had had a slight acquaintance for some years past. He was some years my senior, and was believed to have had misfortunes which had affected his

brain; for he lived quite alone, mixed hardly at all in society, and occasionally published a queer pamphlet of a gloomy, fatalistic tone. He was said by some to be a clairvoyant, and to be able to predict the future, but he disclaimed such power when taxed with it, and showed a dislike of talking about himself or his theories.

"I thought I should see you up here soon," he said, taking my hand, and speaking in a kindly, sympathetic voice.

Finding him there, obviously flesh and blood and tweed clothes, put such a face of reality on the scene, that I felt even more puzzled.

"But what are they playing at?" I cried.

"They call it the Willing Game, up here," he said.

I hardly took in what he was saying, so bewildered was I by the curious scene.

"But they seem to have nothing to play with," I objected. "They are all leaning over empty tables."

"Come a little nearer to one of them," he answered, "and you will see that they *have* something to play with."

We moved towards the table nearest us. Our heads reached about half-way up the boots of the giants seated at it. The table was transparent, and looking up through it I could see that each giant had a huge elbow resting on the table, and was supporting his colossal brow in his hand, as if in an attitude of deep thought. The great fingers of the other hands were moving rapidly about, touching little blue

and yellow spots that the table was covered with. They looked as if they were playing the piano or working a type-writer. From these blue and yellow spots fell a multitude of blue and yellow silken threads, that disappeared into the transparent floor beneath the tables. The floor just beneath the table was hollowed out like a concave crystal.

"You must come a little nearer, and look down," said my friend.

I moved with him to the edge of the basin, and as I looked exclaimed aloud.

I was looking right down into the heart of the living city—into a world of streets and houses all movement and life—everything in miniature, like things seen from a distance, but so intensely vivid and distinct in colour and detail, that I could distinguish

the features and the slightest gestures of the people hurrying about. It was as if I were looking through the lens of a powerful telescope, the difference being, that whereas the area covered by a telescope is small, the area in this case was very large—so large, in fact, that I could not discover its limits, for as far as I attempted to look there always seemed something beyond.

Any one who has watched people at a distance through a telescope knows what a fascinating occupation it is. I at once became absorbed in watching the movements of the people, carriages, cabs, omnibuses, horses, dogs. When I discovered that it was the city of London I was looking down into my interest increased; and when I found that I was able to see through

the roofs and walls of the houses right into the rooms, that I could read distinctly the print of the books lying on the tables, and the letters people happened to be writing—that I could see into cabs, omnibuses, and the underground railway, I became quite excited. I followed the streets with my eyes till I came to houses in which friends of mine were living, and looked in to see what they were doing. Though none of them happened to be doing anything particularly interesting or unexpected—they were mostly congregated in little groups in the sitting-rooms at tea — I watched them with absorbing interest. In a fever of excitement my eyes sought the house in which, of all others, my hopes centred. Alas! it was empty. The shutters were up, and all

the furniture was wrapped in brown holland, and there was no human being to be seen but a decrepit caretaker in the kitchen. I looked down into the bustle and confusion of Piccadilly, and recognised a friend sailing along on the top of a 'bus. I shouted, "Hullo!" and called him by name, and was amused to see him look about him with a puzzled air, as if he had heard me.

I should doubtless have spent hours gazing at the fascinating scene, but that my attention was at this moment drawn to the fact that the little luminous threads that fell from the table were attached to the people moving about below, connecting them with the little blue and yellow spots.

For the moment I had forgotten

my human friend. I looked up at the vast form towering above me, and shouted at the top of my voice—

"For God's sake tell me what you are doing, and what it all means!"

He took no more notice of me than if I had been an insect. I was reminded of my companion by his touching me on the arm and saying—

"He is so absorbed in the game and in listening to what is being said down there that he could not possibly hear you, much less answer your questions. The four legs of the tables are sound conductors, and the sounds from below come up them with a roar that would deafen one of us. I swarmed up one of them once, but the noise knocked me down. However, I have studied

the game a great deal, and can explain what I know about it."

I begged he would explain the whole thing, and he began at once—

"The game, as I told you, is called the 'Willing Game,' because they move the puppets by willing them. Each piece is connected with one of the little spots on the board by one of those silken threads that you see. Down that they send a will current by touching the spot with their fingers. Look down. Don't you see a sort of sparkling and glittering of the various threads?"

I looked, and saw that it was as if a light was passing to and fro among them, lighting up now one, now another, each one shining only for a second, and the lights darting about with

bewildering rapidity. I told him I saw what he meant.

"When a Piece is actually being moved," he said, "the string always shines like that from the current passing through it; so that, if one were quick, one might follow the moves. But they go so quickly that it is very difficult. Even after some years' practice I am only just able to follow the moves in the very slowest games."

He paused, looking down at something, as if interested, but I begged him to go on.

"We human beings," he said, "as you have probably discovered by this time, are the Pieces. We imagine we play the game ourselves, whereas, as a matter of fact, we are simply puppets in the hands of these creatures up here, who move us about, as far

as I can see, merely for their own amusement. Who the creatures are I have not yet discovered, but I imagine they are the inhabitants of another universe that surrounds ours, and of which we are not sensible. They don't often speak, and when they do it is such a terrific roar that one cannot make out much of what they say. But I gather that this is some sort of club set apart exclusively for the playing of the game."

"It seems to be a very large club," I said, gazing around. For as far as I could see stretched the groups of Players, dwindling in the far, far distance to men of apparently our own size.

"It stretches for miles and miles," he said—"further than you can see. I have walked for

a whole day, on and on in the same direction, past table after table, and when I was so exhausted that I could go no further, I looked down into one of the games on to a town called Haslemere, about thirty miles out of London, while the groups of Players still stretched as far as I could see. In fact, I am convinced that it stretches over the whole of England, and is, in short, the English Club. From remarks I have caught I believe there is a French Club, a German Club, an American Club, and, in fact, a club for every nation all over the world."

"How many Pieces are there in a game?" I asked.

"The numbers vary very much. Some games are very large, consisting of several thousands—the London games, for instance—

while others—little country village games—have as few as fifty.

The Pieces are divided equally between the two Players, who draw lots for them at the beginning of the game. The Player who draws the least valuable Piece begins."

"What constitutes the value of a Piece?"

"Well, that question has puzzled me a good deal. I cannot understand why certain Pieces should be considered more valuable than others. The Players seem to see at a glance the value of a Piece, and I sometimes think that they must be all marked, but that we are unable to see the marks. Physique and intellect seem to be of great importance—and Youth. Babies are, I believe, marked very high—I suppose as good raw material."

"Then, I suppose, the object of the Player is to increase the value of his Pieces?" I said.

"Exactly—to increase their value, and to secure for them Success or Happiness, or, better still, both. By doing so he scores. Success and Happiness together count highest, then Success alone, then Happiness alone. That creature who stands at each table looking on and occasionally writing on the board is keeping the score. Whichever Player reaches a particular score first—depending on the size of the game—wins. When the game is over the two Players as a rule go off, and two new Players take their place, though sometimes they play two or three games running."

"How long do the games last?" I asked.

"For years and years. Three years is considered a very short game. I believe they sometimes go on for a century. Of course time is counted differently up here. A year is to them, I fancy, about what an hour is to us. It gives one a feeling of hopeless insignificance to think of it."

He paused for a moment, and then went on—

"Each Player, of course, plays for his own Pieces and against those of his adversary. While he aims at achieving an object for the advantage of his own Pieces, he must be on the look out to frustrate any like object on the part of his adversary. He must have a separate scheme for each one of his own Pieces, and at the same time be cognisant of the designs of his opponent, in order to check

them. As none of the games about here have less than a thousand Pieces, you may imagine it is not easy for a Player to keep in his head a scheme for each individual Piece. And indeed the very best Players sometimes leave a Piece in a corner and forget all about it, which is hard lines on the Piece. Not that they care about that!" he added, with a touch of bitterness. "That forgetting of a Piece accounts for the extraordinary uneventful lives some people of great merit lead. One wonders that they do so little and see so little of life. They will tell you they have had no opportunities, which is true in a sense. They have been forgotten by their Player. They have not been played at all. It is almost worse than being played badly—not to

be played at all. Women Pieces suffer from it more than men, of course, for they are as a rule of less value.

Of course a good deal depends upon the lie of the Pieces when the game begins. It is easier for a Player to score for an indifferent Piece in a good position than for a valuable Piece who happens to be badly placed. That accounts for the fact that it is not always the most talented people who make a mark in the world. There are just as many and as great talents hidden in corners that never show themselves at all."

I was so interested in what he was telling me that I did not stop him to ask questions, but only begged him to go on whenever he paused for a moment.

"The games," he went on, "vary

enormously in interest, the big games and those of the best Players being by far the most exciting.

They draw for partners, and a good and bad Player may be drawn together, or two bad Players, or two good Players. If a good and a bad Player play together, the good one of course has it all his own way, so that the game is a foregone conclusion; but it is instructive to watch. Come along here, and I will show you a game of this kind."

We moved on to the next table, and looked down through the crystal concave on a part of West London that I was fairly well acquainted with. It was a bewildering, turbulent scene, and the moves followed each other with such rapidity that I was unable to follow them. But my

friend pointed out several things to me. In the first place he bade me look at the board where the score was being noted, and to observe that Blue had by far the best of it, his score reaching half way down the board, while Yellow had scored for four Pieces only. He then told me to look at various puppets of my acquaintance whom I knew to be specially happy and successful, and to note that they were all attached to Blue threads, and then to notice that all my most unfortunate, unlucky friends were attached to Yellow threads. In that few minutes things were explained to me that had puzzled me for years—why, for instance, that fellow A., who was such an ass, always got on and succeeded so well in everything he undertook; why that delightful, clever, charming B. did nothing but fail,

"He's a splendid fellow," said my friend, as we looked at the latter, "and if he had fallen to a good Player might have ruled the world. But what chance has he against such odds? Every little scheme his Player makes for him is promptly nipped in the bud by his adversary. He has not scored a single point for him, though he is the best Piece on the board. Now Blue drew a poor set of Pieces to begin with, but look at them! You know that idiot X.? Look at the success he has had at the Bar! Look at that beast L., with his twaddly books that sell by thousands. And look into Number 24 of that street. You see that man asleep in his study attached to a yellow thread?"

I looked. "Why, it is you!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," he said, "on the losing side. That is why I am a fatalist. I was a good Piece to begin with, and, if I had been well played, might have had a splendid time. As it is, what am I?" He sighed.

We walked on to another table, and gazed down on a scene even more tumultuous and bewildering than the last. "The best game in the room," said my friend, "*I* think, though some might say the Political game was better."

The scene was one of the most fashionable parts of London, and the Pieces mostly members of what is called "society."

"In a game of this sort," said my friend, where the Players are equally matched, all is excitement. You never know what is going to happen next. The puppets are down on their luck

one day, at the top of the tree the next—never quiet. Look at that fellow there! You remember what a fuss was made about him a short time ago. His name was in everybody's mouth. Everything he touched seemed to succeed. He was on a sort of pinnacle, being made much of by Fortune and everthing else. But, by a clever move on the part of his adversary, down he goes! and look at him now! But he'll have him up again before the game's over, and people will say, 'What pluck that fellow has, to be sure!' As if his pluck had anything to do with it!"

We then glanced at a game where the Players were equally matched but poor. It was not at all exciting. Pieces, some very good ones, seemed to be

left in corners doing nothing, and there were no high scores. It was not a part of London that I was well acquainted with, but I had heard it spoken of as a "dull neighbourhood," a fact that was now accounted for.

"Are there any rules in these games?" I asked.

"Hundreds, I believe," he answered. "One of the important rules seems to be that a player may not kill a puppet, directly. He may not, as it were, put his finger on him and squash him—as I have no doubt they would often like to do. If they want to kill, they can only do it indirectly."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, I will give you an instance. You remember Smith who died of typhoid fever a few

months ago?" I nodded. "Well, he was in the same game that I am in, and one of Yellow's Pieces. He happened at the moment to be one of his most useful Pieces, and Blue wanted to get him out of the way. I happened to be up here when it happened, and saw the whole thing. Smith was invited to a dinner party. Blue arranged, unperceived by Yellow, that a bad typhoid oyster should be among those sent round from the neighbouring fish-shop to the dinner. He also arranged that one of his own Pieces should be engaged as extra waiter. He then contrived that another of his Pieces, a very pretty girl, should sit next to Smith, enter into conversation with him and, so to speak, beguile him; and also that the bad oyster should

fall to her share (the extra waiter put it on her plate). He then made her ask Smith if he liked oysters, and on his replying in the affirmative, say, 'Well I will give you two of mine, for I have too many,' and present him with the bad one and another. At this point, Yellow noticed what was going on, but it was too late. Smith experienced an unaccountable disinclination to eat the oyster, owing to Yellow's willing that he should leave it on his plate. But not wishing to be rude to the pretty girl, he overcame the feeling, ate it, and died in consequence."

"You say that Smith *did* eat the oyster, in spite of Yellow's willing him not to do so. That looks as if the Pieces had some will of their own."

"I have not yet made up my

mind on that point," said my friend. "I am inclined to think they have *no* will of their own; but that the determination to eat the oyster which Yellow had to contend with in Smith, and which conquered in the end, was the effect of Yellow's first order which Smith had a tendency to carry out.

"Yellow willed Smith to go to the table and eat his dinner, and then left him alone, to attend to another Piece. When he saw the oyster, he had to modify his order, to interpolate—'But don't eat that oyster.' But Smith had a tendency to carry out the first order, and did in fact carry it out, though he was conscious of a conflict.

"One notices a great many of these secondary moves at the time of a railway accident or

wreck. A certain number of Pieces have been 'willed' to start by a certain train or boat. Just before they start a Player may see that there is going to be an accident. He at once wills his most important Pieces (all of them if he have time) not to go. In a good many cases this secondary move will get the better of the first; but the Piece will, as a rule, be conscious of a conflict, and will have a strong tendency to carry out the first order and go."

"Would the fact of the pretty girl wishing Smith to eat the oyster have any influence with him?" I asked.

"A certain amount," said my friend. "That is what they call indirect willing, and is the only way in which a Player can move his adversary's Pieces, *i.e.*,

through his own. It plays, in fact, an important part in the game. A Player wishes we will say, to frustrate a meeting between two of his adversary's Pieces. He can only keep them apart by means of his own. He will seize every opportunity of making his own Pieces waylay them, engage them in conversation, make love to them. In short, there are a thousand and one little devices he can employ, if he is clever, to prevent their meeting. I have known two Pieces who were seriously in love with each other successfully kept apart for months, by all sorts of little obstacles being cleverly thrown in their way, and the woman Piece finally married to some one else."

I thought of my own case and ground my teeth.

"Why," I asked, "should a Player wish to prevent his adversary's Pieces marrying?"

"For many reasons. In the first place, if it turned out a happy marriage, his adversary will score very highly—a double score of some kind. And besides that, one of the most important rules of the game is that a woman Piece belongs to the same side as her husband. So that if a Player can marry his women Pieces to his own men, he secures them. If, on the other hand, his adversary captures a wife for one of his men, he gains a Piece. There is more exciting play about marriage in the game than about anything else. What a good Player aims at doing is to marry his women Pieces, as soon as he can, to his own men, in order to keep

them safe and score for happy marriages; and of course his adversary does all he can to prevent such marriages. Then, if he has any women over, he must do all he can to keep them unmarried and not let them be captured. This he does by hiding them in corners or making them appear unattractive to the men Pieces. If he happens to have men over, he tries to capture wives for them from his adversary's Pieces, and often has an exciting time over it."

"Then they cannot capture men?" I asked.

"They can; but they don't often do it. It is very difficult, and uses up a great many Pieces. What they have to do is to surround the desired Piece with a Will Current through their own Pieces. As soon as they

have made a complete ring he is captured. Parnell was captured in this way, I believe. His Player was absorbed in some little by-play, and did not notice what was going on. But, oddly enough, the man who captured him was rather a poor Player, and never made anything of him. He scored for the capture, but that was all.

"There are, too," he went on, "many rules of good play that the best Players always observe. For instance, a good Player will always keep all his Pieces moving —even the least valuable. He will never let any of them get stuck in corners. He will bring them all forward one after the other, and make the most of each one. A good Player delights in leading an obscure Piece of small value through intricate moves to

a position of importance — to bring a boot-boy, for instance, up to being Prime Minister, or a ballet girl to be a society Queen—marry her to a Duke. Such play, of course, displays great skill, and only the cleverest Players would attempt it.

"Another rule of good play is that they must never allow their Pieces to congregate. For it would allow an opportunity for a catastrophe which a clever opponent would be sure to seize."

At this point I noticed that round the top of the crystal basin at which I was looking, there were little moving pictures that looked like looking-glass reflections, and that there were people in them connected with the table by blue and yellow strings. They were disconnected

bits of a panorama that went all round the concave crystal, but as vivid and distinct as the scene below. One was a scene in the snowy Alps; another a bit of blue sea with a ship sailing along in it; another a deep forest; another a hot sandy plain. As I looked at them, my guide said—

"Ah, those puzzled me for a long time. But you see a great many of the puppets move away from the scene of action as the game goes on, and those reflections are to enable the Players to keep their eyes on them. As the puppet moves about, the tiny scenes change."

These tiny pictures fascinated me strangely, and I watched them for a long time, until my guide drew my attention to another game.

"I want," he said, "to show you something curious here."

I looked down where he pointed into a hall, where apparently a mesmeric *séance* was going on. The mesmeriser, a young man, had, I noticed, a sort of luminosity about him, like a halo, only it went all over him.

"Sometimes," he said, "the Players get excited, and drop one of the will conductors, and once dropped it appears that they cannot pick it up again. They can only send down another, and attach it to the Piece. The Piece whose string was dropped has therefore a quantity of loose will power about him; and if any one comes near enough to be in contact with it, he can 'move' them just as the Players do. But of course they are not as powerful as the Players, and, as

you know, the object has to be reduced to a torpid, quiescent state before they can move it at all. They are often not aware that they have this power, and consequently never make use of it. But some of the Players make a speciality of this second-hand willing."

Up to this I had gazed at everything and listened to all his explanations with the deepest interest, as if I were a mere spectator of the curious scene. But now I seemed suddenly to realise what it all meant—that I myself was one of the puppets thus being moved about; and a sort of hopeless impotent rage took possession of me.

"Do you mean to tell me, then," I said, "that we human beings are nothing but puppets being moved about by these

monsters for their own amusement, and that if we happen to fall to a bad Player there is no chance for us—that we must just submit to have our lives spoilt, without even any hope of revenge?"

"Yes," he said. "I am afraid we can do nothing. We can only submit, and hope that the next Shuffle will bring us better luck."

"What is the Shuffle?" I asked eagerly.

"There are three different sorts of Shuffles," he said. "One every three years, one every fifteen years, and one at the beginning of each century. The one every three years is merely an optional change of partners on the part of the Players. One man at each table may change with any one he can

find to change with him. The majority, however, stay as they are, only those who are very dissatisfied with their partners care to change. Consequently not many of the Pieces are the better or the worse for it. But the fifteen years' Shuffle is compulsory. There was one four years ago. I was up here and saw it. All the Players got up and changed places. The Pieces and the games remained the same, but no two Players continued to play together, and none remained at the table they were at before. It was like a game of General Post. The consequence was that most of the Pieces experienced a change of some sort. Some fell to better Players, some to worse, some of course remained pretty much as they were. It was at the last 'General Post'

that you suffered a change for the worse. Up till then you had been in the hands of a very good Player—one of the best; but after the Shuffle you fell to a very poor one indeed, one who has, moreover, a strong adversary. You may remember that your luck changed four years ago."

I remembered only too well. "Then there is not another Shuffle for eleven years," I said.

"No," he said, "not for eleven years." And then, correcting himself: "But I am forgetting the Grand Shuffle at the beginning of the century, That will be the next. It seems to be an interchange of Players between all the clubs all over the world, and is carried on according to a rather curious system. All the winners from one club take the place of all the losers

from another, while the losers take the place of the winners. Thus in some clubs the play improves, while in others it gets worse. The clubs to which the winners go are called Winning Clubs, and the others Losing Clubs. I believe they continue Winning Clubs century after century, till the play reaches a certain pitch of excellence, and that then they change and become Losing Clubs, and the other clubs have a chance. I don't know what the object of it is, unless it be to give all the best Players a chance of playing together and improving the play. But you see, of course, that it accounts for what we call the 'Rise and Fall of Nations.' It also accounts, I think, for the careless, extravagant play that goes on towards the end of a

century; the Players are getting tired and bored, and are beginning to think of the coming Grand Shuffle. They are looking forward to it and talking about it up here now."

It now occurred to me that I had not yet come across my own game. I turned to my friend and begged that he would take me to it. As we walked along I felt myself burn with a sense of injustice.

"Surely, you will write a book and expose all this," I said.

He shook his head. "No," he said, "it is absolutely useless. I made a feeble attempt to do so when I first found it out, but I was only laughed at for my pains, and a great many people thought I was mad."

I remembered that I myself had thought he was mad, so I had nothing more to say.

By this time we had reached a table not far off, and I was gazing down eagerly at the familiar scenes of my daily routine: into my own empty chambers, into the houses of my friends and acqaintances, and at my friends and acquaintances themselves, as they moved about, occupied in their various pursuits. It did not take me long to see that yellow was the winning colour. All my most prosperous friends were attached to yellow strings, all the unfortunate, unlucky fellows to blue. In a fever of anxiety I sought for myself.

"You are outside the board for the moment," said my friend. "Look at the reflections."

I looked at the panoramic rim at the top of the concave, and there, in a tiny reflection of green

meadows and blue sky, I saw myself lying asleep, attached, as I feared, to a blue string. I next sought eagerly for the girl I had loved, and the man she was to marry, though before I found them I knew they belonged to Yellow, as indeed they proved to be. No wonder I had been unable to win her. I looked at the scoring board: Blue had a miserable score for about six Pieces, while Yellow's successes reached the whole way down the board.

I gazed helplessly up at the cause of my misery, towering above me like a mountain, and a wild thirst for revenge seized me. I began to climb up the leg of the table. My friend shouted to me to stop, but I was possessed by a sort of fury and climbed on. The leg of the

table was rough and knobby, so that the task was not difficult. When I was on a level with the monster's knee, I stepped on to it with one foot to rest for a moment. He seemed to feel me, for he gave a little brush at me with his hand, as if I had been a fly, and nearly precipitated me on to the floor again. However, I managed to cling on, and continued mounting. As I climbed I resolved that I would stand on the table in front of him, where he could not fail to see and hear me, and would reason with him, and beg him to cease his persecution of me. I had forgotten what my friend had told me about about the legs of the table being sound conductors, and as I neared the top I put up my hand and gave myself a little pull, which raised me with a jerk

above the level of the table. At the same moment there was a bang like a terrific thunder-clap. I felt as if I had been blown into a thousand pieces, and was conscious of nothing more till I opened my eyes and found myself on the grass beside the stream where I had found the ladder.

I got up, rubbed my eyes, and looked about me. The ladder had disappeared.

"So it was a dream after all," I said to myself, as I turned my steps homewards. But the extraordinary vividness of it prevented my putting it aside with this explanation. So deeply had it impressed me, that I called a few days later at the house of my fatalistic friend, eager to see him, but only to hear that he was dangerously ill. Two days

afterwards he died, and I was denied the satisfaction of having the question settled beyond doubt.

Two circumstances in connection with it occurred soon after and impressed me as curious coincidences, if nothing more. I happened to hear casually that the family in whom I was so greatly interested, and whose house I had seen enveloped in brown holland, had in fact shut up their house and gone abroad. And a day or two later I happened to meet the friend whom I had hailed on the top of a 'bus. His first words to me were, "Where on earth were you the other day when I passed you in Piccadilly? I heard you shout quite distinctly, but you were nowhere to be seen. Was your astral body taking a walk?"

"That's just what it *was* doing," I answered grimly.

Meanwhile thing are going on much the same, and I am trying to wait patiently for the next Shuffle. The Grand Shuffle it will be, for the end of the century is not far off.

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