Nesbit Edith

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Содержание

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I
THE BEGINNING

TO understand this story you will have to believe in the Greater Gods – Love and Youth, for example, and Adventure and Coincidence; also in the trusting heart of woman and the deceitful spirit of man. You will have to reconcile yourself to the fact that though daily you go to London by the nine-seven, returning by the five-fifteen, and have your accustomed meals at eight, one, and half-past six, there are those who take neither trains nor meals regularly. That, while nothing on earth ever happens to you, there really are on earth people to whom things do happen. Nor is the possibility of such happenings wholly a matter of the independent income – the income for which you do not work. It is a matter of the individual soul. I knew a man whose parents had placed him in that paralyzing sort of situation which is symbolized by the regular trains and the regular meals. It was quite a nice situation for some people, a situation, too, in which one was certain to "get on." But the man I knew had other dreams. He chucked his job, one fine Saturday morning

in May, went for a long walk, met a tinker and bought his outfit – a wheel on wheels, a sort of barrow with a grindstone on it, and a pot for putting fire in dangling underneath. This he wheeled profitably through rural districts – so profitably that he was presently able to buy a donkey and a cart, and to sell kettles as well as mend them. He has since bought a gipsy tent; with these impediments – or helps – he travels through the pleasant country. Things are always happening to him. He has found a buried treasure; frustrated a burglary; once he rescued a lady in distress; and another time he killed a man. The background to these dramatic incidents is always the pleasant background of quiet road, blossoming hedgerows and orchards, corn-fields and meadows and lanes. He says this is the way to live. I will write down his story some day, but this is not it. I only bring him in to illustrate my point, which is that adventures do happen – to the adventurous.

My friend the tinker has had, perhaps, more than his share of adventures, but then his is the temperament that shoots, like a willing needle, to the great magnet of melodrama. The temperamental needle of Edward Basingstoke followed the magnet of romance. In a gayer, if less comfortable, age he might have been a knight-errant, or, at least, the sympathetic squire of a knight-errant. Had he been born in the days when most people stayed at home and minded their own business he would have insisted on going out and minding other people's. Living in the days of aeroplanes, motors, telegraphy, and cinematographs, in

a world noisy with the nonsense of politics and the press, he told himself that the ideal life was the life of the farmer who plowed and sowed and reaped, tended his beasts and filled his barns, and went home from his clean, quiet work to the open hearth whence the wood smoke curled up to heaven like the smoke of an altar.

Destiny, in deep perversity, was making an engineer of him. He dreamed his pastoral dreams in the deafening clangor of the shops at Crewe, but not ten thousand hammers could beat out of his brain the faith that life was really – little as one might suppose it, just looking at it from Crewe – full of the most beautiful and delicate possibilities, and that, somehow or other, people got from life what they chose to take. While he was making up his mind what he should take, he went on learning his trade. And Destiny seemed determined that he should learn nothing else. What we call Destiny is really Chance – and so far from being immutable, she is the veriest flirt and weathercock. She changed her mind about Edward – or perhaps Death, who is stronger than she, insisted and prevailed.

Just at the time when a faint dust was beginning to settle on his dreams – the sort of dust that thickens and hardens into clay and you grow cabbages in it – Death intervened to save him. It was his uncle who died, and he left a will, and by that will certain property came to Edward. When the news came he took a day to think of it, and he went to the works as usual that afternoon and the next morning. But next day at noon he laid down his tools and never took them up again. Instead he took a ticket to

Oxford, appeared at the rooms of his friend, whom he surprised in slumber, and told his tale.

"And you're going to chuck the shop," said the friend, whose name was Vernon Martingale, and his father a baronet.

"I have chucked the shop," said Edward. "I chucked it at Fate as you might throw a stone at a dog. And that reminds me – I want a dog. Do you know of a nice dog – intelligent, good manners, self-respecting, and worthy?"

"Any particular breed?"

"Certainly not. These researches into family history are in the worst possible taste. You don't love me for my pedigree. Why should I love my dog for his?"

"I suppose you want some tea, anyhow," said Martingale.

So they had tea, and talked cricket.

"Any idea what you mean to do?" Martingale asked several times, and at last Edward answered him.

"What I mean to do," he said, "is what I always meant to do. I mean to be a farmer, and hunt, and shoot, and grow flowers. I think I shall specialize on sunflowers. They're so satisfying."

"More than you are," said Vernon. "Mean to say you're going to buy a farm and ruin yourself the moment you've got a few half-crowns to ruin yourself with?"

"I am going to be a farmer," said Basingstoke, "but first I am going to see life."

"Life? But you were always so.."

"I mean *that*" – Edward indicated the sunshine outside – "not

getting drunk and being disreputable. I can't think why the deuce-dickens that sort of beastliness is always called seeing life. As if life were all gas, and wining, and electric light, and the things you don't talk about before ladies. No, my boy, I'm going out into the unknown – not into the night, because it happens to be afternoon – and I thought I'd just come and clasp that hand and gaze once into those eyes before I set my foot on the untrodden path of adventure. Farewell, Vernon of Martingale, good knight and true! Who knows when we shall meet again?"

"*I* don't, anyhow," said Vernon, "and that's why you're not going till the day after to-morrow, and why I insist on knowing what you mean by seeing life – and why you're going to stay till to-morrow, anyhow."

"Heaven forbid that I should criticize another man's tastes," Edward sighed, "or deprive him of any innocent enjoyment. If you want me to stay – well, I'll stay – till to-morrow. And as for what I mean by seeing life – well, I should have thought even you would have understood that. I'm going to get a stick, and a knapsack, and a dog, and a different kind of hat, and some very large boots with nails, and a new suit, only I shall wear it all night before I wear it all day. Oh, Vernon, can't you guess my simple secret?"

"He calls a walking-tour seeing life!" Vernon pointed out. "And who's going with you and where are you going? The Hartz Mountains? – the Carpathians? – Margate? – Trouville? What?"

"The person who is going with me," said Edward, "is the dog

whom we haven't yet bought. Come along out and buy him. As to where I'm going, I shall follow the most ancient of sign-posts – and I know that I can't go wrong."

"You will follow – "

"My nose," Edward explained, kindly —

> "That indicator of the place to be,
> The Heaven-sent guide to beauty and to thee.

"Do you know, if you talk rot to the chaps at the works they try to understand what you mean. Like Scotchmen, you know. They think they can understand anything, no matter how shallow. Now I will say for you that you know your limitations. Let's buy the dog, my son, and get a canoe."

They did. And the dog upset the canoe.

II
MAKING AN AEROPLANE

THE Five Bells was asleep; asleep, at least, was the face with which it met the world. In the brick-floored kitchen, out of sight and hearing of the road, the maid was singing as she sluiced the bricks with a white mop; but if she and her mop had been state secrets, matters of life and death, they could not have been more safely hidden from any chance passer. In the bar the landlord was asleep behind the *Lewes Gazette and South Coast Journal*. In the parlor the landlady was asleep behind a screen of geraniums and campanulas. The ornamental clock on the mantelpiece said, most untruly, ten minutes to eight. Really it was four o'clock, the sleepiest hour in the day. The flies buzzed in the parlor window; in the bar the wasps buzzed in the bottle that had seemed so sweet a bourn to each as it drifted in from the out-of-door heat to the cool darkness of the sanded bar.

On the broad, white door-step the old cat slept, his person nicely adjusted to the sun and shade, his flanks in the sunshine and his head in the shadow of the porch. The white blind of the window swelled out, now and then, like a sail, because in this sort of weather one leaves all doors and windows open. In the yard some one had drawn a bucket of water – the brown oak and the brown iron of the bucket were still wet, and still wet the

trail it had made where it was carried to the old bath that the chickens drank from. But the trail was drying quickly, and the hens, having had their drink, had gone to sleep in the hollows they had scooped for themselves in the dust of their inclosure. Some one had been chopping wood, for a few chips lay round the block, in which the bill was stuck by its sharp edge. The man who attended to the wood and water was asleep, standing against the ladder that led from the stable to the hay-loft – a convenient position, and, if you were wanted in a hurry, not compromising, as lying down would be.

To right and left the road stretched, very white and shining, between dusty hedgerows and scattered cottages whose drawn blinds looked like the eyelids of sleepers. The whole village was asleep, it seemed – only a boy and a dog were awake. The boy had not gone to school because he had torn his every-day trousers on a nail in the stable. To wear his Sunday trousers was, of course, out of the question. And to mend the every-day trousers would take time. So Tommy was put to bed, nominally as a punishment for not looking where he was going – a most unfair implication, for the nail had attacked him in the rear. Children do not go to sleep when they are put to bed as a punishment. They cry, if their spirit has been broken by unkindness; if not, they lie and meditate mischief. Tommy waited till the afternoon silence settled on the house, and then very carefully and slowly crept down the stairs in his nightshirt, dodged Gladys and the mop, and reached the larder. Here he secured a flead-cake, a raisin-

cake, and an apple, dodged Gladys again, and reached the back door, where he stood looking out at the yard. It would be silly to go back to bed. Mother would not be awake for a good half-hour yet. There would be time to get to the stable, climb into the loft, and eat his booty there. It would be safer, in one way, and in another more adventurous.

He stooped till his head was below the kitchen window and crept by, skirting the walls of the yard till he reached the stable door, and next moment was safe in the half-darkness where the sunlight through the cracks of the door made dusty shafts of radiance. The familiar smell of hay and horses charmed him, as it always did. Ah, there was Robert, asleep as usual. Well, even if Robert woke, he could be trusted not to tell. Tommy climbed into the manger of one of the empty stalls, and just as he got his knee on it some one behind pushed him with sudden and incredible violence. He fell heavily, dropped his plunder, and found himself involved in the enthusiastic embraces of a large, strange, white dog, which in one breathless instant licked his face all over, trampled on his stomach, made two mouthfuls of the flead-cake and the raisin-cake, rolled the apple in the muck of the stable, snorted in a sort of brutal ecstasy, and bolted heavily out into the sunshine.

It was too much. The sudden and brutal attack overcame all considerations of prudence. Tommy forgot where he was, and why; the dangers of his situation were nothing beside the outrage of this unprovoked assault and theft. Robert was awakening

slowly. If he had been awake before he might have repulsed the enemy. Tommy opened his mouth to howl, but the howl changed to a scream, for there was the dog back again, snuffing loudly in the straw and fawning at Tommy as on an old and valued friend.

"Charles!" a stern voice called from the yard, "come here, sir."

The dog wagged a muscular tail and grinned at Tommy, as though inviting him to share the joke. The stable door was darkened by a form. Even in the difficulties of repulsing the dog's attention without irritating it, the child found time to be glad that the darkening form was that of a stranger.

"Call him off, if he's your dog," Tommy urged, thickly, backing against the manger.

"Might as well call him off, sir," Robert – now almost awake – conceded.

The stranger stepped forward, a snap clicked, and Charles, still widely smiling, was straining at the end of a leathern thong.

"I hope he didn't frighten you," said the stranger.

"He bunted at me with his great head," said Tommy, with half a sob, "and then he eat up what I'd got, and hooked it off again afore you could say knife."

"What had you got?"

"Nothing," said Tommy, remembering caution, "at least – "

"The jingling of the guinea heals," said the stranger, incomprehensibly. "Would sixpence be any comfort to you?"

Tommy's eyes answered, and the stranger held it out.

"Thank you, sir," said Tommy, and added, in close imitation

of his father's manner to thirsty travelers, "Going far to-day, sir?"

"I was thinking," said the stranger, "of putting up here."

"Then," said Tommy, with great presence of mind, "please don't say anything to them about the dog eating – what he did eat – nor me being here in my shirt, nor about Robert being asleep. If you'll go round to the front, sir, you'll find the bar, and that'll give me a chance to slip back to bed, sir, if you'd be so kind."

"I see," said the stranger, "you were sent to bed."

"In punishment like," said Tommy, "so you see I don't want to.."

"Exactly. An unobserved retreat. I will draw the enemy's fire from the front premises. Come, Charles."

Charles obeyed, only pausing to entangle the lead in the handle of a shovel and to bring this down upon the feet of Robert, to upset a sieve of chaff and run between his master's legs with a sudden violence which, but for the support of the door-post, would have thrown him to the ground.

"Nice-spoken young man," said Robert. "Now, young Tommy, you cut along back where you belong. I'll be asking Gladys the time to keep her off of the back door while you slips in, you young limb."

He strolled across to the window as Tommy's bare feet trod the sun-warmed bricks to the back door. As the child crept up the stairs he heard the stranger's voice in the bar.

"Sixpence," said Tommy, in ecstasy, "and him going to put up here." He cuddled down into his bed well satisfied

with the afternoon's adventure. Adventures are, indeed, to the adventurous.

"If I'd 'a' bin a good boy and stayed in bed nothing wouldn't have happened," was how he put it to himself.

Meanwhile the stranger, encumbered by the striving Charles, was "being shown the rooms" – the bare, much-scrubbed bedroom, the all-too-full and too-carpeted parlor.

"They are exactly what I want," he said, and so won the heart of his hostess.

When Tommy, his trousers restored, came down to tea he was warned not to go clamping about in his boots, because there was a gentleman in the parlor. Tommy fingered the sixpence in his pocket and said nothing; his mouth was, indeed, far too full for words.

That evening in the parched orchard behind the house Tommy came edging shyly toward the stranger as he lounged under the trees smoking a fat pipe.

"Hullo, young man!" was the greeting. "Come here and talk to me."

Tommy dumbly drew near.

"Got your trousers back, I see," said the stranger, genially.

Tommy admitted it with a grunt. The stranger nodded and took his pipe out of his mouth.

"Ever see a pig?" he asked.

Tommy grunted again.

"I see you have. You speak their language awfully well." The

stranger uttered a sound which Tommy recognized and smiled to hear. "That's what the pigs say," said the stranger. "Agreeable little boys who have recovered their trousers say 'Yes' or 'No' when their friends ask them questions. Don't they?"

"I dun'no'," said Tommy.

"Oh yes, you do. Because I've told you. Now what would you like to do?"

"I dun'no'."

"I can't tell you that you know, because I don't know myself. But I'll put it to you like this: If you can make up your mind to talk the language of agreeable little boys who have recovered their trousers, I am disposed to endure your company and even to assist you in any play you may have in hand. But I can't associate with a person who grunts at me. If you want to grunt, go and grunt at some one who likes it. I don't."

"I didn't go for to," Tommy urged.

"Handsomely admitted. I accept your apology. You don't know what you'd like to do, I say. Well, is there anything you'd like to *have?* I'm living the idle life, Tommy, and my hands are beginning to ache for want of something to do. I want to make something. Ever make anything?"

"I made a rabbit-hutch, onst," Tommy owned, "but the door warn't straight on her hinges. And I tried a kite – but it stuck to me and come to bits afore ever it was dry."

"Look here," said the stranger, sitting up, "what about a kite? I could make you a kite as big as a house or a fire-balloon. Would

you like that?"

Tommy began a grunt, pretended that it had been a cough, and turned that into, "Yes, please, sir."

"We must restrain Charles," said the stranger, turning to the large white dog, who sat with feet firmly planted, smiling a wide, pink smile, "or this kite will certainly stick to *him* and come to pieces afore *it's* dry. Where's the shop?"

"Down street," said Tommy. "I could pop down street in a minute for the paper and things."

"Sure you'd rather have a kite than anything else?"

Tommy hesitated, and then said of course he'd rather have a hairyplane, but he supposed the stranger couldn't.

To which the stranger startlingly replied, "Oh, couldn't I, my boy! Father got a horse and trap?" he went on. And from that moment the most wonderful four days of Tommy's life moved forward majestically without pause or let.

To drive into Eastbourne with the gentleman – rather slow the old horse was, but it was the best trap – to hold the reins outside important and unusual shops, including the Eastbourne Motor-Car Company and the telegraph-office at the station; to be taken to dinner at a fine hotel with flowers in all the windows, and real waiters dressed exactly like the gentlemen who sang at the school concert, white ties and all – or just like the butler at Mr. Ferney's who had the training-stables – and such things to eat as Tommy "never did."

The horse and trap were put up at Mr. Pettigrew's Livery

and Bait Stables, in itself an act of unheard-of daring and extravagance. And after dinner the stranger got a motor-car – a real private one – none of your red flags and mustn't ride on the front seat, where, in fact, he and the stranger did, with great dash and daring, actually ride. And they went to Pevensy and Hurstmonceau and Hastings, and the stranger told Tommy stories about the places, so that history was never quite itself again to Tommy. Then back to Eastbourne, to call again at the unusual shops, as well as at one of the more usual character, where the stranger bought toffee and buns and cake and peppermint creams; to get a parcel from the station, and so home round the feet of the downs in the pleasant-colored evening, with the dust white on the hedges, and the furze in flower, and the skylarks singing "fit to bu'st theirselves," as Tommy pointed out when the stranger called his attention to the little, dark, singing specks against the clear sky, the old white horse going at a spanking pace. No one would have believed he had it in him, compared to what he was in the morning; and drawing up very short and sharp in front of the porch – no driving into the yard and just calling for Robert – and father himself coming out to take the reins. Oh, that was a day!

To the stranger, also, whose name, it will surprise you little to learn, was Edward Basingstoke, the home-coming was not without charm. The day before he had been welcomed as a guest; now he was welcomed as a friend, one who had taken Tommy for an outing and spent money on him like water. Any one could

see that from the parcels the child had his arms full of.

Robert in the stable, hearing the return, and heartened by the unmistakable attitude of the family, loosened Charles from the taut chain at whose end he had choked all day, and sent him flying like a large white bullet into the bar, where his master was standing. Charles knocked over a table and three glasses, trod on the edge of a spittoon and upset it, and the landlord said it didn't matter! Could any reception have been more warmly welcoming?

It charmed Edward so much that he said, "When Tommy's face is washed, might he have tea with me to finish up the day?"

And this, too, happened. And after tea, when Charles had been partially calmed by five whole buns, eaten in five eager mouthfuls, they undid the parcels, and Tommy reveled in the tools and metals, the wood, the canvas, the dozen other things he knew neither the names nor the uses of. And when it was time to say good night and they had said it, Tommy wanted to say something else. He stood by the parlor door, shuffling his boots and looking with blue, adoring eyes at the stranger.

"I say," he said.

"Well, what *do* you say?"

"I say," was still all that Tommy said.

"Yes, I hear you do. But what?"

"I'm right-down glad you come here to stay, instead of going on to Wilmington, like what you might have," was the most Tommy could do. Then he added, after a fierce, brief struggle between affection and shyness: "I do take it very kind, sir – and

the peppermints, and all. Good night, sir."

It was the happiest day Edward had spent since he left Crewe.

And next day they began to make the aeroplane. I do not know how toy aeroplanes are made. There may be a hundred ways of making them. If there are, Mr. Basingstoke knew at least one of these ways, and it was quite a good way, too. The village carpenter and the village blacksmith each was visited – I know that – and a good deal of the work was done at the carpenter's bench. And at the end of the third day the toy was ready.

"We'll fly it in the morning," said Mr. Basingstoke. "Are you glad it's done? Sure you wouldn't have liked a kite better?"

"Not by long chalks," was Tommy's fervent answer.

The little aeroplane sat on the little stand the carpenter had made for it, shiny with varnish, white with canvas, glittering in all its metal mysteries.

"Jiminy!" said Tommy, awe-stricken at his own good fortune, "I didn't know anybody could be so clever as what you are."

Edward Basingstoke, as he went to bed, wondered whether, after all, he could spend his money to any better purpose than going about the country making aeroplanes to please little boys.

III
EDEN

WHEN you have made an aeroplane, the next thing is to make it fly. And however agreeable an admiring audience may be while one is fiddling with definite and concrete objects of wood, canvas, and metal, one is apt, for the flight itself – the great flight, the flight by which the aeroplane shall stand or fall – to desire solitude.

That was why Edward drew the yellow blind up and the dimity curtain aside and turned his bed round, so that the sun at its first rising should strike through his dreams and awaken him. The sun did exactly what it was expected to do, and Edward awoke saying "Bother" before he remembered that "Bother" was not at all what he meant. Then he got up and splashed gently, so as not to break the audible sleep of the people in the next room, stole down the creaking, twisted stairs in his tennis-shoes, soft-footed as a cat, drew the bolts of the back door, and slipped out, closing the door noiselessly behind him. He was careful to draw the bolt into its place again by means of a bit of fishing-line. You can do this quite easily with an old door that does not fit very closely – if you are careful to mark with chalk on the outside of the door, as Edward did, the exact place where the bolt is. Having thus secured the door against passing tramps or burglars, he went out

across the highroad, soft with thick, white dust, where the dew lay on hedge and grassy border, and the sun made diamonds of the dew. Charles, choking himself in the stable, grew faint with distance.

Beyond the village was a meadow suited to his needs. It was bordered on one side by a high red-brick wall, above whose moss-grown coping the rounded shapes of trees leaned. A wood edged it on two other sides, and in the front was a road.

Here he made his preparations, wound up his machine, and, after one or two false starts, got it going. He meant to fly it like a kite, and to this end he had tied one end of a ball of fine twine to the middle of its body. Now he raised it above his head and launched it. The little creature rose like a bird; the ball of string leaped and jumped between his feet, as he paid out the line; the whirring wings hung poised a second, at the level of the tree-tops, and then, caught by the wind, sailed straight toward the red wall, burrowed into the trees, and stopped. He ran toward the wall, winding up the string, and stood below, looking up. He could not see the winged loose thing. He tweaked the string and his tweak was met with uncompromising resistance. The aeroplane had stuck in a chestnut-tree, and hung there, buzzing.

Edward measured the wall with his eye. It was an old wall, of soft red brick, from which the mortar had fallen away. In its crannies moss grew, and ragged-robin and ground-ivy hung their delicate veil in the angles of its buttresses – little ferns and wall-flowers run to seed marked its courses, the yellow snapdragon

which English children call toad-flax flaunted its pure sulphur-colored plumes from the ledge below the coping. An architect would have said that the wall wanted pointing; a builder would have pointed it – an artist would have painted it. To an engineer in grief for a lost toy the wall presented itself as an obstacle to be climbed. He climbed it.

He thrust the string into his jacket pocket, and presently set hand and foot to the hold that the worn wall afforded. In half a minute he was astride the coping; next moment he had swung by his hands and let himself go on the wall's other side. It was a longer drop than he expected; it jarred him a little, and his hat tumbled off. As he picked this up he noticed that the wall on the inside had been newly pointed. The trees were a good thirty feet from the wall. There would be no getting back by the way he had come. He must find a gate. Meantime the little aeroplane's buzzing had grown faint and ceased. But the twine led him to the tree, as the silken clue led Queen Eleanor to the tower of Fair Rosamond. The next thing was to climb the tree and bring down the truant toy.

The park spread smooth and green before him – the green smoothness that comes only to English grass growing where grass has been these many years. Quiet trees dotted the smooth greenness – thickening about the house, whose many chimneys, red and twisted, rose smokeless above the clustered green. Nothing moved in all the park, where the sun drank the dew; birds stirred and twittered in the branches – that was all. The little

aeroplane had stopped its buzzing. Edward was moved to thank Fate that he had not brought Charles. Also he was glad that this trespass of his had happened so early. He would get down the aeroplane and quietly go out by the lodge gate. Even if locked, it would be climbable.

The chestnut-tree, however, had to be climbed first. It was easy enough, though the leaves baffled him a little, so that it was some time before he saw the desired gleam of metal and canvas among the dappled foliage. Also, it was not quite easy to get the thing down without injuring it, and one had to go slowly.

He lowered it, at last, by its string to the ground from the lowest branch, then moved along a little, hung by his hands, and dropped.

He picked up the toy and turned to go. "Oh!" he said, without meaning to. And, "I beg your pardon," without quite knowing what for.

Because, as he turned he came face to face with a vision, the last one would have expected to see in an English park at early day. A girl in a Burmese coat, red as poppies, with gold-embroidered hem a foot deep. Her dress was white. Her eyes were dark, her face palely bright, and behind her dark head a golden-green Japanese umbrella made a great ridged halo.

"I beg your pardon," said Edward again, and understood that it was because he was, after all, trespassing.

"I should think you did," said the vision, crossly. "What on earth do you mean by it? How did you get in?"

Edward, standing a little awkwardly with the aeroplane in his hands, looked toward the wall.

"I came over after this," he said. "I'm very sorry. I was flying the thing and it stuck in the tree. If you'll tell me the way to the lodge, I'll – I hope I didn't scare you."

"I couldn't think what it was," she answered, a little less crossly. "I saw the tree tossing about as if – as if it had gone mad."

"And you thought of dryads and hastened to the spot. And it was only an idiot and his aeroplane. I say – I *am* sorry – "

"You can't help not being a dryad," she said, and now she smiled, and her smile transformed her face as sunlight does a landscape. "What I really thought you were was a tramp. Only tramps never climb trees. I couldn't think how you got in here, though. Tramps never climb walls. They get in sometimes through the oak fence beyond the plantations."

"It was very intrepid of you to face a tramp," he said.

"Oh, I love tramps," she said; "they're always quite nice to you if you don't bully them or patronize them. There were two jolly ones last week, and I talked to them, and they made tea out in the road, you know, and gave me a cup over the fence. It *was* nasty." She shuddered a little. "But I liked it awfully, all the same," she added. "I wish I were a tramp."

"It's not a bad life," said he.

"It's *the* life," she said, enthusiastically. "No ties, no responsibilities – no nasty furniture and hateful ornaments – you just go where you like and do what you like; and when you don't

like where you are, you go somewhere else; and when you don't like what you're doing, you needn't go on doing it."

"Those are very irresponsible sentiments – for a lady."

"I know. That's why I think it's so dull being a woman. Men can do whatever they want to."

"Only if they haven't their living to earn," said Edward, not quite so much to himself as he would have liked.

There was a little pause, and then, still less himself, he blundered into, "I say, it is jolly of you to talk to me like this."

She froze at once. "I forgot," she said, "that we had not been introduced. Thank you for reminding me."

Edward's better self was now wholly lost, and what was left of him could find nothing better to answer than, "Oh, I say!"

"What I ought to have said," she went on, her face a mask of cold politeness, "is that you can't possibly get out by the lodge. There are fierce dogs. And the lodge-keepers are worse than the dogs. If you will follow me – at a distance, for fear I should begin to talk to you again – I'll show you where the gardener's ladder is, and you can put it up against the wall and get out that way."

"Couldn't I get out where the tramps get in?" he asked, humbly. "I don't like to trouble you."

"Not from here. We should have to pass close by the house."

The "we" gave him courage. "I say – do forgive me," he said.

"There's nothing to forgive," said she.

"Oh, but do," he said, "if you'd only see it! It was just because it was so wonderful and splendid to have met you like this.. and

to have you talk to me as you do to the other tramps."

"You're not a tramp," she said, "and I ought not to have forgotten it."

"But I am," said he, "it's just what I really and truly am."

"Come and get the ladder," said she, and moved toward the wall.

"Not unless you forgive me. I won't," he added, plucking up a little spirit, "be indebted for ladders to people who won't forgive a man because he speaks the truth clumsily."

"Come," she said, looking back over her shoulder.

"No," he said, obstinately, not moving. "Not unless you forgive me."

"It can't possibly matter to you whether I forgive you or not," she turned to say it. And as she spoke there came to Edward quite suddenly and quite unmistakably the knowledge that it did matter. Sometimes glimpses do thus suddenly and strangely come to us – and that by some magic inner light that is not reason we know things that by the light of reason we could never know.

"Look here," he said. "I'll go after that ladder in a minute. But first I've got something to say to you. Don't be angry, because I've got to say it. Do you know that just now – just before I said that stupid thing that offended you – you were talking to me as though you'd known me all your life?"

"You needn't rub it in," she said.

"Do you know why that is? It's because you *are* going to know me all your life. I'm perfectly certain of it. Somehow or other, it's

true. We're going to be friends. I sha'n't need to say again how jolly it is of you to talk to me. We shall take all that as a matter of course. People aren't pitchforked into meetings like this for nothing. I'm glad I said that. I'm glad you were angry with me for saying it. If you hadn't I might just have gone away and not known till I got outside – and then it would have been a deuce and all of a business to get hold of you again. But now I know. And you know, too. When shall I see you again? Never mind about forgiving me. Just tell me when I shall see you again. And then I'll go."

"You must be mad," was all she could find to say. She had furled her sunshade and was smoothing its bamboo ribs with pink fingers.

"You'll be able to find out whether I'm mad, you know, when you see me again. As a matter of fact – which seems maddest, when you meet some one you want to talk to, to go away without talking or to insist on talk and more talk? And you can't say you didn't want to talk to me, because you know you did. Look here, meet me to-morrow morning again – will you?"

"Certainly not."

"You'll be sorry if you don't. We're like two travelers who have collected all sorts of wonderful things in foreign countries. We long to show each other our collections – all the things we've thought and dreamed. If we'd been what you call introduced, perhaps we shouldn't have found this out. But as it is, we know it."

"Speak for yourself," she said.

"Thank you," he said, seriously. "I will. Will you sit down for ten minutes? This tree-root was made for you to sit down on for ten minutes, and I will speak for myself."

"I can't," she said, and her voice – there was hurry in it, and indecision, but the ice had gone. "You must come at once for that ladder. It's getting more dangerous every moment. If any one saw you here there'd be an awful row."

"For you?"

"Yes, for me. Come on."

He followed her along the wall under the chestnuts. There was no more spoken words till they came to the ladder.

Then, "Right," he said. "Thank you. Good-by." And set the ladder against the wall.

"Good-by," said she. "I'll hand the aeroplane up to you?"

"Stand clear," he said, half-way up the ladder. "I'll give it a sideways tip from the top – it'll fall into its place. It's too heavy for you to lift. Good-by."

He had reached the top of the wall. She stood below, looking up at him.

"There won't be any row now?"

"No. It's quite safe."

"Then have you nothing to say?"

"Nothing. Yes, I have. I will come to-morrow. You'll misunderstand everything if I don't."

"Thank you," he said.

She came up the ladder, two steps, then handed him his toy. Then the ladder fell with a soft thud among the moss and earth and dead leaves; his head showed a moment above the wall, then vanished.

He went thoughtfully through the dewy grass, along the road, and back to his inn.

Tommy met him by the horse-trough. "You been flying it?" he asked, breathlessly.

"Yes. She went like a bird."

"How far did she go?" Tommy asked.

"I don't quite know," said Edward, quite truly, "how far she went. I shall know better to-morrow."

IV
THE SOUTH DOWNS

THE day was long. Though the aeroplane flew to admiration, though Tommy adored him and all his works, though the skylarks sang, and the downs were drenched in sunshine, Edward Basingstoke admitted to himself, before half its length was known to him, that the day was long.

He climbed the cliff above Cuckmere and sat in the sunshine there, where the gulls flashed white wings and screamed like babies; he watched the tide, milk-white with the fallen chalk of England's edge, come sousing in over the brown, seaweed-covered rocks; he felt the crisp warmth of the dry turf under his hand, and smelt the sweet smell of the thyme and the furze and the sea, and it was all good. But it was long. And, for the first time in his life, being alone was lonely.

And for the second time since the day when Charles, bounding at him from among the clean straw of an Oxford stable, had bounded into his affections, he had left that strenuous dog behind.

He got out his road map and spread it in the sun – with stones at the corners to cheat the wind that, on those Downs, never sleeps – and tried to believe that he was planning his itinerary, and even to pretend to himself that he should start to-morrow and

walk to Lewes. But instead his eyes followed the map's indication of the road to that meadow where the red wall was, and presently he found that he was no longer looking at the map, but at the book of memory, and most at the pictures painted there only that morning. Already it seemed a very long time ago.

"I am afraid," said Mr. Basingstoke, alone at the cliff's edge, "that this time it really is *it*. It's different from what I thought. It's confoundedly unsettling."

Like all healthy young men, he had always desired and intended to fall in love; he had even courted the experience, and honestly tried to lose his heart, but with a singular lack of success. In the girls he had met he had found gaiety, good looks, and a certain vague and general attractiveness – the common attribute of youth and girlhood – but nothing that even began to transfigure the world as his poets taught him that love should transfigure it. The little, trivial emotions which he had found in pressing hands and gazing into eyes had never lured him further than the gaze and the hand-clasp. Yet he had thought himself to be in love more than once.

"Or perhaps this isn't the real thing, either," he tried to reassure himself. "How could it be?"

Then he explained to himself, as he had often explained to Vernon, that love at first sight was impossible. Love, he had held and proclaimed, was not the result of the mere attraction exercised by beauty – it was the response of mind to mind, the admiration of character and qualities – the satisfaction of one's

nature by the mental and moral attributes of the beloved. That was not exactly how he had put it, but that was what he had meant. And now – he had seen a girl once, for ten minutes, and already he could think of nothing else. Even if he thought of something else he could perceive the thought of her behind those other thoughts, waiting, alluring, and sure of itself, to fill his mind the moment he let it in.

"Idiot," he said at last, got up from the turf, and pocketed the map, "to-morrow she'll be quite ordinary and just like any other girl. You go for a long walk, young-fellow-my-lad, and think out a water-mill for Tommy."

This had, indeed, been more than half promised. Mr. Basingstoke was one of those persons whom their friends call thorough; their enemies say that they carry everything too far. If he did a thing at all, he liked to do it thoroughly. If he wrote a duty-letter to an aunt, he wrote a long one, and made it amusing. As often as not he would illustrate it with little pictures. If he gave a shilling to a beggar he would immediately add tobacco and agreeable conversation. One of his first acts, on coming into his inheritance, had been to pension his old nurse, who was poor and a widow with far too many children – too many, because she was a widow and poor and had to go out to work instead of looking after her family, as she wanted to do. Any one else would have written and told her she was to have two pounds a week as long as she lived. Edward sent her a large box of hot-house flowers – her birthday happening to occur at about

that date – the most expensive and beautiful flowers he could find, anonymously. Then he sent her a fat hamper bursting with excellent things to eat and drink – and a box of toys and clothes for the children. The lady who "served" him with the clothes was amused at his choice – but approved it. And in the end he told his solicitors – smiling to himself at the novel possession – to write and tell the woman that an old employer had secured her an annuity. Later he went down to see her, to find her incredibly happy and prosperous, and to hear the wonderful and mysterious tale. So now, in the case of Tommy, most people would have thought an aeroplane and a motor-ride as much as any little boy could expect. But Mr. Basingstoke liked to give people much more than they could expect. It was not enough to give them enough. He liked to give a feast.

That evening after tea, Tommy breathing hard on the back of his neck, he sketched the water-wheel with the highest degree of precision and a superfluous wealth of detail. But the thought was with him through it all.

Next morning he went to the trysting-place, through the fresh, sweet morning. He climbed the wall, sat down on the log, and waited. He waited an hour, and she did not come. It says a good deal for his tenacity of purpose that when he went home he began at once on the water-wheel.

In the afternoon he took Charles out for a walk. Charles chased and killed a hen, and was butted by a goat, before they reached the end of the street; knocked a leg of mutton off the

block at the butcher's in the next village; bit the rural police to the very undershirt, and also to the tune of ten compensating shillings; and was run over by a bicycle, which twisted its pedal in the consequent fall, and grazed its rider's hands and trousers knees. After each adventure Charles was firmly punished, but, though chastised, he was not chastened, and when they met a dog-cart coming slowly down a hill he was quite ready to run in front of it, barking and leaping at the horse's nose. The horse, which appeared to Charles's master to be a thoroughbred, shied. There was a whirl of dust and hoofs and brown flank, a cry from the driver – another cry, a fierce bark from Charles, ending in a howl of agony – the next instant the horse had bolted and Edward was left in the dusty road, Charles writhing in the dust, and the dog-cart almost out of sight.

"Charles, old man – Charles, lie still, can't you? Let me see if you're hurt."

He stooped, and as he stooped Charles did lie still.

His master lifted the heavy, muscular body that had been so full of life and energy. It lay limp and lifeless, head and hind-quarters drooping over his arm like a wet shawl.

Basingstoke sat down on the roadside with the dog across his knees. For him the light of life was out. Men do not cry, of course, as women do when their dogs die, but he could not see very clearly. Presently he found himself face to face with that question, always so disconcerting, even to criminals – what to do with the body. He was miles from his inn, and Charles was no

light weight. He could not leave the dog in the road. His friend must have decent burial. There was nothing for it but to wait till some cart should come by and then to ask for a lift.

So he sat there, thinking such thoughts as men do think in adversity. After a calamity, when the first excitement of horror dies down, one always says, "How different everything was yesterday!" and Mr. Basingstoke said what we all say. Yesterday Charles was alive and well, and his master had not taken him out because he wanted to be at leisure to think – he realized that now – about the girl whom he was to have met to-day. And he had not met the girl. And Charles was dead.

"I wish I hadn't left you at home yesterday, old boy," said Mr. Basingstoke.

And then came the sound of hoofs, and he prepared to stop the vehicle, whatever it was, and beg for a lift for himself and what he carried. But when the wheels came near and he saw that it was the very cart that had run over Charles he sat down again and kept his eyes on the ground. It wasn't their fault, of course, but still..

The cart stopped and some one was saying: "I hope the dog isn't much hurt." A hard, cold voice it was.

Edward got out his hand from under Charles to take his hat off, and said: "My dog is dead."

"I am extremely sorry, but it was the dog's fault," said the voice, aggressively.

"Yes," said Edward.

"There's nothing to be done," said the voice. "It was nearly a nasty accident for us."

"I apologize for my dog's conduct," said Edward, formally.

And then came another voice, "But, Aunt Loo, can't we *do* anything?"

Of course you will have known all along whose voice that would be. Edward was less discerning. He had been far too much occupied with Charles and the horse to do more than realize that the two people in the cart were women – and now when he heard again the voice that had talked to him yesterday in the freshness of the morning, the shock sent his blood surging. He looked up – face, neck, ears were burning. Men do not blush, but if they did you would have said that Mr. Basingstoke blushed in that hour.

He looked up. Holding the reins was a hard, angular woman of fifty, the sort that plays golf and billiards and is perfectly competent with horses. Beside her sat the girl, and under her white hat the crimson of her face matched his own. The distress he felt at this unpropitious coincidence deepened his color. Hers deepened, too.

"You can't do anything, thank you," he said, just a moment too late. For his pause had given the aunt time to look from one to the other.

"Oh!" she said, shortly.

The girl spoke, also just too late.

"At least, let us take the poor, dear dog home for you," she said.

"By all means," said the aunt, with an air of finality. "Where shall we leave it?"

"I am at the Five Bells, in Jevington," said Edward, and was thankful to feel his ears a shade less fiery.

"I see," said the aunt, with hideous significance. "Put it in at the back, will you?"

She spoke as though Charles were a purchase she had just made and Mr. Basingstoke the shopman.

He would have liked to refuse, but how dear of her to suggest it. "Thank you," he said, and came through the dust to the back of the cart.

Almost before he had replaced the second pin the cart moved, and he was left alone in the white road.

The way home was long and dismal – its only incident the finding of a little white handkerchief in the dust about a mile from the scene of the tragedy. It was softly scented. Of course it might be Aunt Loo's handkerchief, but he preferred to think that it was Hers. He shook the dust from it and put it in his pocket. As he came down the village street he remembered how, only yesterday, he had heard, just here by the saddler's, that strangled, choking bark which betokened Charles's recognition of his master's approach. Well, there would be no such barking welcome for him now.

Some other dog was choking and barking, though, and in that very stable where Charles had choked and barked. And Charles's body would have been put in the stable, no doubt. He would go

round and see. He went round, opened the stable door, and next moment was struck full in the chest by what seemed to be a heavy missive hurled with tremendous force. It was Charles, who had leaped from the end of his chain to greet his master – Charles, alive and almost idiotic in his transports of uncouth affection. Edward felt the dog all over – to see if any bones were broken. Charles never winced. There was not a cut or a bruise on him! The two sat on the straw embracing for quite a long time.

"Yes, sir, seems quite himself, don't he?" said Robert. "Miss Davenant she brought him. Told me to tell you the dog come to himself quite sudden on the cart. Must have fainted, young miss said, and when he come to it was all she could do to hold him down. He seems to have come to quite sudden and all wild-like among their legs in the bottom of the cart till miss dragged him out – nearly upset the old lady right out of the cart, coming up sudden under her knees. Awful nasty she was about it. Said the dog must have been shamming. Thank you, sir. I'll drink your health and the dog's."

"Shamming, indeed!" said Edward to himself, and resented the cruel and silly aspersion. Yet, stay, was it really quite impossible that Charles, fearing that the same punishment might visit this last exploit as had followed his earlier outrages, had really shammed, to disarm a doting master? Edward put away the thought. It was impossible.

The main thing was that Charles was alive. But, after all, *was* that the main thing? Now that the dog was alive it suddenly

ceased to be. The main thing was that he had not seen her that morning and that he must, somehow, see her again.

Somehow. But how? This gave him food for thought.

He went into his parlor and sat down – to think. But, try as he could, there seemed no way. Of course he could go next morning – of course he would go next morning – and every morning for a week. But if she hadn't come to-day, why should she come to-morrow or the next day, or the day after that?

Or the handkerchief. Wouldn't it be natural that he should call to return it and to thank them for taking care of the lifeless Charles, and apologize for that thoughtless animal's inconvenient and sudden change of attitude? Yes, that would have been natural if the girl had not blushed and if he had not turned scarlet.

He took out the handkerchief and spread it on the table – what silly little things girls' handkerchiefs were! Then he looked at it more closely. Then he took it to the window, stretched it tightly, and looked more closely than ever. Yes, there was something on it, something intended – not just the marks of the road. There were letters – pencil letters an inch or more long, very rough and straggling, but quite unmistakable —*Ce soir 12 heures.* At least, it might be 13, but, then, she wasn't an Italian.

The light of life blazed up, and the world suddenly became beautiful again. She had not forgotten – she had wished to come to meet him – something had prevented her coming in the morning. But to-night she would come. Twelve o'clock! A strange hour to choose. Bah! who was he to cavil at the hour she

chose to set? How sweet and soft the handkerchief was!

V
LA MANCHE

THE bolts of the back door did not creak at all when, at twenty minutes to twelve, Edward Basingstoke let himself out. Tommy always saw to the bolts, for his own purposes, with a feather and a little salad oil.

The night was sweet and dark under the trees and in among the houses. In the village no lamp gleamed at any window. Beyond the village, the starshine and dew lent a gray shimmer to field and hedge, and the road lay before him like a pale ribbon. He crossed the meadow, climbed the wall, and dropped. The earth sounded dully under his feet, and twigs crackled as he moved. There was no other sound. She was not there. He dared not light a match to see his watch's face by. Perhaps he was early. Well, he could wait. He waited. He waited and waited and waited. He listened till his ears were full of the soft rustlings and movements which go to make up the silence of country night. He strained his eyes to see some movement in the gray park dotted with black trees. But all was still. It was very dark under the trees. And through all his listening he thought, thought. Did it do to trust to impulses – to instincts? Did it do, rather, to disregard them? A gipsy woman had said to him once, "Your first thoughts are straight – give yourself time to think twice and you'll think wrong." What he

had felt that morning while he waited, vainly, for her to come had taught him that, fool as he might be for his pains, the feeling that possessed him was more like the love poets talked of than he would have believed any feeling of his could be. And, after all, love at first sight *was* possible – was it not the theme of half the romances in the world? He felt that at this, their second meeting, he must know whether he meant to advance or to retreat. Always when he had trusted his impulse his choice had been a wise one. But was a choice necessary now? His instincts told him that it was. This midnight meeting – planned by her and not by him – it was a meeting for "good-by." No girl would make an assignation at that hour just to tell a man that she intended to meet him again the next day. So he must know whether he meant to permit himself to be said good-by to. And he knew that he did not.

The day had been long, but it seemed to him that already the night had been longer than the day. Could he have mistaken the hour? No, it was certainly twelve – or thirteen. Then his heart leaped up. If it *had* been thirteen, that meant one o'clock. Perhaps it was not one yet. But he felt that he knew it to be at least three. Yet if it were three there would be the diffused faint illumination of dawn growing, growing. And there was no light at all but the changeless light of the stars. Again and again he thought he saw her, thought he heard her. And again and again only silence and solitude came to meet his thoughts.

When at last she did come he saw her very far off, and heard the rustle of her dress even before he saw her.

He would not go to meet her across the starlit space; that would be very dangerous. He stood where he was till she came into the shadow. Then he went toward her and said:

"At last!"

She drew a long breath. "Oh, I was so afraid you wouldn't come!"

"I was here at twelve," he said.

"So you got the handkerchief. I put thirteen because I thought if I put one – it was so difficult to write – and, of course, I couldn't look at it to see if it was readable. I wrote it under the driving-rug. Oh, suppose you hadn't got it!"

"I can't suppose it. What should I have done if I hadn't?"

"Oh," she said, "don't! Please don't. I thought you'd understand it was serious. I shouldn't have asked you to come in the middle of the night to talk nonsense as if we were at a dance."

"What's serious?" he said.

She said, "Everything," and her voice trembled.

He took her arm, and felt that she herself was trembling.

"Come and sit down," he said, comfortably, as one might speak to a child in trouble. "Come and sit down and tell me all about it."

They sat down on the log, and he pulled the dark cloak she wore more closely round her.

"Now," he said, "what's happened? Why didn't you come this morning?"

"I stayed too long the first time," she answered, "and met Aunt

Loo as I went in. She asked me where I'd been. I said I'd been out to swim in the lake. That was quite true. That *was* why I had gone out. I've often done it. But, of course, my hair wasn't wet. She didn't say anything. But this morning when I came down she was sitting in the hall, waiting for me. She asked me if I was going bathing again, and I said, No, I was going to walk in the park. So she said, 'Charming idea. I'll come, too.'"

"And what did you say?"

"I said, 'Do,' of course. But it was awful. I was so afraid of her seeing you."

"Suppose she *had* chosen to walk that way."

"Yes, of course I thought of that. So *I* led the way and walked straight toward you. Then she thought whoever I was going to meet must be the other way. So she insisted on going the other way. I knew she would."

"That was subtle of you."

"No; it's only that she's stupid. It wouldn't have taken any one else in."

"So she was baffled."

"Yes, but she has instincts, though she's so stupid. She knew there was something up. And then when we met you – oh, I *am* so glad the dog's all right – when we met you I knew she thought you'd something to do with my being out so early in the morning, and then you blushed."

"If I did," he said, "I wasn't the only one."

"Oh, I know," she said, "but I don't suppose I should have if

you hadn't. Though unjust suspicions like that are enough to make anybody blush. Yes, they were unjust because you had nothing to do with my going out the first time – why, I didn't even know there *was* a you. And now all the fat's in the fire, and she's taking me to Ireland or Scotland to-morrow – she won't say which. And I couldn't bear to go and have you think I'd made an appointment and not kept it. It's so unbusiness-like to break appointments," she said.

"Does she suppose, then, that we – that I am – that you have – that I should – ?"

"I don't know what she supposes. At least I do. But it's too silly. Now I've explained everything. Good-by. I'm glad you found the handkerchief – and I'm *awfully* glad about Charles."

"I didn't know you knew his name."

"The stableman said it when the dog ran between his knees and nearly knocked him down. It's a darling dog – but isn't it strong! Good-by!" She held out her hand. "Good-by," she said, again.

"No," said he, and held the hand.

There was a little pause.

"Say good-by," she said. "Indeed I must go."

"Why?" he asked, releasing the hand.

"I've said everything there was to say – I mean, what I came to say."

"There's a very great deal that you haven't told me. I don't understand. Who does your aunt think I am?"

"I would rather not tell you; you'd only laugh."

"But please tell me. I shouldn't."

A troubled silence answered him.

"Look here," he said, "I know there's a lot you haven't told me. Do tell me, and let me help you, if I can. You're worried and unhappy. I can hear it in your voice. Tell me. Things look different when you've put them into words. First of all, tell me who your aunt thought I was."

She sat down again with the air of definite decision. "Very well," she said, "if you will have it, she thought you were the piano-tuner. Why don't you laugh?"

"I'm not amused yet," he said. "What piano-tuner? And why should he – why should you – "

"The piano-tuner is a fence," she said, "and she thinks you're it."

"I don't understand a word you're saying."

"I don't care," she said, desperately. "I'll tell you the whole silly story and you can laugh, if you like. I shan't be offended. Last autumn father brought a man to lunch, quite a nice man – sensible, middle-aged, very well off – and next day he told me the man had proposed for me, and I'd better take him. He'd accepted for me."

"Good heavens!" said Edward, "I thought it was only in the *Family Herald* that such fathers existed."

"Laugh as much as you like," said she; "it's true, for all that. You see, I'd refused several before that. It's rather important for

me to marry well – my father's not rich, and – "

"I see. Well?"

"Well, I wasn't going to. And when it came to this luncheon man I told you about there was a scene, and my father said was there any one else, and I said no; but he went on so frightfully and wouldn't believe me. So at last I told him."

"Told him what?"

"That there was some one."

"Yes?" His voice was only more gentle for the sudden sharp stab of disappointment which told him what hope it was that he had nursed.

"And then, of course, I wouldn't say who it was. And he sent for my aunts. Aunt Enid's worse than Aunt Loo. And they bothered and bothered. And at last I said it was the piano-tuner. I don't know how I could have. Father turned him off, of course, poor wretch, and they brought me down here to come to my senses. Aunt Loo never saw the miserable piano-tuner, and she thinks you're him. So now you know. And that's why they're taking me away from here. They think the piano-tuner is pursuing me. I believe Aunt Loo thinks you trained the dog to bark at horses so as to get a chance to speak to me."

"Do you care much for your father?" he asked, "or for any of them?"

"It's a horrid thing to say," she answered, "but I don't. The only one I care for's Aunt Alice – she's an invalid and a darling. Father thinks about nothing but bridge and races, and Aunt Loo's all golf

and horses, and Aunt Enid's a social reformer. I hate them all. And I've never been anywhere or seen anything. I'm not allowed to write to any one. And they don't have any one here at all, and I'm not to see a single soul till I've come to my senses, as they call it. And that's why I was so glad to talk to you yesterday."

"I see," he said, very kindly. "Now what can I do for you? Where's the other man? Can't I post a letter to him or something? Why doesn't he come and rescue you?"

"What other man?" she asked.

"The man you're fond of. The man whose name you wouldn't tell them."

"Oh," she said, lightly, and just as though it didn't matter. "There isn't any other man."

"There isn't?" he echoed, joyously.

"No, of course not. I just made him up – and then I called him the piano-tuner."

"Then," he said, "forgive me for asking, but I must be quite sure – you don't care for any man at all?"

"Of course I don't," she answered, resentfully, "I shouldn't go about caring about any one who didn't care for me – and if any one cared for me and I cared for him, of course we should run away with each other at once."

"I see," said Mr. Basingstoke, slowly and distinctly. "Then if there isn't any one else I suggest that you run away with me."

It was fully half a minute before she spoke. Then she said: "I don't blame you. I deserve it for asking you to meet me and

coming out like this. But I thought you were different."

"Deserve what?"

"To be insulted and humiliated. To be made a jest of."

"It seems to me that my offer is no more insulting or humiliating than any of your other offers. I like you very much. I think you like me. And I believe we should suit each other very well. Don't be angry. I'm perfectly serious. Don't speak for a minute. Listen. I've just come into some money, and I'm going about the country, seeing places and people. I'm just a tramp, as I told you. Come and be a tramp, too. We'll go anywhere you like. We'll take the map and you shall put your finger on any place you think you'd like to see, and we'll go straight off to it, by rail or motor, or in a cart, or a caravan, if you'd like it. Caravans must be charming. To go wherever you like, stop when you like – go on when you like. Come with me. I don't believe you'd ever regret it. And I know I never should."

"I believe you're serious," she said, half incredulously.

"Of course I am. It's a way out of all your troubles."

"I couldn't," she said, earnestly, "marry any one I wasn't very fond of. And one can't be fond of a person one's only seen twice."

"Can't you?" he said, a little sadly.

"No," she answered. "I think it's very fine of you to offer me this – just to get me out of a bother. And I'm sorry I thought you were being horrid. I'll tell you something. I've always thought that even if I cared very much for some one I should be almost afraid to marry him unless I knew him very, very well. Girls do make

such frightful mistakes. You ought to see a man every day for a year, and then, perhaps, you'd know if you could really bear to live with him all your life."

Instead of answering her directly, he said: "You would love the life in the caravan. Think of the camp – making a fire of sticks and cooking your supper under the stars, and the great moonlit nights, and sleeping in pine woods and waking in the dawn and curling yourself up in your blanket and going to sleep again till I shouted out that the fire was alight and breakfast nearly ready."

"I wish I could come with you without having to be married."

"Come, then," he said. "Come on any terms. I'll take you as a sister if I'm not to take you as a wife."

"Do you mean it? Really?" she said. "Oh, why shouldn't I? I believe you would take me – and I should be perfectly free then. I've got a little money of my own that my godmother left me. I was twenty-one the other day. I don't get it, of course. My father says it costs that to keep me. But if I were to run away he would have to give it to me, wouldn't he? And then I could pay you back what you spent on me. Oh, I wish I could. Will you really take me?"

But he had had time to think. "No," he said, "on reflection, I don't think I will."

But she did not hear him, for as he spoke she spoke, too. "Hush!" she said. "Look – look there."

Across the park, near the house, lights were moving.

"They're looking for me," she gasped. "They've found out that

I'm away. Oh, what shall I do? Aunt Loo will never be decent to me again. What *shall* I do?"

"Come with me," he said, strongly. "I'll take care of you. Come."

He took her hand. "I swear by God," he said, "that everything shall be as you choose. Only come now – come away from these people. You're twenty-one. You're your own mistress. Let me help you to get free from all this stuffy, stupid tyranny."

"You won't make me marry you?" she asked.

"I can't make you do anything," he said. "But if you're coming, it must be now."

"Come, then," she said, making for the ladder.

VI
CROW'S NEST

HE had brought a ball of string in his pocket, this time, and he was glad to know he could lower the ladder by it – for the thud of a falling ladder would sound far in the night stillness. From the top of the wall he held the ladder while she mounted.

"Sit here a moment," he said, "while I get rid of the ladder." He lowered it gently, drew the string up, leaped to the ground outside the wall, and held up his hands to her.

"Jump," he whispered. "I'll catch you."

But even as he spoke she had turned and was hanging by her hands. He let her do it her own way. She dropped expertly, landing with a little rebound. He was glad he had not tried to catch her. It would have been a poor beginning to their comradeship if he had, at the very outset, shown doubts of her competence to do anything she set out to do.

They stood under the wall very near together.

"What are you going to do?" she said.

"I must get a car and take you away. Are you afraid to be left alone for a couple of hours?"

"I – I don't think so," she said. "But where? Did you notice the lights as you got over the wall?"

"Yes; they were still near the house."

The two were walking side by side along the road now.

"If you were any ordinary girl I should be afraid to leave you to think things over – for fear you should think you'd been rash or silly or something – and worry yourself about all sorts of nonsense, and perhaps end in bolting back to your hutch before I could come back to you. But since it's you – let's cut across the downs here – we'll keep close to the edge of the wood."

Their feet now trod the soft grass.

"How sensible of you to wear a dark cloak," he said.

"Yes," she said, "a really romantic young lady in distress would have come in white muslin and blue ribbons, wouldn't she?"

He glowed to the courage that let her jest at such a moment.

"Where am I to wait?" she asked.

"There's an old farm-house not far away," he said. "If you don't mind waiting there. Could you?"

"Who lives there?"

"Nobody. I happen to have the key. I was looking at it yesterday. It's not furnished, but I noticed some straw and packing-cases. I could rig you up some sort of lounge, but don't do it if you're afraid. If you're afraid to be left to yourself we'll walk together to Eastbourne. But if we do we're much more likely to be caught."

"I'm not in the least afraid. Why should I be?" she said, and they toiled up the hill among the furze bushes in the still starlight.

"What they'll do," she said, presently, "when they're sure I'm not in the park, is to go down to your inn and see if you're there."

"Yes," he said, "I'm counting on that. That's why I said two or three hours. You see, I must be there when they do come, and the minute they're gone I'll go for the motor. Look here – I've got some chocolate that I got for a kiddy to-day; luckily, I forgot to give it to him; and here are some matches, only don't strike them if you can help it. Now, stick to it."

They went on in silence; half-way up the hill he took her arm to help her. Then, over the crest of the hill, in a hollow of the downs there was the dark-spread blot of house and farm buildings. They went down the road. Nothing stirred – only as they neared the farm-yard a horse in the stable rattled his halter against the manger and they heard his hoofs moving on the cobbled floor of his stall. They stood listening. No, all was still.

"Give me your hand," he said, and led her round to the side of the house. The key grated a little as he turned it in the lock. He threw back the door.

"This is the kitchen," he said. "Stand just inside and I'll make a nest for you. I know exactly where to lay my hands on the straw."

There was rustling in the darkness and a sound of boards grating on bricks. She stood at the door and waited.

"Ready," he said.

"They'll find me," she said. "We shall never get away."

"Trust me for that," said he.

"I must have been mad to come," he heard through the darkness.

"We're all mad once in our lives," he said, cheerfully. "Now

roll yourself in your cloak. Give me your hands – so." He led her to the straw nest he had made, and lowered her to it.

"Do you wish you hadn't come?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said.

"I hope to Heaven I haven't misjudged you," he said, with the first trace of anxiety she had yet heard in his voice. "If you should be the kind of girl who's afraid of the dark – "

The straw rustled as she curled herself more comfortably in her nest.

"I'm not afraid," she said.

"Look here," said he, "here's my match-box, but don't strike a light among the straw. The door into the house is locked and the key's on this side of the door. Can you come to the back door and lock it after me, and then find your way back to your nest?"

"Yes," she said, and felt her way past the big copper to the door.

"Sure you're not frightened?"

"Quite," said she.

"Then I'll go," said he, and went.

She locked the door and crept back to the straw. He waited till its crackling told him that she had found her way back to her couch. Then he started for Jevington.

And as he went he told himself that she was right. She had been mad to come, and he had been mad to let her come. But there was no going back now.

There was no looking back, even. From the brow of the

hill the road was down-hill all the way, and he ran, his rubber shoes patting almost noiselessly in the dust. At his inn the bolt yielded to his knife-point's pressure, the well-oiled lock let him in without a murmur, the stairs hardly creaked more than stairs can creak in their dark solitudes when we lie awake and listen to them and wonder… The night was as silent as a thought, and when at last the silence was shattered by the clatter of hoofs and the jangle of harness, Mr. Basingstoke's head turned a little on his pillow, not restlessly.

He heard the clanging bell echo in the flagged passage; heard through the plaster walls the heavy awakening of his host, the scrape of a match, the hasty, blundering toilet; heard the big bar dropped from the front door; voices – the groom's voice, the host's voice, the aunt's voice.

Then heavy steps on the stairs and a knock at his door.

"Very sorry to disturb you, sir," came the muffled tones through the door, almost cringingly apologetic, "but could you get up, sir, just for a minute? Miss Davenant from the Hall wants a word with you – about your dawg, sir, as I understand. If you could oblige, sir – very inconvenient, I know, sir, but the Hall is very highly thought of in the village, sir."

"What on earth – ?" said Mr. Basingstoke, very loudly, and got out of bed. "I'll dress and come down," he said.

He did dress, to the accompaniment of voices below – replaced, that is, the collar, tie, and boots he had taken off – and then he began to pack, his mind busy with the phrases in which he

would explain that a house in which these nocturnal disturbances occurred was not fit for the sojourning of… No, hang it all, that would not be fair to the landlord – he must find some other tale.

When he had kept the lady waiting as long as he thought a man might have kept her who had really a toilet to make, he went slowly down. Voices sounded in the parlor, and a slab of light from its door lay across the sanded passage.

He went in; the landlord went out, closing the door almost too discreetly.

Mr. Basingstoke and the aunt looked at each other. She was very upright and wore brown gloves and a brown, boat-shaped hat with an aggressive quill.

"You *are* here, then?" she said.

"Where else, madam?" said Mr. Basingstoke.

"I should like you," said the aunt, deliberately, "to be somewhere else within the next hour. I will make it worth your while."

"Thank you," Edward murmured.

"I think I ought to tell you," said she, "that I saw through that business of the dog. He was well trained, I admit. But I can't have my niece annoyed in this way."

"The lady must certainly not be annoyed," said Edward, with feeling.

"I came to-night to see if you were here.."

"It is an unusual hour for a call," said Edward, "but I am proportionally honored."

" – to see if you were here, and, if you were, to tell you that my niece is not."

Edward cast a puzzled eye around the crowded parlor. "No," he said. "No."

"I mean," Miss Davenant went on, "that my niece has left this neighborhood and will not return while you are here; so you are wasting your time and trouble."

"*I* see," said Edward, helpfully.

"You will gain nothing by this attitude," said Miss Davenant. "If you will consent to leave Jevington to-night I will give you twenty pounds."

"Twenty pounds!" he repeated, softly.

"Yes, twenty pounds, on condition that you promise not to molest this defenseless girl."

"Put up your money, madam," said Edward Basingstoke, with a noble gesture copied from the best theatrical models, "and dry your eyes. Never shall it be said that Edward Basingstoke was deaf to the voice of a lady in distress. Lay your commands on me, and be assured that, for me, to hear is to obey."

"You are very impertinent, young man," Miss Davenant told him, "and you won't do yourself any good by talking like a book. Clear out of this to-night, and I'll give you twenty pounds. Stay, and take the consequences."

"Meaning – ?"

"Well, stay if you like. You won't see her. She won't return to Jevington till you're gone. So I tell you you'd better accept my

offer and go."

"Accept your offer and go," repeated Edward.

"Twenty pounds," said the lady, persuasively.

"Tempt me not!" said Edward. "To a man in my position.."

"Exactly."

"Nay," said Edward, "there are chords even in a piano-tuner's breast – chords which, too roughly touched, will turn and rend the smiter."

"Good gracious!" said Miss Davenant, "I believe the man's insane."

"Withdraw that harsh expression," he pleaded. And then, without warning, the situation ceased to amuse him. Here he was, swimming in the deep, smooth waters of diplomacy, and suddenly diplomacy seemed a sticky medium. He would have liked Miss Davenant to be a man – a man in green-silk Georgian coat and buckled shoes; himself also gloriously Georgian, in murray-colored cut velvet, with Mechlin at wrists and throat. Then they could have betaken themselves to the bowling-green and fought it out with ringing rapiers, by the light of the lantern held in the landlord's trembling fingers. Or at dawn, in the meadow the red wall bounded, there could have been measured pacings – a dropped handkerchief, two white puffs drifting away on the chill, sweet air, and Edward Basingstoke could have handed his smoking pistol to his second and mounted his horse – Black Belial – and so away to his lady, leaving his adversary wounded slightly ("winged," of course, was the word). Thus

honor would have been satisfied, and Edward well in the limelight. But in this little box of an overfurnished room, by the light of an ill-trimmed paraffin-lamp, to rag an anxious aunt… He withdrew himself slowly from diplomacy – tried to find an inch or two of dry truth to stand on.

"Well, why don't you say something?" asked the anxious aunt.

"I will," said Mr. Basingstoke. "Madam, I have to ask your pardon for an unpardonable liberty. I have deceived you. I am not what you think. I am not a piano-tuner, but an engineer."

"But you said you were.."

"Pardon me. I said there were chords in the breasts of piano-tuners."

"But if you aren't, how did you know there was one?"

This *riposte* he had not anticipated. Frankness had its drawbacks – so small a measure of it as he had allowed himself. He leaped headlong into diplomacy again.

"Look back on what you have said, not only to me, but to others," he said, solemnly, and saw that the chance shot had gone home. "Now," he said, "don't let us prolong an interview which cannot but be painful to us both. I am not the piano-tuner for whom you take me. You are a complete stranger to me. The only link that binds us is the fact that your horse ran over my dog and that you bore the apparently lifeless body home for me. Yet if you wish me to leave the neighborhood, I will leave it. In fact, I was going in any case," he added, struggling against diplomacy.

Miss Davenant looked at him. "You're speaking the truth,"

she said; "you're not the piano-tuner. But you got as red as fire yesterday. So did my niece. What was that for?"

"I cannot explain my complicated color-scheme," said Edward, "without diagrams and a magic-lantern. And as for your niece, I can lay my hand on my heart and say that the light of declining day never illumined that face for me till the moment when it also illumined yours."

"Are you deceiving me?" Miss Davenant asked, weakly, and Edward answered:

"Yes, I am; but not in the way you think. We all have our secrets, but mine are not the secrets of the piano-tuner."

Some one sneezed in the passage outside.

"Our host has been eavesdropping," said Edward, softly.

"Well, if he doesn't make more of this conversation than I do, he won't make much," said Miss Davenant. "I don't trust you."

"That would make it all the easier for me to deceive you," said Edward, "if I sought to deceive."

"You've got too much language for me," said Miss Davenant. "If you're not the man, I apologize."

"Don't mention it," said Edward.

"If you are, I don't wonder so much at what happened in London. Good night. Sorry to have disturbed you."

"Don't you think," said Edward, "that you might as well tell me why you *did* disturb me?"

"I thought you were the piano-tuner," she said; "you knew that perfectly well. And I don't want piano-tuners hanging round

Jevington. I'm sorry I offered the money. I ought to have seen."

"Not at all," said Mr. Basingstoke, "and, since my presence here annoys you, know that by this time to-morrow I shall be far away."

"There's one thing more," said Miss Davenant. But Mr. Basingstoke was never to know what that one thing was, for at the instant a wild shriek rang through the quiet night, there was a scuffle outside, hoarse voices in anger and pain, the door burst open, and Miss Davenant's groom staggered in.

"Beg pardon, ma'am" – he still remembered his station, and it was thus he affirmed it – "beg pardon, ma'am, but this 'ere dawg – "

It was too true. Charles, perhaps conscious of his master's presence in the parlor, had slipped his collar, scratched a hole under the stable door, and, finding the groom and the landlord in the passage, barring his entrance, had bitten the groom's trousers leg. It hung, gaping, from knee to ankle – with Charles still attached. Charles's master choked the dog off, but confidential conversation was at an end, even when a sovereign had slipped from his hand to the groom's.

"Seems the young lady's missing," said the host, when the dog-cart had rattled up the street.

"Indeed!" said Edward. "Well, I think I also shall retreat. Will it inconvenience you if I leave my traps to be sent on? I shall walk into Seaford and catch the early train."

"It wasn't my fault the lady come, sir," said the landlord, sulky

but deferential.

"I know it," said the guest, "and I am not leaving because of her coming. I should have left in any case. But it is a fine night, I have a fancy for a walk, and it does not seem worth while to go to bed again. If you will kindly take this, pay your bill out of it, and divide the remainder between Robert and Gladys, I shall be very much obliged. I've been very comfortable here and I shall certainly come again."

He pressed a five-pound note into the landlord's hand, and before that bewildered one could think of anything more urgent than the commonplaces which begin, "I'm sure, sir," or, "I shouldn't like to think," he and Charles had turned their backs on the Five Bells, and the landlord was staring after them. The round, white back of Charles showed for quite a long time through the darkness. Slowly he drew the bolts, put out the lights, and went back to bed.

"It's a rum go," he told his wife, after he had told her all he had heard and overheard, "a most peculiar rum go. But he's a gentleman, he is, whichever way you look at it. Miss up at the Hall might do a jolly sight worse, if you ask me. Shouldn't wonder, come to think of it, if she ain't waiting for him around the corner, as it is."

"He's the kind of gentleman a girl *would* wait around the corner for," said the landlady. "It's his eyes, partly, I think. And he's got such a kind look. But if she is – waiting round the corner, I mean, like what you said – he *have* got a face to go on like what

he did to Miss Davenant."

"Yes," said the landlord, blowing out the candle, "he *have* got a face, whichever way you look at it."

It was bright daylight when a motor – one of the strong, fierce kind, no wretched taxicab, but a private motor of obvious speed and spirit – blundered over the shoulder of the downs down the rutty road to Crow's Nest Farm.

Mr. Basingstoke, happy to his finger-tips as well as to the inmost recesses of the mind in his consciousness of results achieved and difficulties overcome, slipped from the throbbing motor and went quickly around to the back door, Charles with him, straining at the lead. The path that led to the door had its bricks outlined with green grass, a house-leek spread its rosettes on the sloping lichened tiles of the roof, and in the corner of the window the toad-flax flaunted its little helmets of orange and sulphur-color. He tapped gently on the door. Nothing from within answered him – no voice, no movement, no creak of board, no rustle of straw, no click of little heels on the floor of stone. She might be asleep – must be. He knocked again, and still silence answered him. Then a wave of possibilities and impossibilities rose suddenly and swept against Mr. Basingstoke's heart. So sudden was it, and so strong was it, that for a moment he felt the tremor of a physical nausea. He put his hand to the latch, meaning to try with his shoulder the forcing of the lock. But the door was not locked. The latch clicked, yielding to his hand, and the door opened into the kitchen, with

its wide old chimneyplace, big mantel-shelf, its oven and pump, its brewing-copper and its washing-copper, its litter of packing-cases and straw, and the little nest he had made for her between the copper and the big barrel. The soft, diffused daylight showed him every corner, and Charles sniffing, as it seemed, every corner at once. He crossed over and tried the door that led to the house. But he knew, before his hand found it unyielding, that it had not been unlocked since last he saw it. He knew, quite surely, that the lady was not there. There was no sign or trace of her, save the rounded nest where she must have snuggled for at least a part of the night that he had spent in such strenuous diplomacy, such ardent organization, for her sake. No other trace of her.. yes, on the flap-table by the window his match-box, set as weight to keep in its place a handkerchief. It was own sister to the little one his pocket still held – and, as he took it up, exhaled the same faint, delicate fragrance. He read it, Charles snuffling and burrowing in the straw at his feet. On it a few words were written, some illegible, but these few plain:

I will write to General Post-Office, London

There are no words for the thoughts of the baffled adventurer as he locked the door and walked around the farm to the waiting motor. His only word on the way was to Charles, and it calmed, for an instant, even that restless spirit.

"London," he said to his chauffeur. "My friend isn't coming,"

and he and Charles tumbled into the car together.

A line of faces drawn up against a long fence watched his departure with mild curiosity. Twenty or thirty calves and their rustic attendant saw him go. The chauffeur looked again at the house's blank windows and echoed the landlord's words.

"Rum go!" he said to himself. "Most extraordinary rum go."

VII
TUNBRIDGE WELLS

AN earnest and prolonged struggle with Charles now occupied Mr. Basingstoke. Charles was determined to stand on the seat with his paws on the side of the car, to look out and to be in readiness to leap out should any passing object offer a more than trivial appeal. His master was determined that Charles should lie on the mat in the bottom of the car, and, what is more, that he should lie there quietly. The discussion became animated and ended in blows. It was just at the crisis of the affair, when Edward had lightly smitten the hard, bullet head and Charles was protesting with screams as piercing as those of a locomotive in distress, that the car wheeled into the highroad and narrowly missed a dog-cart coming up from Seaford. As they passed, Edward's hand went to his hat, for the driver of the dog-cart was Miss Davenant.

Charles, partially released, leaped toward the lady, only to hang by his chain over the edge of the car. By the time he had been hauled in again and cuffed into comparative quiescence Miss Davenant was left far behind, a little, gesticulating figure against the horizon. Her gestures seemed to Edward to be gestures of recall. But he disregarded them. It was not till later that he regretted this.

A final struggle with Charles ended in victory, not because Edward had enforced his will on that strong and strenuous nature, but because Charles was now exhausted and personally inclined to surrender. He lay at last on the floor of the car, his jaws open in a wide, white-toothed smile, and his pink tongue palpitating to his panting breaths. Edward sat very upright, his hands between his knees, holding the shortened chain of Charles. Mile after mile of the smooth down country slipped past, the car had whirled down the narrow, tree-bordered road into Alfreston, past the old church and the thirteenth-century, half-timbered Clergy House, where three little girls in green pinafores were seeking to coerce a reluctant goat along to Polegate and across the railway lines, and still Mr. Basingstoke never moved. His mind alone was alive, and of his body he was no longer conscious. He thought and thought and thought. Why had she left the farm? Had she been frightened? Had she been captured? Where had she gone? And why? And behind all these questions was a background of something too vague and yet too complicated to be called regret – or something which, translated into words, might have gone something like this:

"Adventures to the adventurous. And three days ago the world was before me. I had set out for adventures and I found nothing more agitating than the pleasant pleasing of one little child. Then suddenly the adventure happened. And now no more charming wanderings, no more aimless saunterings in this pleasant, green world, but rush and worry and hurry and dust, uncertainty,

anxiety… the whole pretty dream of the adventurer shattered by the reality of the adventure."

Suddenly, and without meaning to do it, he had mortgaged his future to a stranger. The stranger had fled and he was – well, not pursuing, but going to the place she had named as that from which he might gain a clue and take up the pursuit. It was not exactly regret, but Mr. Basingstoke found himself almost wishing that time could move backward and set him in the meadow where the red wall was, and give him once more the chance to fly or not to fly his aeroplane. Perhaps if he had the choice he would not fly it. But all this was among the shadows at the back of his mind. In the foreground was the small, insistent cycle of questions: Why had she left the farm? Had she been frightened? Had she been captured? Where had she gone? When? How? Why?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.