The life of man

Leonid Andreyev

THE LIFE OF MAN

A PLAY IN FIVE ACTS

BY

LEONIDAS ANDREIEV

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN

BY

C. J. HOGARTH

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PROLOGUE

[*A Being, clad in Grey, is speaking. He is speaking of the Life of Man.*

[*The stage presents the semblance of a large, square, empty room which has neither doors nor windows, and within which all is uniformly grey and misty. The ceiling, walls, and floor are grey, and from some hidden source there flows a stream of dim, unflickering light, of the same dull, monotonous, elusive colour. This light throws no shadows, nor is reflected back from any point.*

[*Without a sound the Being in Grey detaches himself from the wall, with which he has almost seemed to mingle. He is clothed in a loose, grey, shapeless habit, roughly outlining a gigantic frame, and his head is veiled in a cowl of the all-pervading hue. This cowl throws the upper portion of his face into deep shadow, so that no eyes, but*

only a nose, mouth, and prominent chin are visible; all of which features are as clear-cut in outline and granite-like in texture as though they were hewn of grey stone. At first his lips are tightly compressed; until presently he raises his head a little, and begins to speak in a stern, cold voice—a voice as destitute of passion or emotion as that of some hired clerk reading aloud, with dry nonchalance, the records of a court of law.]

LOOK ye and listen, ye who have come hither for sport and laughter; for there is about to pass before you, from its mysterious beginning to its mysterious close, the whole life of a Man.

Hitherto without being; hidden away in the womb of eternity; possessed neither of thought nor feeling; remote from the range of human ken,—the Man bursts, in some unknown manner, the bars of non-existence, and announces with a cry the beginning of his brief life. In the night of non-existence there bursts forth also a little candle, lit by an unseen hand. It is the life of that Man. Mark well its flame: for it is the life of that Man.

Born, the Man assumes the name and image of humanity, and becomes in all things like unto other men who dwell upon the earth. Their hard lot becomes his, and his, in turn, becomes the lot of all who shall come after him. Drawn on inexorably by time, it is not given him to see the next rung on which his faltering foot shall fall. Bounded in knowledge, it is not given him to foretell what each succeeding hour, what each succeeding minute, shall have in store for him. In blind nescience, in an agony of foreboding, in a whirl of hopes and fears, he completes the sorry cycle of an iron destiny.

First we see him a joyous youth. Mark how clearly the candle burns! Icy winds from desert wastes may eddy round it and pass by. Its flame may flicker gently, but it still remains quite bright and clear. Yet the wax is ever melting as the flame consumes it—yet the wax is ever melting.

Next we see him a happy man and father. Mark how dim, how strange, is now the candle's glimmer! Its flame is growing pale and wrinkled, it shivers as with cold, and its light is feebler than of yore. For the wax is ever

melting as the flame consumes it—for the wax is ever melting.

Lastly we see him an old man, weak and ailing. The rungs of the ladder have all been climbed, and only a black abyss yawns before his faltering foot. The flame of the candle is drooping earthward, and turning to a faint blue. It droops and quivers, it droops and quivers—and then softly goes out.

Thus the Man dies. Come from darkness, into darkness he returns, and is reabsorbed, without a trace left, into the illimitable void of time. There there is neither thought not feeling, nor any intercourse with men. And I, the Unknown, shall remain ever the fellow-traveller of that Man—through all the days of his life, through all his journeyings. Though unseen by him and his companions, I shall ever be by his side. Be he waking or sleeping, be he praying or blaspheming; in the hour of joy, when his soul soars free and fearless; in the hour of sorrow, when his spirit is o'ershadowed by the languor of death, and the blood is curdling back upon his heart; in the hour of victory or defeat as he wages his great contest with the Inevitable,—I shall be with him, I shall ever be with him.

And ye who have come hither for sport and laughter (ye who none the less must die also), look ye and listen: for there is about to pass before you, and to reveal to you its joys and its sorrows, the brief, fleeting life of a Man.

[*Once more the Being in Grey is silent; and as his voice ceases, the light becomes wholly extinguished, and his form and the grey, empty room are swallowed up in impenetrable darkness.*]

CURTAIN.

ACT I

THE BIRTH OF THE MAN

[*The stage is in deep shadow—nothing being visible amid the gloom save the silhouetted grey forms of some old women and the faint outlines of a large and lofty chamber. Clad in weird, shapeless garments, the old women look, as they crouch together, like a little cluster of grey mice. They are talking in low tones.*]

DIALOGUE OF THE OLD WOMEN.

I wish I knew which her baby is going to be—a boy or a girl.

Whatever can it matter to *you?*

Nothing; except that I prefer boys.

And *I* prefer girls. They sit quietly at home, and make company when one wants a gossip.

Oh, you are so fond of company!

[*The Old Women give a chuckle.*]

The woman herself is hoping it will be a girl,

for she says that boys are too boisterous and headstrong, and too fond of running into danger. While they are little (she says) they are for ever climbing tall trees and bathing in deep water; and when they are grown up they take to fighting, and killing one another.

Pooh! Does she think that *girls* never get drowned? Many a drowned girl's corpse have I seen, and they looked as all drowned corpses do—wet and livid and swollen.

And does she think that gauds and jewellery never yet brought a girl to her death?

Ah, poor thing! she is having a hard and painful childbed of it. Here have we been sitting these sixteen mortal hours, and she screaming the whole time! True, she is quieter now, and only gasps and moans, but, a short while ago, it fairly split one's ears to hear her!

The doctor thinks she is going to die.

No, no! What the doctor said was that the *child* will be born dead, but the mother herself recover.

But why need there be births at all? They are such painful things!

Well, why need there be deaths either? They are more painful still, are they not?

[*The Old Women chuckle again.*]

Ah well, 'tis the way of the world—births and deaths, births and deaths.

Yes ; and then more births.

[*For the third time the Old Women chuckle. At the same moment there is heard behind the scenes a stifled cry, as of a woman in agony.*]

There ! She is going to scream again !

Well, at least it is a good sign that she has recovered her voice.

Yes, it is a good sign.

That poor husband of hers ! The silly fool is in such a way about it that it makes one almost die of laughing to see him. A short while ago he was in raptures because his wife was pregnant, and kept saying that he hoped the baby would be a boy. Perhaps he thought that any boy of *his* would grow up to be a Minister of State or a general at the very least ! But now he wants neither boy nor girl, but only fusses about and weeps.

When the pangs come upon her he seems to suffer almost as much as she does. He grows absolutely livid in the face !

A short while ago they sent him to the chemist's for some medicine ; but, after kicking his heels about outside the shop for two mortal hours, he was still unable to remember what he had come for, and had to go home again empty-handed.

[*The Old Women burst into renewed*

chuckles, while the screams behind the scenes increase for a moment, and then die away again into silence.]

What ails her now? Surely she has not expired?

Not she! Had that been so, we should have heard the wailers beginning their lament, and the doctor running about the house, and chattering his foolish nonsense. Besides, her husband would have been gone off into a dead faint and been brought in here, and then *we* should have had some work to do. No, no; she's not dead.

Then why need we stay here longer?

Oh, ask *Him*. How can *we* tell what is going to happen?

He never tells us *anything*—never!

No, indeed! He is a perfect pest to us—for ever pulling us out of our beds, and setting us to watch, and then telling us that we need not have come after all!

Nevertheless, since we *are* here, we may as well do something. There! She is screaming again! Anyway, we could not help coming, could we?

No; he gave us no choice in the matter. Yet surely you have had enough watching by now?

Oh, I just sit quiet and wait—sit quiet and wait.

What a patient old lady you are, to be sure!

[*The Old Women chuckle again, and the screams grow louder.*]

How dreadful those screams sound! What agony she must be in! Do you know what that agony is like? It is like having one's entrails torn out.

Oh, we have all been through it in our time.

Yes, but I doubt whether *she* has before. Listen to that voice of hers! One would hardly know it to be hers at all. It used to be such a sweet and gentle one.

Well, 'tis more like the howl of a wild beast now. Besides, it has a sort of a night sound in it.

Yes. It puts me in mind of great, dark, lonely forests, and of utter solitude and desolation.

Yes; and of despair and a broken heart. But is there no one in the room with her? Why is it we hear no voices but hers—no voices but that terrible, yelling, shrieking voice of hers?

Oh, there are people in the room with her, only we do not seem to remark their voices when she is screaming. Have you never noticed that a scream always appears to stand out from other sounds? No matter how many

persons there be talking and chattering together, let but a scream be uttered, and the whole world seems to be struck silent and listening to it.

Yes, once I heard a man cry out as he was being run over by a wagon. The street was full of people at the time, yet at the moment he might have been the only one in it.

But this is a stranger sound than any *man* could utter.

Perhaps it is a trifle more *shrill*.

No, no, it is more prolonged.

Perhaps you are right. It *is* a stranger sound than any man could utter. Besides, it has the ring of death in it.

Well? Was there not a ring of death in that man's cry as well? He died, didn't he?

Yes, yes; but never mind. We need not quarrel about it.

[*For a moment there is silence. Then the screams begin again.*]

What a strange thing is a scream! If it is you yourself who are screaming you never notice how horrible the screams sound: but if it is some one else——

What throat can possibly produce such a noise as she is making? Surely it cannot be a woman's throat? No, no; I cannot believe it!

The cries sound as though her neck were being twisted round and round.

Or as though the cries were coming from some deep hollow in her chest. Now they are more like the gasps of a drowning man. Listen to the choking noise she is making!

It sounds as though some heavy person were kneeling on her chest.

Or as though she were being strangled.

[*The screams suddenly cease.*]

There! At last she is quiet again. I was getting tired of it all. It was such a monotonous, ugly screaming.

Did you expect to find it *beautiful*, then?

[*The Old Women chuckle.*]

Hush! Is *He* here?

I do not know.

I believe He is.

He does not approve of laughter.

They say He laughs Himself at times.

Who knows? It is mere gossip. They tell so many strange stories about Him.

Anyway, He might hear us, so we had better keep a straight face upon us.

[*The Old Women chuckle again.*]

What I want to know is—Will the baby be a boy or a girl?

Yes, 'tis always nice to know what one is going to deal with.

I hope it may die before birth.

How kind of you!

Not more so than of you.

And *I* trust it may grow up to be a general.

[*The Old Women chuckle again.*]

Some of you are very merry now. I do not quite like it.

And *I* do not quite like your looking so gloomy.

No quarrelling, no quarrelling! Every one must be either merry or gloomy; so let each be what she pleases.

[*There is a pause.*]

Babies are merry enough things, if you like.

Yes, and spoilt too.

And troublesome as well. I cannot abide them. As soon as ever they are born they begin to cry out, and to beg for what they want, just as though everything ought to be ready to their hand at once. Even before they can see out of their eyes they have learnt that there are such things in the world as a breast and milk, and straightway they ask for them. Then they need to be put to bed, and to be rocked to sleep, and to have their little red backs patted. For my part, I like them best when they are dying.

Then they grow less clamorous—they just stretch themselves out, and require rocking to sleep no more.

But they are such *playful* little dears! How I love to wash them just after they are born!

And *I* to wash them just after they are dead!

No quarrelling, no quarrelling! Each to her own taste. One loves to wash them after they are born, and another to wash them after they are dead. That is all about it.

But what right have babies to think that they may cry for what they want? It does not seem to me the proper thing.

They think nothing at all about it. 'Tis their stomach which does the asking.

But 'tis *they* who do the actual asking, is it not?

Perhaps so; but they do not always get.

[*The Old Women chuckle again. Presently the screams recommence behind the scenes.*]

There! She is screaming again!

'Tis a strange fact, but animals seem to have easier young-bearing than women do.

Yes, and easier dying too—and easier living, into the bargain. You should see how sleek and contented my cat is!

The same with my dog. Every day I say

to him, '*Your* turn too will come to die," but he only grins at me, and goes on wagging his tail as merrily as ever.

Ah, but they are only animals.

Well, and what else are women?

[*Again the Old Women chuckle.*]

Dying, or about to be delivered, she has nearly come to the end of her strength now. You can tell that by the sound of her cries.

I can see her eyes starting!

And the cold sweat on her brow!

[*Again the Old Women chuckle.*]

She is about to be delivered!

No, she is dying!

[*Suddenly the screams cease.*]

I tell you——

[*At this instant the Being in Grey stands out momentarily in clearer relief as he exclaims in a deep, sonorous voice:*]

Silence ye! A man is being born into the world.

[*And almost as he speaks the cry of a baby is heard behind the scenes, and the tall candle in the hand of the Being bursts into flame. At first weak and fitful, the flame grows stronger by*

degrees; yet though the corner in which the Being is standing is in deeper shadow than the rest of the scene, the candle's yellow light illuminates only his tightly compressed lips, high cheekbones, and prominent chin, while the rest of his face remains hidden, as before, in the shadow of the cowl. In stature he is above the ordinary height of man, and the candle in his hand is proportionately tall and massive. Set in a candlestick of antique design (the green bronze of which causes the fingers encircling it to show up grey and stonelike as those of some statue), the candle burns up with sufficient brightness to make the crouching forms of the Old Women stand out clearly from the obscurity. Also, the room is now seen to be a high and perfectly square apartment, with bare, colourless walls; while both in the back wall and in the wall to the right are curtainless casement windows, through which the outer night shows darkly. Ranged against the walls are a number of chairs with high, straight backs.]

[*The Old Women begin to utter excited exclamations.*]

Hark! People are hurrying about! Presently they will be coming in here!

How light it is growing! Let us go, let us go!

See how clearly and steadily the candle burns!

Yes, let us go, let us go! Quickly, quickly!

Yes, let us go, let us go!

[*Bursting into shrill laughter, they begin with weird, zigzag movements to shuffle away through the gloom. Yet, though, with their departure, the light grows stronger, there still remains a dim, cold, lifeless air about the scene.*

[*Enter a Doctor, accompanied by the Father of the Man. The Doctor is clad in a white hospital overall, and wears a look at once wise and self-important. Contrariwise, the Father's face, though expressive of great relief, is deeply scored with anxiety. Also, his cheeks look sunken, his hair is dishevelled, and his clothes are in much disorder.*]

THE DOCTOR.

Up to the very last moment I was in doubt as to whether your wife would come safely through it. I brought all my knowledge and skill to bear upon her, but even the most skilful

doctor is of little avail unless Nature herself come to his aid. Besides, I was feeling very nervous. Even yet my pulse is throbbing. Curiously enough, though I have helped to bring hundreds of babies into the world, I have never yet succeeded in overcoming a certain feeling of diffidence during the opera—— But you are not listening to me, sir?

THE FATHER.

Oh yes, I am listening to you, but I cannot altogether take in what you say. Her screams still ring in my ears, and have made me dull of comprehension. Poor woman, how she suffered! In my folly and conceit I was so anxious to have a child, but now I renounce that criminal wish for ever.

THE DOCTOR.

Oh, you will soon be sending for me again, when the next baby arrives.

THE FATHER.

No, never! I am almost ashamed to say it, but I actually *hate* this child which has put her to such pain. I have not even seen it. What is it like?

THE DOCTOR.

It is a fine, strong, healthy boy, and greatly resembles yourself, if I mistake not.

THE FATHER.

Oh, it resembles me, does it? Well, I am pleased at that! I begin to feel a little more drawn towards the child. It had always been my desire to have a boy—and especially one which resembled myself. You have seen the child. Has it, then, a nose like mine?

THE DOCTOR.

Yes, and eyes too.

THE FATHER.

And eyes? Oh, that is capital! I feel as though I ought to pay you a trifle over your fee.

THE DOCTOR.

Well, let us call it an extra honorarium for the instruments which I had to use.

[*The Father of the Man turns towards the corner wherein the figure of the Being in Grey stands motionless, and utters the following prayer:*]

THE FATHER.

O Lord and Creator of Life, I thank Thee for according me my heart's desire, and granting me a son like myself. I thank Thee also for watching over my beloved wife, and enabling her to bear the child in safety. I beseech Thee

that the child may grow up wise and honourable, and that he may never at any time bring sorrow upon the heads of us, his father and mother. If Thou wilt grant me this my petition, I swear that I will trust in Thee for ever, and worship Thee in Thy Holy Temple. For I feel a great love arising in me for my son.

[*Enter the Relations, to the number of six. First, there is a stout, elderly lady who has a double chin, small, puffy eyes, and a pompous, self-important manner. Next, there is her husband, who is so tall and thin that his clothes seem literally to hang on him, as on a clothes-peg. Also, he has spectacles, a short, pointed beard, smooth, damp-looking hair which straggles over his shoulders, and a manner which, though diffident, is also curiously didactic. In his hands he holds a black, low-crowned hat, and he appears to stand in awe of his wife. These two are accompanied by a young girl, their daughter, who has an impudently up-turned nose, twinkling eyes, and a mouth perpetually half-open. Likewise there is a tall, thin lady, of sour, depressed mien, who at times wipes her lips with the handkerchief perpetually*

dangling from her hands. Finally, there are two youths, precisely identical in appearance, with long, thin necks encased in high collars, hair smoothly plastered over their foreheads, and an expression of bewilderment and vacuity on their faces which would seem to denote that their mental faculties are, as yet, but in the growing stage.]

ELDERLY LADY.

Let me congratulate you, my dear brother, on the birth of a son.

HER HUSBAND.

Let me congratulate you, my dear brother-in-law, on the advent of this long-expected child.

THE REST.

(*In unison.*) We all of us congratulate you, our dear kinsman.

THE FATHER.

(*With much emotion.*) I thank you—I thank you all! You are most kind, good, and charming people, and I am greatly beholden to you. True, hitherto I had felt a little doubtful concerning you; for I had thought that you, my dear sister, were too much taken up with yourself

and your many estimable qualities; that you, my dear brother-in-law, were inclined to be a trifle pedantic; and, as regards the rest, that they cared less for myself than for what they could get to eat at my house. But now I see that I was wrong. I am very happy, not only because I have been granted a son who is like myself, but also because the birth of this child has afforded me an opportunity of seeing here so many good people who love me.

[*There is general embracing.*]

THE DAUGHTER.

What do you intend to *call* your son, dear Uncle? I should so like him to have a beautiful, poetic name! It makes so much difference what one calls a boy.

ELDERLY LADY.

I should like him to have a plain, sensible name. People with beautiful, poetic names are always light-minded, and seldom get on in life.

HER HUSBAND.

And *I* think, my dear brother-in-law, that you ought to give him the name of one of his elder relatives. It is a custom which tends to continue and strengthen family ties.

THE FATHER.

Yes. But first my wife and I must think the matter over. We cannot come to a decision yet. So many new ideas and responsibilities arise with the advent of a baby!

ELDERLY LADY.

It is an event which imparts a great *fulness* to life.

HER HUSBAND.

Yes, and also a great sense of *purpose in life*. For, as we educate a child—removing out of its path those obstacles over which we ourselves, in early days, have stumbled, and strengthening its mind with the aid of our own matured experience—we, as it were, construct a new and better replica of ourselves, and thus enable the race to move slowly, but surely, forward towards the ultimate goal of existence —towards *perfection*.

THE FATHER.

You are quite right, most estimable brother-in-law. When I was a boy I used to torment dumb animals, and the practice bred in me cruelty: wherefore I shall never allow my son to be unkind to any living thing. Again, when I was grown up I fell into many errors as regards the bestowal of my friendship and

affections—I chose unworthy comrades, and loved deceitful women; but now I shall warn my son that——

[*Enter the Doctor hurriedly.*]

THE DOCTOR.

Sir, your wife has taken a turn for the worse. You ought to go and see her at once.

THE FATHER.

My God!

[*Exit with the Doctor, while the Relations seat themselves in a semicircle, and for a while preserve a solemn silence. Meanwhile the Being in Grey stands motionless as before, with his stony face turned towards the company.*]

DIALOGUE OF THE RELATIONS.

THE HUSBAND.

My dear wife, do you not think that our sister-in-law is going to die?

ELDERLY LADY.

No, I do not. She was always a nervous, fidgety woman—a woman who made overmuch of her ailments. All of us have to go through childbed, and few of us die of it. Why, I myself have been through it six times!

THE DAUGHTER.

But she screamed so dreadfully, mother dear? And she grew quite black in the face with it?

ELDERLY LADY.

It was not with screaming; it was a mere nervous flush. You do not understand these things. *I* used to turn quite black in the face, though I never uttered a single scream.

Not long ago the wife of an engineer of my acquaintance had a baby, and she never uttered a sound from start to finish.

I know. My brother should not grow so alarmed, but keep himself in hand, and take a saner, cooler view of things.

I am afraid he will bring much indulgence and absurdity to bear upon the education of this child.

Yes. He is a man much too easily influenced. Though anything but rich, he gives away money to the most undeserving people.

Do you know how much he paid for this child's *layette*?

Do not speak of it! My brother's extravagance fairly sickens me! We have had many quarrels about it.

They say it is a stork which brings the babies. What a funny stork it must be!

[*The young people laugh.*]

Oh, do not talk such nonsense. I myself have brought six babies into the world, and *I* am no stork.

[*The young people laugh still more unrestrainedly, despite the fact that the Elderly Lady is regarding them with a fixed and stony stare.*]

Really, you children ought to know that that is a mere fable. Babies are born quite naturally, and in a way which is perfectly familiar to science.

They have moved to another flat now.

Who have?

That engineer and his wife of whom I was speaking. They found their old quarters too damp and cold. They made many complaints to the landlord, but he took no notice of them.

In my opinion a small, but warm, flat is preferable to a large, but cold, one. A cold flat can so easily give one one's death of influenza or rheumatism!

I know some people who are living in a *terribly* cold flat.

And I too.

What a number of cold flats there seem to be nowadays!

Do you know, I have often wanted to hear of a good method for removing grease stains from light materials.

Woollen materials?

No, silken.

Very well, then. Take a piece of clean glass, and rub the stains with it. Then, after plenty of friction, iron with a hot iron.

Really? How simple! But I was told that turpentine is best?

May we smoke now? Somehow I never felt a desire to smoke while we were waiting for the birth of that baby.

We never had a chance to do so. How absurd! Of course one would not want to smoke at a *funeral,* but on such an occasion as this we really——

Smoking is a most pernicious habit. Both of you are young men, and ought to guard your health. There are so many occasions in after-life when health is everything.

But tobacco gives one a stimulus?

Believe me, it is a very unhealthy stimulus. I too used to smoke when I was young and foolish.

Mamma, how the baby cries! How it does cry! Does it want milk?

[*The young people burst into renewed laughter, while the Elderly Lady regards them with a stern air of reproval.*]

CURTAIN.

ACT II

LOVE AND POVERTY

[*The stage is in clear light, while the scene represents a large, lofty room with bare walls of a bright pink colour that is intersected, in places, with grey tracery fantastically designed. To the right are two curtainless casement windows through which the outer night shows darkly, while the furniture consists of a couple of bedsteads, two chairs, and a rough deal table, on the latter of which stands a broken water-jug, holding a bunch of wild flowers. In one corner* (*which is in deeper shadow than the rest of the apartment*) *stands the Being in Grey. The candle in his hand is burnt away for a third of its length, yet its flame remains steady, bright, and tall, and throws the statuesque face of the Being into strong relief.*]

[*Enter a group of Neighbours, dressed in holiday attire, and carrying in their hands flowers, wild grasses, and sprigs*

of oak and birch. They disperse themselves about the room, looking cheerful, kindly, simple, and solicitous as they do so.]

DIALOGUE OF THE NEIGHBOURS.

How poor they must be! See, they have not even a spare chair.

Nor curtains to the windows!

Nor pictures on the walls!

Nor a morsel in their larder except some stale bread!

Nor anything to drink but water—cold water from the well!

Nor sufficient clothes to wear! For she is always to be seen in the same worn-out pink dress and frayed hair-riband—things only fit for a servant-girl to wear, and *he* is never to be seen in anything but an artist's blouse with turned-down collar—a garment which makes him look like a tramp, and sets all the dogs barking at him.

Yes, so much so that respectable people are afraid of him.

Dogs never like poor people. Yesterday I saw no fewer than three dogs flying at him at once; yet he only cried, as he beat them off with his stick: "Do not you dare to tear my trousers! They are the only ones I have left!"

All the time he was laughing, though the dogs were showing their teeth at him, and growling most furiously.

And only to-day I saw a smart lady and gentleman so nervous at his appearance that they crossed to the other side of the road to avoid passing him. "I think he is going to beg of us," the gentleman said, and the lady exclaimed shrilly that probably he would assault them as well. So they crossed over—eyeing him carefully as they did so, and keeping a tight hold upon their pockets. But he only tossed his head and laughed.

Yes, he is always in good spirits.

Both of them are like that—always merry.

Yes, and singing too; or, rather, he sings, and she dances to his singing, in that poor pink dress of hers and shabby riband!

It is quite a pleasure to look at them, they are so youthful and handsome.

All the same, I feel very, very sorry for them. At times they are almost starving. To think of it!—starving!

Yes, too true. Once upon a time they had plenty of furniture and clothes; but, little by little, they have had to sell them, until now they have nothing at all left.

Yes, I remember the time when she used to wear beautiful serge dresses; but now those dresses have had to go for bread.

And he used to wear a fine frockcoat—the one in which he got married; but that too has had to go.

In fact, the only valuables they have left to them are their wedding-rings. What poverty, to be sure!

Oh, they do not care, they do not care! I too have been young, and know how one takes things at that age.

What do you say, Grandfather?

I say that they do not care, they do not care.

See, it almost makes Grandfather sing, even to think of them!

Yes, and dance too!

[*There is general laughter.*]

And her husband is *so* kindhearted! One day he made my little boy a bow-and-arrows.

And when my little girl fell ill his wife wept almost as much as I did.

And when my garden wall fell down he helped me to build it up in no time. What a fine strong fellow he is, to be sure!

Yes, it is quite pleasant to have such kindly folks for neighbours. Their youthfulness helps to warm our chilly old age, and their light-heartedness to drive away our care.

But this poor room of theirs looks like a prison-cell, it is so bare.

Nay. Say, rather, it is like a church, it is so bright!

See the flowers on the table! She has been plucking them as she walked through the fields, in that poor pink gown of hers and faded hair-riband. Here are some May lilies, with the dew not dry upon them.

And a bright red pineflower.

And violets.

And field grasses.

Do not touch them, dear children—do not touch the flowers. She has imprinted her kiss upon them, so we must not let them fall to the ground. She has breathed her sweet breath upon them, so we must not mingle our breath with hers. Do not touch them, dear children—do not touch them.

She means him to see them the moment he enters the room.

Yes, and to receive her sweet kisses from them.

And to scent her dear breath in theirs.

Come! We must go now, we must go now.

But surely we did not come here to leave nothing behind us for these charming young neighbours of ours? That would be a sorry thing to do!

I have brought a loaf of spiced bread and a bottle of milk.

And I some sweet, fresh herbs. If we strew

the floor with them it will look like a verdant meadow, and smell of spring.

And I some flowers.

And we some sprigs of oak and birch, with their pretty green leaves. If we deck the walls with them the room will look like a fresh, luxuriant arbour.

And my present is a fine cigar. It did not cost very much, but it is mellow and strong, and will be a splendid thing to dream over.

And I have brought her a new pink hair-riband. When she has bound up her hair with it she will look so neat and charming! It was given me by my sweetheart, but *I* have many ribands, whereas she has only one.

And what have *you* brought with you, little girl? Surely you have brought some present for our good neighbours?

No, nothing—nothing. At least, I have brought my cough with me, but they would not care for *that*, would they, neighbour?

No, no, little girl; no more than they would for my crutches. Ah, dear child, who would care for crutches?

But you leave good wishes behind you, Grandfather, do you not?

Yes, yes, my dear. And so, I know, do you. Now we must go, good neighbours, for it is getting late.

[*The Neighbours begin to leave the room—*

some of them yawning as they go, the little girl coughing badly, and the old man stumping along on crutches.]

Yes, we must go now, we must go now.

God grant them the best of good fortune, for they are such a kindly couple!

Yes, God grant them always good health and happiness and mutual love: and may He see to it that never a black cat step between them, to bring them evil luck!

And may the poor young man find work to do; for it goes hard with a man when he cannot find work to earn his daily bread!

[*Exeunt all.*

[*Enter the Man's Wife, her hair decked with wild flowers, and her whole appearance graceful, pretty, and innocent. At the same time, her face is expressive of deep dejection, and as she sits down to the table she turns towards the audience, and says in a sorrowful voice:*]

I have just returned from the town, where I have been looking for, I have been looking for —oh, I hardly know *what* I have been looking for. We are so poor that we have nothing in all the world. Indeed, we find it a struggle even to live. We need money, money;

yet I know not where to get it. If I were to go out into the streets and beg I feel sure that no one would give me anything. No, every one would refuse me. And, moreover, I have not the courage to do it. I have tried hard to get work for my husband, but it is not to be got. Every one to whom I apply says that there is too little work to do, and too many people to do it. I have even roamed the town, and searched the roadways, in the hope that some rich lady or gentleman might have dropped a purse or jewellery ; but either no one had done so, or else some mortal, luckier than I, had found the treasure first. Oh, I am so unhappy ! Soon my husband will be coming home—tired out with his long search for work to do ; yet once more he will find that I have nothing for him but my poor kisses ! And kisses will not feed a starving man. Oh, I am so unhappy that I could weep for ever ! To me it is nothing to have to go hungry—indeed, I scarcely feel it ; but he is different, for he has a larger frame to feed, and requires more food. When he has had to go hungry a little while he begins to look so white and ill, so thin and worried ! He takes to scolding me, and then gives me a kiss, and begs me not to mind what he has said. But *I* never mind ; I love him too much for that. Oh, I am so unhappy ! He is one of the cleverest architects in all the world. Indeed, I believe he

is a veritable genius. Left, when quite an infant, to face the world alone, he was adopted by some relations. But, alas ! his quick and independent temper led him to say things which displeased them, and caused them to declare that he was ungrateful ; with the result that, in the end, they turned him from their doors again. Yet still he continued his studies—maintaining himself the while by giving lessons, and often going hungry. Yes, he came well to know what hunger meant ! Yet now, though he has completed his course of studies, and become a fully qualified architect, and can do the most beautiful designs imaginable, no one will accept them. Nay, some stupid people even laugh at them ! To succeed in life one needs two things—influence and a lucky star : and he has neither. So he goes wandering about, ever looking for a chance—any sort of a chance—to find work to do. It may even be that, like myself, he searches the roadways for lost purses, for he is but a boy in mind as well as in years. Of course, *some* day we shall succeed : but the question is, When will that be? Meanwhile life is very hard for us ; for although, when we married, we had a little money, it soon disappeared, what with too many visits to the theatre and too much eating of bonbons. *He* is still sanguine of success, but I—well, sometimes I seem to lose all hope, and give way to tears when quite alone. Even now my heart is aching

to think that here is he coming home—only to find nothing for him but my poor kisses !

[*She rises from her chair, and goes down upon her knees.*]

O Lord God, be unto us a kind and pitying Father. Thou hast so much to give of what we need—of bread, of work, of money. Thy earth is so rich, it brings forth so much fruit and corn in its fields—it covers its meadows with so many flowers, it yields such weight of gold, such countless shining gems from the depths of its dark bowels ! Thy sun's rays have so much warmth in them ; in the shining of Thy stars there is so much pensive and peaceful joy ! Give us, then, but a little of that bounty—but a little, but so much as Thou bestowest upon Thy birds : a little bread to stay the hunger of my brave, beloved husband, a little warmth to fend him from the cold, a little work to do, that he may raise his handsome head once more. And, I beseech Thee, be not angry with him that he should scold me so often, and that at other times he should laugh and bid me dance : for he is as yet but young, and cannot always be grave and sober.

[*She rises to her feet again.*]

There ! Now that I have said a prayer I feel better—I begin to hope once more. Surely God

must give *occasionally* when He is entreated so often? Now I will go out again and search the roadways, in the hope that some one may have dropped a purse or some jewellery. [*Exit.*

THE BEING IN GREY.

The woman knows not that her prayer is already granted. She knows not that this very day some noblemen have been bending eagerly over some designs submitted by the Man, and that finally they have decided to accept them. All this day those two noblemen have been seeking the Man in vain. Yea, wealth has been seeking him, even as hitherto he has been seeking wealth. And early on the morrow, at the hour when workmen are setting forth to their toil, a carriage will draw up at the entrance to the Man's dwelling, and the two wealthy noblemen will enter his humble chamber—bowing low in courteous salutation as they do so, and bringing with them the first beginnings of his fame and fortune. But, as yet, neither the Man nor his Wife knows of this, although good fortune is coming to the Man as surely as some day it will depart again.

[*Enter the Man and his Wife. The former has a proud, handsome head, brilliant eyes, a high forehead, and dark eyebrows—the latter springing*

from a point so low down the nose as almost to resemble a pair of small, clearly defined wings attached to that member. His wavy black hair is flung back clear of his brow, and there are visible, over a soft, white turned-down collar, a well-set neck and a portion of the throat. Although his movements are as quick and elastic as those of some young animal, his pose is purely that of a symmetrical, well-balanced human being.]

THE MAN.

Once more nothing! Soon I shall have to take to lying in bed all day: so that whoever wants to see me will have to come to *me*, not I go to *him*. Yes, I will begin that mode of life to-morrow.

HIS WIFE.

Are you so tired, then, my darling?

THE MAN.

Yes, tired and hungry; and though I could devour a whole ox, like one of Homer's heroes, I suppose I shall have to put up with a piece of dry bread! Yet a man cannot go on eating dry bread for ever, when all the time his appetite craves to be sated—craves for something into

which it can plunge its teeth, and gorge itself, and be filled.

HIS WIFE.

I am so sorry for you, my dearest one!

THE MAN.

As I am for you. Yet that makes me none the less ravenous. To-day I spent a whole hour in front of a cookshop; and just as people gape at masterpieces of art, so did I gape at the fat pies and capons and sausages in the window. And oh, the signboard above them! Do you know, it is possible to depict a ham on a signboard so cunningly that one could devour it, signboard and all.

HIS WIFE.

Yes—I too could eat something.

THE MAN.

Of course. Who could not? But do you like lobsters?

HIS WIFE.

I simply adore them!

THE MAN.

Then what a lobster I saw there! Though only a painted one, he was fairer even than the

reality. Red, stately, and severe as a cardinal, he looked fit for consecration. I believe I could eat *two* such cardinals, and a reverend father carp into the bargain.

HIS WIFE.

(*Sadly.*) But you have not noticed my flowers?

THE MAN.

Flowers, flowers? Do you expect me to eat *them*?

HIS WIFE.

Ah, you cannot love me, to speak thus!

THE MAN.

Forgive me, forgive me, but I am so hungry! See how my hand is trembling. I could not even throw a stone at a dog with it.

HIS WIFE.

(*Kissing his hand.*) My poor darling!

THE MAN.

But what is this parcel on the table? It seems to send forth a most unctuous smell. Did you put it there?

HIS WIFE.

No indeed! It must have been the neighbours.

THE MAN.

What dear, goodhearted folks! But it is strange to think that, for all the kind people in the world, a man may perish of hunger! Why should that be?—Ah! Look there!

HIS WIFE.

How you frighten me! How your eyes are staring! What is it you see? Surely it is something dreadful?

THE MAN.

Yes. Even as I jested there uprose before me—there, in that dark corner—the terrible figure of Starvation! Do you not see it now? Its hands are stretched forth as in piteous appeal, like those of some poor child which is lost in a forest and keeps crying out in a voice of childish agony—a voice which echoes and re-echoes in the deserted wilds—"Help me, or I die! Help me, or I die!"—and there is none to hear! Look, my wife, look! See how those dark shadows quiver and float, like volumes of black smoke belched forth from some deep shaft leading down to the pit of hell! See! see! I am being drawn into them!

HIS WIFE.

Oh, I am terrified! I dare not look into that corner!—But, nay, nay; 'twas only in the street you saw all this?

THE MAN.

Yes, it was only in the street; but soon I shall be seeing it in this room.

HIS WIFE.

No, no! God would never permit it!

THE MAN.

But why not? Does He not permit it to happen to *other* people?

HIS WIFE.

Yes; but we are better than they. We are *good* people, and have done no wrong.

THE MAN.

Think you so? Then remember all my cruel scoldings of you.

HIS WIFE.

But you have never *really* been cruel to me.

THE MAN.

Yes, I have!—yes, many and many a time! Nor is that all; for no wild boar could fall to grinding his tusks more wickedly than I do as I wander through the streets and gaze upon all those things whereof we stand in such desperate need. Ah, how much money there is in the world that we have not got! Listen to me, little wife. This afternoon I was walking in the park—that beautiful park where the paths

run straight as pistol-shots, and the beech-trees look like kings in crowns.

HIS WIFE.

And I too was walking in the streets, with shops, shops, shops everywhere—such beautiful shops !

THE MAN.

And people passed me who were carrying gold-mounted canes and wearing splendid clothes : and I could not help thinking to myself, " Ah, *I* have none of these things ! "

HIS WIFE.

And I too was passed by rich people—by fine ladies in dainty boots which made their feet look so elegant, and exquisite hats from under which their eyes glanced so bewitchingly, and silken petticoats which gave their figures such an inexpressible charm : and I could not help thinking to myself, " Ah, *I* have no smart hats and silken petticoats ! "

THE MAN.

One dandy had the impudence to jostle me, but I just gave him a glimpse of my boar's tusks, and he very soon lost himself in the crowd.

HIS WIFE.

And I too was jostled by a fine lady ; yet I could not bring myself even to look at her, I felt so miserable !

THE MAN.

Also, I saw people riding in the park—riding fiery, spirited horses. Alas, *I* have none such !

HIS WIFE.

One fine lady whom I met was wearing diamond earrings — earrings which I could actually have kissed !

THE MAN.

Red and green motor-cars, with great, glaring eyes, were gliding along as silently as ghosts, and the people in them were laughing and jesting and looking indolently about them. Alas, *I* have no motor-car !

HIS WIFE.

Nor I diamonds, nor emeralds, nor clear white pearls !

THE MAN.

Up above the ornamental water there was a restaurant, blazing with lights like the firmament of heaven ; and in it people were dining, while men in tail-coats who might have been ministers

of State, and white-aproned women who looked like veritable winged angels, were carrying wine and dishes about. And every one was eating and drinking, eating and drinking. Ah, how I too could have eaten and drunk! My wife, my wife, I am so hungry!

HIS WIFE.

My poor darling, it is having to walk about so much that makes you hungry. But never mind. Sit down here, and I will climb on to your knee, and you shall take paper and pencil and draw me a beautiful, beautiful palace.

THE MAN.

Ah, but my inspiration seems equally to be suffering from hunger; it cannot rise above pictures of eatables, and for a long while past I have been making my palaces look like pies filled with rich stuffing and my churches like pease-puddings. But I see tears in your eyes! What ails thee, little wife of mine?

HIS WIFE.

It hurts me so much to think that I can do nothing for you!

THE MAN.

Is that it? Then am I filled with shame to think that I—I, a strong man, talented, educated, and in the prime of life—should sit here grum-

bling until I have seen my poor little wife—the good fairy of the legends—burst into tears! When a woman weeps it is a man's shame. I am overcome with remorse.

HIS WIFE.

But it is not *your* fault that people do not appreciate you.

THE MAN.

Nevertheless I blush to my ears. I feel that I deserve as sound a whipping as ever I received when I was a boy. To think that you too were hungry—as hungry as I am—and that I never noticed it! Oh, what a selfish egoist am I! It was shameful of me!

HIS WIFE.

My dearest one, I was not, I am not, hungry.

THE MAN.

Oh, it was shameful and unmanly of me! The dandy who jostled me in the park did rightly, for he saw that it was a mere sensual pig that was passing him by—a wild boar of sharp tusks indeed, but most gross mind.

HIS WIFE.

If you go on scolding yourself so unjustly I shall weep again.

THE MAN.

No, no, you must not weep. When I see tears in those pretty eyes I am seized with dread. Yes, I am afraid of those little crystal drops; for, whenever I behold them, I feel as though it were not you, but some stranger whom I know not, that were shedding them. No, you must not weep. We are poor, and have nothing, I know, but we can talk of what we shall surely have *some* day, and I can tell you bright fairy tales, and wrap you round with shining fancies, my little queen.

HIS WIFE.

Ah, we have no cause to be afraid. You are too strong, and too great a genius, to be vanquished by life. The present time will pass away, and inspiration will once more spread its influence over your splendid head.

[*The Man assumes a proud and daring attitude of challenge, and throws a sprig of oak towards the corner where stands the Being in Grey.*]

THE MAN.

See thou, whatsoever be thy name—whether Fate, Life, or Devil! I cast thee down my gauntlet, I challenge thee to battle! Men of faint heart may bow before thy mysterious power,

thy face of stone may inspire them with dread, in thy unbroken silence they may discern the birth of calamity and an impending avalanche of woe. But *I* am daring and strong, and I challenge thee to battle! Let us draw our swords, and join our bucklers, and rain such blows upon each other's crests as shall cause the very earth to shake again! Ha! Come forth and fight with me!

HIS WIFE.

(*With enthusiasm, as she leans upon the Man's shoulder.*) More boldly yet, my dearest one! More boldly yet!

THE MAN.

To thy vile laggardness I will oppose my swift and living strength—to thy dim mystery my open, ringing laughter! Ha! Parry thou my strokes if thou canst! At thy dull forehead of stone I will aim the whitehot bullets of my flashing intellect! Into thy pitiless heart of stone I will inject the burning poison of remorse for the agony which thou didst cause my mother at my birth! Of a surety there shall arise a sun which shall dispel the black thunderclouds of thy cruel enmity! Yea, the flashing of our swords shall illumine the darkness! Ha! Fend thou my passes if thou canst!

HIS WIFE.

More boldly yet, my dearest one! More boldly yet! Thy trusty armour-bearer stands beside thee, my valiant knight!

THE MAN.

As I advance thou shalt hear me singing such songs as shall echo the wide world through! What though I fall beneath a blow of thine, I will yet utter no cry, but cast about how I may raise myself and renew the combat! In my armour there are weak spots—that I know full well; but though I be covered with wounds, though I be red with my own blood, I will yet summon my last remaining strength to cry, "Thou hast not vanquished me yet, thou cruel enemy of man!"

HIS WIFE.

More boldly yet, my trusty knight! More boldly yet! I will bathe thy wounds with my tears, and staunch thy red blood with my kisses!

THE MAN.

What though I die upon the field of battle, it will be as brave men die; making thy triumph but an empty one with my never-failing challenge, "Thou hast not vanquished me yet, nor wilt thou ever!" In very truth it will be I who will have gained the victory, thou bitter foe

of mine: for until my last faint breath shall have been drawn I shall have refused to own thy power!

HIS WIFE.

More boldly yet, my knight! More boldly yet! *I* will die with thee!

THE MAN.

Ha! Come forth to battle! Let us flash our swords, and join our bucklers, and rain such blows upon each other's crests as shall cause the very earth to shake again! Ha! Come forth, come forth!

[*For a few seconds the Man and his Wife retain their respective attitudes. Then they turn to one another and embrace.*]

THE MAN.

Thus will we deal with life, my little helpmeet. Will we not, eh? What though it blink at us like an owl that is blinded by the sun, we will yet force it to smile.

HIS WIFE.

Yes, and to dance to our singing, too. Together we will do it.

THE MAN.

Yes, together, my paragon among wives, my

trusty comrade, my brave little armour-bearer. So long as I have *thee* by my side, nothing can make me fear. A fig for poverty! We may be poor to-day, but we shall be rich to-morrow.

HIS WIFE.

And what does hunger matter? To-day we may be without a crust, but to-morrow we shall be feasting.

THE MAN.

Think you so? Well, 'tis very likely. But I shall require a great deal of satisfying. What think you of this for our daily *menu?* First meal in the morning, tea, coffee, or chocolate, whichever we prefer; then a breakfast of three courses; then luncheon; then dinner; then supper; then——

HIS WIFE.

Yes; and always as much fruit as possible. I adore fruit!

THE MAN.

Very well. I will go out and buy it myself—buy it in the market-place, where it is cheapest and most fresh. Besides, we shall be having our own fruit garden before long.

HIS WIFE.

But we have no land yet?

THE MAN.

No, but I shall soon be buying some. I have always wished to possess an estate, not only as a pleasure-ground, but also as a place where I may build a house from my own designs. The rascally world shall see what an architect I am!

HIS WIFE.

I should like the house to be in Italy, close to the sea: a villa of white marble, set in the midst of a grove of lime-trees and cypresses, with white marble steps leading down to the blue waters.

THE MAN.

Yes, I see your idea. It would be capital. Yet *my* plan, rather, is to build a castle on a Norwegian mountain, with a fjord below, and the castle perched on a peak above. Have we no paper? Well, never mind. I can show you on the wall what I mean. This is the fjord. Do you see?

HIS WIFE.

Yes. How beautiful!

THE MAN.

And here are the deep, sparkling waters, reflecting the tender green of the grass above. Here, too, is a red, black, and cinnamon-coloured

cliff. And there, in that gap (just where I have made that smudge), is a patch of blue sky, gleaming through a fleecy white cloud.

HIS WIFE.

Nay, it is not a cloud. Rather, it is a white boat, with its reflection in the water, like two white swans joined breast to breast.

THE MAN.

And see, over all there rises a mountain, with sides of brilliant green, except just at the top, where it is more misty and rugged. Here, too, are sharp spurs, and dark shadows of clefts, and wisps of cloud.

HIS WIFE.

Oh, it looks like a ruined castle!

THE MAN.

And *here*—on that "ruined castle," as you call it (just where I have put that mark in the centre)—I will build me a stately mansion.

HIS WIFE.

But it will be so cold up there—so windy?

THE MAN.

Nay, I shall give the mansion stout walls and huge windows of plate-glass; and then at night, when the winter storms are raging and the

fjord is tossing below, we shall draw the curtains over the windows, and heap up a roaring fire (I shall make enormous fireplaces, you know —large enough to hold whole trunks of trees, whole beams of pine).

HIS WIFE.

Ah ! it will be warm enough *then*.

THE MAN.

Yes, indeed ; and the whole interior will be quiet and restful, for I mean to have soft carpets everywhere, and the walls lined with thousands and thousands of books, and everything looking snug and cheerful. And you and I will sit before the fire on a white bearskin ; and when you say to me, " Shall we go and look at the storm? " I shall answer, " Yes," and we shall run to the largest of the great windows, and draw aside the curtains : and then, my God, what a night it will look like.

HIS WIFE.

Snowflakes whirling by !

THE MAN.

Yes ; like little white horses galloping, or myriads of tiny, frightened souls, pale with fear and seeking shelter in the night. And there will be such a howling and a roaring !

HIS WIFE.

And I shall say that I am cold, and give a shiver.

THE MAN.

And then we shall scamper back to the fire, and I shall call aloud, "Ho, there! Bring me the ancestral goblet—the one of pure gold from which Vikings have drunk—and fill it with aureate wine, and let us drain the soul-warming draught to the dregs!" Meanwhile we shall have had a chamois roasting on the spit, and again I shall call aloud, "Ho, there! Bring hither the venison, that we may eat it!" Yes, and in about two seconds I shall be eating *you*, little wife, for I am as hungry as the devil.

HIS WIFE.

Well, suppose they have brought the roast chamois? Go on. What next?

THE MAN.

What next? Well, once I have begun to eat it, there will soon be little of it left—and therefore nothing more to tell. But what are you doing to my head, little playmate?

HIS WIFE.

I am the Goddess of Fame. I have woven you a chaplet of the oak-leaves which the neigh-

bours brought, and am crowning you with it. Thus shall fame—yes, real, resounding fame—some day be yours.

[*She crowns him with the chaplet.*]

THE MAN.

Yes, fame, fame, resplendent fame! Look here on the wall as I draw. This is myself advancing. Do you see? But who is that with me?

HIS WIFE.

I!

THE MAN.

Yes. And see how people are bowing down to us, and whispering about us, and pointing us out with their fingers. Here is a city father shedding tears of joy as he exclaims, "Happy is our town to have been the birthplace of such children!" Here, too, a certain young man turns pale with emotion as he gazes upon his handiwork; for fortune has smiled upon him at last, and he has built a City Hall that is the pride of all the land.

HIS WIFE.

Yes, even as you are *my* pride. And even as I have placed this wreath of oak-leaves upon

your head, so will the day come when you are accorded one of laurels.

THE MAN.

But look again. Here are other magnates of my native town advancing to pay me their respects. They make low bows—yes, to the very ground—and say, "Our town rejoices at having been accorded the honour of——"

HIS WIFE.

Oh!

THE MAN.

What is it?

HIS WIFE.

I have found a bottle of milk!

THE MAN.

Surely not?

HIS WIFE.

And bread!—beautiful spiced bread!—and a cigar!

THE MAN.

Impossible! You must be joking. Or you must have mistaken some of the damp from these accursed walls for milk.

HIS WIFE.

No, no. Indeed I have not.

THE MAN.

And a cigar! Cigars do not grow on window-sills. They cost money, and have to be bought in shops. What you see is only a piece of black twig, or something of the kind.

HIS WIFE.

But look for yourself. I am sure it must be the neighbours who have left these things for us.

THE MAN.

The neighbours? Well, of a truth they may have been the instruments, but the work has been the work of God himself. And even if it were devils who have brought the things here, it should not prevent you from coming and sitting on my knee, little wife.

[*The Man's Wife seats herself upon his knee, and they proceed to eat; she breaking off little bits of bread, and placing them between his lips, while he feeds her with milk out of the bottle.*]

THE MAN.

I believe it is cream, it looks so good.

HIS WIFE.

No, it is milk. You must bite your bread more carefully, or you will choke.

THE MAN.

No, no, I shall not. Let me have some more of the crust—of that nice brown crust.

HIS WIFE.

But I am *sure* you will choke before you have finished.

THE MAN.

No, no. See how easily I swallow.

HIS WIFE.

You are making the milk run down my neck! How dreadfully it tickles!

THE MAN.

Then let me lick it up. Not a drop of it ought to be wasted.

HIS WIFE.

How thrifty you are growing!

THE MAN.

Be ready. Now, then! Quick!—Ah, everything good comes to an end too soon. I believe that this bottle must have got a false bottom

to it, to make it look deeper. What rascally fellows those bottlemakers are!

[*The Man lights the cigar, and sinks back in the attitude of a blissfully tired man, while his wife ties her hair with the new riband, and goes to look at herself in the darkness of the window-panes.*]

THE MAN.

This cigar must have cost a fortune, it is so mellow and strong. In future I mean always to smoke this brand of cigars.

HIS WIFE.

But do you not see how nice I look?

THE MAN.

Yes, I see. I see the new riband, and I see, too, that you wish me to kiss your pretty little neck.

HIS WIFE.

But I will not allow it, sir. You are getting much too free. Puff away at your cigar if you wish, but my neck——

THE MAN.

Eh what? Is it not mine too? Devil take me if I do not assert my proprietorship!

[*She pretends to dart away, but he pursues and kisses her.*]

THE MAN.

There! I have asserted my rights. And now, little wifie, you must dance. Imagine this to be a splendid, a supernaturally beautiful palace.

HIS WIFE.

Very well. I have imagined it.

THE MAN.

And that you are the queen of the ball.

HIS WIFE.

I am ready.

THE MAN.

And that counts, marquises, and city magnates keep requesting the honour of your hand, but you persistently refuse them, and choose, instead, a man like—like—oh, a man in a beautiful gala dress, a real live prince. What did you say?

HIS WIFE.

That I do not like princes.

THE MAN.

Good gracious! Whom *do* you like, then?

HIS WIFE.

I like architects of genius.

THE MAN.

Very well, then. Imagine such a man to have asked you to dance with him (for I suppose you would not care to have the empty air for a partner, would you?).

HIS WIFE.

I have imagined him.

THE MAN.

Good! Imagine, too, a marvellous orchestra, with a Turkish drum beating pom, pom, pom.

[*He begins to thump the table with his fist.*]

HIS WIFE.

But, my dearest one, it is only in a *circus* that they beat a drum like that, to attract the people—not in a palace.

THE MAN.

What a fool I am! Very well, then. Never mind that part. Let us begin again. Imagine a fiddle pouring out its soul in melody, and a flute tootling tenderly, and a double-bass droning like a beetle. Thus :—

[*The Man hums a tune as he sits crowned with his chaplet of oak-leaves. The tune is the same as is played during*

Act III, on the occasion of the grand ball given by the Man. His wife dances to his humming, looking comely and graceful as she does so.]

THE MAN.

Ah, my little pet goat!

HIS WIFE.

Nay, I am the queen of the ball.

[*The tune and the dance grow merrier and merrier, until the Man rises to his feet, and, dancing lightly where he stands, takes his wife round the waist, and dances with her—his chaplet slipping down to one side as he does so. Meanwhile the Being in Grey looks on imperturbably—the candle in his hand continuing to burn steadily with a clear light.*]

CURTAIN.

ACT III

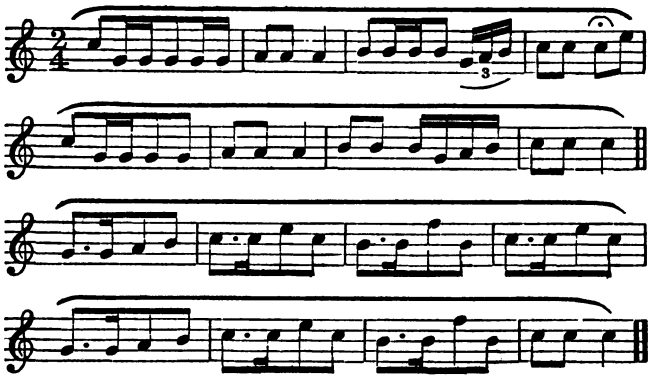
THE BALL GIVEN BY THE MAN

[*A grand ball is in progress in the* salon *of the mansion which the Man has built for himself. The scene is a large, square, lofty room with smooth, white walls and ceiling and a polished floor. Yet a certain discrepancy in the proportions of some of the minor features of the apartment conveys to the beholder a sort of vague, unsatisfactory impression, as though something were wanting, or discordant, or superfluous, or bizarre—one cannot exactly tell which. For instance, the doors are small as compared with the windows, and constitute, with the latter, the only features breaking the monotony of the apartment's outline. The windows, too, are of immense size. Reaching almost to the ceiling, they are placed only in the rear wall, and in close juxtaposition to one another, while their panes show black with the darkness of the outer night, and neither spot nor*

speck breaks the wall spaces between them. Eloquent testimony to the wealth of the Man is afforded by the superabundance of gilding on the cornices, chairs, and picture-frames; yet the pictures are but few in number, and confined to the side walls, of which they form the sole adornment. Light is furnished by hoop-shaped lustres and a few scattered electric globes. Nevertheless, though the ceiling is in brilliant relief, the rest of the room is in slight shadow—a circumstance which imparts a kind of greyish tinge to the walls. In general, the scene has about it an air of pallor and chill.

[*The ball is in full swing—the music being furnished by an orchestra of three players, each of whom bears a certain resemblance to his instrument. The fiddler has a long, thin neck and a small head ornamented on both sides with little tufts of hair. His body is grotesquely curved in outline, and he has a handkerchief neatly folded on his shoulder, to form a pad for his fiddle. The flute player resembles his flute in that he is exceedingly tall and thin, with long, lean face and taper legs; while the man with the double-bass is short, with broad, rounded shoulders, a fat body, and baggy trousers. All three executants play*

with an energy which is manifested even in their faces as they grind out the tune and sway their heads and bodies to and fro to the rhythm. The tune in question (which is never once changed throughout the ball) consists of a short, polka-like air, made up of two separate parts, and charged with a sort of vapid, jaunty, staccato lilt. All the instruments are slightly out of tune with one another, and this sometimes causes the discrepancies in pitch and tempo to give rise to an extraordinary series of dissonances and gaps in the melody. The following is the tune:—



To these strains a number of young men and girls are dancing a legato measure

in a graceful, refined manner. To the first phrase of the tune they advance and meet; to the second phrase they retire; to the third and fourth they advance and retire as before—all with a rather stately, old-fashioned demeanour.

[*Along the walls are seated a number of chaperons and other guests, in a variety of studiedly affected attitudes. Their movements are stiff and angular, and their remarks stilted and spasmodic. Never is the correctness of their tone lowered by, for instance, light laughter or whispering. Gazing straight in front of them, with their hands primly folded on their laps and their wrists stuck out so sharply as to convey the impression that those members have been fractured, these onlookers mouth their sentences in the sententious fashion of copy-books, and express, in their whole bearing, a sort of disdainful weariness. Indeed, so absolutely monotonous and uniform in expression are their faces that the latter would seem to have been turned out of one and the same mould—a mould which has stamped them with a stereotyped air of conceit and arrogance, coupled with a certain dull respect for the Man's wealth. The dancers are dressed in white, the musicians in black, and the remaining*

guests in white, black, or yellow. In the right-hand front corner of the stage (a corner in deeper shadow than the rest of the scene) stands the motionless figure of the Being in Grey. The candle in his hand is now burnt away for two-thirds of its length, yet its flame is still strong and yellow, and continues to throw lurid gleams over the statuesque face and chin of the Being.]

DIALOGUE OF THE GUESTS.

I feel it my bounden duty to remark that to be numbered among the guests at any ball given by the Man is indeed an honour!

Yes; and to that you might have added that only a very limited circle of persons are permitted to attain to that honour. My husband, my sons, my daughters, and myself are profoundly sensible of the privilege which has been accorded us.

I am truly sorry for those who have not had the good fortune to receive an invitation to the ball. Never this night, I fear, will they be able to close their eyes in sleep, by reason of the pangs of envy. Yet on the morrow they will not hesitate to speak in disparaging terms of the fêtes which the Man periodically gives.

Ah, but never have they looked upon such brilliancy as we see here to-night!

No, never! Nor, you might have added, upon such luxury and wealth!

Nor upon such enchanting, such soul-emancipating gaiety! If this be not gaiety, then I know not what gaiety is. But let that pass. 'Tis ill quarrelling with persons who writhe in the pangs of envy. Yet I will venture to foretell that those same persons will presumptuously assert that these were not gilded chairs upon which we are now sitting—not gilded chairs!

No; mere deteriorated articles, purchased, for a trifling sum, from some secondhand dealer!

They will say, too, that those beautiful electric globes were tallow candles of the commonest quality!

Yes—mere farthing dips!

Or trashy oil lamps! Oh, tongues of envy!

Peradventure they will have the effrontery to deny that the mansion has gilded cornices?

Or that to the pictures on the walls there are the massive gilded frames which we see before us? For my part, I seem to hear the veritable chink of gold in this palace.

Well, at all events we behold its glitter: and that, in my opinion, is as good.

Seldom has it fallen to my lot to enjoy

such ravishing strains as those which always greet our ears at balls given by the Man. They constitute the veritable music of the spheres, and waft the soul from earth to higher regions.

Yes, in truth do they! Yet we have some reason to expect that the music should be of the finest quality, seeing that the Man is in a position to pay the immense fees demanded by the musicians. You must recollect that this is the most distinguished orchestra of the day, and plays at all the most *recherché* functions.

Ah, one could listen to such strains for ever! They simply *enchant* one's sense of hearing! I may inform you that, for days and nights after one of these balls given by the Man, my sons and daughters never cease to hum the tunes which they have heard there.

At times I seem to hear such divine music when I am walking in the streets. I gaze around me, but neither instrument nor player is to be seen.

And *I* hear it in my dreams.

What appears to me so especially excellent about these musicians is that they play with such *abandon*. Though aware of the immense fees which they are entitled to demand for their services, they are yet good enough to refrain from giving nothing in return. That seems to me particularly right and proper.

Yes. 'Tis as though the musicians completely identified themselves with their instruments, so great is the *verve* with which they surrender themselves to their playing.

Or, rather, as though their instruments identified themselves with *them*.

How rich it all is !

How sumptuous !

How brilliant !

How luxurious !

[*And so on, for a considerable time, like a pack of dogs barking one against the other.*]

I would have you to know that, in addition to this *salon*, the mansion contains no fewer than fifteen magnificent apartments. I have seen them all. The dining-room is fitted with a fireplace which can accommodate whole trunks of trees. The drawing-room, too, and boudoir are simply *gorgeous*, while the state bedroom is not only an apartment of the most gigantic dimensions, but is actually furnished with bedsteads to which baldaquins are attached !

Indeed? You surprise me ! Baldaquins?

Yes, I said *baldaquins*. Pray permit me to continue what I was saying. The son of the house lives in a beautiful, bright nursery, lined throughout with yellow wood and gilding, so

that the sun seems for ever to be shining there. And the little fellow is so charming! He has curls like the rays of the sun himself.

Yes, indeed! When one looks upon him one involuntarily exclaims, "The sun has just come out."

And when one gazes into his eyes one involuntarily thinks, "Ah! Now are the chill autumn and winter passed, for there is blue sky to be seen."

The Man loves the boy to distraction. He has just bought him a pony—a beautiful, pure white pony—to ride on. Now, *my* children——

Well, as we were saying. Have I yet told you of the bathroom?

No, you have not.

It is a truly marvellous apartment.

Ah! Is it indeed?

Yes; with hot water always laid on. Then there is the Man's study, replete with books—endless books. He is said to be immensely clever—and of a truth you could tell that from the number of the books alone.

I have seen the gardens. Have *you*?

Indeed? No, I have not.

And I am not ashamed to confess that they simply astounded me. In them I saw the most marvellous lawns—all of an emerald green, and mown with surprising neatness, with little paths intersecting them, lined with

the finest of red sand. And the flowers, too! And the palm-trees!

Palm-trees?

Yes, I said *palm-trees*. Every shrub is pruned into a shape of some kind, such as a pyramid or a column of green foliage. Then there is a fountain with huge globes of glass, and, in the centre of the main lawn, a number of plaster gnomes and sirens.

How splendid!

How brilliant!

How luxurious!

[*And so on, as before.*]

The Man also did me the honour to show me his coach-houses and stables, until I found myself wholly unable to repress the admiration evoked in me by the spectacle of the horses and carriages which they contained. His motor-car, too, made a great impression upon me.

And, to think of it, he has no fewer than *seventeen* attendants for his person alone, in addition to the general staff of cooks, kitchen-maids, housemaids, gardeners, and so forth!

And grooms, surely?

Yes, and grooms.

Of course, it is only right and proper that the Man and his Wife should have everything done for them, seeing that they are personages of such high degree.

Yes ; and for the same reason it is all the more an honour for us to be included among the number of their guests.

But do you not find the music just a trifle—well, *monotonous*?

No, I do not, and I am surprised that *you* should do so. Surely you know who the musicians are?

Yes ; I was but jesting. I could listen to such strains for ever. There is something in them which especially appeals to me.

And to me also.

It is delightful to be able to surrender oneself to their influence, and to become absorbed in dreams of ecstatic bliss.

It is not too much to say that they waft one's soul to the very empyrean.

How delightful it all is !

How splendid !

How luxurious !

[*And so on, as before.*]

But I see a movement at that door. Probably the Man and his Wife are making their entry into the *salon*.

See how the musicians are redoubling their efforts !

There they come ! There they come !

Yes, there they come ! There they come !

[*The Man and his Wife appear at a low*

door on the right, accompanied by the Man's Friends and Enemies. They cross the salon *obliquely to a door on the left, walking in solemn procession, and causing the dancers to divide and leave a clear space for them. The musicians play more loudly, and more extravagantly out of tune, than ever.*

[*The Man looks much older than he did in Act II, and a sprinkling of grey is noticeable in his long hair and beard. Yet his face is still handsome and vigorous. He walks with a sort of calm dignity and aloofness, and gazes straight in front of him, as though he were not aware of the presence of the surrounding company. His Wife, too, looks older, but still beautiful, as she leans upon his arm. Like her husband, she seems to see none of the surrounding company, but gazes in front of her with a strange, half-apprehensive expression. They are both of them magnificently dressed.*

[*Behind the Man and his Wife come the Man's Friends. The latter are uniformly like one another, with aristocratic faces, high, open foreheads, and candid eyes. They move with dignity*

—expanding their chests, setting down their feet with firmness and assurance, and gazing from side to side with faintly condescending smiles. They wear white buttonholes.

[*Following them at a respectful distance come the Man's Enemies. These also bear a strong general resemblance to one another—their faces being vicious and cunning, their brows low and beetling, and their hands slender and apelike. They move as though ill at ease—jostling one another, hunching their shoulders, hiding behind one another, and throwing sharp, mean, envious glances about them. They wear yellow buttonholes.*

[*In this manner the procession moves slowly across the* salon, *without a word being spoken by any one of its members. The sound of their footsteps, combined with the strains of the musicians and the acclamations of the guests, gives rise to a sort of confused, discordant din.*]

ACCLAMATIONS OF THE GUESTS.

There they are! There they are! What an honour for us!

How handsome he is !
What a manly face !
Look, look !
Yet he does not deign us even a glance !
No ; although we are his guests !
He has not so much as seen us !
No matter. This is a great honour for us.
And there is his Wife ! Look, look !
How lovely she is !
But how proud !
Look at her diamonds, her diamonds !
Her diamonds, her diamonds !
And her pearls, her pearls !
And her rubies, her rubies !
How splendid ! We are indeed honoured !
Yes, are we not? What an honour, what an honour !

[*And so on, and so on.*]

And there come the Man's Friends !
Look, look !
What aristocratic faces !
And what a haughty bearing !
Yes, for they reflect his glory.
And how attached to him they are !
And what true friends to him !
What an honour to be one of their number !
They look at everything as though it were theirs.
Yes ; they are at home here.

What an honour for us! What an honour!

[*And so on, and so on.*]

And there come the Man's Enemies!
Look, look! The Man's Enemies!
They crouch like whipped dogs!
Yes, for the Man has tamed them.
Yes, he has muzzled them.
See how they droop their tails between their legs!
And how they slink along!
And how they jostle one another!
Booh! Booh!

[*General laughter.*]

What vulgar faces!
And what greedy looks!
What a cowardly bearing!
What an envious air!
They are afraid to look at us.
Yes. They know that we have a better right than they to be here.
They need frightening a little more.
The Man will thank us for doing it.
Booh! Booh!

[*The Guests receive the Man's Enemies with renewed jeers and laughter, while the Enemies crowd nervously upon one another, and throw sharp glances to right and left.*]

There! They are going now! They are going now!

Truly an honour of the greatest kind has been done us!

Yes, they are going now!

Booh! Booh!

They have gone! They have gone!

[*The procession disappears through a doorway to the left, and the din dies down a little. The music plays less loudly than before, and the dancers spread themselves over the floor again.*]

Where have they gone to?

To the great dining-room, I suppose, where supper is to be served.

Then we may take it that we too will be invited presently?

Yes. Has not a lackey come to summon us?

I think it is high time we were sent for. If supper be served much later than this, we shall all of us sleep badly.

Yes, I assure you I *always* sup early.

A late supper lies so heavily on one's stomach!

The music still goes on.

Yes, and so do the dancers. Yet I am surprised that they have not tired of it.

How rich it is!

How sumptuous!

[*And so on, as before.*]

Did you see how many covers were laid for supper?

No. I had barely time to begin counting them before the butler entered the room and I had to depart.

Surely we have not been forgotten?

My good madam, please remember that (in his own eyes, at least) the Man is a very great personage, and that we are personages of *small* account.

No matter. My husband often asserts that it is *we* who do *the Man* honour by accepting his invitations—not *the Man* who does *us* honour by according them. We are rich ourselves, for that matter.

And if one should also take into account the reputation of his wife——!

Has any one seen a footman, sent to summon us to supper? Perhaps he is looking for us in one of the other rooms?

How rich the Man must be!

Yet wealth may be acquired without dipping one's hands into other people's pockets.

Hush! Only the Man's Enemies say that.

Indeed? And do they not comprise among their number men of the highest honour? My husband is one of them.

How late it is getting !

I think there must have been some misunderstanding here. I can scarcely suppose that we have *purposely* been forgotten.

Well, if you cannot suppose that, I must say that your knowledge of life and men is grossly deficient.

I am surprised. We ourselves are rich, but——

Hark ! I think I heard some one call us.

'Twas only your fancy. *No one* has called us.

I feel it my bounden duty to remark that I cannot conceive how we ever came to permit ourselves to patronize a house which possesses such a dubious reputation. Of a surety we ought to pick and choose our acquaintances more carefully.

[*Enter a footman, who cries aloud: "The Man and his Wife request the honour of their guests' company at supper." Upon this the Guests resume their conversation with a sigh of relief.*]

What a splendid livery !

So the Man *has* invited us, after all !

I knew it was only a misunderstanding.

The Man is *so* goodhearted ! In all probability he and his party themselves have not yet sat down to supper.

I *told* you a lackey would be sent to summon us.

What a magnificent livery he wore !

They say the supper is equally magnificent.

Oh, nothing is ever badly done in the Man's house.

What music ! What an honour to be one of the guests at a ball given by the Man !

How persons must envy us who have not been accorded that honour !

How rich it all is !

How sumptuous !

[*Repeating these ejaculations over and over again, the Guests begin to depart. Only one couple of dancers continue dancing; the rest follow the Guests in silence. For a little while the last couple continue their diversion; then they hasten to overtake their companions. Nevertheless the musicians play with unabated vigour.*

[*Presently a footman enters, and extinguishes all the lights save the furthest lustre. For a few moments afterwards the forms of the musicians are still distinguishable through the gloom as they sway themselves and their instruments to the music; but eventually nothing remains visible save the tall figure of*

the Being in Grey. The flame of the candle in his hand is now flickering heavily, yet its light remains strong and yellow, and throws the strong face and chin of the Being into sharp relief. Presently, without raising his head, he makes a slight turn towards the audience. Then, lit up by the glare of the candle's rays, he crosses the salon *with slow and soundless foot-steps, and disappears through the doorway by which the Guests and the dancers have made their exit.*]

CURTAIN.

ACT IV

RUIN AND BEREAVEMENT

[*The scene is a large, square room of poverty-stricken, dilapidated appearance, with walls, floor, and ceiling dark in colour, and the back wall broken only by two lofty, curtainless windows through which the outer night shows darkly. Between the windows is a door leading out into the garden. The general effect of the room gives the beholder the impression that, however brilliantly it were lighted, the great, dark expanses of window-pane would still absorb the major portion of the light. To the left is a second door, giving entry to other portions of the Man's mansion. Near this second door there stands a sofa, upholstered in coarse horsehair, while beneath one of the windows there can be seen the Man's working-table—a perfectly plain piece of furniture. Upon it are mingled in careless confusion a dimly burning candle, a shaded lamp, a faded sketch-plan, and three*

child's toys—namely, a small pasteboard helmet, a wooden horse without a tail, and a red-nosed clown doll, holding cymbals in its hands. To the right is an old bookcase —empty, and almost falling to pieces, but showing, by the lines left in the dust with which its shelves are covered, that the books which it formerly contained have not long been removed. The room contains a single chair.

[*In one corner, darker than the rest of the scene, there stands the Being in Grey. The candle in his hand is now reduced to a stump, and even from this the wax is fast running down as it burns with a red, unsteady light and throws gleams of a ruddy hue over the stony face and chin of the Being.*

[*Seated on the solitary chair which the room contains, and talking to herself, is discovered an old woman—the last remaining servant of the Man.*]

THE OLD WOMAN.

So once again the Man has sunk to poverty! Once upon a time he had many valuable possessions—horses, carriages, even a motor-car; but now he has nothing at all. Of his many servants I am the only one left. True, this room and two others still contain an odd piece or two of furniture, but in the other fifteen

apartments there is nothing whatever; they stand dark and empty, and day and night the rats scamper and squeak in them. *Some* people might be afraid of the rats, but I am not. Nothing matters much to me.

For a long while now there has been a notice-board hanging on the entrance-gates, to say that the mansion is for sale; but no one seems to care to be a purchaser. The board has grown rusty with the rain, and the letters on it are fast being washed out, but no customer ever appears. *Who* would want to buy a house in such repair? Still, some day some one *might* do so, and then we shall be turned out of doors, I suppose, and have to seek another place in which to lay our heads. At first it will seem strange to us, but we shall soon get used to it. Sometimes my mistress weeps, and my master too, but *I* never weep. Nothing matters much to me.

Are you wondering what has become of all the Man's wealth? Nay, I do not know. Sometimes I too wonder, but I have lived a long life in service, and have seen more than one great fortune slip away into chinks and clefts, and vanish quietly. So it has been with my master and mistress. At first they had much, then little, then nothing at all. Once upon a time patrons and customers used to come and give my master commissions. Now they have

ceased to come. That is all. One day I asked my mistress why things were so, and she replied: "What used to be fashionable is not so now. People no longer care for the styles in architecture which they used to affect." "But what has made the fashions change?" said I. She made no answer, but burst into tears. *I* shed no tears. Nothing matters much to me, nothing matters much to me. So long as they pay me my wages I shall stop with them, and as soon as they cease paying those wages I shall go and take service elsewhere. For many years I have done their cooking for them, but I should leave them at once, and go and cook for some one else, if my wages were to cease. In any case I shall soon have to give up working, for I am growing old, and my sight is not what it was. Some day, perhaps, I shall be dismissed—yes, told to go about my business and make room for some one else. Ah, well, what will it matter? I shall just go—that is all. Nothing matters much to me.

Sometimes people are surprised at me. "It must be lonely for you," they say, "in that kitchen—alone every evening while the wind howls in the chimney, and the rats scamper and squeak." I do not know. Perhaps it *is* lonely, only I never think of it. Why should I? My master and mistress sit alone, the same as I

do, and look at one another, and listen to the wind ; and I sit in my kitchen and listen to the wind also. Once upon a time young folks used to come and visit my master's little son ; and then there would be such singing and laughter and scampering about the empty rooms to scare the rats ! Yet no one ever came to see *me*. No, I sat alone as I am sitting now—alone, quite alone : and since I have no one to talk to I talk to myself. Nothing matters much to me.

Three days ago yet another misfortune came upon this house. The young master brushed his hair, and cocked his hat as young gentlemen will do, and went out for a walk. And some rascally villain picked up a stone, and threw it at him, and split the boy's head like a cocoa-nut. Well, he was lifted up, and brought home, and now lies upon his bed—though whether to live or to die the good God alone knows. My old master and mistress wept so bitterly over him ! Then they took all the books out of that bookcase yonder, and piled them upon a cart, and sent them away to be sold : and with the money they have hired a nurse, and bought medicines and grapes for the boy. But he will not touch the grapes, nor look at them, and they lie unheeded on a plate by his bedside.

[*Enter a Doctor, looking worried and fatigued.*]

THE DOCTOR.

Old woman, can you tell me if I have come to the right house? I am a doctor with a large practice, and many patients to visit, so that I sometimes make mistakes. First I am called to one house, and then to another—only to find that the first house is empty, and the second one inhabited by a colony of idiots! Have I come to the right place *this* time?

THE OLD WOMAN.

I do not know.

THE DOCTOR.

Well, I will consult my memorandum-book. Have you a child with the croup and a sore throat?

THE OLD WOMAN.

No.

THE DOCTOR.

Then have you a man with a broken leg?

THE OLD WOMAN.

No.

THE DOCTOR.

Or a man who has gone out of his mind and attacked his wife and children with a hatchet —four patients in all?

THE OLD WOMAN.

No.

THE DOCTOR.

Then have you a young girl with palpitation of the heart? Do not lie to me, old woman, for I am almost sure that this is where I was to attend her.

THE OLD WOMAN.

No.

THE DOCTOR.

No? Well, I believe you, for you speak with such conviction. Let me look in my book again. Have you a young gentleman who has had his head broken with a stone, and now lies at death's door?

THE OLD WOMAN.

Yes. Step through that door on the left, and mind the rats don't eat you.

THE DOCTOR.

Very well, I will attend the young gentleman. Oh dear, oh dear! I am for ever being sent for, for ever being sent for—day and night alike! This time it is night, and though the street lamps have long ago been put out, I have to trot away

all the same. Thus I often make mistakes, old woman.

[*Exit through the door on the left.*

THE OLD WOMAN.

Already one doctor has been to attend the boy, without doing him any good, and now here comes another one—to do him about as little, I reckon. Well, what of that? The boy will die, and we shall go on living without him—that is all. I shall go on sitting in my kitchen as before, without a soul to keep me company, and think; and one room the more will be left empty for the rats to scamper and squeak in. Well, *let* them scamper, and *let* them squeak: it is all one to me.

Do you want to know why that ruffian flung the stone at the young master's head? Nay, I do not know. How should I know why men want to kill one another? All I know is that a man threw a stone, and then hid himself in a dark corner, and that a boy was struck by that stone, and now lies a-dying. They say that the young master was good and kind to poor people. Maybe. I do not know. It is all one to me. Kind or cruel, old or young, alive or dead—folk are all one to me. So long as I am paid my wages I shall stop where I am; and when those wages cease I shall move elsewhere and cook for some one else, or, maybe,

give up working altogether, for I am growing old, and sometimes mistake salt for sugar. Or perhaps I shall be discharged, and told to go about my business, so that they may get another cook in my place. Well, what of that? I shall just go—that is all. Every place is the same to me—here, there, or anywhere; every place is the same to me.

[*Re-enter the Doctor, accompanied by the Man and his Wife. Both the latter are now grown old and grey. Yet, though the Man walks with his body slightly bent, he holds his head (to which his shaggy, upstanding hair and long beard impart something of a leonine appearance) erect. Likewise, though he has to don a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles whenever he wishes to observe an object closely, his glance still flashes keenly and directly from under his grey eyebrows.*]

THE DOCTOR.

Your son has fallen into a deep sleep, and you must not wake him. Perhaps it is the best sign at present. But you yourselves ought to take some rest. People who have time to sleep should *use* it, and not waste the precious hours of the night in walking about and talking, as *I* have to do.

THE MAN'S WIFE.

We thank you, doctor. You have greatly reassured us. Are you coming again to-morrow?

THE DOCTOR.

Yes, and the next day as well. (*To the Old Woman*) You too ought to be in bed. Every one ought to be in bed at this time of night. Is that my way out—through that door there? I so often make mistakes!

[*Exit with the Old Woman.*

THE MAN.

(*Taking up the sketch-plan from his work-table.*) Look at this, my wife. It is something which I had begun upon just before our boy's accident happened. I remember stopping in the middle of that line and thinking, "I will take a little rest now, and continue it later." See how simple and easy that line was to draw! Yet how strange to look upon it and think, "Perhaps this may prove to have been the last line which I drew while our boy was yet alive!" With what an unconscious air of ill-omen do its very straightness and simplicity seem charged!

HIS WIFE.

Nay; do not fret yourself, my darling, but chase away these despondent thoughts from you.

I feel sure now that the doctor spoke truth—that our boy will recover.

THE MAN.

Ah, but are not *you* fretting a little, my dear one? Look at yourself in the mirror, and you will see that your face is as white as your hair, my poor old comrade.

HIS WIFE.

Oh, perhaps I *am* worrying a little; but, none the less, I feel *sure* that our boy will recover.

THE MAN.

Ah, how you hearten my spirits, as always you have done! How you charm away my sorrows with your sincerity and goodness! O little armour-bearer, the never-failing keeper of my faltering sword, thy old knight is in pitiful case now—his trembling hand can scarce hold his weapon. But what see I here? My son's old toys! Who put them there?

HIS WIFE.

My dear one, you forget. You yourself put them there, long ago; for you said that you could work better if those innocent, childish toys lay beside you.

THE MAN.

Yes, yes, I was forgetting. Yet I can scarcely bear to look upon them now; even as a condemned criminal cannot bear to look upon the instruments of torture and death. When a son is dying his toys become things of horror to the father who is to be left behind. Wife, wife, I cannot bear to see them!

HIS WIFE.

Ah, it was in the far-off, early days when we were poor—as poor as we are now—that we bought them for him. I too feel hurt to see them there—poor darling little toys!

THE MAN.

I cannot help it; I must take them in my hands once more. Here is the little horse without a tail. "Gee up, gee up, little horse! Where are you galloping to?" "Oh, a long way off, Papa—a long way off, to where there are fields and forests of green." "Will you take me with you on your little horse?" "Oh yes, oh yes, Papa! Climb on to his back, dearest Papa!——" And here is the little pasteboard helmet which I tried on my own head the day that we bought it in the shop and made so merry over it. "Who are you?" "I am a knight, Papa—the most powerful, daring knight." "And where are

you going to, little knight?" "To slay a dragon, dear Papa, and to set his prisoners free." "Go then, go then, little knight——"

[*The Man's Wife bursts into tears.*]

And here, too, is our old friend, the clown doll, with his dear, silly face. But how ragged he looks now!—as though he had been through a hundred fights! Yet he is as red-nosed and smiling as ever. Now, sound your cymbals, my little friend, as you were used to do. You cannot, eh? You say that you cannot?—that you have only one cymbal left? Very well, then. Down upon the floor you go!

[*He throws down the doll.*]

HIS WIFE.

Oh, what are you doing? Remember how often our boy has kissed its merry face.

THE MAN.

Yes, I did wrong. Forgive me, my dear. And do you too pardon me, my little friend of old times. [*He stoops with some difficulty and picks up the doll.*] So thou art still smiling? Ah well, I will lay thee aside awhile. Be not angry with me, but I cannot bear thy smiles just now—thou must go and smile elsewhere.

HIS WIFE.

Oh, how your words rend my heart! Believe me, our son will yet recover. How could it be right that youth should go to the grave before old age?

THE MAN.

And how often have you known the "right" to happen, my wife?

HIS WIFE.

Nay, nay; speak not so, my old comrade, but, rather, let us go upon our knees and say a prayer to God.

THE MAN.

Methinks it would be difficult for my old knees to bend now.

HIS WIFE.

Yet *try* to bend them, dearest one. It is our duty.

THE MAN.

Think you, then, that God would heed one who has never yet troubled His ear with prayer or praise? Do *you* pray: you are the mother.

HIS WIFE.

Nay, but do you also: you are the father. If a father will not pray for his son, who else

shall do it—to whom else shall it be left? And would my prayer alone avail as much as yours and mine together?

THE MAN.

Be it so, then; and perhaps the Everlasting Goodness will yet hold His hand when He sees an aged couple on their knees.

[*They kneel down, with their faces towards the corner where stands the Being in Grey, and clasp their hands in an attitude of prayer.*]

PRAYER OF THE MOTHER.

O God, I beseech Thee to spare the life of our son. One thing, one thing only, can my tongue find to say unto Thee: Spare us our son, O God! Spare us our son! Nought but this can I ask of Thee, for all around me is dark—all around me is slipping beneath my feet, so that I am utterly bewildered and astray. In the agony of my soul I beseech Thee, O God—again, and yet again—to spare us our son, to spare us our son. Forgive me this poor prayer of mine, but indeed I can do no better. Thou Thyself knowest that I can do no better. Look down upon me, look down upon me! Dost thou not see my trembling head, my trembling

hands—ah, my trembling hands, O God? Have mercy, then, upon our child. He is yet so young that the birthmark is not faded from his right hand. Suffer him, then, I beseech Thee, to live a little longer—just a little longer—just a little longer. Have mercy upon him, have mercy upon him!

[*She breaks off into silent weeping, and covers her face with her hands. The Man does not glance at her, but gives utterance, in his turn, to the following prayer.*]

PRAYER OF THE FATHER.

O God, dost Thou see me praying to Thee? Dost Thou see that I have bent my aged knees, and am crouching in the dust—that I am kissing the very earth in token of my supplication? Perchance at times I have offended Thee? If that be so, yet grant me Thy forgiveness. Perchance at times I have been insolent and presuming—I have blamed Thee for my misfortunes—I have demanded when I should have asked? Yet now, I pray Thee, forgive me these things. Punish me if Thou wilt—punish me howsoever Thou pleasest: only spare us the life of our son. Yea, spare him, I beseech Thee. I do not ask this of Thy mercy, nor of Thy pity, but

of Thy *justice:* for Thou art old in years, as even am I, and wouldst the better comprehend me for that. Evil men have tried to kill our son—cruel, pitiless men who lurked in dark places and cast stones at him. Yea, they lurked in dark places, and cast stones at him, the cowardly villains! Yet suffer them not to have achieved their evil purpose, seeing that they are men who do offend Thee with their misdeeds, and pollute Thy earth with their abominations. Staunch Thou, rather, the blood of our beloved son, and preserve to us his life. When Thou didst take away from me my riches, did I beseech and importune Thee to give me back my possessions, my friends, my fame, my talents? Did I, O God? No, never did I. I asked not even that my talents should be restored to me; and Thou Thyself knowest that a man's talents are more to him than life itself. Perchance, thought I, these things must be; so I bore them—bore them ever without complaining. Yet now I beseech Thee—here on my knees, and kissing the very dust of earth before Thee—that Thou wilt restore to us our little son. Yea, I kiss the very earth in token of my supplication.

[*The Man and his Wife rise to their feet again. The Being in Grey has listened to these prayers without making any sign.*]

THE MAN'S WIFE.

My dearest one, I cannot help fearing that your prayer was not sufficiently humble in tone. Methought there was too much of the note of pride in it.

THE MAN.

No, no, my wife. I did but speak Him fair, as man would speak to man. Surely He cannot prefer flatterers to open, self-respecting men who speak the truth? No, wife; you do not understand Him. I feel quite confident again now, and my mind is at ease—it is even cheerful. I feel that I can still do a little to help our son, and the thought gives me comfort. Go now, and see if he is asleep. He ought to have a good, sound sleep.

[*The Man's Wife leaves the room, and the Man seems to throw a glance as of gratitude towards the Being in Grey; after which he takes up the doll again, and begins to play with it, and to kiss its long red nose. Presently his Wife returns.*]

THE MAN.

(*With cheerful animation*). Yes, I feel sure now that I am forgiven for my late insult to this little friend of mine. And how is our dear boy?

HIS WIFE.

He looks so dreadfully pale!

THE MAN.

Oh, that is nothing. That will soon pass away. You must remember that he has lost so much blood.

HIS WIFE.

Yet it hurts me to see his poor, pale face and close-cropped head. He used to have such beautiful curls!

THE MAN.

Yes, I know, but the doctor was obliged to cut them off to dress the wound. But never mind, my wife; they will soon grow again, more beautiful than ever. Did you save the curls when they were cut off? They ought certainly to have been saved, for there was his dear blood upon them.

HIS WIFE.

Yes, my beloved one; and I stored them in this casket here—the only thing of value which we have left.

THE MAN.

Then you did rightly. We have no cause to fret about our vanished riches, for the boy

will soon be grown up, and able to go and work for us all. Yes, he will soon recover for us what we have lost. I feel quite cheerful again, my wife—quite confident about the future. Do you remember our poor old room with the pink walls, and how the good neighbours brought us sprigs of oak and birch, and how you made a chaplet of leaves for my head, and swore that I was a genius?

HIS WIFE.

Yes; and I swear it now, my darling. Others may have ceased to appreciate you, but not I.

THE MAN.

Yet you are mistaken, little wife. If I were *really* a genius my creations would have outlived this poor old relic which they call my body: yet *I* am still alive, whereas my creations——

HIS WIFE.

No, no! They have not perished, nor will they ever. Think of that great mansion at the corner of the street—the one which you designed ten years ago. I know well that you go to look at it every evening when the sun is setting. And, indeed, is there in all the world a more beautiful, a more stately mansion?

THE MAN.

Yes, of set purpose I built it in such a way that the beams of the setting sun may fall upon it and make its windows flash. When all the rest of the city is in twilight my house is still bidding farewell to the sun. Yes, 'twas a fine piece of work; and perchance—who knows? —it will outlive me a little while.

HIS WIFE.

Of *course* it will, my darling!

THE MAN.

One thing, and one thing only, grieves me concerning that masterpiece of mine: and that is that people should so soon have forgotten its designer. They might have remembered him a *little* longer, just a *little* longer.

HIS WIFE.

Oh, in time people forget every one, just as they cease to care for fashions which they once adored.

THE MAN.

Yet they might have remembered me just a little longer, just a little longer.

HIS WIFE.

One day I saw a young artist gazing at

that mansion. He was studying it carefully, and sketching it in a notebook.

THE MAN.

Oh, you should have told me of that before, dear wife! It means a great deal, a very great deal. It means that my design will be handed down to future generations, and that, even if my personality be forgotten, my *work* will live. Yes, it means a great deal, a very great deal.

HIS WIFE.

Ah! So you see that you are *not* forgotten, my darling! Think, too, of the young man who saluted you so respectfully in the street the other day.

THE MAN.

Yes, that is true, my wife. He was a nice-looking young man—a very nice-looking young man, and had such a distinguished face. I am glad to have been reminded of his bow that day. Well, I am almost bowing myself now; yes, bowing to sleep, for I am quite worn out. Yes, I am growing old, my little greyheaded wife. Do you not notice it?

HIS WIFE.

No, you are as handsome as ever.

THE MAN.

But are not my eyes just a little less bright than they used to be?

HIS WIFE.

No. They flash as brilliantly as ever they did.

THE MAN.

And my hair—is it as jet-black as before?

HIS WIFE.

No; but it is so snowily white that it looks even more beautiful.

THE MAN.

And have I no wrinkles?

HIS WIFE.

Oh, perhaps a *little* one or two, but——

THE MAN.

Oh yes, I know! I am a perfect Adonis. I will buy a uniform to-morrow, and take service in the light cavalry. Will that do, eh?

[*His Wife bursts out laughing.*]

HIS WIFE.

Ah, now you are joking, just as you used to do. But lie down here, my darling, and take

some sleep, while I go and sit by our boy. You may rest easy, for I shall not leave him, and when he wakes I will call you.—You will not mind kissing an old wrinkled hand, will you?

THE MAN.

Silence, silence! You are still the most beautiful woman that I have ever seen.

HIS WIFE.

But are there no wrinkles on my face?

THE MAN.

Wrinkles? What wrinkles? I see only a beautiful, dear, kind, clever face—beyond that, nothing. You will not be angry with me for chiding you thus? Now go to our boy, and watch over him; spreading around his bed the calm halo of your love and tenderness. And if he should be restless in his sleep, sing to him a little lullaby, as you were wont to do, and place the grapes near his bedside, so that he may be able to reach them with his hand when he awakes.

[*Exit the Man's Wife, while the Man lies down upon the couch with his head at the end which is nearest to the corner occupied by the motionless figure of the Being in Grey: so near, indeed, that the hand of the Being*

seems almost to be resting upon the Man's grey, dishevelled locks. In a moment the Man is asleep.]

THE BEING IN GREY.

Thus in sound and happy slumber sleeps the Man—buoyed up with fond, delusive hopes. His breathing is as calm as that of a little child, and his aged heart beats evenly and quietly as he rests. He knows not that within a few seconds his son will have passed away for ever into the Infinite. Yet even as the Man lies there the shadowy mists of sleep are presenting to his vision a dream of happiness which shall never be. He dreams that he is with his son, and that together they are gliding in a fair white boat down a broad and peaceful river. It seems to him that it is a beautiful day in summer, and that he is gazing upon pure blue sky and water clear as crystal. He can hear the rustling of the reeds as they part before the boat, and in his heart he is joyous and hopeful. For all his senses are deceiving the Man.

Yet suddenly he grows uneasy. Some strange fancy has pierced the mists of sleep and seared his soul. "Why have thy golden locks been shorn, my boy? Why have they done that?" "My head was hurting me, Papa. That is why they have shorn my locks." And once again, in his fond delusion, the Man feels happy as he

gazes at the blue sky and listens to the rustling of the reeds as they part before the boat.

No ; he knows not that at this moment his son is dying. He knows not that his beloved child is calling to him with a last voiceless cry of the soul as, in the throes of delirium, the boy's childish instinct turns once more to its belief in the superior strength of his elders. "Papa, Papa ! I am dying ! Save me, Papa !" No ; the Man sleeps on, in sound and happy slumber, while secret, fleeting dreams continue to present to his vision a dream of happiness which shall never be.

Awake, Man, awake ! Thy son is—*dead* !

[*The man lifts his head with a frightened gesture, and rises to his feet.*]

THE MAN.

I feel a sort of fear upon me. I thought I heard some one call.

[*Almost at the same moment the sound of female voices in lamentation is heard behind the scenes, and the Man's Wife enters, looking as white as a sheet.*]

THE MAN.

Our—our son? Is—is he dead?

HIS WIFE.

Yes—he is *dead* !

THE MAN.

Did he call to me just now?

HIS WIFE.

No ; he never returned to consciousness ; he never recognized any one. Yes, he is dead—our son, our darling son !

[*She falls to the ground before the Man, sobbing violently, and clasping him round the knees. The Man lays his hand protectingly upon her head as he turns towards the Being in Grey and exclaims in a choking voice:*]

Villain ! Thou hast wounded a woman, and thou hast killed a child !

[*His Wife still continues sobbing, while the Man silently strokes her head with a trembling hand.*]

THE MAN.

Do not weep, my darling ; do not weep. Life only laughs at our tears, even as it has laughed at our prayers.

[*Then, turning once more towards the Being in Grey, he exclaims:*]

And for *thee*—Fate, Life, God, or Devil, whatsoever be thy name—I hereby curse thee!

[*As the Man delivers the following curse he stands with one arm outstretched, as though shielding his Wife from danger, while the other arm he extends menacingly towards the Being in Grey.*]

THE MAN'S CURSE.

Hereby I curse thee, and all that thou hast given me! I curse the day whereon I was born, and the day whereon I shall die! I curse my whole life, its joys and its sorrows! I curse myself, my ears, my eyes, my heart, my tongue, my head! All those things which thou hast given me I fling back in thy face, thou Fate, thou Demon! Cursed be thou—aye, cursed for ever! Yet with this very curse will I vanquish thee at the last. For, in truth, what more canst thou do unto me? Strike me, if thou wilt—aye, strike me to the ground: I will yet laugh aloud in thy face, and cry, "My curse be upon thee, my curse be upon thee!" Or fill my mouth full with the creeping worms of death: I will yet with my last breath gasp into thy obscene ears, "My curse be upon thee, my curse be upon thee!" Seize thou my carcase, gnaw it

like a dog, worry it in the outer darkness of hell: what though my soul have left it and be fled to other regions, I will yet repeat, again and again, "My curse be upon thee, my curse be upon thee!" Aye! By the head of this woman whom thou hast wounded, and by the body of this child whom thou hast slain, I curse thee, I curse thee—aye, I, the Man!

[*For a little while he remains standing in silence, his arm raised in a menacing attitude. During the pronouncement of the curse the Being in Grey has made no sign. Only, the flame of the candle has flickered as with a breath of wind. Thus they stand facing one another—the Man and the Being in Grey; until gradually the sounds of lamentation behind the scenes grow louder, and merge into a concerted threnody as the curtain falls.*]

CURTAIN.

ACT V

THE DEATH OF THE MAN

[*When the curtain rises the stage is discovered wrapped in a vague, dim, flickering light —the sort of light which makes it difficult to distinguish objects at the first glance. Gradually, however, as the eye grows accustomed to the gloom, the following picture begins to stand out from the obscurity.*

[*The scene is a large, low hall or cellar, to which there are neither doors nor windows, but which is entered by a ladder leading down from a trapdoor in the ceiling. The walls are bare of ornamentation, and so thickly encrusted with dirt that almost they seem to be covered with leather made out of the hide of some gigantic wild beast. Along the back wall runs a rudely constructed drinking-bar, containing rows of bottles filled with variously-coloured liquids; and in front of this bar the proprietor of the den is seated on a low*

stool, with his hands clasped over his stomach. His face is pale, save for a pair of brilliantly red cheeks, and his head bald, while his neck and chin are covered with a large tawny beard. His whole expression denotes absolute lethargy and indifference, and he retains this attitude unchanged throughout the entire Act—never at any time making the least modification in his posture.

[*At a number of small tables persons of both sexes are seated drinking—the apparent number of these individuals being increased by the fantastic shadows which dart hither and thither over the walls and ceiling of the room. All have faces both horrible and repulsive, but in such infinite variety of ugliness that they resemble, rather, an assortment of hideous masks. Likewise, the majority of them have one or more features either grotesquely exaggerated or wholly absent (such, for instance, as a gigantic nose or no nose at all, eyes wildly protruding or shrunk to imperceptible slits, a throat horribly goitred or a chin receding to the point of deformity). Also, most of them have coarse, matted hair which covers the greater portion of their faces. Yet, despite this bizarre variety of feature, there is a marked similarity*

in the general appearance of these creatures —a similarity which finds its most distinctive characteristic in the greenish, corpse-like hue with which their faces are overlaid, no matter whether the face be rudely jocular or convulsed with semi-maniacal fear and horror. As for the bodies of the drunkards, they are clad in the most miserable of rags, of a uniformly dull, monotonous colour, and disclosing here a livid, bony hand or knee, and there a deformed or concave chest. Indeed, some of the wretches are almost naked, whilst the women are indistinguishable from the men, save for the fact that they are, if anything, the more uncouth. Men and women alike have tremulous hands and heads, and whenever a drunkard rises to walk about, he or she moves as though treading upon an exceedingly slippery, uneven, or unstable surface. Finally, the same timbre of voice —a sort of harsh and grating croak—is common to all, and they mouth their words as haltingly as they walk, with lips which seem frozen.

[*At a table a little apart from the rest there sits the Man. His white, dishevelled head is bowed upon his arms, and he maintains this attitude unchanged until the moment, towards the close of the Act, when*

he rises and speaks for the last time. Like the drunkards, he is very poorly clad.

[*In another corner of the room there stands the motionless figure of the Being in Grey. In the Being's hand a fast-expiring candle (its flame now grown thin and blue) is flickering heavily, as at one moment it droops downwards over the edge of the candlestick, and at another darts upwards into a fine point as it casts gleams of a lurid, deathlike hue over the statuesque face and chin of the Being.*]

DIALOGUE OF THE DRUNKARDS.

O my God, my God!

See how the room is heaving about! I can scarcely keep an eye fixed upon anything at all!

It is shivering as though with ague—ceiling, tables, floor, and walls!

It is as though we were at sea!

Hark! Do you hear that strange sound—a sound as of iron wheels being rattled, or of great stones rolling down a hillside—showers of stones as thick as raindrops?

Pooh! That sound is in your own ears. 'Tis the blood makes it. My blood too is playing me strange pranks, for it has turned all thick and black, and smells of *vodka*. It will scarce pass

through the veins now, and when it draws near to the heart it dams itself up, and refuses to flow at all.

I can see lightning flashing, lightning flashing!

And *I* can see great funeral-piles, with men burning on them! I can smell the horrid smell of their roasting flesh! I can see black shadows dancing round them! Hi, shadows! Let me come and dance with you awhile!

O my God, my God!

I must have another dram. Who will join me? No one? Then a curse upon you all! I will drink alone.

See! A lovely woman is kissing me on the lips! She smells of musk, and her teeth are like a crocodile's! Ugh! She will bite me, she will bite me! Away, harridan!

I am no harridan. I am only an old serpent with young, and have been watching little serpents crawl out of my womb this hour past, or more. See the little devils, how they wriggle about! Hi, you! Do not you dare to tread upon my serpent brood!

Where are you off to?

Who is that going away? Sit down again. You make the whole room shake with your tread.

No, I dare not stay; I dare not sit down again.

Nor I. When I sit down I feel the horrors coming over me.

Over me too. Let me pass, I say!

[*A number of the drunkards rise, and go surging towards the entrance-ladder—overturning some of the tables during their staggering progress.*]

See what that monster is doing! For two hours past it has been trying to climb on to my lap, only it cannot succeed. I keep driving it away, yet it always returns. At what sort of a game is it playing?

I feel as though a swarm of cockroaches were buzzing about, and nesting in my skull.

And I as though my skull were splitting in two—as though the very brains were coming out of it. They must have turned all maggoty, those brains, for they smell like mouldy cheese.

Or, rather, like carrion.

O my God, my God!

To-night I am going to creep up to her on my hands and knees, and slit her throat for her. Yes, her blood shall flow to-night; that nice red blood of hers shall soon be streaming down her breast.

Three men keep following me about everywhere. Some day they mean to catch me alone in some dark, lonely spot, and murder me. At

this very moment they are waiting for me outside.

What sort of a creature is it keeps walking about over the walls and ceiling?

O my God! They have come in! They are after me!

Who are?

Those three men! I cannot move hand or foot! Whatever shall I do? Whatever shall I do?

See! My clothes are slipping off me! Soon I shall be turned inside out—and a fine sight I shall look then!

Help, some one! Help! A monster is after me! It is seizing me by the hand! Help! Help!

What is it? God be with us! 'Tis a monstrous spider! Help! Help!

[*For a few moments some of the drunkards continue reiterating these cries for help.*]

Oh, we are drunk; that is all. Go and call down the rest of the town. It is so cold and miserable up there.

No, no; I dare not ascend into the street. If I were to do so I should find *her* waiting for me, and raging like a wild beast. She would kill me, to a certainty.

Well, there are enough of us here already, so let us have some more liquor, and be merry.

No, no! It only gives me the horrors. I have been shaking with them this many an hour past.

Better the horrors than real life. Who would want to be sober, and to go back to real life?

Not I!

Nor I! I would rather stay down here. No, *I* have no wish to go back to life.

Nor has any one else.

O my God, my God!

Why does the Man come here? He drinks little, but he sits much. *We* don't want his company.

No, indeed! Let him go home, since he has a home to go to. 'Tis a home with sixteen rooms in it!

Yes, but they are empty now. Only the rats scamper and squeak in them.

But he has a wife?

No, she is dead.

[*Throughout this dialogue the Old Women seen in Act I have, one by one, been entering the drinking den. Clad in the same weird garments as before, they seat themselves silently in places vacated by departing revellers. Likewise they continue to enter during the*

dialogue which follows. Neither their entry nor the fact of their interjecting scattered remarks into the general conversation seems to excite surprise among the company present, nor even to be noticed.]

MINGLED DIALOGUE OF DRUNKARDS AND OLD WOMEN.

The Man is near his end now. He can scarce stand for very weakness. Do you know, he has a mansion with sixteen rooms in it! Sixteen rooms!

Listen to the beating of his heart, how irregular and feeble it is! Soon it will have stopped for ever.

Hi, Man! Invite us to your mansion, since there are sixteen rooms in it.

Yes, that heart will soon have stopped for ever. It is an old, weak, diseased heart now.

He has gone to sleep, the drunken fool! This is a strange place to sleep in, but he seems able to do it. He might die in his sleep. Wake him up, some one.

Hi, Man! Wake up!

Think how that heart used to beat when it was young and strong.

[*The Old Women chuckle.*]

Who says more liquor? By the way, there seems to be a larger company present now.

What do you mean? I see only the same company as before.

I am going up into the street to raise the alarm! I have been robbed! I am nearly naked! See how my green skin is showing through!

Well, go; and good luck to you!

Do you remember the night when the Man was born? I think you were present on that occasion?

I am dying, I am dying! O my God! Who will carry me to the grave, or lay me in it? My corpse will be left to cumber the streets like a dog's, to be trodden upon by passers-by, to be ridden over and crushed! O my God, my God!

Do you remember the Relations saying, "Let us congratulate you, dear kinsman, on the birth of a son"?

I am certain you are wrong when you say that the circle can be squared. I will prove to you how absurd it is.

Well, you may be right.

O my God, my God!

Only an ignoramus in geometry would make such an assertion. I do not admit it—do you hear? I do not admit it.

Do you remember how the Man's Wife looked, in her poor pink dress and shabby hair-riband?

Yes ; and the flowers, too—the May lilies with the dew not dry upon them, the violets, and the grasses?

"Do not touch them, dear children ; do not touch the flowers."

[*The Old Women chuckle.*]

O my God, my God !

[*By this time the drunkards have all departed, and their places been taken by the Old Women. The light has been growing steadily fainter, until only the form of the Being in Grey and the white, drooping head of the Man stand out clearly under shafts of light falling upon them from above.*]

DIALOGUE OF THE OLD WOMEN ALONE.

Good evening to you !
And to you ! What a glorious night it is !
We are all here, are we not? How are *you*?
I have caught a little cold, I think.

[*The Old Women chuckle.*]

This time we shall not have very long to wait. Death and the Man have nearly met.

See the candle ! See its thin, blue, ragged flame ! It has almost no wax now—only wick.

Yes ; but it seems reluctant to go out?

Well? Are not *all* candles reluctant to go out?

Come, come ! No quarrelling, no quarrelling ! Whether the candle chooses to go out or not, the Man's time is fast ebbing away.

Do you remember his motor-car? Once it nearly ran me down.

And his mansion, too, with the sixteen rooms in it?

Yes. I was in them a short while ago. The rats nearly devoured me, and the draughts nearly blew me away, for some one had stolen the window-frames from their sockets, and the wind was tearing through the rooms.

And you had a snooze on the very bed on which his Wife died, did you not? Oh, you sentimental old thing !

I did. But I must confess that some queer thoughts passed through my mind as I wandered through those rooms. There used to be such a charming nursery in the mansion, and I felt hurt to see that its windows were all shattered, and that the wind was blowing the dust in clouds over the floor. And there used to be such a lovely little cradle in the room ! Now the rats are making *their* nests in that nursery, and rocking *their* children to sleep in that cradle.

Oh the dear little naked rat-children !

[*The Old Women chuckle.*]

And on a table in the study I saw some broken toys—a little horse without a tail, a pasteboard helmet, and a red-nosed clown doll. I played with them each in turn, and tried on the helmet. It would have suited me well enough if it had only been a trifle less mouldy and covered with dust.

And surely you paid a visit to the grand *salon* where the ball was given that night? What a gay scene it was!

Yes, I went in there too. But judge of my surprise when I found it in darkness, with the windows broken, and the wind whistling round the cornices!

Ah! That would serve as music.

Yes, of course. And the walls were all lined with guests—with guests sitting there in the darkness! You should have seen how queer they looked!

We can imagine it.

And you should have heard them ejaculating with their old wheedling lips, "How rich it all is! How sumptuous!"

Oh, you are joking!

Yes, I am only joking. You know my playful disposition.

How "rich" indeed, how "sumptuous," everything must have looked when you went in!

Man, do you remember the tune that was played at your ball?

Ah! he is near his death now.

Do you remember how the dancers surrounded you, and how tenderly, how bewitchingly, the music played? It played like this.

[*The Old Women form a semicircle around the Man, and begin softly to hum the tune which was played at his ball.*]

Let us have a ball ourselves. It is so long since I had a dance!

Very well. "Imagine this to be a palace—a supernaturally beautiful palace."

First of all we must call the musicians. One cannot have a proper ball without music.

The musicians?

Yes, certainly. Do you not remember them?

[*The Old Women give a shrill cry, and instantly there are seen coming down the ladder the same three musicians who played at the Man's ball. The fiddler folds a handkerchief on his shoulder, to form a pad for his fiddle, and they begin to play with extraordinary energy. Yet the music is soft and low, as in a dream.*]

Now we can have our ball!

"How rich it all is!"

"How sumptuous!"

" How brilliant ! "
Do you remember it, Man?

[*Softly humming to the music, the Old Women begin to circle round the Man —mouthing with their lips, and making a horrible travesty of the movements of the white-robed dancers who danced at the Man's ball. To the first phrase of the tune they whirl themselves round; to the second they converge and retire; to the third and fourth they whirl themselves round in their places—stepping softly, and on tiptoe, as, at intervals, they whisper in the Man's ear:*]

Do you remember it, Man?
You are going to die soon, but do you remember it?
Do you remember it?
Do you remember it?
You are going to die soon, but do you remember it?

[*The dance becomes swifter, the motions more abandoned, and strange, wailing notes begin to make themselves heard in the voices of the Old Women as they hum the tune, and reiterations of weird laughter to run*

softly round the circle like a ripple. Each time that the dancers pass before the Man they shoot into his ear such whispered ejaculations as:]

Do you remember it, Man?
Do you remember it?
How ravishing it all was—how voluptuous?
How delightful to the soul?
Do you remember it, Man?
You are going to die soon!
You are going to die soon!
You are going to die soon!
Do you remember it, Man?

[*Still more swiftly the Old Women circle in the dance; still more wild and uncouth their antics become. Suddenly all become stricken to silence, and come to a dead stop—even the musicians standing arrested in the exact attitudes of playing, and remaining perfectly silent and motionless. The Man rises, and tries to stand upright, with his handsome grey head shaking tremulously. Lastly, in a startlingly loud voice—a voice charged with entreaty, wrath, and mortal agony—he cries out, with a pause between each several phrase:*]

Where is my armour-bearer?—Where is my sword?—Where is my buckler?—I am without arms !—To my aid !—Speed !—Speed ! —My curse be upon——

[*He falls back dead upon the chair, with his head bowed upon his breast. At the same moment the candle in the hand of the Being in Grey gives a last flicker and goes out. Instantly the scene becomes wrapped in deep shadow —a shadow which seems to come creeping down the entrance-ladder, and gradually to envelop the whole. Finally, no light whatever is left upon the stage but a solitary shaft resting upon the head of the corpse. Only a low, vague murmuring can be heard proceeding from the Old Women—a sort of whispering and chuckling.*]

THE BEING IN GREY.

Silence ye ! A man is dead !

[*Again there is silence; save that a cold, passionless voice is heard re-echoing as from a great distance, "Silence ye! A man is dead!" Slowly the gloom deepens, though the crouching, mouse-like forms of the Old Women still remain faintly visible in the obscurity.*

Presently they begin to circle around the corpse again—at first without a word or sound of any kind, but gradually with renewed humming of the refrain of the tune. Also, the musicians begin again to play, but with music that is soft and low like dream music; until, in proportion as the gloom deepens, the strains of the musicians and the humming of the Old Women grow louder, the dance recovers its former wildness and abandon, and the revelry becomes, not so much a dance, as a furious swirl and rush around the dead Man—a movement accompanied by stamping of feet, shrill yells, and frequent bursts of weird laughter. In time the darkness becomes complete, except for the shaft of light which is resting upon the head of the corpse; until this also is extinguished, and the scene becomes wrapped in a blackness of obscurity which the eye cannot pierce. From its depths come sounds of the dancers' wild movements, yells, bursts of laughter, and the now strident, discordant strains of the musicians. At length, when the combined din has attained the extreme pitch of pande-