

Miss Cayley's Adventures.

VI.—THE ADVENTURE OF THE URBANE OLD GENTLEMAN.

BY GRANT ALLEN.



WHEN Elsie's holidays—I beg pardon, vacation—came to an end, she proposed to return to her High School in London. Zeal for the higher mathematics devoured her. But she still looked so frail, and coughed so often—a perfect *Campo Santo* of a cough—in spite of her summer of open-air exercise, that I positively worried her into consulting a doctor—not one of the Fortescue-Langley order. The report he gave was mildly unfavourable. He spoke disrespectfully of the apex of her right lung. It was not exactly tubercular, he remarked, but he “feared tuberculosis”—excuse the long words; the phrase was his, not mine; I repeat *verbatim*. He vetoed her exposing herself to a winter in London in her present unstable condition. Davos? Well, no. *Not* Davos: with deliberative thumb and finger on close-shaven chin. He judged her too delicate for such drastic remedies. Those high mountain stations suited best the robust invalid, who had dropped by accident into casual phthisis. For Miss Petheridge's case—looking wise—he would not recommend the Riviera, either: too stimulating, too exciting. What this young lady needed most was rest: rest in some agreeable southern town, some city of

the soul—say Rome or Florence—where she might find much to interest her, and might forget the apex of her right lung in the new world of art that opened around her.

“Very well,” I said, promptly; “that's settled, Elsie. The apex and you shall winter in Florence.”

“But, Brownie, can we afford it?”

“Afford it?” I echoed. “Goodness gracious, my dear child, what a bourgeois sentiment! Your medical attendant says to you, ‘Go to Florence’; and to Florence you must go; there's no getting out of it. Why, even the swallows fly south when their medical attendant tells them England is turning a trifle too cold for them.”

“But what will Miss Latimer say? She depends upon me to come back at the beginning of term. She *must* have *somebody* to undertake the higher mathematics.”

“And she will get somebody, dear,” I answered, calmly. “Don't trouble your sweet little head about that. An eminent statistician has calculated that five hundred and thirty duly qualified young women are now standing four-square in a solid phalanx in the streets of London, all agog to teach the higher mathematics to anyone who wants them at a moment's notice. Let Miss Latimer take her pick of the five hundred and thirty. I'll wire



“ALL AGOG TO TEACH THE HIGHER MATHEMATICS.”

to her at once: 'Elsie Petheridge unable through ill health to resume her duties. Ordered to Florence. Resigns post. Engage substitute.' *That's* the way to 'do it.'

Elsie clasped her small white hands in the despair of the woman who considers herself indispensable—as if we were any of us indispensable! "But, dearest, the girls! They'll be so disappointed!"

"They'll get over it," I answered, grimly. "There are worse disappointments in store for them in life. Which is a fine old crusted platitude worthy of Aunt Susan. Anyhow, I've decided. Look here, Elsie: I stand to you *in loco parentis*." I have already remarked, I think, that she was three years my senior; but I was so pleased with this phrase that I repeated it lovingly. "I stand to you, dear, *in loco parentis*. Now, I can't let you endanger your precious health by returning to town and Miss Latimer this winter. Let us be categorical. I go to Florence; you go with me."

"What shall we live upon?" Elsie suggested, piteously.

"Our fellow-creatures, as usual," I answered, with prompt callousness. "I object to these base utilitarian considerations being imported into the discussion of a serious question. Florence is the city of art; as a woman of culture, it behoves you to revel in it. Your medical attendant sends you there; as a patient and an invalid, you can revel with a clear conscience. Money? Well, money is a secondary matter. All philosophies and all religions agree that money is mere dross, filthy lucre. Rise superior to it. We have a fair sum in hand to the credit of the firm; we can pick up some more, I suppose, in Florence."

"How?"

I reflected. "Elsie," I said, "you are deficient in Faith—which is one of the leading Christian graces. My mission in life is to correct that want in your spiritual nature. Now, observe how beautifully all these events work in

together! The winter comes, when no man can bicycle, especially in Switzerland. Therefore, what is the use of my stopping on here after October? Again, in pursuance of my general plan of going round the world, I must get forward to Italy. Your medical attendant considerably orders you at the same time to Florence. In Florence we shall still have chances of selling Manitous, though possibly, I admit, in diminished numbers. I confess at once that people come to Switzerland to tour, and are therefore liable to need our machines; while they go to Florence to look at pictures, and a bicycle would doubtless prove inconvenient in the Uffizi or the Pitti. Still, we *may* sell a few. But I descry another opening. You write shorthand, don't you?"

"A little, dear; only ninety words a minute."

"*That's* not business. Advertise yourself, *à la* Cyrus Hitchcock! Say boldly, 'I write shorthand.' Leave the world to ask, 'How fast?' It will ask it quick enough without your suggesting it. Well, my idea is this. Florence is a town teeming with English tourists of the cultivated classes—men of letters, painters, antiquaries, art-critics. I suppose even art-critics may be classed as cultivated. Such people are sure to need literary aid. We exist, to supply it. We will set up the Florentine School of Stenography and Typewriting. We'll buy a couple of typewriters."

"How can we pay for them, Brownie?"



"THERE'S ENTERPRISE FOR YOU!"

I gazed at her in despair. "Elsie," I cried, clapping my hand to my head, "you are not practical. Did I ever suggest we should pay for them? I said merely, buy them. Base is the slave that pays. That's Shakespeare. And we all know Shakespeare is the mirror of nature. Argal, it would be unnatural to pay for a typewriter. We will hire a room in Florence (on tick, of course), and begin operations. Clients will flock in; and we tide over the winter. *There's* enterprise for you!" And I struck an attitude.

Elsie's face looked her doubts. I walked across to Mrs. Eveleigh's desk, and began writing a letter. It occurred to me that Mr. Hitchcock, who was a man of business, might be able to help a woman of business in this delicate matter. I put the point to him fairly and squarely, without circumlocution; we were going to start an English typewriting office in Florence; what was the ordinary way for people to become possessed of a typewriting machine, without the odious and mercenary preliminary of paying for it?

The answer came back with commendable promptitude.

"DEAR MISS,—Your spirit of enterprise is really remarkable! I have forwarded your letter to my friends of the Spread Eagle Typewriting and Phonograph Company, Limited, of New York City, informing them of your desire to open an agency for the sale of their machines in Florence, Italy, and giving them my estimate of your business capacities. I have advised their London house to present you with two complimentary machines for your own use and your partner's, and also to supply a number of others for disposal in the city of Florence. If you would further like to undertake an agency for the development of the trade in salt codfish (large quantities of which are, of course, consumed in Catholic Europe), I could put you into communication with my respected friends, Messrs. Abel Woodward and Co., exporters of preserved provisions, St. John, Newfoundland. But, perhaps in this suggestion I am not sufficiently high-toned.—Respectfully, CYRUS W. HITCHCOCK."

The moment had arrived for Elsie to be firm. "I have no prejudice against trade, Brownie," she observed, emphatically; "but I do draw the line at salt fish."

"So do I, dear," I answered.

She sighed her relief. I really believe she half expected to find me trotting about Florence with miscellaneous samples of

Messrs. Abel Woodward's esteemed productions protruding from my pocket.

So to Florence we went. My first idea was to travel by the Brenner route through the Tyrol; but a queer little episode which met us at the outset on the Austrian frontier put a check to this plan. We cycled to the border, sending our trunks on by rail. When we went to claim them at the Austrian Custom-house, we were told they were detained "for political reasons."

"Political reasons?" I exclaimed, non-plussed.

"Even so, Fräulein. Your boxes contain revolutionary literature."

"Some mistake!" I cried, warmly. I am but a drawing-room Socialist.

"Not at all; look here." And he drew a small book out of Elsie's portmanteau.

What? Elsie a conspirator? Elsie in league with Nihilists? So mild and so meek! I could never have believed it. I took the book in my hands and read the title, "Revolution of the Heavenly Bodies."

"But this is astronomy," I burst out. "Don't you see? Sun-and-star-circling. The revolution of the planets."

"It matters not, Fräulein. Our instructions are strict. We have orders to intercept *all* revolutionary literature without distinction."

"Come, Elsie," I said, firmly, "this is *too* ridiculous. Let us give them a clear berth, these Kaiserly-Kingly blockheads!" So we registered our luggage right back to Lucerne, and cycled over the Gotthard.

When at last, by leisurely stages, we arrived at Florence, I felt there was no use in doing things by halves. If you are going to start the Florentine School of Stenography and Typewriting, you may as well start it on a proper basis. So I took sunny rooms at a nice hotel for myself and Elsie, and hired a ground floor in a convenient house, close under the shadow of the great marble Campanile. (Considerations of space compel me to curtail the usual gush about Arnolfo and Giotto.) This was our office. When I had got a Tuscan painter to plant our flag in the shape of a sign-board, I sailed forth into the street and inspected it from outside with a swelling heart. It is true, the Tuscan painter's unaccountable predilection for the rare spellings "Scool" without an *h*, and "Stenografy" with an *f*, somewhat damped my exuberant pride for the moment; but I made him take the board back and correct his Italianate English. As soon as all was fitted up with desk and tables we reposed upon our laurels, and

waited only for customers in shoals to pour in upon us. I called them "customers"; Elsie maintained that we ought rather to say "clients." Being by temperament averse to sectarianism, I did not dispute the point with her.

We reposed on our laurels—in vain. Neither customers nor clients seemed in any particular hurry to disturb our leisure.

I confess I took this ill. It was a rude awakening. I had begun to regard myself as the special favourite of a fairy godmother; it surprised me to find that any undertaking of mine did not succeed immediately. However, reflecting that my fairy godmother's name was really Enterprise, I recalled Mr. Cyrus W. Hitchcock's advice, and advertised.

"There's one good thing about Florence, Elsie," I said, just to keep up her courage. "When the customers *do* come, they'll be interesting people, and it will be interesting work. Artistic work, don't you know—Fra Angelico, and Della Robbia, and all that sort of thing; or else fresh light on Dante and Petrarch!"

"When they *do* come, no doubt," Elsie answered, dubiously. "But do you know, Brownie, it strikes me there isn't quite that literary stir and ferment one might expect in Florence. Dante and Petrarch appear to be dead. The distinguished authors fail to stream in upon us as one imagined with manuscripts to copy."

I affected an air of confidence—for I had sunk capital in the concern (that's business-like—sunk capital!). "Oh, we're a new firm," I assented, carelessly. "Our enterprise is yet young. When cultivated Florence learns we're here, cultivated Florence will invade us in its thousands."

But we sat in our office and bit our thumbs all day; the thousands stopped at home. We had ample opportunities for making studies of the decorative detail on the

Campanile, till we knew every square inch of it better than Mr. Ruskin. Elsie's notebook contains, I believe, eleven hundred separate sketches of the Campanile, from the right end, the left end, and the middle of our window, with eight hundred and five distinct distortions of the individual statues that adorn its niches on the side turned towards us.

At last, after we had sat, and bitten our

thumbs, and sketched the Four Greater Prophets for a fortnight on end, an immense excitement occurred. An old gentleman was distinctly seen to approach and to look up at the sign-board which decorated our office.

I instantly slipped in a sheet of foolscap, and began to type-write with alarming speed—click, click, click; while Elsie, rising to the occasion, set to work to transcribe imaginary shorthand as if her life depended upon it.

The old gentleman, after a moment's hesitation, lifted the latch of the door somewhat nervously. I affected to take no notice of him, so breathless was the haste with which our immense business connection compelled me to finger the keyboard; but, looking up at him under my eyelashes, I could just make out he was a peculiarly bland and urbane old person, dressed with the greatest care, and some attention to fashion. His face was smooth; it tended towards portliness.

He made up his mind, and entered the office. I continued to click till I had reached the close of a sentence—"Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by



"PAINTING THE SIGN-BOARD."

opposing, end them." Then I looked up sharply. "Can I do anything for you?" I inquired, in the smartest tone of business. (I observe that politeness is not professional.)

The Urbane Old Gentleman came forward with his hat in his hand. He looked as if he had just landed from the Eighteenth Century. His figure was that of Mr. Edward Gibbon. "Yes, madam," he said, in a markedly deferential tone, fussing about with the rim of his hat as he spoke, and adjusting his *pince-nez*. "I was recommended to you—ur—your establishment for shorthand and typewriting. I have some work which I wish done, if it falls within your province. But I am *rather* particular. I require a quick worker. Excuse my asking it, but how many words can you do a minute?"

"Shorthand?" I asked, sharply, for I wished to imitate official habits.

The Urbane Old Gentleman bowed. "Yes, shorthand. Certainly."

I waved my hand with careless grace towards Elsie—as if these things happened to us daily. "Miss Petheridge undertakes the shorthand department," I said, with decision. "I am the typewriting from dictation. Miss Petheridge, forward!"

Elsie rose to it like an angel. "A hundred," she answered, confronting him.

The old gentleman bowed again. "And your terms?" he inquired, in a honey-tongued voice. "If I may venture to ask them."

We handed him our printed tariff. He seemed satisfied.

"Could you spare me an hour this morning?" he asked, still fingering his hat nervously with his puffy hand. "But perhaps you are engaged. I fear I intrude upon you."

"Not at all," I answered, consulting an imaginary engagement list. "This work can wait. Let me see: 11.30. Elsie, I think you have nothing to do before one, that cannot be put off? Quite so!—Very well, then; yes, we are both at your service."

The Urbane Old Gentleman looked about him for a seat. I pushed him our one easy chair. He withdrew his gloves with great deliberation, and sat down in it with an apologetic glance. I could gather from his dress and his diamond pin that he was wealthy. Indeed, I half guessed who he was already. There was a fussiness about his manner which seemed strangely familiar to me.

He sat down by slow degrees, edging himself about till he was thoroughly comfortable. I could see he was of the kind that will have comfort. He took out his notes and a packet of letters, which he sorted slowly. Then he looked hard at me and at Elsie. He seemed to be making his choice between us. After a time he spoke. "I *think*," he said, in a most leisurely voice, "I will not trouble your friend to write shorthand for me, after all. Or should I say your assistant? Excuse my change of plan. I will content myself with dictation. You can follow on the machine?"

"As fast as you choose to dictate to me."

He glanced at his notes and began a letter. It was a curious communication. It seemed

to be all about buying Bertha and selling Clara—a cold-blooded proceeding which almost suggested slave-dealing. I gathered he was giving instructions to his agent: could he have business relations with Cuba? I wondered. But there were also hints of mysterious middies—brave British tars to the rescue, possibly! Perhaps my bewilderment showed itself upon my face, for at last he looked queerly at me. "You don't quite like this, I'm afraid," he said, breaking off short.

I was the soul of business. "Not at all," I answered. "I am an automaton—nothing more. It is a typewriter's function to transcribe the words a client dictates as if they were absolutely meaningless to her."

"Quite right," he answered, approvingly. "Quite right. I see you understand. A very proper spirit!"



THE URBANE OLD GENTLEMAN.

Then the Woman within me got the better of the Typewriter. "Though I confess," I continued, "I *do* feel it is a little unkind to sell Clara at once for whatever she will fetch. It seems to me—well—unchivalrous."

He smiled, but held his peace.

"Still—the middies," I went on: "they will perhaps take care that these poor girls are not ill-treated."

He leaned back, clasped his hands, and regarded me fixedly. "Bertha," he said, after a pause, "is Brighton A's—to be strictly correct, London, Brighton, and South Coast First Preference Debentures. Clara is Glasgow and South-Western Deferred Stock. Middies are Midland Ordinary. But I respect your feeling. You are a young lady of principle." And he fidgeted more than ever.

He went on dictating for just an hour. His subject-matter bewildered me. It was all

Argentine Central were likely to be weak; but Provincials must soon become commendably firm, and if Uruguays went flat, something good ought to be made out of them. Scotch rails might shortly be quiet—I always understood they were based upon sleepers; but if South-Eastern stiffened, advantage should certainly be taken of their stiffening. He would telegraph particulars on Monday morning. And so on till my brain reeled. Oh, artistic Florence! was *this* the Filippo Lippi, the Michael Angelo I dreamed of?

At the end of the hour, the Urbane Old Gentleman rose urbanely. He drew on his gloves again with the greatest deliberation, and hunted for his stick as if his life depended upon it. "Let me see; I had a pencil; oh, thanks; yes, that is it. This cover protects the point. My hat? Ah, certainly. And my notes; much obliged; notes *always* get mislaid. People are so careless. Then I



"HE WENT ON DICTATING FOR JUST AN HOUR."

about India Bills, and telegraphic transfers, and selling cotton short, and holding tight to Egyptian Unified. Markets, it seemed, were glutted. Hungarians were only to be dealt in if they hardened—hardened sinners I know, but what are hardened Hungarians? And fears were not unnaturally expressed that Turks might be "irregular." Consols, it appeared, were certain to give way for political reasons; but the downward tendency of Australians, I was relieved to learn, for the honour of so great a group of colonies, could only be temporary. Greeks were growing decidedly worse, though I had always understood Greeks were bad enough already; and

will come again to-morrow; the same hour, if you will kindly keep yourself disengaged. Though, excuse me, you had better make an entry of it at once upon your agenda."

"I shall remember it," I answered, smiling.

"No; will you? But you haven't my name."

"I know it," I answered. "At least, I think so. You are Mr. Marmaduke Ashurst. Lady Georgina Fawley sent you here."

He laid down his hat and gloves again, so as to regard me more undistracted. "You are a most remarkable young lady," he said, in a very slow voice. "I impressed upon Georgina that she must not mention to you

that I was coming. How on earth did you recognise me?"

"Intuition, most likely."

He stared at me with a sort of suspicion. "Please don't tell me you think me like my sister," he went on. "For though, of course, every right-minded man feels—ur—a natural respect and affection for the members of his family—bows, if I may so say, to the inscrutable decrees of Providence—which has mysteriously burdened him with them—still, there *are* points about Lady Georgina which I cannot conscientiously assert I approve of."

I remembered "Marmy's a fool," and held my tongue judiciously.

"I do not resemble her, I hope," he persisted, with a look which I could almost describe as wistful.

"A family likeness, perhaps," I put in. "Family likenesses exist, you know—often with complete divergence of tastes and character."

He looked relieved. "That is true. Oh, how true! But the likeness in my case, I must admit, escapes me."

I temporized. "Strangers see these things most," I said, airing the stock platitudes. "It may be superficial. And, of course, one knows that profound differences of intellect and moral feeling often occur within the limits of a single family."

"You are quite right," he said, with decision. "Georgina's principles are not mine. Excuse my remarking it; but you seem to be a young lady of unusual penetration."

I saw he took my remark as a compliment. What I really meant to say was that a commonplace man might easily be brother to so clever a woman as Lady Georgina.

He gathered up his hat, his stick, his gloves, his notes, and his typewritten letters, one by one, and backed out politely. He was a punctilious millionaire. He had risen by urbanity to his brother directors, like a model guinea-pig. He bowed to us each separately as if we had been duchesses.

As soon as he was gone, Elsie turned to me. "Brownie, how on earth did you guess it? They're so awfully different!"

"Not at all," I answered. "A few surface unlikenesses only just mask an underlying identity. Their features are the same; but his are plump; hers, shrunken. Lady Georgina's expression is sharp and worldly; Mr. Ashurst's is smooth, and bland, and financial. And then their manner! Both are fussy; but Lady Georgina's is honest, open, ill-tempered fussiness; Mr. Ashurst's is concealed under

an artificial mask of obsequious politeness. One's cantankerous; the other's only pernickety. It's one tune, after all, in two different keys."

From that day forth, the Urbane Old Gentleman was a daily visitor. He took an hour at a time at first; but after a few days, the hour lengthened out (apologetically) to an entire morning. He "presumed to ask" my Christian name the second day, and remembered my father—"a man of excellent principles." But he didn't care for Elsie to work for him. Fortunately for her, other work dropped in, once we had found a client, or else, poor girl, she would have felt sadly slighted. I was glad she had something to do; the sense of dependence weighed heavily upon her.

The Urbane Old Gentleman did not confine himself entirely, after the first few days, to Stock Exchange literature. He was engaged on a Work—he spoke of it always with bated breath, and a capital letter was implied in his intonation; the Work was one on the Interpretation of Prophecy. Unlike Lady Georgina, who was tart and crisp, Mr. Marmaduke Ashurst was devout and decorous; where she said "pack of fools," he talked with unction of "the mental deficiencies of our poorer brethren." But his religious opinions and his stockbroking had got strangely mixed up at the wash somehow. He was convinced that the British nation represented the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel—and in particular Ephraim—a matter on which, as a mere laywoman, I would not presume either to agree with him or to differ from him. "That being so, Miss Cayley, we can easily understand that the existing commercial prosperity of England depends upon the promises made to Abraham."

I assented, without committing myself, "It would seem to follow."

Mr. Ashurst, encouraged by so much assent, went on to unfold his System of Interpretation, which was of a strictly commercial or company-promoting character. It ran like a prospectus. "We have inherited the gold of Australia and the diamonds of the Cape," he said, growing didactic, and lifting one fat forefinger; "we are now inheriting Klondike and the Rand, for it is morally certain that we shall annex the Transvaal. Again, 'the chief things of the ancient mountains, and the precious things of the everlasting hills.' What does that mean? The ancient mountains are clearly the Rockies; can the everlasting hills be anything but the Himalayas? 'For they shall suck of the abundance

of the seas'—that refers, of course, to our world-wide commerce, due mainly to imports—'and of the treasures hid in the sand.' Which sand? Undoubtedly, I say, the desert of Mount Sinai. What then is our obvious destiny? A lady of your intelligence must

consider these questions from a historical and prophetic point of view. They see nothing above percentages."

"That's it," he replied, lighting up. "They have no higher feelings. Though, mind you, there will be dividends too; mark my words,



"HE BOWED TO US EACH SEPARATELY."

gather at once that it is——?" He paused and gazed at me.

"To drive the Sultan out of Syria," I suggested tentatively, "and to annex Palestine to our practical province of Egypt?"

He leaned back in his chair and folded his fat hands in undisguised satisfaction. "Now, you are a thinker of exceptional penetration," he broke out. "Do you know, Miss Cayley, I have tried to make that point clear to the War Office, and the Prime Minister, and many leading financiers in the City of London, and I *can't* get them to see it. They have no heads, those people. But *you* catch at it at a glance. Why, I endeavoured to interest Rothschild and induce him to join me in my Palestine Development Syndicate, and will you believe it, the man refused point blank. Though if he had only looked at Nahum iii., 17——"

"Mere financiers," I said, smiling, "will not

there will be dividends. This syndicate, besides fulfilling the prophecies, will pay forty per cent. on every penny embarked in it."

"Only forty per cent. for Ephraim!" I murmured, half below my breath. "Why, Judah is said to batten upon sixty."

He caught at it eagerly, without perceiving my gentle sarcasm.

"In that case, we might even expect seventy," he put in with a gasp of anticipation. "Though I approached Rothschild's first with my scheme on purpose, so that Israel and Judah might once more unite in sharing the promises."

"Your combined generosity and commercial instinct does you credit," I answered. "It is rare to find so much love for an abstract study side by side with such conspicuous financial ability."

His guilelessness was beyond words. He swallowed it like an infant. "So I think," he answered. "I am glad to observe that you understand my character. Mere City men don't. They have no soul above shekels. Though, as I show them, there are shekels in it, too. Dividends, dividends,

di-vidends. But *you* are a lady of understanding and comprehension. You have been to Girton, haven't you? Perhaps you read Greek, then?"

"Enough to get on with."

"Could you look things up in Herodotus?"

"Certainly."

"In the original?"

"Oh, dear, yes."

He regarded me once more with the same astonished glance. His own classics, I soon learnt, were limited to the amount which a public school succeeds in dinning, during the intervals of cricket and football, into an English gentleman. Then he informed me that he wished me to hunt up certain facts in Herodotus "and elsewhere" confirmatory of his view that the English were the descendants of the Ten Tribes. I promised to do so, swallowing even that comprehensive "elsewhere." It was none of my business to believe or disbelieve; I was paid to get up a case, and I got one up to the best of my ability. I imagine it was at least as good as most other cases in similar matters; at any rate, it pleased the old gentleman vastly.

By dint of listening, I began to like him. But Elsie couldn't bear him. She hated the fat crease at the back of his neck, she told me.

After a week or two devoted to the Interpretation of Prophecy on a strictly commercial basis of Founders' Shares, with interludes of mining engineers' reports upon the rubies of Mount Sinai and the supposed auriferous quartzites of Palestine, the Urbane Old Gentleman trotted down to the office one day, carrying a packet of notes of most voluminous magnitude. "Can we work in a room alone this morning, Miss Cayley?" he asked, with mystery in his voice: he was always mysterious. "I want to intrust you with a piece of work of an exceptionally private and confidential character. It concerns Property. In point of fact," he dropped his voice to a whisper, "I want you to draw up my will for me."

"Certainly," I said, opening the door into the back office. But I trembled in my shoes. Could this mean that he was going to draw up a will, disinheriting Harold Tillington?

And, suppose he did, what then? My heart was in a tumult. If Harold were rich—well and good, I could never marry him. But, if Harold were poor—I must keep my promise. Could I wish him to be rich? Could I wish him to be poor? My heart stood divided two ways within me.

The Urbane Old Gentleman began with immense deliberation, as befits a man of

principle when Property is at stake. "You will kindly take down notes from my dictation," he said, fussing with his papers; "and afterwards, I will ask you to be so good as to copy it all out fair on your typewriter for signature."

"Is a typewritten form legal?" I ventured to inquire.

"A most perspicacious young lady!" he interjected, well pleased. "I have investigated that point, and find it perfectly regular. Only, if I may venture to say so, there should be no erasures."

"There shall be none," I answered.

The Urbane Old Gentleman leant back in his easy chair, and began dictating from his notes with tantalizing deliberateness. This was the last will and testament of him, Marmaduke Courtney Ashurst. Its verbiage wearied me. I was eager for him to come to the point about Harold. Instead of that, he did what it seems is usual in such cases—set out with a number of unimportant legacies to old family servants and other hangers-on among "our poorer brethren." I fumed and fretted inwardly. Next came a series of quaint bequests of a quite novel character. "I give and bequeath to James Walsh and Sons, of 720, High Holborn, London, the sum of Five Hundred Pounds, in consideration of the benefit they have conferred upon humanity by the invention of a sugar-spoon or silver sugar-sifter, by means of which it is possible to dust sugar upon a tart or pudding without letting the whole or the greater part of the material run through the apertures uselessly in transit. You must have observed, Miss Cayley—with your usual perspicacity—that most sugar-sifters allow the sugar to fall through them on to the table prematurely."

"I have noticed it," I answered, trembling with anxiety.

"James Walsh and Sons, acting on a hint from me, have succeeded in inventing a form of spoon which does not possess that regrettable drawback. 'Run through the apertures uselessly in transit,' I think I said last. Yes, thank you. Very good. We will now continue. And I give and bequeath the like sum of Five Hundred Pounds—did I say, free of legacy duty? No? Then please add it to James Walsh's clause. Five Hundred Pounds, free of legacy duty, to Thomas Webster Jones, of Wheeler Street, Soho, for his admirable invention of a pair of braces which will not slip down on the wearer's shoulders after half an hour's use. Most braces, you must have observed, Miss Cayley——"

"My acquaintance with braces is limited, not to say abstract," I interposed, smiling.

He gazed at me, and twirled his fat thumbs. "Of course," he murmured. "Of course. But most braces, you may not be aware, slip down unpleasantly on the shoulder-blade, and so lead to an awkward habit of hitching them up by the sleeve-hole of the waistcoat at frequent intervals. Such a habit must be felt to be ungraceful. Thomas Webster Jones, to whom I pointed out this error of manufacture, has invented a brace the two halves of which diverge at a higher angle than usual, and fasten further towards the centre of the body in front—pardon these details—so as to obviate that difficulty. He has given me satisfaction, and he deserves to be rewarded."

factor, Miss Cayley; a real benefactor to the link-wearing classes; for he has sensibly diminished the average annual output of profane swearing."

When he left Five Hundred Pounds to his faithful servant Frederic Higginson, courier, I was tempted to interpose; but I refrained in time, and I was glad of it afterwards.

At last, after many divagations, my Urbane Old Gentleman arrived at the central point—"and I give and bequeath to my nephew, Harold Ashurst Tillington, Younger of Gledcliffe, Dumfriesshire, attaché to Her Majesty's Embassy at Rome—"

I waited, breathless.

He was annoyingly dilatory. "My house and estate of Ashurst Court, in the County of



"I WAITED BREATHLESS."

I heard through it all the voice of Lady Georgina observing, tartly, "Why the idiots can't make braces to fit one at first passes *my* comprehension. But, there, my dear; the people who manufacture them are a set of born fools, and what can you expect from an imbecile?" Mr. Ashurst was Lady Georgina, venerated with a thin layer of ingratiating urbanity. Lady Georgina was clever, and therefore acrimonious. Mr. Ashurst was astute, and therefore obsequious.

He went on with legacies to the inventor of a sauce-bottle which did not let the last drop dribble down so as to spot the tablecloth; of a shoe-horn the handle of which did not come undone; and of a pair of sleeve-links which you could put off and on without injury to the temper. "A real bene-

Gloucester, and my town house at 24, Park Lane North, in London, together with the residue of all my estate, real or personal—" and so forth.

I breathed again. At least, I had not been called upon to disinherit Harold.

"Provided always—" he went on, in the same voice.

I wondered what was coming.

"Provided always that the said Harold Ashurst Tillington does not marry—leave a blank there, Miss Cayley. I will find out the name of the young person I desire to exclude, and fill it in afterward. I don't recollect it at this moment, but Higginson, no doubt, will be able to supply the deficiency. In fact, I don't think I ever heard it; though Higginson has told me all about the woman."

"Higginson?" I inquired. "Is he here?"

"Oh, dear, yes. You heard of him, I suppose, from Georgina? Georgina is prejudiced. He has come back to me, I am glad to say. An excellent servant, Higginson, though a trifle too omniscient. All men are equal in the eyes of their Maker, of course; but we must have due subordination. A courier ought not to be better informed than his master—or ought at least to conceal the fact dexterously. Well, Higginson knows this young person's name; my sister wrote to me about her disgraceful conduct when she first went to Schlangenbad. An adventuress, it seems; an adventuress; quite a shocking creature. Foisted herself upon Lady Georgina in Kensington Gardens—unintroduced, if you can believe such a thing—with the most astonishing effrontery; and Georgina, who will forgive anything on earth, for the sake of what she calls originality—another name for impudence, as I am sure you must know—took the young woman with her as her maid to Germany. There, this minx tried to set her cap at my nephew Harold, who can be caught at once by a pretty face; and Harold was bowled over—almost got engaged to her. Georgina took a fancy to the girl later, having a taste for dubious people (I cannot say I approve of Georgina's friends), and wrote again to say her first suspicions were unfounded: the young woman was in reality a paragon of virtue. But I know better than that. Georgina has no judgment. I regret to be obliged to confess it, but cleverness, I fear, is the only thing in the world my excellent sister cares for. The hussy, it seems, was certainly clever. Higginson has told me about her. He says her bare appearance would suffice to condemn her—a bold, fast, shameless, brazen-faced creature. But you will forgive me, I am sure, my dear young lady. I ought not to discuss such painted Jezebels before you. We will leave this person's name blank. I will not sully your pen—I mean, your typewriter—by asking you to transcribe it."

I made up my mind at once. "Mr. Ashurst," I said, looking up from my keyboard, "I can give you this girl's name; and then you can insert the proviso immediately."

"You can? My dear young lady, what a wonderful person you are! You seem to know everybody, and everything. But perhaps she was at Schlangenbad with Lady Georgina, and you were there also?"

"She was," I answered, deliberately. "The name you want is—Lois Cayley!"

He let his notes drop in his astonishment.

I went on with my typewriting, unmoved. "Provided always that the said Harold Ashurst Tillington does not marry Lois Cayley; in which case I will and desire that the said estate shall pass to—whom shall I put in, Mr. Ashurst?"

He leant forward with his fat hands on his ample knees. "It was really *you*?" he inquired, open-mouthed.

I nodded. "There is no use in denying the truth. Mr. Tillington did ask me to be his wife, and I refused him."

"But, my dear Miss Cayley——"

"The difference in station?" I said; "the difference, still greater, in this world's goods? Yes, I know. I admit all that. So I declined his offer. I did not wish to ruin his prospects."

The Urbane Old Gentleman eyed me with a sudden tenderness in his glance. "Young men are lucky," he said, slowly, after a short pause; "—and—Higginson is an idiot. I say it deliberately—an idiot! How could one dream of trusting the judgment of a flunkey about a lady? My dear, excuse the familiarity from one who may consider himself in a certain sense a contingent uncle—suppose we amend the last clause by the omission of the word *not*. It strikes me as superfluous. 'Provided always the said Harold Ashurst Tillington consents to marry'—I think that sounds better!"

He looked at me with such fatherly regard that it pricked my heart ever to have poked fun at his Interpretation of Prophecy on Stock Exchange principles. I think I flushed crimson. "No, no," I answered, firmly. "That will not do either, please. That's worse than the other way. You must not put it, Mr. Ashurst. I could not consent to be willed away to anybody."

He leant forward, with real earnestness. "My dear," he said, "that's not the point. Pardon my reminding you that you are here in your capacity as my amanuensis. I am drawing up my will, and if you will allow me to say so, I cannot admit that anyone has a claim to influence me in the disposition of my Property."

"Please!" I cried, pleadingly.

He looked at me and paused. "Well," he went on at last, after a long interval; "since *you* insist upon it, I will leave the bequest to stand without condition."

"Thank you," I murmured, bending low over my machine.

"If I did as I like, though," he went on, "I should say, Unless he marries Miss Lois

Cayley (who is a deal too good for him) the estate shall revert to Kynaston's eldest son, a confounded jackass. I do not usually indulge in intemperate language; but I desire to assure you, with the utmost calmness, that Kynaston's eldest son, Lord Southminster, is a con-founded jackass."

I rose and took his hand in my own spontaneously. "Mr. Ashurst," I said, "you may interpret prophecy as long as ever you like, but you are a dear kind old gentleman. I am truly grateful to you for your good opinion."

"And you will marry Harold?"

"Never," I answered; "while he is rich. I have said as much to him."

"That's hard," he went on, slowly. For . . . I should like to be your uncle."

I trembled all over. Elsie saved the situation by bursting in abruptly.

I will only add that when Mr. Ashurst left, I copied the will out neatly, without erasures. The rough original I threw (somewhat carelessly) into the wastepaper basket.

That afternoon, somebody called to fetch the fair copy for Mr. Ashurst. I went

out into the front office to see him. To my surprise, it was Higginson—in his guise as courier.

He was as astonished as myself. "What, *you* here!" he cried. "You dog me!"

"I was thinking the same thing of you, M. le Comte," I answered, curtsying.

He made no attempt at an excuse. "Well, I have been sent for the will," he broke out, curtly.

"And you were sent for the jewel-case," I retorted. "No, no, Dr. Fortescue-Langley; I am in charge of the will, and I will take it myself to Mr. Ashurst."

"I will be even with you yet," he snapped out. "I have gone back to my old trade, and am trying to lead an honest life; but *you* won't let me."

"On the contrary," I answered, smiling a polite smile. "I rejoice to hear it. If you

say nothing more against me to your employer, I will not disclose to him what I know about you. But if you slander me, I will. So now we understand one another."

And I kept the will till I could give it myself into Mr. Ashurst's own hands in his rooms that evening.



"'WHAT, YOU HERE!' HE CRIED,"