

Hilda Wade.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

II.—THE EPISODE OF THE GENTLEMAN WHO HAD FAILED FOR EVERYTHING.



ONE day, about those times, I went round to call on my aunt, Lady Tepping. And lest you accuse me of the vulgar desire to flaunt my fine relations in your face, I hasten to add that my poor dear old aunt is a very ordinary specimen of the common Army-widow. Her husband, Sir Malcolm, a crusty old gentleman of the ancient school, was knighted in Burma, or thereabouts, for a successful raid upon naked natives, on something that is called the Shan frontier. When he had grown grey in the service of his Queen and country, besides earning himself incidentally a very decent pension, he acquired gout, and went to his long rest in Kensal Green Cemetery. He left his wife with one daughter, and the only pretence to a title in our otherwise blameless family.

My cousin Daphne is a very pretty girl, with those quiet, sedate manners which often develop later in life into genuine self-respect and real depth of character. Fools do not admire her; they accuse her of being "heavy." But she can do without fools: she has a fine, strongly-built figure, an upright carriage, a large and broad forehead, a firm chin, and features which, though well-marked and well-moulded, are yet delicate

in outline and sensitive in expression. Very young men seldom take to Daphne: she lacks the desired inanity. But she has mind, repose, and womanly tenderness. Indeed, if she had not been my cousin, I almost think I might once have been tempted to fall in love with her.

When I reached Gloucester Terrace, on this particular afternoon, I found Hilda Wade there before me. She had lunched at my aunt's, in fact. It was her "day out" at St. Nathaniel's, and she had come round to spend it with Daphne Tepping. I had introduced her to the house some time before, and she and my cousin had struck up a close acquaintance immediately. Their temperaments were sympathetic: Daphne admired Hilda's depth and reserve, while Hilda admired Daphne's grave grace and self-control, her perfect freedom from current affectations. She neither giggled, nor aped Ibsenism.

A third person stood back in the room



"SHE AND MY COUSIN HAD STRUCK UP A CLOSE ACQUAINTANCE."

when I entered—a tall and somewhat jerry-built young man, with a rather long and solemn face, like an early stage in the evolution of a Don Quixote. I took a good look at him. There was something about his air that impressed me as both lugubrious and humorous: and in this I was right, for I learned later that he was one of those rare people who can sing a comic song with immense success, while preserving a sour countenance like a Puritan preacher's. His eyes were a little sunken, his fingers long and nervous: but I fancied he looked a good fellow at heart, for all that, though foolishly impulsive. He was a punctilious gentleman, I felt sure; his face and manner grew upon one rapidly.

Daphne rose as I entered, and waved the stranger forward with an imperious little wave: I imagined, indeed, that I detected in the gesture a faint touch of half-unconscious proprietorship. "Good morning, Hubert," she said, taking my hand, but turning towards the tall young man. "I don't think you know Mr. Cecil Holsworthy."

"I have heard you speak of him," I answered, drinking him in with my glance. I added internally, "Not half good enough for you."

Hilda's eyes met mine and read my thought. They flashed back word, in the language of eyes, "I do not agree with you."

Daphne, meanwhile, was watching me closely. I could see she was anxious to discover what impression her friend Mr. Holsworthy was making on me. Till then, I had no idea she was fond of anyone in particular: but the way her glance wandered from him to me, and from me to Hilda, showed clearly that she thought much of this gawky visitor.

We sat and talked together, we four, for some time: I found the young man with the lugubrious countenance improved immensely on closer acquaintance. His talk was clever. He turned out to be the son of a politician high in office in the Canadian Government, and he had been educated at Oxford: the father, I gathered, was rich, but he himself was making an income of nothing a year just then as a briefless barrister, and he was hesitating whether to accept a post of secretary that had been offered him in the colony, or to continue his negative career at the Inner Temple, for the honour and glory of it.

"Now, which would *you* advise me, Miss Tepping?" he inquired, after we had discussed the matter together some minutes,

Daphne's face flushed up. "It is so hard to decide," she answered. "To decide to *your* best advantage, I mean, of course. For naturally all your English friends would wish to keep you as long as possible in England."

"No, do you think so?" the gawky young man jerked out with evident pleasure. "Now, that's awfully kind of you. Do you know, if *you* tell me I ought to stay in England, I've half a mind . . . I'll cable over this very day and refuse the appointment."

Daphne flushed once more. "Oh, please don't," she exclaimed, looking frightened. "I shall be quite distressed if a—a stray word of mine should debar you from accepting a good offer of a secretaryship."

"Why, your least wish——" the young man began, then checked himself hastily—"must be always important," he went on, in a different voice, "to everyone of your acquaintance."

Daphne rose hurriedly. "Look here, Hilda," she said, a little tremulously, biting her lip, "I have to go out into Westbourne Grove to get those gloves for to-night, and a spray for my hair; will you all excuse me for half an hour?"

Holsworthy rose too. "Mayn't I go with you?" he asked, eagerly.

"Oh, if you like: how very kind of you," Daphne answered, her cheek a blush rose. "Hubert, will you come too? and you, Hilda?"

It was one of those invitations which are given to be refused. I did not need Hilda's warning glance to tell me that my company would be quite superfluous: I felt those two were best left together.

"It's no use; though, Dr. Cumberledge!" Hilda put in, as soon as they were gone. "He *won't* propose, though he has had every encouragement. I don't know what's the matter; but I've been watching them both for weeks, and somehow things seem never to get any forwarder."

"You think he's in love with her?" I asked.

"In love with her! Well, you have eyes in your head, I know: where could they have been looking? He's madly in love—a very good kind of love, too: he genuinely admires and respects and appreciates all Daphne's sweet and charming qualities."

"Then what do you suppose is the matter?"

"I have an inkling of the truth: I imagine Mr. Cecil must have let himself in for a prior attachment."

"If so, why does he hang about Daphne?"

"Because—he can't help himself. He's a

good fellow, and a chivalrous fellow : he admires your cousin ; but he must have got himself into some foolish entanglement elsewhere, which he is too honourable to break off ; while at the same time he's far too much impressed by Daphne's fine qualities to be able to keep away from her. It's the ordinary case of love *versus* duty."

"Is he well off? Could he afford to marry Daphne?"

"Oh, his father's very rich : he has plenty of money. A Canadian millionaire, they

ing about her, and arranging her black lace shawl.

"She has just run out into Westbourne Grove to get some gloves and a flower for the *fête* this evening," Hilda answered. Then she added, significantly, "Mr. Holsworthy has gone with her."

"What? That boy's been here again?"

"Yes, Lady Tepping. He called to see Daphne."

My aunt turned to me with an aggrieved tone. It is a peculiarity of my aunt's—I have met it elsewhere—that if she is angry with Jones, and Jones is not present, she assumes a tone of injured asperity on his account towards Brown or Smith or any other innocent person whom she happens to be addressing.

"Now, this is really too bad, Hubert," she burst out, as if I were the culprit. "Disgraceful! Abominable! I'm sure I can't make out what the young fellow means by it. Here he comes dangling after



"IS HE WELL OFF?"

say. That makes it all the likelier that some undesirable young woman somewhere may have managed to get hold of him. Just the sort of romantic, impressionable hobbledehoy such women angle for."

I drummed my fingers on the table. Presently Hilda spoke again. "Why don't you try to get to know him, and find out precisely what's the matter?"

"I *know* what's the matter—now you've told me," I answered. "It's as clear as day. Daphne is very much smitten with him, too. I'm sorry for Daphne! Well, I'll take your advice : I'll try to have some talk with him."

"Do, please ; I feel sure I have hit upon it. He has got himself engaged in a hurry to some girl he doesn't really care about, and he is far too much of a gentleman to break it off, though he's in love quite another way with Daphne."

Just at that moment the door opened and my aunt entered.

"Why, where's Daphne?" she cried, look-

Daphne every day and all day long—and never once says whether he means anything by it or not. In *my* young days, such conduct as that would not have been considered respectable."

I nodded and beamed benignity.

"Well, why don't you answer me?" my aunt went on, warming up. "*Do* you mean to tell me you think his behaviour respectful to a nice girl in Daphne's position?"

"My dear aunt," I answered, "you confound the persons. I am not Mr. Holsworthy. I decline responsibility for him. I meet him here, in *your* house, for the first time this morning."

"Then that shows how often you come to see your relations, Hubert!" my aunt burst out, obliquely. "The man's been here, to my certain knowledge, every day this six weeks."

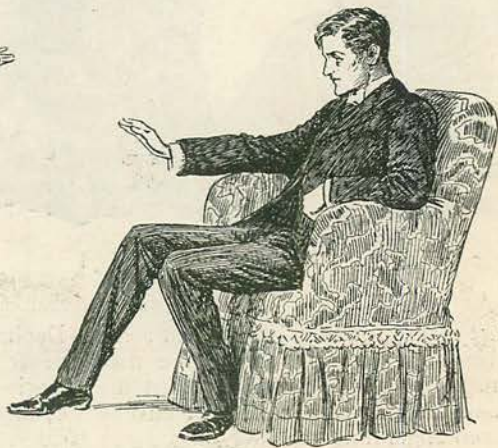
"Really, Aunt Fanny," I said : "you must recollect that a professional man——"

"Oh, yes. *That's* the way! Lay it all down to your profession, do, Hubert!

Though I *know* you were at the Thorntons' on Saturday—saw it in the papers—the *Morning Post*—‘among the guests were Sir Edward and Lady Burnes, Professor Sebastian, Dr. Hubert Cumberledge,’ and so forth, and so forth. *You* think you can conceal these things: but you can't. I get to know them!”

“Conceal them! My dearest aunt! Why, I danced twice with Daphne.”

“Daphne! Yes, Daphne. They all run after Daphne,” my aunt exclaimed, altering the venue once more. “But there's no respect for age left. I expect to be neglected. However, that's neither here nor there. The point is this: you're the one man now living in the family. You ought to behave like a brother to Daphne. Why don't you board this Holsworthy person and ask him his intentions?”



“WHY DON'T YOU ASK HIM HIS INTENTIONS?”

“Goodness gracious!” I cried: “most excellent of aunts, that epoch has gone past. The late lamented Queen Anne is now dead. It's no use asking the young man of to-day to explain his intentions. He will refer you to the works of the Scandinavian dramatists.”

My aunt was speechless. She could only gurgle out the words: “Well, I can safely say that of all the monstrous behaviour—” then language failed her and she relapsed into silence.

However, when Daphne and young Holsworthy returned, I had as much talk with him as I could, and when he left the house I left also.

“Which way are you walking?” I asked, as we turned out into the street.

“Towards my rooms in the Temple.”

“Oh! I'm going back to St. Nathaniel's,” I continued. “If you'll allow me I'll walk part way with you.”

“How very kind of you!”

We strode side by side a little distance in silence. Then a thought seemed to strike the lugubrious young man. “What a charming girl your cousin is!” he exclaimed, abruptly.

“You seem to think so,” I answered, smiling.

He flushed a little; the lantern jaw grew longer. “I admire her, of course,” he answered. “Who doesn't? She is so extraordinarily handsome.”

“Well, not exactly handsome,” I replied, with more critical and kinsmanlike deliberation. “Pretty, if you will; and decidedly pleasing and attractive in manner.”

He looked me up and down, as if he found me a person singularly deficient in taste and appreciation. “Ah, but then, you are her cousin,” he said at last, with a compassionate tone. “That makes a difference.”

“I quite see all Daphne's strong points,” I answered, still smiling, for I could perceive he was very far gone. “She is good-looking, and she is clever.”

“Clever!” he echoed. “Profound! She has a most unusual intellect. She stands alone.”

“Like her mother's silk dresses,” I murmured, half under my breath.

He took no notice of my flippant remark, but went on with his rhapsody. “Such

depth; such penetration! And then, how sympathetic! Why, even to a mere casual acquaintance like myself, she is so kind, so discerning."

"Are you such a casual acquaintance?" I inquired, with a smile. (It might have shocked Aunt Fanny to hear me: but *that* is the way we ask a young man his intentions nowadays.)

He stopped short and hesitated. "Oh, quite casual," he replied, almost stammering. "Most casual, I assure you . . . I have never ventured to do myself the honour of supposing that . . . that Miss Tepping could possibly care for me."

"There is such a thing as being *too* modest and unassuming," I answered. "It sometimes leads to unintentional cruelty."

"No, do you think so?" he cried, his face falling all at once. "I should blame myself bitterly if that were so. Dr. Cumberledge, you are her cousin. Do you gather that I have acted in such a way as to—lead Miss Tepping to suppose I felt any affection for her?"

"It is," I responded, with my best paternal manner, gazing blankly in front of me.

He stopped short again. "Look here," he said, facing me. "Are you busy? No? Then come back with me to my rooms, and—I'll make a clean breast of it."

"By all means," I assented. "When one is young—and foolish, I have often noticed, as a medical man, that a drachm of clean breast is a magnificent prescription."

He walked back by my side, talking all the way of Daphne's many adorable qualities. He exhausted the dictionary for laudatory adjectives. By the time I reached his door it was not *his* fault if I had not learned that the angelic hierarchy were not in the running with my pretty cousin for graces and virtues. I felt that Faith, Hope, and Charity ought to resign at once in favour of Miss Daphne Tepping, promoted.

He took me into his comfortably-furnished rooms—the luxurious rooms of a rich young bachelor, with taste as well as money—and



"HE SAT DOWN OPPOSITE ME."

I laughed in his face. "My dear boy," I answered, laying one hand on his shoulder, "may I say the plain truth? A blind bat could see you are madly in love with her."

His mouth twitched. "That's very serious," he answered, gravely; "very serious."

offered me a partaga. Now, I have long observed, in the course of my practice, that a choice cigar assists a man in taking a philosophic outlook on the question under discussion: so I accepted the partaga. He sat down opposite me, and pointed to a

photograph in the centre of his mantelpiece. "I am engaged to that lady," he put in, shortly.

"So I anticipated," I answered, lighting up.

He started and looked surprised. "Why, what made you guess it?" he inquired.

I smiled the calm smile of superior age—I was some eight years or so his senior. "My dear fellow," I murmured, "what else could prevent you from proposing to Daphne—when you are so undeniably in love with her?"

"A great deal," he answered. "For example: the sense of my own utter unworthiness."

"One's own unworthiness," I replied, "though doubtless real—p'f, p'f—is a barrier that most of us can readily get over, when our admiration for a particular lady waxes strong enough. So *this* is the prior attachment!" I took the portrait down and scanned it.

"Unfortunately, yes. What do you think of her?"

I scrutinized the features. "Seems a nice enough little thing," I answered. It was an innocent face, I admit. Very frank and girlish.

He leaned forward eagerly. "That's just it. A nice enough little thing! Nothing in the world to be said against her. While Daphne—Miss Tepping, I mean——" His silence was ecstatic.

I examined the photograph still more closely. It displayed a lady of twenty or thereabouts, with a weak face, small, vacant features, a feeble chin, a good-humoured, simple mouth, and a wealth of golden hair that seemed to strike a keynote.

"In the theatrical profession?" I inquired at last, looking up.

He hesitated. "Well, not exactly," he answered.

I pursed my lips and blew a ring. "Music-hall stage?" I went on, dubiously.

He nodded. "But a girl is not necessarily any the less a lady because she sings at a music-hall," he added, with warmth, displaying an evident desire to be just to his betrothed, however much he admired Daphne.

"Certainly not," I admitted. "A lady is a lady; no occupation can in itself unladify her. . . . But on the music-hall stage, the odds, one must admit, are on the whole against her."

"Now, *there* you show prejudice!"

"One may be quite unprejudiced," I

answered, "and yet allow that connection with the music-halls does not, as such, afford clear proof that a girl is a compound of all the virtues."

"I think she's a good girl," he retorted, slowly.

"Then why do you want to throw her over?" I inquired.

"I don't. That's just it. On the contrary, I mean to keep my word and marry her."

"*In order* to keep your word?" I suggested. He nodded. "Precisely. It is a point of honour."

"That's a poor ground of marriage," I went on. "Mind, I don't want for a moment to influence you, as Daphne's cousin. I want to get at the truth of the situation. I don't even know what Daphne thinks of you. But you promised me a clean breast. Be a man, and bare it."

He bared it instantly. "I thought I was in love with this girl, you see," he went on, "till I saw Miss Tepping."

"That makes a difference," I admitted.

"And I couldn't bear to break her heart."

"Heaven forbid!" I cried. "It is the one unpardonable sin. Better anything than that." Then I grew practical. "Father's consent?"

"*My* father's? *Is* it likely? He expects me to marry into some distinguished English family."

I hummed a moment. "Well, out with it!" I exclaimed, pointing my cigar at him.

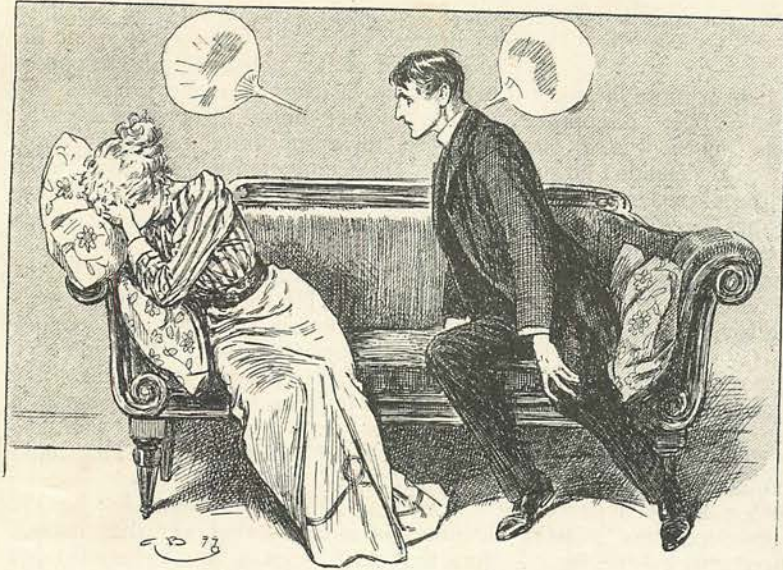
He leaned back in his chair and told me the whole story. A pretty girl: golden hair: introduced to her by a friend: nice simple little thing: mind and heart above the irregular stage on to which she had been driven by poverty alone: father dead: mother in reduced circumstances: "to keep the home together, poor Sissie decided——"

"Precisely so," I murmured, knocking off my ash. "The usual self-sacrifice! Case quite normal! Everything *en règle*!"

"You don't mean to say you doubt it?" he cried, flushing up, and evidently regarding me as a hopeless cynic. "I do assure you, Dr. Cumberledge, the poor child—though miles, of course, below Miss Tepping's level—is as innocent, and as good——"

"As a flower in May. Oh, yes, I don't doubt it. How did you come to propose to her, though?"

He reddened a little. "Well, it was almost accidental," he said, sheepishly. "I called there one evening, and her mother had a headache and went up to bed. And when we two were left alone, Sissie talked a great



"SHE BROKE DOWN AND BEGAN TO CRY."

deal about her future, and how hard her life was. And after a while she broke down and began to cry. And then——"

I cut him short with a wave of my hand. "You need say no more," I put in, with a sympathetic face. "We have all been there."

We paused a moment, while I puffed smoke at the photograph again. "Well," I said at last, "her face looks to me really simple and nice. It is a good face. Do you see her often?"

"Oh, no; she's on tour."

"In the provinces?"

"M'yes: just at present, at Scarborough."

"But she writes to you?"

"Every day."

"Would you think it an unpardonable impertinence if I made bold to ask whether it would be possible for you to show me a specimen of her letters?"

He unlocked a drawer and took out three or four. Then he read one through, carefully. "I don't think," he said, in a deliberative voice, "it would be a serious breach of confidence in me to let you look through this one. There's really nothing in it, you know—just the ordinary average everyday love-letter."

I glanced through the little note. He was right. The conventional hearts-and-darts epistle. It sounded nice enough. Longing to see you again: so lonely in this place: your dear sweet letter: looking forward to the time: your ever-devoted Sissie.

"That seems straight," I answered. "However, I am not quite sure. Will you allow me to take it away, with the photograph? I know I am asking much. I want to show it to a lady in whose tact and discrimination I have the greatest confidence."

"What, Daphne?"

I smiled. "No, not Daphne," I answered. "Our friend Miss Wade. She has extraordinary insight."

"I could trust anything to Miss Wade. She is true as steel."

"You are right," I answered. "That shows that you too are a judge of character."

He hesitated. "I feel a brute," he cried, "to go on writing every day to Sissie Montague—and yet calling every day to see Miss Tepping. But still—I do it."

I grasped his hand. "My dear fellow," I said, "nearly ninety per cent. of men, after all—are human!"

I took both letter and photograph back with me to Nathaniel's. When I had gone my rounds that night, I carried them into Hilda Wade's room, and told her the story. Her face grew grave. "We must be just," she said, at last. "Daphne is deeply in love with him; but even for Daphne's sake, we must not take anything for granted against the other lady."

I produced the photograph. "What do you make of that?" I asked. "I think it an honest face, myself, I may tell you."

She scrutinized it long and closely with a magnifier. Then she put her head on one side and mused very deliberately. "Madeline Shaw gave me her photograph the other day, and said to me, as she gave it, 'I do so like these modern portraits; they show one *what might have been.*'"

"You mean, they are so much touched up!"

"Exactly. That, as it stands, is a sweet, innocent face—an honest girl's face—almost babyish in its transparency; but . . . the

innocence has all been put into it by the photographer."

"You think so?"

"I know it. Look here at those lines just visible on the cheek. They disappear, nowhere, at impossible angles. *And* the corners of that mouth. They couldn't go so, with that nose and those puckers. The thing is not real. It has been atrociously edited. Part is nature's; part, the photographer's; part, even possibly paint and powder."

"But the underlying face?"

"Is a minx's."

I handed her the letter. "This next?" I asked, fixing my eyes on her as she looked.

She read it through. For a minute or two she examined it. "The letter is right enough," she answered, after a second reading, "though its guileless simplicity is perhaps, under the circumstances, just a little overdone; but the handwriting—the handwriting is duplicity itself: a cunning, serpentine hand: no openness or honesty in it. Depend upon it, that girl is playing a double game."

"You believe, then, there is character in handwriting?"

"Undoubtedly; when we know the character, we can see it in the writing. The difficulty is, to see it and read it *before* we know it: and I have practised a little at that. There is character in all we do, of course—our walk, our cough, the very wave of our hands: the only secret is, not all of us have always skill to see it. Here, however, I feel pretty sure. The curls of the g's and the tails of the y's—how full they are of wile, of low, underhand trickery!"

I looked at them as she pointed. "That is true!" I exclaimed. "I see it when you show it. Lines meant for effect. No straightness or directness in them!"

Hilda reflected a moment. "Poor Daphne," she murmured. "I would do anything to help her. . . . I'll tell what might be a good plan." Her face brightened. "My holiday comes next week. I'll run down to Scarborough—it's as nice a place for a holiday as any—and I'll observe this young lady. It can do no harm—and good may come of it."

"How kind of you!" I cried.

"But you are always all kindness."

Hilda went to Scarborough, and

came back again for a week before going on to Bruges, where she proposed to spend the greater part of her holidays. She stopped a night or two in town to report progress, and finding another nurse ill, promised to fill her place till a substitute was forthcoming. "Well, Dr. Cumberledge," she said, when she saw me alone, "I was right! I have found out a fact or two about Daphne's rival!"

"You have seen her?" I asked.

"Seen her? I have stopped for a week in the same house. A very nice lodging-house on the Spa front, too. The girl's well enough off. The poverty plea fails. She goes about in good rooms, and carries a mother with her."

"That's well," I answered. "That looks all right."

"Oh, yes, she's quite presentable: has the manners of a lady—whenever she chooses. But the chief point is this: she laid her letters every day on the table in the passage outside her door for post—laid them all in a row, so that when one claimed one's own one couldn't help seeing them."

"Well, that was open and above-board," I continued, beginning to fear we had hastily misjudged Miss Sissie Montague.

"Very open—too much so, in fact; for I was obliged to note the fact that she wrote



"TO MY TWO MASHES," SHE EXPLAINED."

two letters regularly every day of her life—'to my two mashes,' she explained one afternoon to a young man who was with her as she laid them on the table. One of them was always addressed to Cecil Holsworthy, Esq."

"And the other?"

"Wasn't."

"Did you note the name?" I asked, interested.

"Yes; here it is." She handed me a slip of paper.

I read it: "Reginald Nettlecraft, Esq., 427, Staples Inn, London."

"What, Reggie Nettlecraft!" I cried, amused. "Why, he was a very little boy at Charterhouse when I was a big one; he afterwards went to Oxford and got sent down from Christ Church for the part he took in burning a Greek bust in Tom Quad—an antique Greek bust—after a bump supper."

"Just the sort of man I should have expected," Hilda answered, with a suppressed smile. "I have a sort of inkling that Miss Montague likes *him* best; he is nearer her type; but she thinks Cecil Holsworthy the better match. Has Mr. Nettlecraft money?"

"Not a penny, I should say. An allowance from his father, perhaps, who is a Lincolnshire parson; but otherwise, nothing."

"Then, in my opinion, the young lady is playing for Mr. Holsworthy's money; failing which, she will decline upon Mr. Nettlecraft's heart."

We talked it all over. In the end, I said abruptly, "Nurse Wade, you have seen Miss Montague, or whatever she calls herself. I have not. I won't condemn her unheard. I have half a mind to run down one day

next week to Scarborough and have a look at her."

"Do. That will suffice. You can judge then for yourself whether or not I am mistaken."

I went; and what is more, I heard Miss Sissie sing at her hall—a pretty domestic song, most childish and charming. She impressed me not unfavourably, in spite of what Hilda said. Her peach-blossom cheek might have been art, but looked like nature. She had an open face, a baby smile; and there was a frank girlishness about her dress and manner that took my fancy. "After all," I thought to myself, "even Hilda Wade is fallible."

So that evening, when her "turn" was over, I made up my mind to go round and call upon her. I had told Cecil Holsworthy my intentions beforehand, and it rather shocked him. He was too much of a gentleman to wish to spy upon the girl he had promised to marry. However, in my case, there need be no such scruples. I found the house, and asked for Miss Montague. As I mounted the stairs to the drawing-room floor, I heard a sound of voices—the murmur of laughter: idiotic guffaws, suppressed giggles, the masculine and feminine varieties of tomfoolery.

"You'd make a splendid woman of business, *you* would!" a young

man was saying. I gathered from his drawl that he belonged to that sub-species of the human race which is known as the Chappie.

"Wouldn't I just?" a girl's voice answered, tittering: I recognised it as Sissie's. "You ought to see me at it! Why, my brother set up a place once for mending bicycles; and I used to stand about at the door, as if I had just returned from a ride: and when



"MOST CHILDISH AND CHARMING."

fellows came in with a nut loose or something, I'd begin talking with them while Bertie tightened it. Then, when *they* weren't looking, I'd dab the business end of a darning-needle, so, just plump into their tyres; and of course, as soon as they went off, they were back again in a minute to get a puncture mended! I call *that* business."

A roar of laughter greeted the recital of this brilliant incident in a commercial career. As it subsided, I entered. There were two men in the room, besides Miss Montague and her mother, and a second young lady.

"Excuse this late call," I said, quietly, bowing. "But I have only one night in Scarborough, Miss Montague, and I wanted to see you. I'm a friend of Mr. Holsworthy's. I told him I'd look you up, and this is my sole opportunity."

I *felt* rather than saw that Miss Montague darted a quick glance of hidden meaning at her friends the chappies: their faces, in response, ceased to snigger, and grew instantly sober.

She took my card: then, in her alternative manner as the perfect lady, she presented me to her mother. "Dr. Cumberledge, mamma," she said, in a faintly warning voice. "A friend of Mr. Holsworthy's."

The old lady half rose. "Let me see," she said, staring at me. "*Which* is Mr. Holsworthy, Siss?—is it Cecil or Reggie?"

One of the chappies burst into a fatuous laugh once more at this remark. "Now, you're giving away the whole show, Mrs. Montague!" he exclaimed, with a chuckle. A look from Miss Sissie immediately checked him.

I am bound to admit, however, that after these untoward incidents of the first minute, Miss Montague and her friends behaved throughout with distinguished propriety. Her manners were perfect—I may even say, demure. She asked about "Cecil" with



"I USED TO STAND ABOUT AT THE DOOR."

charming naïveté. She was frank and girlish. Lots of innocent fun in her, no doubt—she sang us a comic song in excellent taste, which is a severe test—but not a suspicion of double-dealing. If I had not overheard those few words as I came up the stairs, I think I should have gone away believing the poor girl an injured child of nature.

As it was, I went back to London the very next day, determined to renew my slight acquaintance with Reggie Nettlecraft.

Fortunately, I had a good excuse for going to visit him. I had been asked to collect among old Carthusians for one of those endless "testimonials" which pursue one through life, and are, perhaps, the worst nemesis which follows the crime of having wasted one's youth at a public school: a testimonial for a retiring master, or professional cricketer, or washerwoman, or something; and in the course of my duties as collector, it was quite natural that I should call upon all my fellow-victims. So I went to his rooms in Staples Inn and re-introduced myself.

Reggie Nettlecraft had grown up into an unwholesome, spotty, indeterminate young

man, with a speckled necktie, and cuffs of which he was inordinately proud, and which he insisted on "flashing" every second minute. He was also evidently self-satisfied, which was odd, for I have seldom seen anyone who afforded less cause for rational satisfaction. "Hullo," he said, when I told him my name. "So it's you, is it, Cumberledge?" He glanced at my card. "St. Nathaniel's Hospital! What rot! Why, blow me tight if you haven't turned sawbones!"

"That is my profession," I answered, unashamed. "And you?"

"Oh, I don't have any luck, you know, old man. They turned me out of Oxford because I had too much sense of humour for the authorities there—beastly set of old fogeys! Objected to my 'chucking' oyster-shells at the tutors' windows—good old English custom, fast becoming obsolete. Then I crammed for the Army: but, bless your heart, a *gentleman* has no chance for the Army nowadays: a pack of blooming cads, with what they call 'intellect,' read up for the exams., and don't give *us* a look-in; I call it sheer piffle. Then the Guv'nor set me on electrical engineering—electrical engineering's played out—I put no stock in it; besides, it's such beastly fag; and then, you get your hands dirty. So now I'm reading for the Bar, and if only my coach can put me up to tips enough to dodge the examiners, I expect to be called some time next summer."

"And when you have failed for everything?" I inquired, just to test his sense of humour.

He swallowed it like a roach. "Oh, when I've failed for everything, I shall stick up to the Guv'nor. Hang it all, a *gentleman* can't be expected to earn his own livelihood. England's going to the dogs, that's where it is: no snug little sinecures left for chaps like you and me: all this beastly competition. And no respect for the feelings of gentlemen, either! Why, would you believe it, Cumber-ground—we used to call you Cumberground at Charterhouse, I remember, or was it Fig Tree?—I happened to get a bit lively in the Haymarket last week, after a rattling good supper, and the chap at the police-court—old cove with a squint—positively proposed to send me to prison, *without the option of a fine!*—I'll trouble you for that—send *me* to prison—just for knocking down a common brute of a bobby. There's no mistake about it, England's *not* a country now for a gentleman to live in."

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"Then why not mark your sense of the fact by leaving it?" I inquired, with a smile.

He shook his head. "What? Emigrate? No, thank you! I'm not taking any. None of your colonies for *me*, if you please. I shall stick to the old ship. I'm too much attached to the Empire."

"And yet imperialists," I said, "generally gush over the colonies—the Empire on which the sun never sets."

"The Empire in Leicester Square!" he responded, gazing at me with unspoken contempt. "Have a whisky and soda, old chap? What, no? 'Never drink between meals?' Well, you *do* surprise me! I suppose that comes of being a sawbones, don't it?"

"Possibly," I answered. "We respect our livers." Then I went on to the ostensible reason of my visit—the Charterhouse testimonial. He slapped his thighs metaphorically, by way of suggesting the depleted condition of his pockets. "Stony broke, Cumberledge," he murmured; "stony broke! Honour bright! Unless Bluebird pulls off the Prince of Wales's Stakes, I really don't know how I'm to pay the Benchers."

"It's quite unimportant," I answered. "I was asked to ask you, and I *have* asked you."

"So I twig, my dear fellow. Sorry to have to say *no*. But I'll tell you what I can do for you: I can put you upon a straight thing—"

I glanced at the mantelpiece. "I see you have a photograph of Miss Sissie Montague," I broke in casually, taking it down and examining it. "*With* an autograph, too. 'Reggie, from Sissie.' You are a friend of hers?"

"A friend of hers? I'll trouble you. She *is* a clinker, Sissie is! You should see that girl smoke. I give you my word of honour, Cumberledge, she can consume cigarettes against any fellow I know in London. Hang it all, a girl like that, you know—well, one can't help admiring her! Ever seen her?"

"Oh, yes; I know her. I called on her, in fact, night before last at Scarborough."

He whistled a moment, then broke into an imbecile laugh. "My gum," he cried, "this *is* a start, this is! You don't mean to tell me *you* are the other Johnnie?"

"What other Johnnie?" I asked, feeling we were getting near it.

He leaned back and laughed again. "Well, you know that girl Sissie, she's a clever one, she is," he went on after a minute, staring at me. "She's a regular clinker! Got two strings to her bow: that's where the trouble



"ONE CAN'T HELP ADMIRING HER."

comes in: Me, and another fellow. She likes Me for love, and the other fellow for money. Now, don't you come and tell me that *you* are the other fellow."

"I have certainly never aspired to the young lady's hand," I answered, cautiously. "But don't you know your rival's name, then?"

"That's Sissie's blooming cleverness. She's a caulker, Sissie is: you don't take a rise out of Sissie in a hurry. She knows that if I knew who the other bloke was, I'd blow upon her little game to him, and put him off her. And I *would*, s'ep me taters: for I'm nuts on that girl: I tell you, Cumberledge, she *is* a clinker!"

"You seem to me admirably adapted for one another," I answered, truthfully. I had not the slightest compunction in handing Reggie Nettlecraft over to Sissie, nor in handing Sissie over to Reggie Nettlecraft.

"Adapted for one another? That's just it. There, you hit the right nail plump on the cocoa-nut, Cumberground! But Sissie's an artful one, she is. She's playing for the other Johnnie. He's got the dibs, you know; and Sissie wants the dibs even more than she wants yours truly."

"Got what?" I inquired, not quite catching the phrase.

"The dibs, old man; the chink; the oof; the ready rhino. He rolls in it, she says. I can't find out the chap's name, but I know

his Guv'nor's something or other in the millionaire trade somewhere across in America."

"She writes to you, I think?"

"That's so: every blooming day: but how the dummy did you come to know it?"

"She lays letters addressed to you on the hall table at her lodgings in Scarborough."

"The dickens she does! Careless little beggar! Yes, she writes to me—pages. She's awfully gone on me, really. She'd marry me if it wasn't for the Johnnie with the dibs. She doesn't care for *him*: she wants his money. He dresses badly, don't you see: and after all, the clothes make the man! I'd like to get at him. I'd spoil his pretty face for him." And he assumed a playfully pugilistic attitude.

"You really want to get rid of this other fellow?" I asked, seeing my chance.

"Get rid of him? Why, of course. Chuck him into the river some nice dark night if I could once get a look at him!"

"As a preliminary step, would you mind letting me see one of Miss Montague's letters?" I inquired.

He drew a long breath. "They're a bit affectionate, you know," he murmured, stroking his beardless chin in hesitation. "She's a hot 'un, Sissie is. She pitches it pretty warm on the affection-stop, I can tell you. But if you really think you can give the other Johnnie a cut on the head with her

letters—well, in the interests of true love, which never *does* run smooth, I don't mind letting you have a squint, as my friend, at one of her charming billy-doo's."

He took a bundle from a drawer, ran his eye over one or two with a maudlin air, and then selected a specimen not wholly unsuitable for publication. "There's one in the eye for C.," he said, chuckling. "What would C. say to that, I wonder? She always calls him C., you know: it's so jolly non-committing. She says, 'I only wish that beastly old bore C. were at Halifax—which is where he comes from: and then, I would fly at once to my own dear Reggie! But, hang it all, Reggie boy, what's the good of true love if you haven't got the dibs? I *must* have my comforts. Love in a cottage is all very well in its way, but who's to pay for the fizz, Reggie?' That's her refinement, don't you see: Sissie's awfully refined: she was brought up with the tastes and habits of a lady."

"Clearly so," I answered. "Both her

tion. If Miss Sissie had written it on purpose in order to open Cecil Holsworthy's eyes she couldn't have managed the matter better or more effectually. It breathed ardent love, tempered by a determination to sell her charms in the best and highest matrimonial market.

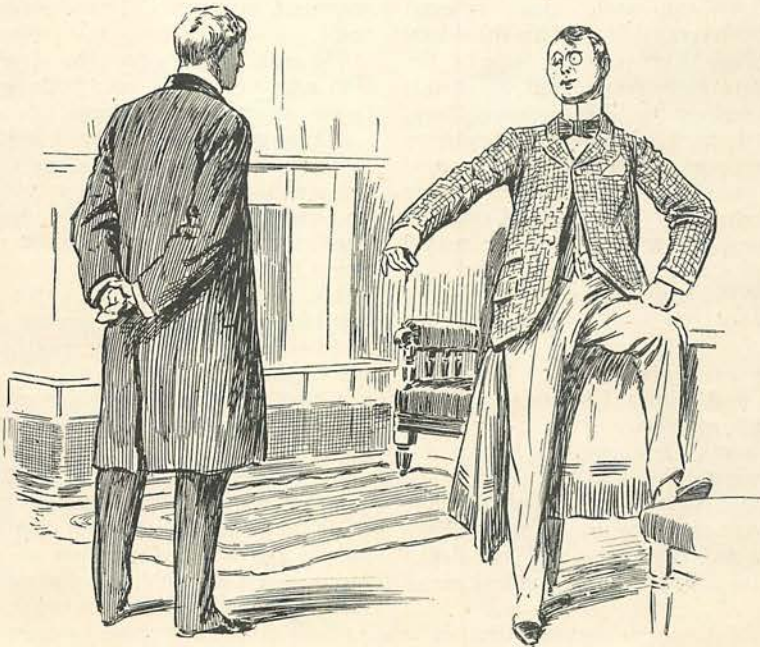
"Now, I know this man, C.," I said when I had finished. "And I want to ask whether you will let me show him Miss Montague's letter. It would set him against the girl, who, as a matter of fact, is wholly unwor—I mean totally unfitted for him."

"Let you show it to him? Like a bird! Why, Sissie promised me herself that if she couldn't bring 'that solemn ass, C.' up to the scratch by Christmas she'd chuck him and marry me. It's here, in writing." And he handed me another gem of epistolary literature.

"You have no compunctions?" I asked again, after reading it.

"Not a blessed compunction to my name."

"Then neither have I," I answered.



"I DON'T MIND LETTING YOU HAVE A SQUINT AT ONE OF HER BILLY-DOOS."

literary style and her liking for champagne abundantly demonstrate it!" His acute sense of humour did not enable him to detect the irony of my observation. I doubt if it extended much beyond oyster-shells.

He handed me the letter. I read it through with equal amusement and gratifica-

I felt they both deserved it. Sissie was a minx, as Hilda rightly judged; while as for Nettlecraft—well, if a public school and an English University leave a man a cad, a cad he will be, and there is nothing more to be said about it.

I went straight off with the letters to Cecil

Holsworthy. He read them through half incredulously at first: he was too honest-natured himself to believe in the possibility of such double-dealing—that one could have innocent eyes and golden hair and yet be a trickster. He read them twice: then he compared them word for word with the simple affection and childlike tone of his own last letter received from the same lady. Her versatility of style would have done honour to a practised literary craftsman. At last he handed them back to me. “Do you think,” he said, “on the evidence of these, I should be doing wrong in breaking with her?”

“Wrong in breaking with her!” I exclaimed. “You would be doing wrong if you didn’t. Wrong to yourself: wrong to your family: wrong, if I may venture to say so, to Daphne: wrong even in the long run to the girl herself, for she is not fitted for you, and she *is* fitted for Reggie Nettlecraft. Now do as I bid you. Sit down at once and write her a letter from my dictation.”

He sat down and wrote, much relieved that I took the responsibility off his shoulders.

“DEAR MISS MONTAGUE,” I began, “the inclosed letters have come into my hands without my seeking it. After reading them, I feel that I have absolutely no right to stand between you and the man of your real choice. It would not be kind or wise of me to do so. I release you at once, and consider myself released. You may therefore regard our engagement as irrevocably cancelled.

“Faithfully yours,

“CECIL HOLSWORTHY.”

“Nothing more than that?” he asked, looking up and biting his pen. “Not a word of regret or apology?”

“Not a word,” I answered. “You are really too lenient.”

I made him take it out and post it, before he could invent conscientious scruples. Then he turned to me irresolutely. “What shall I do next?” he asked, with a comical air of doubt.

I smiled. “My dear fellow, that is a matter for your own consideration.”

“But—do you think she will laugh at me?”

“Miss Montague?”

“No! Daphne.”

“I am not in Daphne’s confidence,” I answered. “I don’t know how she feels.

But on the face of it, I think I can venture to assure you that at least she won’t laugh at you.”

He grasped my hand hard. “You don’t mean to say so!” he cried. “Well, that’s really very kind of her! A girl of Daphne’s high type! And I, who feel myself so utterly unworthy of her!”

“We are all unworthy of a good woman’s love,” I answered. “But, thank Heaven, the good women don’t seem to realize it.”

That evening, about ten, my new friend came back in a hurry to my rooms at St. Nathaniel’s. Nurse Wade was standing there, giving her report for the night when he entered. His face looked some inches shorter and broader than usual. His eyes beamed. His mouth was radiant.

“Well, you won’t believe it, Dr. Cumberland,” he began, “but——”

“Yes, I *do* believe it,” I answered. “I know it. I have read it already.”

“Read it!” he cried. “Where?”

I waved my hand towards his face. “In a special edition of the evening papers,” I answered, smiling. “Daphne has accepted you!”

He sank into an easy chair, beside himself with rapture. “Yes, yes: that angel! thanks to *you*, she has accepted me!”

“Thanks to Miss Wade,” I said, correcting him. “It is really all *her* doing. If *she* had not seen through the photograph to the face, and through the face to the woman and the base little heart of her, we might never have found her out.”

He turned to Hilda, with eyes all gratitude. “You have given me the dearest and best girl on earth,” he cried, seizing both her hands.

“And I have given Daphne a husband who will love and appreciate her,” Hilda answered, flushing.

“You see,” I said, maliciously: “I told you they never find us out, Holsworthy!”

As for Reggie Nettlecraft and his wife, I should like to add that they are getting on quite as well as could be expected. Reggie has joined his Sissie on the music-hall stage: and all those who have witnessed his immensely popular performance of the Drunken Gentleman before the Bow Street Police Court acknowledge without reserve that, after “failing for everything,” he has dropped at last into his true vocation. His impersonation of the part is said to be “nature itself.” I see no reason to doubt it.