

III

HER MARRIAGE, HER CLOTHES, HER APPETITE, AND AN INVENTORY OF HER FURNITURE

A WEEK or two after I dropped the letter I was in a hansom on my way to certain barracks, when loud above the city's roar I heard that accursed haw-haw-haw, and there they were, the two of them, just coming out of a shop where you may obtain pianos on the hire system. I had the merest glimpse of them, but there was an extraordinary rapture on her face, and his head was thrown proudly back, and all because they had been ordering a piano on the hire system.

So they were to be married directly. It was all rather contemptible, but I passed on tolerantly, for it is only when she is unhappy that this woman disturbs me, owing to a clever way she has at such times of looking more fragile than she really is.

When next I saw them, they were gazing greedily into the window of the sixpenny-half-

penny shop, which is one of the most deliciously dramatic spots in London. Mary was taking notes feverishly on a slip of paper while he did the adding up, and in the end they went away gloomily without buying anything. I was in high feather. 'Match abandoned, ma'am,' I said to myself; 'outlook hopeless; another visit to the Governesses' Agency inevitable; can't marry for want of a kitchen shovel.'

But I was imperfectly acquainted with the lady.

A few days afterwards I found myself walking behind her. There is something artful about her skirts by which I always know her, though I can't say what it is. She was carrying an enormous parcel that might have been a bird-cage wrapped in brown paper, and she took it into a bric-a-brac shop and came out without it. She then ran rather than walked in the direction of the sixpenny-half-penny shop. Now mystery of any kind is detestable to me, and I went into the bric-a-brac shop, ostensibly to look at the cracked china; and there, still on the counter, with the wrapping torn off it, was the article Mary had sold in order to furnish on the proceeds. What do you think it was? It was a wonderful doll's house, with dolls at tea downstairs and dolls going to bed upstairs, and a

doll showing a doll out at the front door. Loving lips had long ago licked most of the paint off, but otherwise the thing was in admirable preservation ; obviously the joy of Mary's childhood, it had now been sold by her that she might get married.

'Lately purchased by us,' said the shopwoman, seeing me look at the toy, 'from a lady who has no further use for it.'

I think I have seldom been more indignant with Mary. I bought the doll's house, and as they knew the lady's address (it was at this shop that I first learned her name) I instructed them to send it back to her with the following letter, which I wrote in the shop : 'Dear madam, don't be ridiculous. You will certainly have further use for this.—I am, etc., the Man Who Dropped the Letter.'

It pained me afterwards, but too late to rescind the order, to reflect that I had sent her a wedding present ; and when next I saw her she had been married for some months. The time was nine o'clock of a November evening, and we were in a street of shops that has not in twenty years decided whether to be genteel or frankly vulgar ; here it minces in the fashion, but take a step onward and its tongue is in the cup of the ice-cream man. I usually rush this street, which is not far from my

rooms, with the glass down, but to-night I was walking. Mary was in front of me, leaning in a somewhat foolish way on the haw-er, and they were chatting excitedly. She seemed to be remonstrating with him for going forward, yet more than half admiring him for not turning back, and I wondered why.

And after all, what was it that Mary and her painter had come out to do? To buy two pork chops. On my honour. She had been trying to persuade him, I decided, that they were living too lavishly. That was why she sought to draw him back. But in her heart she loves audacity, and that is why she admired him for pressing forward.

No sooner had they bought the chops than they scurried away like two gleeful children to cook them. I followed, hoping to trace them to their home, but they soon out-distanced me, and that night I composed the following aphorism: It is idle to attempt to overtake a pretty young woman carrying pork chops. I was now determined to be done with her. First, however, to find out their abode, which was probably within easy distance of the shop. I even conceived them lured into taking their house by the advertisement, 'Conveniently situated for the Pork Emporium.'

Well, one day—now this really is romantic, and I am rather proud of it. My chambers are on the second floor, and are backed by an anxiously polite street between which and mine are little yards called, I think, gardens. They are so small that if you have the tree your neighbour has the shade from it. I was looking out at my back window on the day we have come to when whom did I see but the whilom nursery governess sitting on a chair in one of these gardens. I put up my eye-glass to make sure, and undoubtedly it was she. But she sat there doing nothing, which was by no means my conception of the jade, so I brought a field-glass to bear and discovered that the object was merely a lady's jacket. It hung on the back of a kitchen chair, seemed to be a furry thing, and, I must suppose, was suspended there for an airing.

I was chagrined, and then I insisted stoutly with myself that, as it was not Mary, it must be Mary's jacket. I had never seen her wear such a jacket, mind you, yet I was confident, I can't tell why. Do clothes absorb a little of the character of their wearer, so that I recognised this jacket by a certain coquetry? If she has a way with her skirts that always advertises me of her presence, quite possibly she is as cunning with jackets. Or perhaps she is

her own seamstress, and puts in little tucks of herself.

Figure it what you please ; but I beg to inform you that I put on my hat, and five minutes afterwards saw Mary and her husband emerge from the house to which I had calculated that garden belonged. Now, am I clever, or am I not?

When they had left the street I examined the house leisurely, and a droll house it is. Seen from the front it appears to consist of a door and a window, though above them the trained eye may detect another window, the air-hole of some apartment which it would be just like Mary's grandiloquence to call her bedroom. The houses on each side of the bandbox are tall, and I discovered later that it had once been an open passage to the back gardens. The story and a half of which it consists had been knocked up cheaply, by carpenters I should say rather than masons, and the general effect is of a brightly coloured van that has stuck for ever on its way through the passage.

The low houses of London look so much more homely than the tall ones, that I never pass them without dropping a blessing on their builders, but this house was ridiculous ; indeed it did not call itself a house, for over the door was a board with

the inscription 'This space to be sold,' and I remembered, as I rang the bell, that this notice had been up for years. On avowing that I wanted a space, I was admitted by an elderly, somewhat dejected-looking female, whose fine figure was not on scale with her surroundings. Perhaps my face said so, for her first remark was explanatory.

'They get me cheap,' she said, 'because I drink.'

I bowed, and we passed on to the drawing-room. I forget whether I have described Mary's personal appearance, but if so you have a picture of that sunny drawing-room. My first reflection was, How can she have found the money to pay for it all! which is always your first reflection when you see Mary herself a-tripping down the street.

I have no space (in that little room) to catalogue all the whim-whams with which she had made it beautiful, from the hand-sewn bell-rope which pulled no bell to the hand-painted cigar-box that contained no cigars. The floor was of a delicious green with exquisite oriental rugs; green and white, I think, was the lady's scheme of colour, something cool, you observe, to keep the sun under. The window-curtains were of some rare material and the colour of the purple clematis; they swept the floor grandly and suggested a picture of

Mary receiving visitors. The piano we may ignore, for I knew it to be hired, but there were many dainty pieces, mostly in green wood, a sofa, a corner cupboard, and a most captivating desk, which was so like its owner that it could have sat down at her and dashed off a note. The writing-paper on this desk had the word Mary printed on it, implying that if there were other Marys they didn't count. There were many oil-paintings on the walls, mostly without frames, and I must mention the chandelier, which was obviously of fabulous worth, for she had encased it in a holland bag.

'I perceive, ma'am,' said I to the stout maid, 'that your master is in affluent circumstances.'

She shook her head emphatically, and said something that I failed to catch.

'You wish to indicate,' I hazarded, 'that he married a fortune.'

This time I caught the words. They were 'Tinned meats,' and having uttered them she lapsed into gloomy silence.

'Nevertheless,' I said, 'this room must have cost a pretty penny.'

'She done it all herself,' replied my new friend, with concentrated scorn.

‘But this green floor, so beautifully stained——’

‘Boiling oil,’ said she, with a flush of honest shame, ‘and a shillingsworth o’ paint.’

‘Those rugs——’

‘Remnants,’ she sighed, and showed me how artfully they had been pieced together.

‘The curtains——’

‘Remnants.’

‘At all events the sofa——’

She raised its drapery, and I saw that the sofa was built of packing-cases.

‘The desk——’

I really thought that I was safe this time, for could I not see the drawers with their brass handles, the charming shelf for books, the pigeon-holes with their coverings of silk?

‘She made it out of three orange-boxes,’ said the lady, at last a little awed herself.

I looked around me despairingly, and my eye alighted on the holland covering. ‘There is a fine chandelier in that holland bag,’ I said coaxingly.

She sniffed, and was raising an untender hand, when I checked her. ‘Forbear, ma’am,’ I cried with authority, ‘I prefer to believe in that bag. How much to be pitied, ma’am, are those who have lost faith in everything.’ I think all the pretty

things that the little nursery governess had made out of nothing squeezed my hand for letting the chandelier off.

‘But, good God, ma’am,’ said I to madam, ‘what an exposure!’

She intimated that there were other exposures upstairs.

‘So there is a stair,’ said I, and then, suspiciously, ‘did she make it?’

No, but how she had altered it.

The stair led to Mary’s bedroom, and I said I would not look at that, nor at the studio, which was a shed in the garden.

‘Did she build the studio with her own hands?’

No, but how she had altered it.

‘How she alters everything,’ I said. ‘Do you think you are safe, ma’am?’

She thawed a little under my obvious sympathy, and honoured me with some of her views and confidences. The rental paid by Mary and her husband was not, it appeared, one on which any self-respecting domestic could reflect with pride. They got the house very cheap on the understanding that they were to vacate it promptly if any one bought it for building purposes, and because they paid so little they had to submit

to the indignity of the notice-board. Mary A—— detested the words: 'This space to be sold,' and had been known to shake her fist at them. She was as elated about her house as if it were a real house, and always trembled when any possible purchaser of spaces called.

As I have told you my own aphorism I feel I ought in fairness to record that of this aggrieved servant. It was on the subject of art. 'The difficulty,' she said, 'is not to paint pictures, but to get frames for them.' A home-thrust this.

She could not honestly say that she thought much of her master's work. Nor, apparently, did any other person. Result, tinned meats.

Yes, one person thought a deal of it, or pretended to do so; was constantly flinging up her hands in delight over it; had even been caught whispering fiercely to a friend, 'Praise it, praise it, praise it!' This was when the painter was sunk in gloom. Never, as I could well believe, was such a one as Mary for luring a man back to cheerfulness.

'A dangerous woman,' I said, with a shudder, and fell to examining a painting over the mantelshelf. It was a portrait of a man, and had impressed me favourably because it was framed.

‘A friend of hers,’ my guide informed me, ‘but I never seed him.’

I would have turned away from it, had not an inscription on the picture drawn me nearer. It was in a lady’s handwriting, and these were the words: ‘Fancy portrait of our dear unknown.’ Could it be meant for me? I cannot tell you how interested I suddenly became.

It represented a very fine-looking fellow, indeed, and not a day more than thirty.

‘A friend of hers, ma’am, did you say?’ I asked quite shakily. ‘How do you know that, if you have never seen him?’

‘When master was painting of it,’ she said, ‘in the studio, he used to come running in here to say to her such like as, “What colour would you make his eyes?”’

‘And her reply, ma’am?’ I asked eagerly.

‘She said, “Beautiful blue eyes.” And he said, “You wouldn’t make it a handsome face, would you?” and she says, “A very handsome face.” And says he, “Middle-aged?” and says she, “Twenty-nine.” And I mind him saying, “A little bald on the top?” and she says, says she, “Not at all.”’

The dear, grateful girl, not to make me bald on the top.

‘I have seed her kiss her hand to that picture,’ said the maid.

Fancy Mary kissing her hand to me! O the pretty love!

Pooh!

I was staring at the picture, cogitating what insulting message I could write on it, when I heard the woman’s voice again. ‘I think she has known him since she were a babby,’ she was saying, ‘for this here was a present he gave her.’

She was on her knees drawing the doll’s house from beneath the sofa, where it had been hidden away; and immediately I thought, ‘I shall slip the insulting message into this.’ But I did not, and I shall tell you why. It was because the engaging toy had been redecorated by loving hands; there were fresh gowns for all the inhabitants, and the paint on the furniture was scarcely dry. The little doll’s house was almost ready for further use.

I looked at the maid, but her face was expressionless. ‘Put it back,’ I said, ashamed to have surprised Mary’s pretty secret, and I left the house dejectedly, with a profound conviction that the little nursery governess had hooked on to me again.