



**Arnold
Bennett**

**These
Twain**

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Book i

The Woman in the House

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Chapter i

The House

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i

In the year 1892 Bleakridge, residential suburb of Bursley, was still most plainly divided into old and new,—that is to say, into the dull red or dull yellow with stone facings, and the bright red with terra cotta gimcrackery. Like incompatible liquids congealed in a pot, the two components had run into each other and mingled, but never mixed.

Paramount among the old was the house of the Member of Parliament, near the top of the important mound that separates Hanbridge from Bursley. The aged and widowed Member used the house little, but he kept it up, and sometimes came into it with an unexpectedness that extremely flattered the suburb. Thus you might be reading in the morning paper that the Member had given a lunch in London on the previous day to Cabinet Ministers and ladies as splendid as the Countess of Chell, and—glancing out of the window—you might see the Member himself walking down Trafalgar Road, sad, fragile, sedately alert, with his hands behind him, or waving a gracious hand to an acquaintance. Whereupon you would announce, not apathetically: “Member’s gone down to MacIlvaine’s!” (‘MacIlvaine’s being the works in which the Member had an interest) and there would perhaps be a rush to the window. Those were the last great days of Bleakridge.

After the Member's house ranked such historic residences as those of Osmond Orgreave, the architect, (which had the largest, greenest garden and the best smoke-defying trees in Bleakridge), and Fearn, the Hanbridge lawyer; together with Manor "Cottage" (so-called, though a spacious house), where lived the mechanical genius who had revolutionised the pottery industry and strangely enough made a fortune thereby, and the dark abode of the High Church parson.

Next in importance came the three terraces,—Manor Terrace, Abbey Terrace, and the Sneyd Terrace—each consisting of three or four houses, and all on the west side of Trafalgar Road, with long back-gardens and a distant prospect of Hillport therefrom over the Manor fields. The Terraces, considered as architecture, were unbeautiful, old-fashioned, inconvenient,—perhaps paltry, as may be judged from the fact that rents ran as low as £25 a year; but they had been wondrous in their day, the pride of builders and owners and the marvel of a barbaric populace. They too had histories, which many people knew. Age had softened them and sanctioned their dignity. A gate might creak, but the harsh curves of its ironwork had been mollified by time. Moreover the property was always maintained in excellent repair by its landlords, and residents cared passionately for the appearance of the windows and the front-steps. The plenary respectability of the residents could not be impugned. They were as good as the best. For address, they would not give the number of the house in Trafalgar Road, but the name of its Terrace. Just as much as the occupiers of detached houses, they had sorted themselves out from the horde. Conservative or Liberal, they were anti-democratic, ever murmuring to themselves as they descended the front-steps in the morning and mounted them in the evening: "Most folks are nobodies, but I am somebody." And this was true.

The still smaller old houses in between the Terraces, and even the old cottages in the side streets (which all ran to the east) had a similar distinction of caste, aloofness, and tradition. The least of them was scornful of the crowd, and deeply conscious of itself as a separate individuality. When the tenant-owner of a cottage in Manor Street added a bay-window to his front-room the event seemed enormous in Manor Street, and affected even Trafalgar Road, as a notorious clean-shaven figure in the streets may disconcert a whole quarter by growing a beard. The congeries of cottage yards between Manor Street and Higginbotham Street, as visible from certain high back-bedrooms in Trafalgar Road,—a crowded higgledy-piggledy of plum-coloured walls and chimneys, blue-brick pavements, and slate roofs—well illustrated the grand Victorian epoch of the Building Society, when eighteenpence was added weekly to eighteenpence, and land haggled over by the foot, and every brick counted, in the grim, long effort to break away from the mass.

The traditionalism of Bleakridge protected even Roman Catholicism in that district of Nonconformity, where there were at least three Methodist chapels to every church and where the adjective “popish” was commonly used in preference to “papal.” The little “Catholic Chapel” and the priest’s house with its cross-keys at the top of the mound were as respected as any other buildings, because Roman Catholicism had always been endemic there, since the age when the entire let belonged to Cistercian monks in white robes. A feebly endemic Catholicism and a complete exemption from tithes were all that remained of the Cistercian occupation. The exemption was highly esteemed by the possessing class.

Alderman Sutton, towards the end of the seventies, first pitted the new against the old in Bleakridge. The lifelong secretary of a first-class Building Society, he was responsible for a terrace of three commodious modern

residences exactly opposite the house of the Member. The Member and Osmond Orgreave might modernise their antique houses as much as they liked,—they could never match the modernity of the Alderman's Terrace, to which, by the way, he declined to give a name. He was capable of covering his drawing-room walls with papers at three-and-six a roll, and yet he capriciously preferred numbers to a name! These houses cost twelve hundred pounds each (a lot of money in the happy far-off days when good bricks were only £1 a thousand, or a farthing apiece), and imposed themselves at once upon the respect and admiration of Bleakridge. A year or two later the Clayhanger house went up at the corner of Trafalgar Road and Hulton Street, and easily outvied the Sutton houses. Geographically at the centre of the residential suburb, it represented the new movement in Bleakridge at its apogee, and indeed was never beaten by later ambitious attempts.

Such fine erections, though nearly every detail of them challenged tradition, could not disturb Bleakridge's belief in the stability of society. But simultaneously whole streets of cheap small houses (in reality, pretentious cottages) rose round about. Hulton Street was all new and cheap. Oak Street offered a row of pink cottages to Osmond Orgreave's garden gates, and there were three other similar new streets between Oak Street and the Catholic Chapel. Jerry-building was practised in Trafalgar Road itself, on a large plot in full view of the Catholic Chapel, where a speculative builder, too hurried to use a measure, "stepped out" the foundations of fifteen cottages with his own bandy legs, and when the corner of a freshly-constructed cottage fell into the street remarked that accidents would happen and had the bricks replaced. But not every cottage was jerry-built. Many, perhaps most, were of fairly honest workmanship. All were modern, and relatively spacious, and much superior in plan to the old. All had bay-windows. And yet all their bay-windows together could not produce an effect equal to one

bay-window in ancient Manor Street, because they had omitted to be individual. Not one showy dwelling was unlike another, nor desired to be unlike another.

The garish new streets were tenanted by magic. On Tuesday the paperhangers might be whistling in those drawing-rooms (called parlours in Manor Street),—on Wednesday bay-windows were curtained and chimneys smoking. And just as the cottages lacked individuality, so the tenants were nobodies. At any rate no traditional person in Bleakridge knew who they were, nor where they came from, except that they came mysteriously up out of the town. (Not that there had been any shocking increase in the birthrate down there!) And no traditional person seemed to care. The strange inroad and portent ought to have puzzled and possibly to have intimidated traditional Bleakridge: but it did not. Bleakridge merely observed that “a lot of building was going on,” and left the phenomenon at that. At first it was interested and flattered; then somewhat resentful and regretful. And even Edwin Clayhanger, though he counted himself among the enlightened and the truly democratic, felt hurt when quite nice houses, copying some features of his own on a small scale, and let to such people as insurance agents, began to fill up the remaining empty spaces of Trafalgar Road. He could not help thinking that the prestige of Bleakridge was being impaired.

ii

Edwin Clayhanger, though very young in marriage, considered that he was getting on in years as a householder. His age was thirty-six. He had been married only a few months, under peculiar circumstances which rendered him self-conscious, and on an evening of August 1892, as he stood in the hall of his house awaiting the commencement of a postponed and unusual At Home, he felt absurdly nervous. But the nervousness was not painful;

because he himself could laugh at it. He might be timid, he might be a little gawky, he might often have the curious sensation of not being really adult but only a boy after all,—the great impressive facts would always emerge that he was the respected head of a well-known family, that he was successful, that he had both ideas and money, and that his position as one of the two chief master-printers of the district would not be challenged. He knew that he could afford to be nervous. And further, since he was house-proud, he had merely to glance round his house in order to be reassured and puffed up.

Loitering near the foot of the stairs, discreetly stylish in an almost new blue serge suit and a quite new black satin tie, with the light of the gas on one side of his face, and the twilight through the glazed front-door mitigating the shadow on the other, Edwin mused pleasingly upon the whole organism of his home. Externally, the woodwork and metalwork of the house had just been repainted, and the brickwork pointed. He took pleasure in the thought of the long even lines of fresh mortar, and of the new sage-tinted spoutings and pipings, every foot of which he knew by heart and where every tube began and where it ended and what its purpose was. The nice fitting of a perpendicular spout into a horizontal one, and the curve of the joint from the eave to the wall of the house, and the elaborate staples that firmly held the spout to the wall, and the final curve of the spout that brought its orifice accurately over a spotless grid in the ground,—the perfection of all these ridiculous details, each beneath the notice of a truly celestial mind, would put the householder Edwin into a sort of contemplative ecstasy. Perhaps he was comical. But such inner experiences were part of his great interest in life, part of his large general passion.

Within the hall he regarded with equal interest and pride the photogravure of Bellini's "Agony in the Garden," from the National Gallery, and the radiator which he had just had

installed. The radiator was only a half-measure, but it was his precious toy, his pet lamb, his mistress; and the theory of it was that by warming the hall and the well of the staircase it softly influenced the whole house and abolished draughts. He had exaggerated the chilliness of the late August night so that he might put the radiator into action. About the small furnace in the cellar that heated it he was both crotchety and extravagant. The costly efficiency of the radiator somewhat atoned in his mind for the imperfections of the hot water apparatus, depending on the kitchen boiler. Even in 1892 this middle-class pioneer and sensualist was dreaming of an ideal house in which inexhaustible water was always positively steaming, so that if a succession of persons should capriciously desire hot baths in the cold middle of the night, their collective fancy might be satisfied.

Bellini's picture was the symbol of an artistic revolution in Edwin. He had read somewhere that it was "perhaps the greatest picture in the world." A critic's exhortation to "observe the loving realistic passion shown in the foreshortening of the figure of the sleeping apostle" had remained in his mind; and, thrilled, he would point out this feature of the picture alike to the comprehending and the uncomprehending. The hanging-up of the Bellini, in its strange frame of stained unpolished oak, had been an epochal event, closing one era and inaugurating another. And yet, before the event, he had not even noticed the picture on a visit to the National Gallery! A hint, a phrase murmured in the right tone in a periodical, a glimpse of an illustration,—and the mighty magic seed was sown. In a few months all Victorian phenomena had been put upon their trial, and most of them condemned. And condemned without even the forms of justice! Half a word (in the right tone) might ruin any of them. Thus was Sir Frederick Leighton, P.R.A., himself overthrown. One day his "Bath of Psyche" reigned in Edwin's bedroom, and the next it had gone, and none knew why. But certain aged Victorians, such

as Edwin's Auntie Hamps, took the disappearance of the licentious engraving as a sign that the beloved queer Edwin was at last coming to his senses—as, of course, they knew he ultimately would. He did not and could not explain. More and more he was growing to look upon his house as an island, cut off by a difference of manners from the varnished barbarism of multitudinous new cottages, and by an immensely more profound difference of thought from both the cottages and the larger houses. It seemed astounding to Edwin that modes of thought so violently separative as his and theirs could exist so close together and under such appearances of similarity. Not even all the younger members of the Orgreave family, who counted as his nearest friends, were esteemed by Edwin to be meet for his complete candour.

The unique island was scarcely a dozen years old, but historical occurrences had aged it for Edwin. He had opened the doors of all three reception-rooms, partly to extend the benign sway of the radiator, and partly so that he might judge the total effect of the illuminated chambers and improve that effect if possible. And each room bore the mysterious imprints of past emotion.

In the drawing-room, with its new orange-coloured gas-globes that gilded everything beneath them, Edwin's father used to sit on Sunday evenings, alone. And one Sunday evening, when Edwin, entering, had first mentioned to his father a woman's name, his father had most terribly humiliated him. But now it seemed as if some other youth, and not Edwin, had been humiliated, so completely was the wound healed.... And he could remember leaning in the doorway of the drawing-room one Sunday morning, and his sister Clara was seated at the piano, and his sister Maggie, nursing a baby of Clara's, by her side, and they were singing Balfe's duet "Excelsior," and his father stood behind them, crying, crying steadily, until at length the bitter old man lost control of himself and sobbed aloud under the emotional

stress of the women's voices, and Clara cheerfully upbraided him for foolishness; and Edwin had walked suddenly away. This memory was somehow far more poignant than the memory of his humiliation.... And in the drawing-room too he had finally betrothed himself to Hilda. That by comparison was only yesterday; yet it was historical and distant. He was wearing his dressing-gown, being convalescent from influenza; he could distinctly recall the feel of his dressing-gown; and Hilda came in-over her face was a veil....

The dining-room, whose large glistening table was now covered with the most varied and modern "refreshments" for the At Home, had witnessed no event specially dramatic, but it had witnessed hundreds of monotonous tragic meals at which the progress of his father's mental malady and the approach of his death could be measured by the old man's increasing disability to distinguish between his knife and his fork; it had seen Darius Clayhanger fed like a baby. And it had never been the same dining-room since. Edwin might transform it, repaper it, refurnish it,—the mysterious imprint remained....

And then there was the little "breakfast-room," inserted into the plan of the house between the hall and the kitchen. Nothing had happened there, because the life of the household had never adjusted itself to the new, borrowed convention of the "breakfast-room." Nothing? But the most sensational thing had happened there! When with an exquisite passing timidity she took possession of Edwin's house as his wife, Hilda had had a sudden gust of audacity in the breakfast-room. A mature woman (with a boy aged ten to prove it), she had effervesced into the naïve gestures of a young girl who has inherited a boudoir. "This shall be my very own room, and I shall arrange it just how I like, without asking you about *anything*. And it will be my very own." She had not offered an idea; she had announced a decision. Edwin had had other notions for the room, but he

perceived that he must bury them in eternal silence, and yield eagerly to this caprice. Thus to acquiesce had given him deep and strange joy. He was startled, perhaps, to discover that he had brought into his house—not a woman, but a tripartite creature—woman, child, and sibyl. Neither Maggie nor Clara, nor Janet Orgreave, nor even Hilda before she became his wife, had ever aroused in him the least suspicion that a woman might be a tripartite creature. He was married, certainly—nobody could be more legally and respectably married than was he—but the mere marriage seemed naught in comparison with the enormous fact that he had got this unexampled creature in his house and was living with her, she at his mercy, and he at hers. Enchanting escapade! Solemn doom! ... By the way, she had yet done nothing with the breakfast-room. Yes, she had stolen a “cabinet” gold frame from the shop, and put his photograph into it, and stuck his picture on the mantelpiece; but that was all. She would not permit him to worry her about her secret designs for the breakfast-room. The breakfast-room was her affair. Indeed the whole house was her affair. It was no longer his house, in which he could issue orders without considering another individuality—orders that would infallibly be executed, either cheerfully or glumly, by the plump spinster, Maggie. He had to mind his p’s and q’s; he had to be wary, everywhere. The creature did not simply live in the house; she pervaded it. As soon as he opened the front-door he felt her.

iii

She was now upstairs in their joint bedroom, dressing for the At Home. All day he had feared she might be late, and as he looked at the hall-clock he saw that the risk was getting acute.

Before the domestic rearrangements preceding the marriage had been fully discussed, he had assumed, and

Maggie and Clara had assumed, and Auntie Hamps had absolutely assumed, that the husband and wife would occupy the long empty bedroom of old Darius, because it was two-foot-six broader than Edwin's, and because it was the "principal" bedroom. But Hilda had said No to him privately. Whereupon, being himself almost morbidly unsentimental, he had judiciously hinted that to object to a room because an old man had died in it under distressing circumstances was to be morbidly sentimental and unworthy of her. Whereupon she had mysteriously smiled, and called him sweet bad names, and kissed him, and hung on his neck. *She* sentimental! Could not the great stupid see without being told that what influenced her was not an aversion for his father's bedroom, but a predilection for Edwin's. She desired that they should inhabit his room. She wanted to sleep in his room; and to wake up in it, and to feel that she was immersing herself in his past.... (Ah! The exciting flattery, like an aphrodisiac!) And she would not allow him to uproot the fixed bookcases on either side of the hearth. She said that for her they were part of the room itself. Useless to argue that they occupied space required for extra furniture! She would manage! She did manage. He found that the acme of convenience for a husband had not been achieved, but convenience was naught in the rapture of the escapade. He had "needed shaking up," as they say down there, and he was shaken up.

Nevertheless, though undoubtedly shaken up, he had the male wit to perceive that the bedroom episode had been a peculiar triumph for himself. Her attitude in it, imperious superficially, was in truth an impassioned and outright surrender to him. And further, she had at once become a frankly admiring partisan of his theory of bedrooms. The need for a comfortable solitude earlier in life had led Edwin to make his bedroom habitable by means of a gas-stove, an easy chair, and minor amenities. When teased by hardy compatriots about his sybaritism Edwin was apt sometimes

to flush and be “nettled,” and he would make offensive unEnglish comments upon the average bedroom of the average English household, which was so barbaric that during eight months of the year you could not maintain your temperature in it unless you were either in bed or running about the room, and that even in Summer you could not sit down therein at ease because there was nothing easy to sit on, nor a table to sit at nor even a book to read. He would caustically ask to be informed why the supposedly practical and comfort-loving English were content with an Alpine hut for a bedroom. And in this way he would go on. He was rather pleased with the phrase “Alpine hut.” One day he had overheard Hilda replying to an acquaintance upstairs: “People may say what they like, but Edwin and I don’t care to sleep in an Alpine hut.” She had caught it! She was his disciple in that matter! And how she had appreciated his easy-chair! As for calm deliberation in dressing and undressing, she could astonishingly and even disconcertingly surpass him in the quality. But it is to be noted that she would not permit her son to have a gas-stove in his bedroom. Nor would she let him occupy the disdained principal bedroom, her argument being that that room was too large for a little boy. Maggie Clayhanger’s old bedroom was given to George, and the principal bedroom remained empty.

Chapter ii

Hilda on the Stairs

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i

Ada descended the stairs, young, slim, very neat. Ada was one of Hilda's two new servants. Before taking charge of the house Hilda had ordained the operation called "a clean sweep," and Edwin had approved. The elder of Maggie's two servants had been a good one, but Hilda had shown no interest in the catalogue of her excellences. She wanted fresh servants. Maggie, like Edwin, approved, but only as a general principle. In the particular case she had hinted that her prospective sister-in-law was perhaps unwise to let slip a tested servant. Hilda wanted not merely fresh servants, but young servants agreeable to behold. "I will not have a lot of middle-aged scowling women about my house," Hilda had said. Maggie was reserved, but her glance was meant to remind Hilda that in those end-of-the-century days mistresses had to be content with what they could get. Young and comely servants were all very well—if you could drop on them, but supposing you couldn't? The fact was that Maggie could not understand Hilda's insistence on youth and comeliness in a servant, and she foresaw trouble for Hilda. Hilda, however, obtained her desire. She was outspoken with her servants. If Edwin after his manner implied that she was dangerously ignoring the touchiness of the modern servant, she would say indifferently: "It's always open to them to go if they don't like it." They did not go. It is notorious that foolhardy mistresses are often very lucky.

As soon as Ada caught sight of her master in the hall she became self-conscious; all the joints of her body seemed to be hung on very resilient springs, and,—reddening slightly,—she lowered her gaze and looked at her tripping toes. Edwin seldom spoke to her more than once a day, and not always that. He had one day visited the large attic into which, with her colleague, she disappeared late at night and from which she emerged early in the morning, and he had seen two small tin trunks and some clothes behind the door, and an alarm-clock and a portrait of a fireman on the mantelpiece. (The fireman, he seemed to recollect, was her brother.) But she was a stranger in his house, and he had no sustained curiosity about her. The days were gone when he used to be the intimate of servants—of Mrs. Nixon, for example, sole prop of the Clayhanger family for many years, and an entirely human being to Edwin. Mrs. Nixon had never been either young, slim, or neat. She was dead. The last servant whom he could be said to have known was a pert niece of Mrs. Nixon's—now somebody's prolific wife and much changed. And he was now somebody's husband, and bearded, and perhaps occasionally pompous, and much changed in other ways. So that enigmatic Adas bridled at sight of him and became intensely aware of themselves. Still, this Ada in her smartness was a pretty sight for his eyes as like an aspen she trembled down the stairs, though the coarseness of her big red hands, and the vulgarity of her accent were a surprising contrast to her waist and her fine carriage.

He knew she had been hooking her mistress's dress, and that therefore the hooking must be finished. He liked to think of Hilda being attired thus in the bedroom by a natty deferential wench. The process gave to Hilda a luxurious, even an oriental quality, which charmed him. He liked the suddenly impressive tone in which the haughty Hilda would say to Ada, "Your master," as if mentioning a sultan. He was

more and more anxious lest Hilda should be late, and he wanted to ask Ada: "Is Mrs. Clayhanger coming down?"

But he discreetly forbore. He might have run up to the bedroom and burst in on the toilette—Hilda would have welcomed him. But he preferred to remain with his anxiety where he was, and meditate upon Hilda bedecking herself up there in the bedroom—to please him; to please not the guests, but him.

Ada disappeared down the narrow passage leading to the kitchen, and a moment later he heard a crude giggle, almost a scream, and some echo of the rough tones in which the servants spoke to each other when they were alone in the kitchen. There were in fact two Adas; one was as timid as a fawn with a voice like a delicate invalid's; the other a loud-mouthed hoity-toity girl such as rushed out of potbanks in flannel apron at one o'clock. The Clayhanger servants were satisfactory, more than satisfactory, the subject of favourable comment for their neatness among the mistresses of other servants. He liked them to be about; their presence and their official demeanour flattered him; they perfected the complex superiority of his house,—that island. But when he overheard them alone together, or when he set himself to imagine what their soul's life was, he was more than ever amazed at the unnoticed profound differences between modes of thought that in apparently the most natural manner could exist so close together without producing a cataclysm. Auntie Hamps's theory was that they were all—he, she, the servants—equal in the sight of God!

ii

Hilda's son, George Edwin, sidled surprisingly into the hall. He was wearing a sailor suit, very new, and he had probably been invisible somewhere against the blue curtains of the drawing-room window—an example of nature's

protective mimicry. George was rather small for his ten years. Dark, like his mother, he had her eyes and her thick eyebrows that almost met in the middle, and her pale skin. As for his mind, he seemed to be sometimes alarmingly precocious and sometimes a case of arrested development. In this and many other respects he greatly resembled other boys. The son of a bigamist can have no name, unless it be his mother's maiden name, but George knew nothing of that. He had borne his father's name, and when at the exciting and puzzling period of his mother's marriage he had learnt that his surname would in future be Clayhanger he had a little resented the affront to his egoism. Edwin's explanation, however, that the change was for the convenience of people in general had caused him to shrug his shoulders in concession and to murmur casually: "Oh, well then—!" He seemed to be assenting with loftiness: "If it's any particular use to the whole world, I don't really mind."

"I say, uncle," he began.

Edwin had chosen this form of address. "Stepfather" was preposterous, and "father" somehow offended him; so he constituted himself an uncle.

"Hello, kid!" said he. "Can you find room to keep anything else in your pockets besides your hands?"

George snatched his hands out of his pockets. Then he smiled confidently up. These two were friends. Edwin was as proud as the boy of the friendship, and perhaps more flattered. At first he had not cared for George, being repelled by George's loud, positive tones, his brusque and often violent gestures, and his intense absorption in himself. But gradually he had been won by the boy's boyishness, his smile, his little, soft body, his unspoken invocations, his resentment of injustice (except when strict justice appeared to clash with his own interests), his absolute impotence against adult decrees, his touching fatalism, his recondite personal distinction that flashed and was gone, and his

occasional cleverness and wit. He admitted that George charmed him. But he well knew that he also charmed George. He had a way of treating George as an equal that few children (save possibly Clara's) could have resisted. True, he would quiz the child, but he did not forbid the child to quiz. The mother was profoundly relieved and rejoiced by this friendship. She luxuriated in it. Edwin might well have been inimical to the child; he might through the child have shown a jealousy of the child's father. But, somewhat to the astonishment of even Edwin himself, he never saw the father in the child, nor thought of the father, nor resented the parenthood that was not his. For him the child was an individual. And in spite of his stern determination not to fall into the delusions of conceited parents, he could not help thinking that George was a remarkable child.

"Have you seen my horse?" asked George.

"Have I seen your horse? ... Oh! ... I've seen that you've left it lying about on the hall-table."

"I put it there so that you'd see it," George persuasively excused himself for the untidiness.

"Well, let's inspect it," Edwin forgave him, and picked up from the table a piece of cartridge-paper on which was a drawing of a great cart-horse with shaggy feet. It was a vivacious sketch.

"You're improving," said Edwin, judicially, but in fact much impressed. Surely few boys of ten could draw as well as that! The design was strangely more mature than certain quite infantile watercolours that Edwin had seen scarcely a year earlier.

"It's rather good, isn't it?" George suggested, lifting up his head so that he could just see over the edge of the paper which Edwin held at the level of his watch-chain.

"I've met worse. Where did you see this particular animal?"

"I saw him down near the Brewery this morning. But when I'm doing a horse, I see him on the paper before I

begin to draw, and I just draw round him."

Edwin thought:

"This kid is no ordinary kid."

He said:

"Well, we'll pin it up here. We'll have a Royal Academy and hear what the public has to say." He took a pin from under his waistcoat.

"That's not level," said George.

And when Edwin had readjusted the pin, George persisted boldly:

"That's not level either."

"It's as level as it's going to be. I expect you've been drawing horses instead of practising your piano."

He looked down at the mysterious little boy, who lived always so much nearer to the earth's surface than himself.

George nodded simply, and then scratched his head.

"I suppose if I don't practise while I'm young I shall regret it in after life, shan't I?"

"Who told you that?"

"It's what Auntie Hamps said to me, I think... I say, uncle."

"What's up?"

"Is Mr. John coming to-night?"

"I suppose so. Why?"

"Oh, nothing.... I say, uncle."

"That's twice you've said it."

The boy smiled.

"You know that piece in the Bible about if two of you shall agree on earth—?"

"What of it?" Edwin asked rather curtly, anticipating difficulties.

"I don't think two *boys* would be enough, would they? Two grown-ups might. But I'm not so sure about two boys. You see in the very next verse it says two *or three*, gathered together."

"Three might be more effective. It's always as well to be on the safe side."

"Could you pray for anything? A penknife, for instance?"

"Why not?"

"But could you?" George was a little impatient.

"Better ask your mother," said Edwin, who was becoming self-conscious under the strain.

George exploded coarsely:

"Poh! It's no good asking mother."

Said Edwin:

"The great thing in these affairs is to know what you want, and to *want* it. Concentrate as hard as you can, a long time in advance. No use half wanting!"

"Well, there's one thing that's *poz* [positive]. I couldn't begin to concentrate to-night."

"Why not?"

"Who could?" George protested. "We're all so nervous to-night, aren't we, with this At Home business. And I know I never could concentrate in my best clothes."

For Edwin the boy with his shocking candour had suddenly precipitated out of the atmosphere, as it were, the collective nervousness of the household, made it into a phenomenon visible, tangible, oppressive. And the household was no longer a collection of units, but an entity. A bell rang faintly in the kitchen, and the sound abraded his nerves. The first guests were on the threshold, and Hilda was late. He looked at the clock. Yes, she was late. The hour named in the invitations was already past. All day he had feared lest she should be late, and she was late. He looked at the glass of the front-door; but night had come, and it was opaque. Ada tripped into view and ran upstairs.

"Don't you hear the front-door?" he stopped her flight.

"It was missis's bell, sir."

"Ah!" Respite!

Ada disappeared.

Then another ring! And no parlour-maid to answer the bell! Naturally! Naturally Hilda, forgetting something at the last moment, had taken the parlour-maid away precisely when the girl was needed! Oh! He had foreseen it! He could hear shuffling outside and could even distinguish forms through the glass—many forms. All the people converging from various streets upon the waiting nervousness of the household seemed to have arrived at once.

George moved impulsively towards the front-door.

“Where are you going?” Edwin asked roughly. “Come here. It’s not your place to open the door. Come with me in the drawing-room.”

It was no affair of Edwin’s, thought Edwin crossly and uncompromisingly, if guests were kept waiting at the front-door. It was Hilda’s affair; she was the mistress of the house, and the blame was hers.

At high speed Ada swept with streamers down the stairs, like a squirrel down the branch of a tree. And then came Hilda.

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She stood at the turn of the stairs, waiting while the front-door was opened. He and George could see her over and through the banisters. And at sight of her triumphant and happy air, all Edwin’s annoyance melted. He did not desire that it should melt, but it melted. She was late. He could not rely on her not to be late. In summoning the parlourmaid to her bedroom when the parlourmaid ought to have been on duty downstairs she had acted indefensibly and without thought. No harm, as it happened, was done. Sheer chance often thus saved her, but logically her double fault was not thereby mitigated. He felt that if he forgave her, if he dismissed the charge and wiped the slate, he was being false to the great male principles of logic and justice. The godlike judge in him resented the miscarriage of justice.

Nevertheless justice miscarried. And the weak husband said like a woman: "What does it matter?" Such was her shameful power over him, of which the unscrupulous creature was quite aware.

As he looked at her he asked himself: "Is she magnificent? Or is she just ordinary and am I deluded? Does she seem her age? Is she a mature woman getting past the prime, or has she miraculously kept herself a young girl for me?"

In years she was thirty-five. She had large bones, and her robust body, neither plump nor slim, showed the firm, assured carriage of its age. It said: "I have stood before the world, and I cannot be intimidated." Still, marriage had rejuvenated her. She was marvellously young at times, and experience would drop from her and leave the girl that he had first known and kissed ten years earlier; but a less harsh, less uncompromising girl. At their first acquaintance she had repelled him with her truculent seriousness. Nowadays she would laugh for no apparent reason, and even pirouette. Her complexion was good; he could nearly persuade himself that that olive skin had not suffered in a decade of distress and disasters.

Previous to her marriage she had shown little interest in dress. But now she would spasmodically worry about her clothes, and she would make Edwin worry. He had to decide, though he had no qualifications as an arbiter. She would scowl at a dressmaker as if to say: "For God's sake do realise that upon you is laid the sacred responsibility of helping me to please my husband!" To-night she was wearing a striped blue dress, imperceptibly décolletée, with the leg-of-mutton sleeves of the period. The colours, two shades of blue, did not suit her. But she imagined that they suited her, and so did he; and the frock was elaborate, was the result of terrific labour and produced a rich effect, meet for a hostess of position.

The mere fact that this woman with no talent for coquetry should after years of narrow insufficiency scowl at dressmakers and pout at senseless refractory silks in the yearning for elegance was utterly delicious to Edwin. Her presence there on the landing of the stairs was in the nature of a miracle. He had wanted her, and he had got her. In the end he had got her, and nothing had been able to stop him—not even the obstacle of her tragic adventure with a rascal and a bigamist. The strong magic of his passion had forced destiny to render her up to him mysteriously intact, after all. The impossible had occurred, and society had accepted it, beaten. There she was, dramatically, with her thick eyebrows, and the fine wide nostrils and the delicate lobe of the ear, and that mouth that would startlingly fasten on him and kiss the life out of him.

“There is dear Hilda!” said someone at the door amid the arriving group.

None but Auntie Hamps would have said ‘dear’ Hilda. Maggie, Clara, and even Janet Orgreave never used sentimental adjectives on occasions of ceremony.

And in her clear, precise, dominating voice Hilda with gay ease greeted the company from above:

“Good evening, all!”

“What the deuce was I so upset about just now?” thought Edwin, in sudden, instinctive, exulting felicity: “Everything is absolutely all right.”

Chapter iii

Attack and Repulse

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The entering guests were Edwin's younger sister Clara with her husband Albert Benbow, his elder sister Maggie, Auntie Hamps, and Mr. Peartree. They had arrived together, and rather unfashionably soon after the hour named in the invitation, because the Benbows had called at Auntie Hamps's on the way up, and the Benbows were always early, both in arriving and in departing, "on account of the children." They called themselves "early birds." Whenever they were out of the nest in the evening they called themselves early birds. They used the comparison hundreds, thousands, of times, and never tired of it; indeed each time they were convinced that they had invented it freshly for the occasion.

Said Auntie Hamps, magnificent in jetty black, handsome, and above all imposing:

"I knew you would be delighted to meet Mr. Peartree again, Edwin. He is staying the night at my house—I can be so much more hospitable now Maggie is with me—and I insisted he should come up with us. But it needed no insisting."

The old erect lady looked from Mr. Peartree with pride towards her nephew.

Mr. Peartree was a medium-sized man of fifty, with greying sandy hair. Twenty years before, he had been second minister in the Bursley Circuit of the Wesleyan

Methodist Connexion. He was now Superintendent Minister in a Cheshire circuit. The unchangeable canons of Wesleyanism permit its ministers to marry, and celibacy is even discouraged, for the reason that wives and daughters are expected to toil in the cause, and their labour costs the circuit not a halfpenny. But the canons forbid ministers to take root and found a home. Eleven times in thirty years Mr. Peartree had been forced to migrate to a strange circuit and to adapt his much-travelled furniture and family to a house which he had not chosen, and which his wife generally did not like. During part of the period he had secretly resented the autocracy of Superintendent Ministers, and during the remainder he had learnt that Superintendent Ministers are not absolute autocrats.

He was neither overworked nor underpaid. He belonged to the small tradesman class, and, keeping a shop in St. Luke's Square, he might well have worked harder for less money than he now earned. His vocation, however, in addition to its desolating nomadic quality, had other grave drawbacks. It gave him contact with a vast number of human beings, but the abnormal proportion among them of visionaries, bigots, hypocrites, and petty office-seekers falsified his general estimate of humanity. Again, the canons rigorously forbade him to think freely for himself on the subjects which in theory most interested him; with the result that he had remained extremely ignorant through the very fear of knowledge, that he was a warm enemy of freedom, and that he habitually carried intellectual dishonesty to the verge of cynicism. Thirdly, he was obliged always to be diplomatic (except of course with his family), and nature had not meant him for the diplomatic career. He was so sick of being all things to all men that he even dreamed diplomatic dreams as a galley-slave will dream of the oar; and so little gifted for the rôle that he wore insignificant tight turned-down collars, never having perceived the immense moral advantage conferred on the diplomatist by a

high, loose, wide-rolling collar. Also he was sick of captivity, and this in no wise lessened his objection to freedom. He had lost all youthful enthusiasm, and was in fact equally bored with earth and with heaven.

Nevertheless, he had authority and security. He was accustomed to the public gaze and to the forms of deference. He knew that he was as secure as a judge,—and far more secure than a cabinet-minister. Nothing but the inconceivable collapse of a powerful and wealthy sect could affect his position or his livelihood to the very end of life. Hence, beneath his weariness and his professional attitudinarianism there was a hint of the devil-may-care that had its piquancy. He could foresee with indifference even the distant but approaching day when he would have to rise in the pulpit and assert that the literal inspiration of the Scriptures was not and never had been an essential article of Wesleyan faith.

Edwin blanched at the apparition of Mr. Peartree. That even Auntie Hamps should dare uninvited to bring a Wesleyan Minister to the party was startling; but that the minister should be Mr. Peartree staggered him. For twenty years and more Edwin had secretly, and sometimes in public, borne a tremendous grudge against Mr. Peartree. He had execrated, anathematised, and utterly excommunicated Mr. Peartree, and had extended the fearful curse to his family, all his ancestors, and all his descendants. When Mr. Peartree was young and fervent in the service of heaven he had had the monstrous idea of instituting a Saturday Afternoon Bible Class for schoolboys. Abetted by parents weak-minded and cruel, he had caught and horribly tortured some score of miserable victims, of whom Edwin was one. The bitter memory of those weekly half-holidays thieved from him and made desolate by a sanctimonious crank had never softened, nor had Edwin ever forgiven Mr. Peartree.

It was at the sessions of the Bible Class that Edwin, while silently perfecting himself in the art of profanity and

blasphemy, had in secret fury envenomed his instinctive mild objection to the dogma, the ritual, and the spirit of conventional Christianity, especially as exemplified in Wesleyan Methodism. He had left Mr. Peartree's Bible Class a convinced anti-religionist, a hater and despiser of all that the Wesleyan Chapel and Mr. Peartree stood for. He deliberately was not impartial, and he took a horrid pleasure in being unfair. He knew well that Methodism had produced many fine characters, and played a part in the moral development of the race; but he would not listen to his own knowledge. Nothing could extenuate, for him, the noxiousness of Methodism. On the other hand he was full of glee if he could add anything to the indictment against it and Christianity. Huxley's controversial victories over Gladstone were then occurring in the monthly press, and he acclaimed them with enormous gusto. When he first read that the Virgin Birth was a feature of sundry creeds more ancient than Christianity, his private satisfaction was intense and lasted acutely for days. When he heard that Methodism had difficulty in maintaining its supply of adequately equipped ministers, he rejoiced with virulence. His hostility was the more significant in that it was concealed—embedded like a foreign substance in the rather suave gentleness of his nature. At intervals—increasingly frequent, it is true—he would carry it into the chapel itself; for through mingled cowardice and sharp prudence, he had not formally left the Connexion. To compensate himself for such bowings-down he would now and then assert, judicially to a reliable male friend, or with ferocious contempt to a scandalised defenceless sister, that, despite all parsons, religion was not a necessity of the human soul, and that he personally had never felt the need of it and never would. In which assertion he was profoundly sincere.

And yet throughout he had always thought of himself as a rebel against authority; and—such is the mysterious intimidating prestige of the past—he was outwardly an