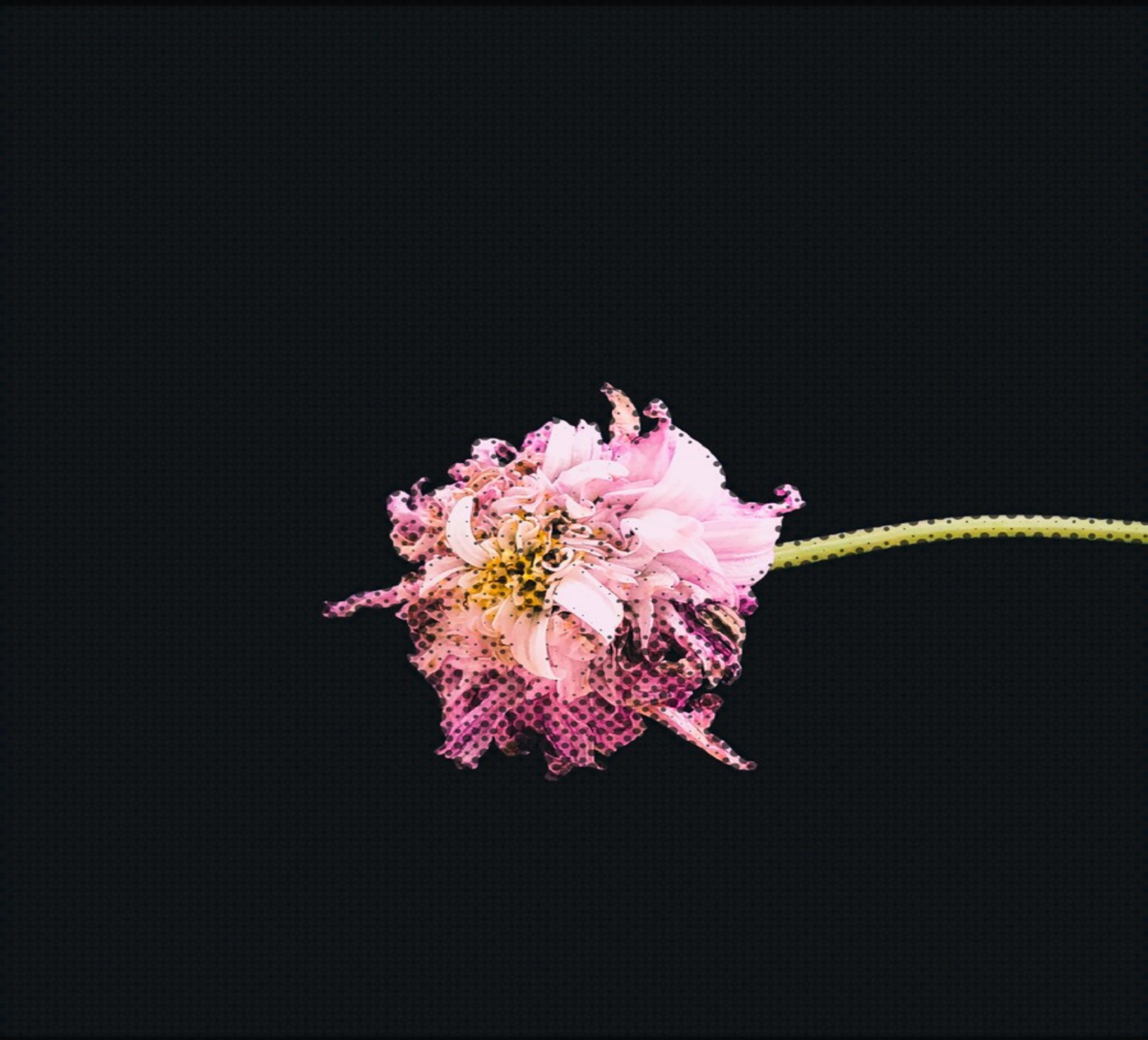
Ethel Lina White



The First Time He Died

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338096586

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I. — ALL MEN ARE MORTAL

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NEARLY every one in the small town of Starminster was sorry to hear of Charlie Baxter's death. He was popular with women, while men invariably called him a "decent little chap"—a curious inaccuracy, since he was well over medium height.

A gentle unassuming nature, he stole out of life as unobtrusively as he left a party—when he nodded farewell to his host and slipped away, without any one knowing that he had gone. At the time flu was epidemic. One day, some one mentioned casually that he was ill. The next bit of news was a thunderclap in the billiard-room at the Grapes.

"Poor Baxter's passed out."

There was a chorus of "Poor chap," for Charlie's slate was clean. He paid his bills, subscribed modestly to local charities, and listened to golf stories. Did the usual things, while his game was always a trifle below the standard of his opponent; the drinks were inevitably on him, but he was a cheerful loser.

No one was really surprised, therefore, to hear that Death had found him a bit below his form, and had taken advantage of the fact.

"When did he die?" asked some one.

"Late last night," replied the herald.

"Flu, I suppose?"

"Yes. Sudden collapse. Heart was weak, I'm told."

"No, it wasn't," announced Acorn, the Insurance agent.

He chalked his cue and looked around him, with no real hope, for some one whom he could beat at snooker. He was the first person to miss Charlie Baxter.

"Damn mistake if they had that old fool Dubarry to attend him," he said savagely. "Another doctor might have pulled him through."

"Mrs. Baxter swears by him," remarked a masculine gossip.

"She would."

The company grunted assent. It was an established fact that Dr. Dubarry had the brains of a stewed mushroom, and allowed nothing to interfere with his personal pleasure; but it had to be admitted in his favour that he had almost entirely ceased to practise, and only took on a case after personal persuasion.

When the matrons of the town heard of Charlie Baxter's death they added a rider to the verdict of medical inefficiency. They hinted that Vera Baxter might have been too casual in her treatment of the patient. Heads were shaken and tongues wagged.

"He always waited on her. It would be a change for her to wait on him. A pity they did not have a trained nurse."

"But Dr. Dubarry said she was wonderful," observed a more charitable tongue.

"He would. She's a pretty woman."

Unlike her husband, Vera Baxter was not very popular in the town. She was a cheery, capable little person, with an anti-litter mind; but she could not play hockey, and they could never be certain that she had gone to the right school.

In appearance, she was a slim, pretty blonde—smart and decorative—who looked too young to be married, until it was noticed that her shrewd blue eyes had grown up before the rest of her.

What the town chiefly resented was the third occupant of Jasmine Cottage—Puggie Williams. He had been a fixture there for several months and was a man of mystery. He wore old well-cut clothes with distinction and his voice betrayed breeding; but he had the red-veined mashed face of a hard drinker, and when he remembered to forget his origin, his manners were appalling.

It was evident, however, that he had begun life in a different social sphere from that of his friends, and had probably met them, when he was sliding down the ladder and they were climbing up, so had clung round their necks, as ballast.

He appeared to be on excellent terms with Charlie and a real friendship seemed to exist between the three. Vera ordered him about as much as she dominated her gentle husband, for she was the type who expected men to be doormats. All the same, the town could not accept Puggie, in connection with Vera, because of his sex.

The news of the tragedy swept through Starminster like a prairie fire. It was a day of wretched weather. There had been a heavy snowfall in the night, so that, in the morning, every roof was white-capped and the church steeple looked like a sugar-loaf.

Now, however, it had begun to melt. Slush covered the pavements and lay in the gutter, while the country roads were churned by traffic to the consistency of brown fudge.

The hills were iced silhouettes against the grey sky, and the streets appeared dark and miserable. People's faces—pinched with cold—seemed actually dirty, so that any one with an artificial complexion was a public benefactor. It was chill and gloomy, and no time to think of death.

Yet it was constantly in the thoughts of many a woman. Charlie's last public appearance had been at a Primrose Dance, when there had been a man-famine. Too retiring to invite the attractive girls and women, he had danced exclusively with wallflowers.

He was an excellent dancer—light as a feather—with a springy step and tireless rhythm. Stout matrons, whose husbands were dancing with buds, seemed to swing years off their age as they swayed in Charlie's arms. Spinsters, who were too mature for public competition, and schoolgirls, who were too callow, found in him not only a partner, but sympathy and deference.

One of these was a Miss Belson, an unmarried woman of some social standing, who had been forced to attend the function because of its political nature. Sitting glued to a hard cane-chair, it did not console her to remember that twenty years previously she had been so much in demand that she was forced to subdivide her programme.

She, too, was an excellent dancer, and Charlie confided to her that she was his best partner. He talked to her about herself, while his soft brown eyes paid her those compliments which his tongue was too circumspect to utter. With customary modesty, he let her usurp their conversation; his sole personal item was the confession that

his beard was not artistic swank, but a safeguard for a delicate throat.

"I don't mind admitting I look better with it than without," he added, with a little laugh. "You know. Chin."

"I hate Strong Men, like Mussolini and Cromwell," declared Miss Belson.

For Charlie had watered the patch of dried romance in her heart, so that she began to wonder whether his married life was happy, and to notice that Vera danced almost exclusively with Puggie Williams.

She was at the library when she heard of his death. It was a terrible shock for her, when the man who had reminded her that she was a woman as well as a ratepayer flicked out of her life, in one casual sentence from the librarian.

"Isn't it sad about poor Mr. Baxter?"

She asked for details with correct composure, but, instead of choosing her usual recommended book, she carried away with her a thriller. She felt she wanted something to take her thoughts off the tragedy.

On her way home she was gripped with an uncontrollable urge to go to Jasmine Cottage and look at the building which held the shell of the man she had met too late. In soaked shoes, she shuffled along over slushy pavements and past snow-powdered laurels, until she reached the little cream-washed house.

It was built on the extreme outskirts of the town, for only two lamp-posts divided it from the utter darkness of the York Road. No light was visible, although the blue-green curtains at the small casement windows were partially undrawn, so

that she could see the flicker of a fire in the lounge. As she paused, a car passed, and its lamps bathed the room in a momentary glow.

She saw two people—Vera Baxter and Puggie Williams—who were sitting close together, as though they were talking in whispers. There was something so furtive in their attitude that it compelled her attention. She caught the flash of teeth and eyes, and wondered incredulously whether they were laughing.

Although she could not be positive about what she had seen, she walked home, throbbing with anger. Instinct insisted that Vera Baxter was not mourning for her husband.

Miss Belson lived with her widowed sister, Lady Fry, who was stout and bronchial. Once she was inside the well-warmed house, she could shut out the cold and misery of the streets; but she could not forget the incident. It remained—a burr on her mind—throughout an excellent dinner, when she ate mechanically, and agreed with her sister that poor Charles Baxter looked like a man who needed "mothering."

That night she read in bed with a hope to induce sleep; but the thriller did not provide the usual escape from life. Instead, its chief function was to sidetrack her thoughts into a new and terrible direction.

Murder.

She told herself that if two persons wanted to put a third out of the way, it would be easy to pull the wool over the eyes of the doctor, if he was an incompetent fool. They had the opportunity to administer a poison or drug, which would

cause a collapse in the ordinary course of illness, especially if the patient had a weak heart.

Even to herself Miss Belson was careful not to mention names.

Suddenly she remembered Charlie Baxter's tireless dancing. He had never panted or shown the least sign of distress. There was a beating inside her temples and her palms grew clammy as she sprang up in the bed.

"Suppose he was murdered," she murmured. "What could I do?"

At that moment she realised the moral courage of those who appeal to the Police. In her own case, however, her course was obvious. Even in the face of a discrepancy she rejected the monstrous notion.

"What an awful thing to think, without a shred of evidence. It's this wretched book."

She slammed down the novel on the table and switched off her light.

All the same this fact is definite. Had Dr. Dubarry—speeding through France in the Blue Train—not taken too much for granted, he would never have written a Certificate of Death for Charles Baxter.

II. — THE MIRACLE

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SOON after the news became known the first flowers arrived at Jasmine Cottage. They were brought by a matron who was so sorry to hear of Charlie's death that she wanted to know more about it.

To her surprise the door was opened by Puggie Williams, wearing a mulberry-silk dressing-gown, which threw up all the smouldering tints of his complexion. He appeared to have been keeping up his spirits in time-honoured fashion, for he stared stupidly at the caller's bunch of white violets.

"What are these for?" he asked.

"Just a few blooms from my frame, for—for the room," explained the inquisitive lady.

"Oh, Charlie." Puggie's face lit up. "By gum, the poor little chap will be pleased." He sighed as he corrected himself. "I mean, he *would* be pleased if he could see them."

"How is Mrs. Baxter?" inquired the matron.

"Crashed. Definitely crashed." Puggie lowered his voice. "She's just sent the maid away. Positively can't stick any one around. Nerves, you know."

"Can't I do something to help?"

"Nothing, thanks frightfully. There's always P.W. on tap. She's used to me, so I don't count." He plunged his short bulbous nose into the white violets. "The stink of these always bring back a memory," he said sentimentally. "A wet country road and a red-haired girl in riding-kit. We'd been coming back from hunting, and she—"

He broke off and added, "Well, Charlie's just another memory now. Thanks for the violets, Mrs. Er-Ah-Um. Charlie'll love them."

A little later, Puggie Williams was popular for the first time, for he became Official News. He appeared in High Street, wearing a dark suit, and combined pink eyelids with a set expression.

He informed people that Mrs. Baxter was deeply grateful for every one's sympathy, but was too upset to see callers until after the funeral.

"I'm rushing it on, on purpose," he explained. "Day after to-morrow if I can make the grade. Fact is, Vera—Mrs. Baxter—is morbid about death. Can't keep her out of the room. She'll be normal once the—body's out of the house. Besides, directly it's over I can clear out."

The fact that Puggie was convention-conscious caused him to soar in the popular estimation.

"Is it a public funeral?" asked some one.

"No, strictly private. Only, if friends showed up, she'd naturally appreciate it."

"Flowers?"

Puggie looked doubtful as he scratched a pimple with a long patrician hand.

"Flowers?" he repeated. "Well, it's like this. The widow wanted none. But he felt it would help the florists. You know what a chap he was for thinking of others."

"So—he *knew*?" asked a woman huskily.

"Yes." Puggie gulped in sympathy. "We couldn't fool him. He knew he was passing on. Conscious to the last."

To change a painful subject, the matron of the white violets asked about future plans.

"Will Mrs. Baxter be staying on here?"

"No," replied Puggie, "definitely not. The mere thought of what she bumped into here would make her shudder. She may stay out her quarter...Well, I must be moving."

He saluted gravely and passed on his way to the undertaker's, where he stated his requirements.

"I've brought Mr. Baxter's measurements, because Mrs. Baxter can't bear to hear the men coming, until—until they've *got* to. How soon can you knock up a rough shell?"

"I've one in stock which might do at a pinch," replied the undertaker. "There's so much illness that we have to be prepared."

"Good," nodded Puggie. "Send it up to-morrow morning at twelve. And send the coffin one-thirty, sharp, the next day. I want the funeral to be two o'clock."

As he left the arrangements entirely to the taste and discretion of the undertaker, the remainder of the short interview was satisfactory to both.

"You understand," he said, as he left the shop, "plain, but good. And no one's to come mucking round. If you want to know anything, ring me. I'll be in all day to-morrow...And now, I've got to flag the vicar."

After he had left the Vicarage, there were still visits to be paid, so that some time elapsed before he returned to Jasmine Cottage, where Vera met him in the passage.

There was no hint of the distracted widow in her appearance. She looked smart as paint in a very becoming black frock, which was not mourning, since she had been

wearing it all the winter. It suited her fair colouring remarkably well. Her lips were tinted coral, and exactly matched her cigarette-holder.

Her small face, however, grew sharp with worry as she listened to Puggie's recital, and when she spoke, her voice grated like a saw.

"You fool. Why didn't you say 'no flowers'? We shall have people messing round here."

"I was thinking of poor Charlie," remarked Puggie quietly. "It's a compliment to him. After all, Vera, it's his due."

"Perhaps so." Vera shrugged. "But, Puggie, what possessed the idiot to promise the girl a fiver? Where am I to find one? Growing on a lamppost?"

Puggie patted her thin shoulders.

"Don't worry, old girl," he advised. "Take one fence at a time."

Later on, additional details of the death at Jasmine Cottage were circulated, when the maid—Minnie Reed—was seen walking about the town, dressed in her best clothes.

"I've got a week's holiday," she explained. "The mistress was wonderful right up to the time of the master's death, and then she went to bits and screamed to leave her alone with *him.* After all I done, she swept me out of the house like so much rubbish."

It was plain that the maid considered that she had been cheated out of a sensational experience, although she admitted that she was allowed to wish her master "Good-bye."

She made the most of that.

"They called me into the room just before the end. He was sinking fast. His face looked like wax and his hands were cold as ice. He shook hands with me, but he couldn't speak, only whisper. He said, 'Good-bye, Minnie, and thank you for all your kindness to me. I didn't know you when I made my Will, but your mistress will give you five pounds to remember me.'"

Among others who heard of Charlie Baxter's death was a schoolgirl who was home for the Christmas holidays. She was a wholesome, athletic youngster of sixteen, in the pudding-face stage, but with promise of attraction. She had only two ambitions—to pass the Senior Cambridge and to enter for the Junior Golf Championship.

When she was going to the Library one wet afternoon for her mother, she dropped the book in the road. Charlie Baxter, who was passing at the time, picked it up and wiped off the flecks of mud with his clean handkerchief.

The courtly gesture left the girl gaping with astonishment. She was inarticulate when he carried the book for her to the Library. On the way he complimented her on the goal she had shot at a recent Ladies' Hockey Match, and discussed the game in general, and her form in particular.

The girl went home feeling that every cell in her body had been subjected to a chemical change. For the first time she experienced the chaotic upheaval of Nature. Hitherto she had been a boy, and would have been murderous to a Constant Nymph on the hockey field.

For about a week she hugged her secret as she rubbed Pond's cold cream into her face at night, and went to soppy,

sentimental pictures. She idealised Charlie to a knight of King Arthur's Court. And then, in the midst of her dawning rapture, she heard of his death.

She was having afternoon-tea in the drawing-room, and she went on munching quantities of hot crumpet, without comment or show of emotion. The strength of her self-consciousness compelled her to hide her feelings. No one must know of her still-born romance.

But as the truth gradually hit home she felt she could not endure the ache in her heart and the bitter sense of loss. Gulping down her last cup of tea she rushed up to her small room at the top of the house.

Regardless of cold, she stood for a long time at her open window, staring down at the huddle of roofs, piebald with patches of semi-melted snow. The blanched hills, the leaden sky, and the fading light all suggested the hopeless twilight of a life without love.

At a sudden memory of a dark bearded face, with liquid brown eyes, and the gleam of strong white teeth displayed in a smile, a lump rose in her throat which nearly choked her. She reminded herself that she was only sixteen and had to endure a life-sentence of loneliness and grief.

The burden of her sorrow was too great for her to bear. Since she had gone away to boarding-school she had given up her childish custom of saying prayers in public, although she often murmured petitions under the sheets.

But now she dropped on her knees, and with tears streaming down her cheeks, put out her soul in a frantic prayer for the unattainable.

"God, give him back to me. Let him be alive now. Don't let him be dead."

It is said that faith will remove mountains. Yet this schoolgirl—without a scrap of faith—apparently achieved the impossible, and worked a major miracle.

Even as she sobbed out her petition, Charlie Baxter was sitting in the kitchen at Jasmine Cottage, smoking his pipe.

III. — BEGINNER'S LUCK

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THE first time he died, Charlie Baxter was genuinely touched by the signs of his popularity. He had an inferiority complex—the result of being avoided by the nice girls in his home town in his youth. He was also generally in disgrace with his family, because of the regularity with which he changed his plans for the future.

In turn, it was arranged that he should be a doctor, a lawyer, an auctioneer. In fact, his only objection to any reputable profession was the system of examination before qualification.

He had discovered, however, other ways of making money—and losing it—besides earning a salary. He went to horse-races and the dogs. Besides this, he was not too proud to turn his hand to anything, and when he lacked a shilling to buy fags, would enter the Children's Competition in the newspapers.

In spite of snubs and neglect he retained a real affection for his home, and always came back when his funds ran out. He never received a welcome, but he remained cheerful, amiable, and quite a charming fellow.

The Baxters had one rich relative—a widowed aunt—whom Charlie cultivated. At her death, the family was astonished to learn that their black sheep was the sole member to receive a legacy. He promptly married Vera—a pretty blonde, who made what might truthfully be described as "a personal appearance"—at some Vanities.

She was a sensible moral little person, and much too good for Charlie; but the Baxters, who were snobs, could not accept her as a member of a family which wore rather more than the average quantity of clothing. Once again the front door was closed upon Charlie. He left the town, and this time he did not return.

While their money lasted, the young Baxters had a riotous time. They went to the Riviera and cut a modest dash. Vera was a genuine actress, and had the power of dramatising herself until she lost her sense of reality. The world was her Stage and she played a Star part. In their theatrical surroundings of blue sea, palms and gilt-cane chairs, she became an Oppenheim adventuress, and she wore big furs and draped herself with ropes of cheap pearls.

But, deep down below her trimmings, she remained the thrifty, honest little soul who took off more and more, as she earned less and less, in order to pay her landlady. She often wished that she had insisted on being keeper of the purse, when she would have combined economy with security.

They got to know some curious people—Puggie Williams among the rest. It was he who suggested the insurance fraud, when they were within sight of their legacy's end. He was living on them at the time, so he sold his brains on the understanding that they should pool interests.

Following his advice, they moved to a small country town, where living was cheap—rented a furnished cottage from a certain Major Blake—budgetted within the limits of a modest income—and posed as people of leisure, refined tastes and means, who wished to live a quiet life.

Puggie Williams had instructed Charlie not to approach an insurance agent, but let the agent come to him.

"Be a good mixer," was his advice.

True to his forecast, a Mr. Acorn, who was local agent for an important insurance company, rose to the occasion, when Charlie, during a round of golf, admitted that he was not insured. Before long he contracted for annual payments of eighty pounds, so that his widow might receive the sum of five thousand pounds at his death.

He paid two instalments—and then he died.

They had beginner's luck in the matter, for in Dubarry they found an ideal doctor to gull. He had inherited a small fortune, and now only visited an old lady or two, who clung to him like limpets, because of his charming bedside manner.

Vera did her utmost to captivate him. She sent for him in an alleged case of nervous prostration—or something equally picturesque in stage production—when he was called upon to do a little more than feel her pulse and be discreetly appreciative of her charming creamy ostrich-feather negligée.

It was natural, therefore, after her own recovery from illness, that Vera should swear that he was the only doctor in whom she could have confidence.

They waited impatiently for the sensational epidemic of flu, when doctors were run off their legs and nurses not to be had for love or money. Their chief danger was that Dr. Dubarry would not remain in England, for it was the time of the year when he always went to the Riviera.

Just as he was on the point of departure, Vera made her tearful appeal. She was distracted; Charlie had flu, and he was the one man who could pull her husband through.

Dr. Dubarry stayed, against his will, compelled by Vera's concealed strength of character. He came daily to Jasmine Cottage, where he saw a little of the patient and quite a lot of Vera. He had not opened a medical journal for years, but he could judge the case by the symptoms, as described by Charlie, and the evidence of the thermometer.

He did not notice that when Charlie was "smoking" it was always the minute when Vera drew away his attention from the bedside. Charlie's scraps of knowledge, gleaned as a medical student, had taught him that somewhat difficult feat for a lay eye—how to read the mercury at a glance. He had also experimented as to the exact length of time he should keep the thermometer buried in the hot baked potato under his pillow, to get desired results.

He knew how to tell the tale, and presently he ran a high temperature, which soared to a peak when Dr. Dubarry looked grave. He hinted at a second opinion and a hospital nurse. But Vera sobbed that she trusted him implicitly and that she could not bear to leave her husband to the mercies of any stranger.

Dr. Dubarry yielded, partly because it was difficult to get a second doctor and nurse. After all, it was a straight case, without complications, and Charlie was receiving the orthodox treatment.

Meanwhile, the plotters were anxiously awaiting for the snow which had been predicted by the weather experts. The instant the first flakes fell, Charlie's temperature shot up like

a rocket and then took a sensational nose-dive, while his heart was weak and fluttering after stiff doses of tobacco-ash mixed with tea.

Dr. Dubarry felt it was his painful duty to warn the poor little woman of the danger. He broke the news to her that unless Charlie's strength could be maintained, he might flicker out of life.

"He's not putting up a fight," he complained. "You'd think he was just letting himself go."

Vera broke down and sobbed on Dr. Dubarry's shoulder.

"Oh, doctor," she cried, "that *is* Charlie. I know the best of him. And the worst of him. And I love him for all...But he never could make an effort."

That night the snow fell thickly. In the morning Dr. Dubarry, who lived in the heart of the country, looked out on a white muffled landscape. While he was dressing he was called to the telephone, when Puggie Williams, speaking in a voice choked with emotion, told him that poor Baxter had passed away during the night. In view of the terrible weather they had not sent for the doctor, since nothing could be done.

Dr. Dubarry thanked them for their thoughtfulness in not dragging him from his warm bed, just to tell them what they already knew. He also offered heroically to come over immediately.

But Williams would not accept the sacrifice. The roads were too awful, and Mrs. Baxter would not hear of it.

"She says you'll be the next to go down with flu, and she would never forgive herself if anything happened to you. If

you don't mind sending round the Certificate—that should meet the case."

Dr. Dubarry hesitated...At the other end of the line the three plotters held their breath. If he decided to come, or to deputise another doctor, they would have to stage a sensational revival of the corpse and face the collapse of their carefully laid plans.

Fortunately for them, Dubarry was both soft and nervous. Common sense assured him that it was a straight case which had run true to type and that the collapse was practically inevitable.

Instead of taking a long cross-country drive into Starminster and running the risk of being blocked by a snowdrift, he could motor by the main road to the nearest large town and take the first express to London. It was true that he could also reach Starminster by the same method—but the Blue Coast was calling him.

He looked again at the Arctic scenery and the slowly falling flakes, like black pompons against the sky, and he decided that it was his duty to his wife and family not to risk his own valuable life.

So he followed the sun, and the death certificate was sent to Jasmine Cottage by special messenger. With its arrival Charlie Baxter became officially dead.

Vera and Puggie shook hands after the front door was closed.

"We've won," declared Vera jubilantly.

But Puggie looked grave.

"We're only beginning," he told her. "So far, we've had the usual beginner's luck. *Now*—for the snags."

IV. — THE FIRST FENCE

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EVEN while Charlie smoked his pipe and stretched his feet blissfully to the open front of the Ideal stove, the first snag was on its way. He heard the bell, and then a prolonged murmur of voices. Presently the front door was shut again, and Puggie Williams came into the kitchen carrying a wreath.

He pitched it on to the table and then sank into a chair and mopped his brow.

"Hullo," he said. "You? Has Vera let you off the chain?"

"I came down a few minutes ago," explained Charlie. "As I pay the rent, I did not ask for permission."

"Don't blame you, old chap. But I shall go bughouse before we're through. D'you know who that was? The Vicar. And he wanted to see—*you*."

"M—me?" stammered Charlie. "Doesn't he know I'm dead?"

"That's just it. He wanted to kneel by your corpse and say a prayer for your soul."

Charlie's brown eyes grew suspiciously moist.

"That was really kind. I—I appreciate it. Did you thank him properly?"

"No, I took a strong line. I said you were chockful of poison. You can guess the rest." Puggie took out his notebook and scrawled 'Disinfectant.' "Sorry to be indelicate, old chap, but we've *got* to keep people from nosing round. Besides, it will help to explain the snap funeral."