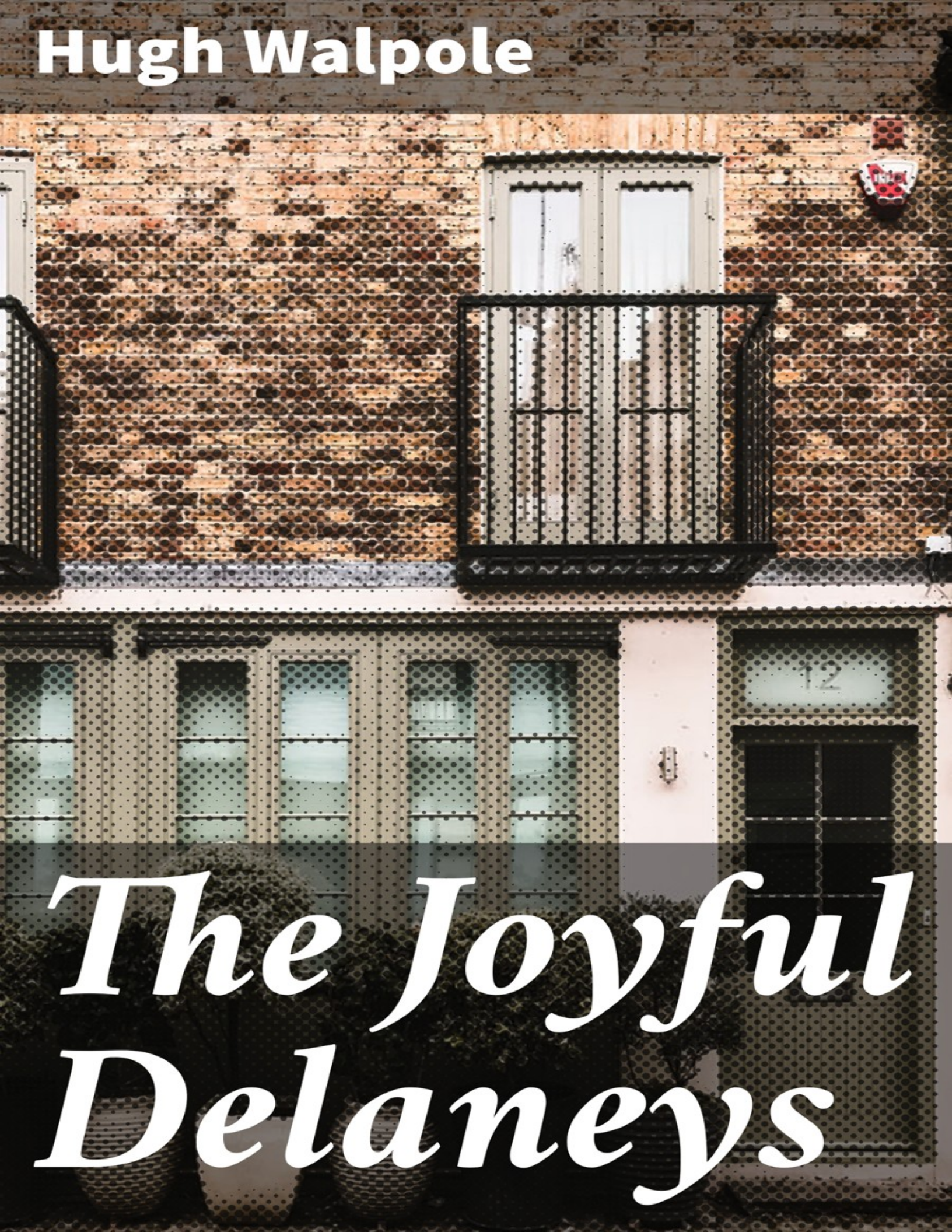
Hugh Walpole



The Joyful Delaneys

Hugh Walpole

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4064066362768

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

HOW FRED DELANEY TALKED TO MR. MUNDEN, A POET —AND THEN HAD BREAKFAST WITH HIS FAMILY

Table of Contents

‘HAPPY New Year!’ Fred Delaney said, standing in the doorway and smiling at the in-no-way beautiful person of Mr. Munden.

He had switched on the electric light, and the illumination revealed Patrick Munden lying half in, half out of the bedclothes. No, he was not beautiful, his thin pointed face unshaven, his black hair spread about the pillow, his lean body protected from the cold by pyjamas, grey with blood-red stripes, by no means so fresh as they should be. The light pressed on Munden’s eyes and he opened them, stared wildly about him, then, cursing, buried his face in the pillow.

‘Happy New Year!’ Delaney said again.

‘What the hell——’

‘Eight-thirty. You asked me as a special favour to call you.’

Munden raised his head and stared at Delaney. It was not a bad-looking face. The blue eyes were good, the forehead broad and clear, the chin finely pointed. He looked clever and peevish and hungry. He stretched himself, his open pyjama jacket showing a chest skeletonic and hairy. He rubbed his eyes with a hairy wrist.

‘Oh, it’s you, is it? Let me sleep, can’t you?’

Delaney watched him with genial good temper.

‘I’m doing you a favour. You said last night it would be the greatest of your life. You have to see the editor of something or other at ten sharp.’

‘He can go to hell. Turn the light off and let me sleep.’

‘You said I was to drag you out of bed if necessary—that your whole life depended on your getting there at ten.’

‘Well, it doesn’t. Let me sleep, can’t you?’

‘All right. But I’ll leave the light on ...

‘No, don’t go.’ Munden sat up, blinking. ‘How damnably fresh you look! It’s revolting. You were up till three, I don’t doubt——’

‘I was,’ Delaney said cheerfully. ‘I don’t need a lot of sleep.’

‘Well, I do.... Oh, blast! Why did I ever tell you anything about it?’

‘You were very serious. Most earnest. You said you must begin the New Year properly.’

‘Speaking of which, can you lend me a fiver?’ Munden asked. ‘Only for a week.’

‘Afraid I haven’t got such a thing,’ Delaney said, laughing.

‘Hang it all, I paid you the rent only a week ago——’

‘Thanks very much. But those are the terms, you know. If you don’t pay you go. Although we’d hate to lose you.’

Munden sighed.

‘Look in the trousers, old man, will you? They’re hanging over the chair. See if there’s anything there.’

Delaney looked in the trousers and found half a crown, some coppers, a lipstick and a half-filled packet of

cigarettes. He laid these things on the dressing-table.

‘You don’t use lipstick, I hope, Patrick?’

‘No, of course not. What do you think I am? How much is there?’

‘Two and ninepence halfpenny.’

‘I’ll make them advance something on the two articles. You wouldn’t like to buy a Chrysler, would you?’

‘A Chrysler? Whatever for?’

‘It’s a marvellous bargain. Ponsonby’s only had it a year and simply not used it at all. He’d let you have it for one-fifty and I’d get a commission.’

Delaney laughed. ‘We go round in our Morris—just as we always have—same old family, same old Morris.’

Munden looked at him with curiosity. ‘I don’t understand you, Fred. You own this house; every bit of it is let to people who pay their rent. You’re none of you what I’d call extravagant and yet you never have any cash.’ He stared resentfully. He went on: ‘You’re a horrid sight—so cheerful and clean and bright. You’re all like that. I ought to hate the lot of you. So unintellectual too. You never read a book, have horrible bourgeois politics, believe in things, in England, beautiful virginal girls, Dickens, cricket, football.... Oh, God! You’re vile! I don’t know why I go on living here.’

‘You live here, Patrick,’ Delaney said, ‘because you get this room damn cheap, it’s a first-class address, and you like us—you can have breakfast with us if you want to.’

‘I don’t need your charity,’ Munden said. ‘What I really want to know is why you look so disgustingly happy, all of you? What is there to be happy about?’

‘Oh, the usual things. Little things mostly. For instance, I’m hungry and I’m going down to a good breakfast.’

‘No. Wait a minute. I really want to know ...’

‘Want to know what?’

‘Why you Delaneys are so cheerful and why I don’t hate you for it.’

‘Why should you hate us for being cheerful?’

‘How *can* you be cheerful with the state the world’s in?’

Delaney turned to the door. ‘Here, I’ve really got to go. You’re properly awake now. I’ve done my job. Anyway,’ he went on, ‘the world’s been in a mess plenty of times before and will be again. As a family we’re just like anybody else. I’ve got the hell of a temper, and you should see Meg when I come back at three in the morning, and Kitty can raise the deuce——’

‘Kitty’s a darling,’ Munden said morosely. ‘Whenever I make love to her she laughs.’

‘Yes, Kitty can look after herself,’ Delaney said, smiling.

‘No. But don’t you understand?’ Munden began to get excited. ‘You’re going against the whole trend of the world. We shall all be Communists soon. Those of us who are left. The next war——’

‘All right,’ Delaney said. ‘You go on talking to yourself. I’ve heard all this so many times. Meanwhile there’s my breakfast ...’

Munden got up and leaned his long bony legs over the bed. He stretched his long bony arms and yawned. His hair stood up on end. Some of it tickled his eyes.

‘You’re wonderful for your years,’ he said to Delaney.

‘I’m only fifty-two.’

‘You look about forty.’

He was right. Delaney was fine for his years. He still had plenty of hair, brown and curly. His eyes were bright blue, his cheeks ruddy, his body tall, straight, muscular, non-corpulent. He had beautiful hands, and when he smiled he wrinkled at the corners of his eyes. His nose was straight and his mouth soft-lined but not weak. His clothes were excellent—easy, well-fitting, fresh as flowers in the spring, but, beyond all things, comfortable. He looked what he was, an active, care-free, good-natured Irish gentleman, who might have the devil of a temper, whose heart was good, conscience easy, sentimental a bit, quarrelsome a bit, honest, careless, and of an excellent digestion.

‘It’s a funny thing,’ Munden said peevishly. ‘I might get my clothes from your tailor, be shaved by the best barber in London, have a bath twice a day, walk for miles. I’d never look straight from the canvas as you do.... Not that I want to,’ he added. ‘You’re the type—good healthy Englishman—that to-day is an absurd anachronism. In another fifty years your type will be extinct, thank God. You’re loathed by the whole world. Americans detest you, Germans spit on you, Italians despise you——’

‘I’m not English. I’m Irish,’ Delaney said mildly.

‘You were born in London, your father was born in London, your grandfather was born in London.’

‘Yes, London’s my city, thank God. And this house is my house. One more year of battle, beginning this minute. Do you know, Patrick, we never thought we’d keep her this last year, Meg and I?’

‘Keep her—keep who?’

‘Why, the house. Everyone wants her. Dollinger and Druitt are just aching to tear her down and build filthy flats over her corpse. Margraves would give us almost anything for her. Wunder and Thompson are at us every week——’

‘Well, why don’t you sell her? You and Meg torture yourselves making both ends meet, so you tell me. Get a nice fat cheque for her and live in the country where you belong. She’s bound to go sooner or later. Everything’s going. Nothing but shops here soon. You can hear Shepherd Market’s dying groans now if you listen.’

‘We’ll keep her, we’ll keep her!’ Delaney cried. ‘Do you know Delaneys have lived in this house for two hundred and fifty years? Do you know the William and Mary clock in our dining-room has been on that same Adam fireplace for nearly two hundred years?’

‘Well, what of it?’ said Munden contemptuously. ‘Isn’t that just what’s wrong with you? You and your clocks! Your William and Mary world is done for, completely finished, and the sooner it’s buried the better. There’s no British aristocracy any more, thank God. There’s no leisure, no money, no old culture, no beautiful England. There’s a new raw world, with every man for himself and all of us living under the shadow of imminent death. That tickles a man’s vitals, *that’s* something to watch and share in—the whole of civilization going down together with a crash-bang. That’s truth, that’s reality, *that’s poetry*!’

Munden was quite excited now and was walking about the room, tossing his head and hugging his meagre body with his long arms.

‘I’ve got you out of bed anyway,’ said Delaney. He turned at the door for one last word. ‘As to the end of civilization, what rot you poor fellows talk! Civilization doesn’t end like that. There are changes, of course, but nothing that’s ever happened in a place dies. The history in this house is deathless. Anyway, Meg and I are going to keep it, save it for another year of its lovely life if we ourselves die in the process.’

‘Yes, you stuff it with decaying bodies and call that life. “Going, going, gone, gentlemen!” The British aristocracy! Who wants to watch the last agonies, catch the final groan, the wheezy whimper, the faint whistle through the air as the life expires! By God, that’s good!’

Munden wheeled round. ‘There’s stuff for a poem there!’

‘There’s stuff for a poem,’ Delaney said, ‘in every inch of the ground from Piccadilly Circus to Hyde Park Corner. Isn’t it pleasant to think, Patrick, of how, not very long ago as time is, the Anglo-Saxons knew this very place where we are as Bulinga-Fen, a horrible marshy swamp? Do you know that round Buckingham Palace the ground is still water-logged?’ As Delaney worked himself up a faint touch of brogue could be caught. Munden had moved into the bathroom, and Delaney came to the other side of the bed and began to shout. ‘Yes, and think of Hay Hill where the Prince Regent was robbed once—Aye Hill it is really—the Aye Bourne, and so you get Tyburn. Well, there was a stream ran all the way down from Hampstead through Marylebone, across Oxford Street, Stratford Place, lower part of Brook Street, Bruton Mews to the foot of Hay Hill. It ran through May Fair and entered the Green Park in the hollow of Piccadilly (there was

a stone bridge over it). Then on, under Buckingham Palace to the Thames. All the way from Hampstead heights to the Thames. It's still running. The Early Britons bathed in it and you can still see a trickle of it under the ventilators of Green Park. The Aye Bourne, the meadowlands of Mayfair, the milkmaids' song where the Ritz is, the reaper whistling in Half Moon Street, hares coursed down Bond Street——'

'Oh, damn and blast!' Munden said. 'What did I use a new razor-blade for?'

'And then,' continued Delaney, who, his bright eyes shining, had advanced to the bathroom door (he must raise his voice now against the running bath-water), 'what about Old Q? He would sit with his muffs and his stockings from Paris and his three-cornered hat in his Piccadilly window ogling the women, his head shaded by a parasol, held by a powdered footman—or old General Blücher, sitting in an armchair on the top of a flight of steps at the hall door, smoking a pipe and acknowledging the salutations of the passer-by? Or the crowd breaking the windows of Apsley House and learning that Wellington's Duchess lay dead inside and going quietly away, or Palmerston riding his horse every morning down Piccadilly to the House of Commons ... and who started it all? Do you know that, Pat? Ever heard of Robert Baker? He was a tailor, my lad, who in 1615 was rated at twenty pence for ten acres of agricultural land behind the King's Mews at the Town's End. That started it all round here, for the King's Mews went from Trafalgar Square to the Haymarket, and Mr. Baker, tailor, built many houses and one of them was called "Piccadilly." There his residence was at the corner of Windmill Street, and perhaps

they were mocking the tailor for setting himself up in the world and his house was a nickname after a ruff or collar called “Pickadel” ...’

Munden raised his face from the bath in which he was now lying. ‘My dear Fred, you may be my landlord, but that’s no reason at all why you should also be my schoolmaster....’

‘And then there’s Baroness Burdett-Coutts’ white cockatoo which my father used to see hanging every day inside the window overlooking Green Park. A mob of rioters stopped in the street once to argue whether it was real or sham and, having stopped, they raised a cheer for the Baroness and forgot the riot.’

‘And was it real?’ asked Munden.

‘No. It was sham.’

‘Well, that’s enough. If you won’t lend me five quid, clear out. Only a week, mind.’

‘Afraid not,’ Delaney sighed. ‘Meg will be thinking I’ve overslept. Cheer up, Patrick. The editor will take your articles, I don’t doubt. I read one of them somewhere last week saying that any writers to-day who are not Communists should be ashamed of themselves. Why shouldn’t writers be what they happen to be? Why this sheep and goat division by politics?’

‘Don’t you begin to talk about literature, Fred. I suppose there’s no one in London knows less about it than you do.’

‘Well, I can’t read your poetry, if that’s what you mean,’ said Delaney.

‘It isn’t written for you.’

‘Who is it written for?’

Munden grinned. ‘Damned if I know,’ he said.

Fred Delaney went on down to his breakfast.

Patrick Munden’s attic rooms were at the top of the house, then came the flat of Lady Helen Pake and Lady Millie Pake, then the flat of the Honourable ‘Smoke’ Pullet and ‘Dodie’ Pullet, his wife. Lastly, on the ground floor, was the abiding-place of the Delaneys themselves.

So he must, to reach his breakfast, descend from the top to the bottom of the house—must descend, after leaving Munden’s attic, by the great staircase itself. It always amused them to call it that, although in fact it was not so very large—only ‘quite, quite too beautiful,’ as Millie Pake, sighing gently, used to murmur. They had cleverly—when, in 1930, the great ‘conversion’ had taken place—managed without disturbing the staircase. ‘Like a piece of music,’ their friend Connie Beaminster always said it was. Perhaps it was. As, from below, you looked upwards and saw it turn the corner the rhythm of its movement was musical, and the dark deep patina of the wood, exquisitely simple, profoundly right, was like a Palestrina tune that repeats itself and repeats, but never too often. ‘Rather rot,’ Fred Delaney thought, ‘comparing all these things with one another. A staircase is a staircase.’

But, although he was almost running down, he yet had time to reflect that he was glad (and proud too) that they had been able to keep it as it was. That ‘conversion’ time had been terrible, dividing the big rooms into little ones without destroying too fearfully their character, putting in the baths, the kitchenettes. Poor house, poor house! It had seemed, when the work was in progress, as though a blow

had been struck at its very heart; but that young architect, Mortimer, how clever he had been! and how tremendous his bill had been too! Well, no matter—it was all paid for by now, and so long as Munden and the dear old Pakes and the Pullets paid up at the proper time, ends were just met and the house was saved. The day would come when, his ship sailing into port, he would turn them out and restore the house to its own true life again; then Bullock should be master, and to his sons in their turn the house should be handed on....

Whistling, he had reached the door of his own particular dining-room.

Before we go inside with him a word ought to be said about the Delaneys; Margaret—Meg—Mrs. Delaney, her son Bullock, her daughter Kitty.

Meg Delaney was at this time a tall, rather stout, magnificent middle-aged lady who looked, in her more dishevelled moments, like a gipsy fortuneteller at the Derby. Sometimes her raven-black hair was beautifully dressed and her clothes superb. Because of her black hair and high colouring she could wear clothes of gold and orange and crimson. When, altogether at her grandest, she entered a ballroom or was a late guest at a fine party (she was always unpunctual) everyone gasped. She was better than the Queen of Sheba. Her uncle, Lord Renys, a little horsy man, full of oaths, had, when alive, been so proud of her that, if he had had any money, he would have showered her with gifts. But most people adored her even when they were most enraged with her.

She had always had in her a burning fire of happiness—happiness often enough without rhyme or reason. Sometimes this fire died down very low and then she would cry: ‘My God, why, oh, why was I ever born!’ Her tempers were as prodigious as evanescent, her generosities absurdly lavish and sometimes disastrous. She was altogether honest, loyal, courageous and indiscreet. Her behaviour was extravagant and vexing.

But this happiness that she felt and was quite unable to account for, gave her a kind of radiance; it was a happiness entirely without selfishness. She made friends on the instant with anybody—on buses, trains, in shops. Beggars in the street always caught her. You might tell her again and again that they were rolling in riches and, anyway, drank what she gave them—it made no difference. She had always been as poor as a rat herself: her father, Captain Wendover, ‘Mumps’ Wendover, had lived by precarious gambling on the Continent, attended by a succession of beautiful ladies. Her mother having died when Meg Wendover was six, Meg Wendover had kicked herself up into life rather than grown into it. She adored Delaney her husband and her two children, but preserved, with all her impetuosity, warmth of heart, friendliness, a curious, unstained independence.

They were perhaps rather naïve and unsophisticated, these Delaneys; many people thought so and patronized them heartily. Kitty and Bullock had something of this same *naïveté*.

Kitty, nineteen years of age, was, everyone said, ’very sweet.’ She disliked intensely this description of herself. What she wanted to be was strange, austere, remote, but

gaiety would keep breaking in. She was tall and slight, dark in colouring like her mother, with very bright eyes, but not really beautiful, because her nose was snub. Unlike her mother, she was neat and quietly dressed. She was not clever, read but little, cared nothing for music or painting or (the craze at this time in her set) current politics or social economy. She was neither Communist nor Fascist, but tried to listen seriously when her friends ardently discussed these things. She had hosts of friends and was constantly made love to. She was as free in speech and knowledge sexually as were all her friends, but remained virginal, apart, in such matters. One thing about her that her friends thought odd was that she was rigidly teetotal, not from any principles but because she detested the taste of liquor. When a man kissed her she did not resist, but, in some fashion, conveyed to him that he would find someone else more amusing.

She had, of course, very little money but managed cleverly. At present the strongest instinct developed in her was the maternal. She was passionately interested in people, and anyone who was in trouble came to her chiefly because she was never bored and had a practical mind. She was always on the side of the underdog, often very unwisely. She could be impetuous like her mother and then, quite unexpectedly, calm, practical, reserved. She supposed she would have to find a job, but *which* job was the question. Her only real gifts lay in her relations with people. Some of her friends thought that she would be excellent at Girls' Clubs and such. But she knew that she would not be good, because as soon as anything was organized she lost her interest in it.

Behind her gaiety, love of life, busy days, devotion to her family, was a private never-expressed wonder and expectation—something was coming, something *must* be coming, a great event that would, in one instant, change everything. What this event would be she had no idea.

Her brother, Bullock, was in one particular a great disappointment. He had been a small stocky boy, a useful scrum-half at King's School, Canterbury, where he had received his nickname of Bullock. (His real name was Stephen.) He had then gone to Oxford, been cox in his College's first boat, and, to everyone's surprise, had not grown an inch. He had never grown any more and was so short that it would have been ludicrous had he not been broad-shouldered and sturdy-legged. He had a round merry face and was immaculate in his appearance. He had a deep voice rather like his mother's and the blue eyes of his father.

He made a very small and precarious income by writing 'funny bits' for *Punch* and other publications. He had two gods at whose shrine he worshipped: Surtees and Mr. P. G. Wodehouse. He liked almost every girl in sight but no girl in particular. He would sit, with his short legs crossed, thinking, then suddenly slap his knee, cry aloud 'By Jove, that's good!' whip out a pocket-book and write something down. He worshipped his sister, owned a dachshund called Endless to whom he confided many of his best witticisms; he found most people extraordinarily funny. Especially poets like Munden seemed to him excruciating, but he had learned that to laugh in people's faces hurt their feelings, so he would stare, his face very grave, his eyes puckered up, struggling to be polite. He had beautiful manners. To old

ladies especially he was quite old-world in his courtesy. Like all the Delaneys he was very happy-go-lucky and refused to be excited when Mussolini was rude to his country or Hitler talked about gun-fodder. He kept his small bedroom as neat as a pin and was apt to be indignant if anyone touched his possessions. He was always busy from morning to night and would comment in an exaggerated way on quite ordinary things like the state of the weather, an accident with the Morris or an incident at his Club.

When Delaney stood inside the room and looked at his family he felt, as he always did on such occasions, a deep affection. The room itself with its cream-coloured walls, the fireplace, the William and Mary clock, the pictures, two Rowlandsons, a large portrait over the fireplace of his grandfather, a fine merry gentleman in a very decorative uniform, his grandmother, an old lady with twinkling eyes, her black corkscrew curls hanging from under a lace cap, a Wilson landscape, the very good Chippendale chairs, the sideboard with the silver breakfast dishes, the dark plum-coloured window-curtains, the fire leaping with a kind of eagerness as though it had never been a fire before and had had no idea what an amusing thing it would prove to be, Endless the dachshund, his black beady eyes fixed in a kind of trance on his master; his family—Kitty, as always officiating, pouring out the coffee, laughing at something her mother had just said; Bullock at the sideboard lifting up the silver covers to see what was there; and Meg—Meg herself—in a loose morning-gown of some dark purple with gold braid at the neck and wrists, a costume that would have seemed tawdry on most women but looked exactly

right on her, her black hair piled high on her head (she would not dream of cutting, clipping, bobbing, waving, cropping), her long white hands with the rings that she loved, examining her letters, talking, laughing, swearing, reminiscing, despairing, exulting.... He looked at her and thought how, early that same morning, she had lain in his arms and been like a little child, rubbing her cheek against his, enchanting him with those long slow kisses that were so peculiarly hers. For he had known many, many women in his time and there had never been any one like Meg—no one like Meg for comradeship, gaiety, sensuality, honesty, humour, and that final necessity in life, freedom of soul both given and taken when life demanded it.

She heard the door close and looked up. ‘You’re late, disgracefully late. We are all finished. Here’s a letter from Barty Perrin and he has the cheek to ask for a meal next Friday. He doesn’t like us, but he’d go anywhere rather than pay for his own food....’

Delaney went over and kissed his daughter. ‘Darling, how are you? Did you sleep beautifully? ... Oh, Barty isn’t a bad sort but he hasn’t a bean. He worships you, but you’re so unkind to him. Yes, I’m late. I went up to get Patrick out of bed and he kept me talking....’

‘And,’ Meg went on, ‘here’s a letter from old Alice Pomery. Why, she must be ninety if she’s a day! I can remember her perfectly well at Nice, that time Father won such a lot at the tables and rented that absurd house in the Rue de—Rue de *what* was its name? Never mind. It was a house like a pair of pink stays set up on end—all ribs. We had the most enormous parties. I used to come down for

dessert and old men covered with scent used to pinch my legs. I remember Alice perfectly well. She was a little woman with a face like a pretty pig and she had a French poodle that I adored. She was married then to old Lord Worgan and when he tried to kiss her she'd hold her head back and say "Non. Non. Pas aujourd'hui." She liked to talk the most excruciating French and no one knew why, and he ran away with a Salvation Army girl from Liverpool or somewhere. Extraordinary how I remember that house. I was supposed to share a room right at the top with a French governess whom Father had engaged, but she was always sleeping with some man or other, so I'd be alone and—terrified! My God, but I was terrified! The house used to shake as though it had an ague, and there were rats. I saw one once, nibbling at the wood of one of the chairs. You didn't know rats did that, did you, darling? And the whole place smelt of patchouli. There was dust everywhere and plants in pots, dead as anything....'

She stopped quite suddenly and stared at her husband.

'How beautiful you are, Fred! So fresh and cool. Give me a kiss, darling.'

Fred kissed her. Her warm arm lay against his cheek.

Then he remarked: 'It's New Year's Day.' No one said anything, so he repeated it: 'It's New Year's Day.'

Kitty smiled at him over the coffee. 'Of course, darling, we know that. I was with the Whartons at Quaglino's and we drank the New Year in over and over again.' She wrinkled her forehead. 'Nice place. Nice people—but I don't know. I agree with Endless. Breakfast's better than supper.'

‘Why, if that’s *all* you’ve got to say about the New Year! Don’t you realize? We’ve kept the house for another year—and now we’ve got to keep it for a year more! Caesar asked for a rise last night—I’m afraid he’ll have to go.’

Bullock lifted his face from his plate. ‘Caesar *go*, Father? Oh, impossible! We’ll never get anyone as good again! Why, I’d rather give him what I make out of my writing. I would really.’

Delaney shook his head. ‘It’s all very well. Give Caesar more and then the General will want more, and then everything topples over!’

Meg tore off her two diamond rings and pushed them beside Delaney’s plate.

‘Sell these, darling,’ she said in her richest contralto. This was a gesture she’d often made before. They all laughed, and Endless, who realized that excitement was in the air, gave a series of short staccato barks.

‘No, it’s all very well,’ Fred Delaney went on. ‘Patrick says we’re fools to hold on to the house as we do when we could get a nice fat sum and live comfortably in Sussex or somewhere. But he doesn’t understand. He knows nothing about the past. He’s no feeling for London or any place. He’s as detached as a bird in the air. All he thinks of is his beastly unintelligible poetry....’

Meg caught her husband’s hand and held it fast.

‘It’s all right, darling. You shall have your London. You shall have your house—even though I have to sell my body to keep it for you. That’s what Bridget is always saying: “I’d sell my body to give Harry what he wants.” So silly—no one would give her a penny for her old body. But what *I* want to

know'—here she leaned her firm bosom right over the table, her purple robe floating about her—'is—what does Caesar want a rise for? We pay him nobly—nobly! *Don't* we pay him nobly, Fred? You have all those things in your head. *What* do we pay him and why does he want a rise?'

'We pay him,' Delaney said, 'well, I don't know about nobly. But quite enough. Of course he says he will stay with us even if we pay him nothing at all. But it's his mother. She can't ever forget she was lodge-keeper at Wintersmoon. She's the greatest old boor the world has ever known, and Caesar says she has neuritis and he has to buy a lot of things for her.'

'Pay him! Pay him!' Meg cried. 'Raise his wages. We'll raise the rent on the Pullets.'

'You know we can't, darling. It's a miracle they pay us as it is. *How* they live I can't imagine.'

'They were at Quaglino's last night,' Kitty remarked. 'Looking as swell as anything. Dodie was as near nude as not to matter, but what she *did* have on was lovely. Must have cost her a fortune. Two wisps of something and a silver band. They danced together all the evening.'

'Raise their rent,' Meg said. 'Then they'll go and we'll get somebody else. "Smoke" Pullet always frightens me. One day he'll be desperate. I can see it growing behind his eyes. They're nice. I like them. But I don't want their climax here. You know, children, this is a happy house. It is really. There isn't a soul inside it's got a farthing—all the same it's a *darling* house, a *darling* house. I never was so happy anywhere.'

Bullock, who had finished his breakfast, came from the fire and laid his cheek for a moment against his mother's.

'Sweetheart, it isn't the house that's happy, it's you. You really are a radiant woman.'

'I know.' Delaney looked at them all. 'Patrick says we're revolting. He says we're selfish, self-centred, behind the times. The world is falling, falling. Civilization is going out with a bang. And here we are happy, contented.'

'And what did *you* say?' Kitty asked.

'*I* said that yes, we *were* happy. We had small minds and were pleased with small things. I said, too, that the world has often fallen to pieces before but nevertheless the seasons returned punctually and were charming at each return, that our digestions were good, and we couldn't be called the rich mocking the poor because there was probably no one in all London poorer than we were. All the same, perhaps we're smug.' He looked at Meg and laughed. 'Darling, are you smug?'

She was slipping her diamond rings on and off her fingers. She looked up aimlessly.

'Am I? I don't know what I am. Who knows what they are anyway?'

And then the door opened.

First there was Caesar. Caesar's real name was Rudge and he was butler, footman, messenger boy, shoe-cleaner, gossip and friend to the Delaney family. He was known also as the Dickens character, being a remarkable combination of Weller, Pickwick, Poor Joe, Traddles, Mark Tapley and now and again (Delaney said) Silas Wegg, all these raised on a basis of Cockney. He had been in service from birth, his

mother being lodge-keeper at Wintersmoon in the days of the old Duke of Romney. He had been simply no age at all when he had helped in the pantry, and then in cocked hat and gaiters sat in the back of the trap that went to the station for luggage, and then (wonderful promotion) had been the Duke's own body-servant under Sellars (how deeply he had loathed Sellars! how truly he had worshipped the old white-haired Duke!).

Then had come changed times and Wildherne Poole had married, the old Duke had died, hard days had followed. Wintersmoon had been closed for a long while and was only open again in part. Then *that* Duke had died and his son, still a boy, reigned in his stead, or rather his mother, the Duchess (a fine good woman surely), reigned in his stead.

All this Caesar had constantly from his old mother with whom he lived in two rooms above the news-vendor's in Shepherd Market. Caesar was short, bony, but very cheerful-featured. No beauty with his large mouth and sharp little Cockney eyes, but he was a faithful devoted soul, feeling proud—even in these days—of his place as a family servant. There were still many of his kind in London, born into service and proud of it, thinking it no degradation, hating more than anything else 'the bloody Bolshies.' '*What* nonsense!' Caesar would say to Mrs. Ganter, the cook, known as The General. 'Men's born to be different. Start 'em all level, and in no time at all one's up, one's down. Share and share alike! I'd like to see Ma share anything she's got with anyone else.'

He liked all four Delaneys and would work himself to the bone for them, but finances were a terrible problem with

him. His old mother was always ‘fancying something’—food, drink, a book or a trinket. And if she didn’t get it she’d cry and say that no one loved her any more and it would be better if she’d died long before. Her whims and fancies cost money. Moreover Caesar wasn’t sure, but he fancied that for the first time in his life he was really in love ... no, he couldn’t be sure, but it looked a little like it.

Dressed in his official black suit, his funny ugly grinning face glitteringly shaved, he looked a respectable retainer. He introduced the visitors without a word, as well he might, for they were part of the family. There were three of them—Larry Delaney, Fred’s brother, Phyllis his wife, and an exceedingly pretty, slim, shy-looking girl. Larry Delaney resembled his brother in his fair curly hair, rosy countenance, general freshness, but he was stouter and coarser. You could see at once, however, that he had all his elder brother’s cheerful indifference to the dangers of to-morrow and enjoyment of the present hour. He looked a little less of a person than Fred, shallower, less important. He earned a precarious living by acting as a sort of middle-man in Society. That is he went, with Phyllis his wife, everywhere, discovered that someone wanted to sell something, persuaded someone else that that was exactly what he or she wanted to purchase, and then brought buyer and seller together. He then received a commission. Practically *everything* in Mayfair was for sale—pictures, furniture, silver—you could enter no house or flat in Mayfair nowadays without someone saying to you, ‘Don’t you love that Turner water-colour? I happen to know you could have it for almost a song. It’s a damned shame, but Dodo’s being

forced to sell almost *all* her lovely old things.' So that it was positively dangerous now in any house or flat to look at anything with too personal an appreciation because *at once* someone said, 'Do you like that? Rather lovely, don't you think? I'll have a word with Doris after lunch and see if I can't persuade her....'

Things being as they are, Larry Delaney's job should have been a lucrative one. There were, however, a number of drawbacks to it as a career, one of the principal being that people were curious about payment. Also a sort of Exchange and Mart went on, so that he would receive a note:

DARLING LARRY—I'm sure Sophy won't mind if I delay in paying for the bit of tapestry which really isn't as nice as I first thought it. I have by the way a really *lovely* Charles II musical box which has been in the family ever since Charles gave it *himself* to my great-great (ever so many greats) Aunt who was his Mistress you know for quite a while. Don't you think Sophy would like the musical box? I'm sure it's worth a lot more than the tapestry. After all, it was a *gift* from a King! Do see what you can do about it, darling Larry.

And then, of course, he was as likely as not to get no commission at all. However, Phyllis and he worked very hard and went about everywhere and, perhaps, didn't do so badly.

Lastly there was the exquisite silent girl with the white face, red lips and wide-open startled eyes. She was a Miss Alice Van Renn, whose old mother was an energetic silly snobbish widow. Mother and daughter had two rooms in Half Moon Street. The old lady was aristocratic and poor. The girl

Alice had a kind aunt who had paid for her ‘finishing’ in Paris. Thence she had but lately returned. Fred Delaney, in fact, had never seen her before, and now he stared at this lovely thing in his doorway as though he had been struck from heaven.

Alice Van Renn had such perfect features that she was almost unreal. Although her colouring was pale, yet it was exquisite. To stroke her cheek was the first natural desire of any natural male, and Delaney was a very natural male indeed. No one knew whether Alice was brilliantly clever or exquisitely stupid, for she spoke but little. What was heavenly, maddening, to every man was that she appeared to be in a kind of trance; she was as yet unawakened. To be the first to achieve that awakening, there was an ambition!

In any case at this particular moment Fred Delaney stood with his mouth a little open, staring, and Meg Delaney saw that it was so.

‘Happy New Year!’ said everybody.

And so, with that ancient greeting, new events in the Delaney family began.

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents