O. DOUGLAS

THE HOUSE THAT IS OUR OWN

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Table of Contents

To you, J. B., who, with little liking for mild domestic fiction, read patiently my works, blue-pencilling when you had to, praising when you could, encouraging always, I dedicate this story, which you are not here to read, of places you knew and loved.

The house from which the heavens are fed.
The old strange house that is our own,
Where tricks of words are never said,
And Mercy is as plain as bread,
And Honour is as hard as stone.

G. K. Chesterton

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

My deepest sense, how hard true sorrow hits.

The Comedy of Errors

Kitty Baillie threw down the book she was reading and yawned inelegantly.

"Why," she asked, "does anyone ever read a thriller? They leave such a nasty sticky taste in one's mind."

"They leave me scared stiff," said her companion. "But then, I'm a feeble soul."

She did not look a feeble soul, this Isobel Logan, as she stood smiling down at her friend, and Kitty Baillie, who had sat herself down on the edge of her bed, said:

"Feeble! You? Why, you look like a pillar of the British Empire."

Isobel, unimpressed by this tribute, continued. "Why read thrillers if you don't like them?"

"Oh, just to make a change. I've been reading nothing but history lately."

"Yes. I know. I like the book you lent me last—*Henrietta Maria*. That was more interesting than any novel. But how they could have beheaded that little gentle Charles, I don't know!"

"Well," said Kitty judicially, "he was terribly obstinate: *dour* to a degree."

"As to that, if every obstinate person was beheaded the world would be a shambles. Kitty, if you bounce like that, you'll make your mattress sag."

"It sags already," said Kitty. "I do *hate* to feel the bones of a bed."

“As bad as that? Mine is quite good, and think what I weigh compared to you.”

“Oh, you needn’t throw your superior height in my face. Am I nothing but low and little? (You know, you and I would make quite a good Helena and Hermia, though I’m too old for the part.) But let me tell you, my girl, you’re much too easily pleased with everything. The world will simply make a footstool of you if you ask so little from it.”

Isobel made no reply, and Kitty gave an impatient jump on her maligned mattress, and continued, “I’m sick of this place.”

“It’s quite good as hotels go,” Isobel reminded her. “It’s well kept, the cooking isn’t at all bad, they keep good fires, and the servants stay. Some of them have been here ever since I came—how many years is that?—five—six?—and that in itself is a testimonial to the place. It’s convenient too for tubes and buses, and near the Park. Perhaps, as you say, I’m too easily pleased, but I confess to a weakness for the Queen’s Court Private Hotel.”

“Oh, it’s all right,” said Kitty; “it’s simply that I’m sick of it.”

She sat staring before her with a look of misery in her dark eyes, and Isobel, who knew her in these moods, turned her back and looked out of the window.

It was not an inspiriting outlook, a sort of court, into which the rain was falling in the peculiarly stark way March rain often falls. A van was being unloaded down below, and a quantity of damp straw lay about, a small dog snuffling amongst it. A message-boy relieved the tedium by shrill whistling, while a street-singer with a blatantly black eye bawled:

I am so lonely, years are so long,
I want you only, you and your song.

“Isobel!”

The girl turned round.

“I didn’t mean to grumble and be ungrateful,” Kitty said. “I haven’t forgotten how thankful I was for this refuge when I came back to England last October. All I asked then was to be allowed to lean back and do nothing. I didn’t even think. I could read and I could listen, that was about all; I went about in a sort of dream.”

“You had had such a long time of strain,” said Isobel’s quiet voice.

“Two years,” said Kitty. “Two years watching my dear Rob suffer and die; wandering from hotel to hotel, from one cure to another. The only comfort was that Rob kept hopeful to the end, always sure that the next place, the next doctor, would cure him. He never knew how difficult it all was. Those foreign hotels are terrified of having a death on the premises, and when they saw Rob they sometimes would hardly let us in. And you couldn’t blame them, they had to look after their own interests. Anyway, it didn’t matter, for I managed to keep it from Rob: he had enough to bear without that.”

“You didn’t think of bringing him home when you found he was getting no better?”

Kitty shook her head.

“He didn’t want to come. It was easier for him being ill among strangers. I quite understood that. He had been rather a figure in his own set, good to look at, good at everything he tried, one of those buoyantly happy and successful people—how could he go creeping back to the pity of his friends? ‘*Poor Rob! Have you seen him? Isn’t it tragic?*’ Banishment was better than that. He clung to me, poor darling, and that stiffened my back. Before, he had always been the one who did things. I followed, squaw-like, behind. Now I had to stand in front and wrestle with hotel-managers and foreign doctors; worst of all, I had to manage the money. If I had had a brother—but both Rob and I were only children, and almost relationless. But I managed

somehow, though not well, and anyway, I never worried Rob with my difficulties. And the only really horrible hotel-manager was the last. Rob had finished with it all by that time, thank God, and that meant that I was past caring much what happened to me. But the little French doctor was all that was kind, helped me with the formalities, arranged everything, and started me on my way home."

Isobel remembered that October evening when, coming in from some party or mild junketing, she had noticed in the entrance-hall a forlorn-looking little black-clad figure.

Kitty went on. "And you were the first person I met when I got here. You came in behind me, your face rosy with the frosty air, and looking so large and golden that it was if the sun had suddenly risen! It had been a miserable crossing; I was chilled to the bone, tired, and sad beyond measure, but when you crinkled up your eyes and smiled at me, I felt, for the first time in months, a slight lifting of the heart. No-one had smiled at me for so long. Nothing but looks of pity and commiseration had come my way. And how I resented them! I tried so hard not to be sorry for myself, for self-pity is a loathsome thing. Rob never pitied himself—or me either. He and I were one in a way few married people, I imagine, are, and we were fighting together to win through. Even that last day, when all the strength he had seemed to go quite suddenly, when he could hardly speak above a whisper, and every breath was an effort, he tried to say something to me, I couldn't catch what, about what we'd do when he was better—and smiled."

"Kitty dear"—Isobel went over and stood beside her friend—"it's too painful for you to remember."

"I'm remembering all the time, and it's a relief to tell it to someone, and you've been so good, never asking any questions. But there's not much to tell. I had dreaded a struggle at the end, a dreadful insufficiency of breath, but there was none: he just stopped breathing. It was a lovely night, full of stars, and the windows were wide open. I knelt

beside him, and looked at the lake and the mountains and felt almost happy. It lasted, that exultant feeling, through the painful, crowded days that followed, and through the journey to England—as if I were rejoicing in his escape—and it wasn't till I reached London and drove through the streets to this hotel that I realised my loneliness. Rob and I had had such happy years in our little house in Hampstead, and the memory of them rushed over me like a flood. We always took our holiday late, in September or even October, for Rob liked the autumn in Scotland, and I had recollections of driving out from Euston on just such a frosty evening, eager, now that our holiday was over, for our own home. And when the taxi-man rang the bell in the wall, and the green door was opened by our Skye housemaid, Katie, so douce in her long skirt and white cap and apron, she'd say—'Och, Mem, ye're back then, and it's glad we are to see you. It's time you were home, for the leaves are all down.' And through the open door we could see Maggie, the cook, hovering. The curtains would be drawn in our living-room, and we'd take just a glance round at our books and pictures, and our chairs drawn up to the fire, before we rushed up to change into something very cosy and shabby, and come down to our little Georgian dining-room and Maggie's dinner, which tasted so good after the more aspiring cooking we had been having."

She stopped speaking, and Isobel said, "If you've sad things to remember, you've very nice things too. Thank you for telling me."

The van had finished unloading, and was departing, pursued by the excited barking of the small dog. The street-singer, discouraged, had left, and his place had been taken by another, a musician of sorts.

As Isobel stood watching her friend, a rollicking tune came up from the court.

Kitty looked up. "Someone's playing a penny whistle—let me see—I knew it. Listen! D'you know what he's playing?"

And she repeated some lines of the song.

An ye had been where I hae been,
Ye wadna be sae canty-o,
An ye had seen what I hae seen
On the banks o’ Killiecrankie-o.

“Rob used sometimes to shout that—he couldn’t *sing*—when he was shaving in the morning. That man must be a Scot. Where’s my purse?” And, throwing up the window, she dropped a shilling on the player, who promptly stopped playing to grovel for the coin.

Then Kitty said rather apologetically, “To me there is something about a penny whistle. . . . Was it R. L. S. who described himself as a mighty performer before the Lord on a penny whistle? And that tune. Do you know, all this time I’ve practically forgotten, or, at least, completely lost touch with, what really means so much to me—my native land. I don’t know how I could, except that my one effort has been not to think of anything that recalled the past. Living in an hotel helped me. I could watch the people come and go, and talk to one and another—or rather listen. It does astonish me how people can pour out all their private affairs to strangers, but in a way it eased one to hear of others’ troubles.”

“What helped you most,” said Isobel, “was your love of reading. I never saw anyone devour books as you do.”

“Reading,” said Kitty, “has been a sort of dope to me. I’ve simply read and read through these months. My particular girl in The Times gives a resigned sigh at the sight of me. As you know, I visit her almost daily, and demand every new book as it comes out. Novels, biography, travel, history, exploration, all are grist to my mill. She must wonder what sort of life I lead, always with my nose in a book. And indeed I am a selfish wretch, doing nothing for any human creature.”

“No more selfish than the most of us,” Isobel protested, but Kitty shook her head, saying:

“Why, you, my dear, give hours every day to other people—doing Braille books, helping overworked secretaries in charitable work. You write such a beautiful clear hand. I wish I did.”

“I’m thirty, all but,” said Isobel, “a great, big, hulking, healthy person, and I’ve done nothing so far to justify my existence.”

“Why? D’you want a career?”

“Not particularly, and, anyway, it’s too late now to think of it. I forget if I ever told you that when I left school I went to live with my only relation, a great-aunt, who didn’t think a career a nice thing for a girl. I daresay I could easily have overborne the poor old dear’s scruples and gone my own way, but I didn’t care enough. I’ve never had much initiative, and there was no-one to give me a lead. Besides, I knew I wasn’t in the least clever. The only prize I ever got at school was for needlework. Another thing, I had enough to live on, and it hardly seemed fair to take a job perhaps from a girl who *had* to earn her own living—so there it was. I did nothing. My time was spent in the most approved Victorian way, doing the flowers, reading to my aunt, driving with her, playing tennis with some of the young people about, now and again going to a dance or a play. I was twenty-four when Aunt Constance died. After travelling about Europe for a bit with a friend, I came here to Queen’s Court, dug myself in, and that’s all. Nothing much to show for thirty years!”

Kitty sat up briskly and demanded, “But surely you don’t mean to stay indefinitely in this hotel, or any hotel? I certainly do not. I’m tired of living among other people’s things, eating with strangers, talking to them. I’ve suddenly realised that I want my own things about me. D’you know that it’s two years and a half since I saw my belongings? We gave up the Hampstead house when the specialists said that Rob must go abroad for a long time. Everything was

stored, and I've hardly ever given the poor things a thought. I don't know what Rob would think of me, losing grip of myself as I've done. His precious books and prints, the furniture we picked up, a piece at a time, with such pleasure, the family silver and portraits. I must get them all out at once."

"There's not much use getting them out if you've no place to put them," Isobel pointed out.

"That's true. I must start looking for a house at once. But where?"

"I don't suppose you'd want to go back to Hampstead?"

"No," said Kitty.

"A flat would be best, don't you think?"

"If I could run to one," said Kitty; "but aren't they hideously expensive, except the very new ones, which are suffocatingly small? But we might look at them."

"Yes, do let's," said Isobel. "I adore looking at houses."

Isobel was delighted to see a spark of interest in her friend's eyes, a slight colour in her cheeks. She had been such a pathetic figure all winter, so small and black, never caring to go out, except to The Times Book Club, shivering over a fire, speaking when spoken to, but making no advances, receiving confidences, but giving none. Isobel herself had been the one person she had been at all intimate with. They were in the same corridor, and Isobel's room was a fairly large one with a pleasant outlook, and she had taken some trouble to make it home-like. Her bed in the day became a divan, a large cupboard did away with the necessity of a wardrobe, and she had supplied herself with two comfortable arm-chairs and a screen, as well as pretty rugs and hangings and shades. The two friends sat there when the lounge was crowded.

Kitty had shrugged her shoulders in resignation over her own room, and made no attempt to improve it. What, she asked, could be done with a jazz carpet, in shades ranging from brown to orange, ugly fumed-oak furniture, depressed

cretonne curtains and covers, and an outlook on a court? Even flowers, she said, were out of place in such a room.

But now, Isobel thought, it looked as if she were rousing herself from the apathy that had held her for months, as if she might now take a grasp of things and remake her life.

“Here’s to-day’s *Times*,” said Kitty. “Let’s see what the house-agents have to say—‘A House of Unique Character, a Gilt-edged Investment.’ That’s not the sort of thing. ‘Something entirely new in Luxury Service Flats.’ ‘Flats with a Difference.’ They all sound rather prohibitive, don’t they? But there’s no harm in going to see them. You’re sure you don’t mind, Isobel? There may just chance to be something about my price. Which reminds me, I must go and see my lawyer and find out how things stand with me. Not that I understand in the least what he tells me. Are you a business woman, Isobel?”

Isobel laughed. “I don’t need to be—much. It’s all perfectly plain sailing with me. I’ve a certain amount of capital, invested in the very safest sort of things, which brings me in a little more than £700 a year, and I let it alone, and never attempt to make it any larger. Aunt Constance’s income came mostly from annuities. After the servants’ legacies had been paid, there was about £2,000 left for me. I’m keeping that as a sort of nest-egg, in case I should ever want to do something adventurous, like going round the world. I like to feel it’s there, though I may never use it.”

“But, my dear girl,” Kitty protested, “why d’you talk as if you were three-score and ten? You’re only a girl. You will marry.”

“I may,” said Isobel calmly, “but I don’t think so somehow. It’s not that I wouldn’t like to marry, but only that so far I’ve seen no-one I could care for in that way, and I’d very much rather live my life alone than take the second best. But I’m not really preoccupied with the subject. And I’m fed to the teeth with all the sex-talk in books and plays.

Wodehouse and the crime-mongers are about the only writers free of it."

"Not quite," said Kitty. "I could name at least a dozen—oh, many more than that—whose books never descend. Of course, it's absurd to object to frankness, but like you, I hate this slavering over sex; you'd think it was the most important thing in life! I don't think you'd be easy to please, but I do earnestly hope that the right man will come along, for I hate waste." She laid her hand on Isobel's. "My dear, the only thing I regret in leaving this place is leaving you. I'm only now beginning to realise what I owe to you. You came and went so unobtrusively I hardly noticed you; I only knew that when you were there you seemed to warm and lighten the atmosphere."

"You owe me nothing," Isobel broke in. "All the other way. You gave me another interest in life. Now do stop bouncing on that poor bed. I can see that the hotel management will have to supply a new mattress for the next occupant of this room! The rain is gone, and your penny whistle man has gone too, to get a drink, probably with your money. The sun's coming out. What about going now to an agent and getting a list of houses? There's nothing like taking time by the fetlock, as Aunt Constance always put it. And if you would be so kind as to come and see me fitted for my new coat and skirt I'd be grateful. It's such a help to have a friend to back one if any alteration is needed. I'm so easily spoken down."

Isobel, as she spoke, brought out from Kitty's wardrobe a coat, a fox fur, a hat, and gloves.

"Thank you, kind Nannie," responded Kitty. "How do you suppose I'm going to stand on my own feet in a cold and draughty world after being made a pet of by you for months?"

"Oh, that's going to cease," Isobel told her. "You don't need me any longer, I know, but I haven't yet got out of the

habit of looking after you. I shan’t be a minute getting ready.”

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents

Merely to be alive is adventure enough in a world like
this, so erratic and disjointed, so lovely and so odd,
and mysterious and profound. It is, at any rate, a
pity to remain in it half-dead.

Walter de la Mare

A week later the two friends sat together in Isobel's room. Spring had made appreciable progress in the week; the crocuses were all aglow in the gardens opposite, the buds on the lilac bushes were swelling, the birds busy with their nests.

Kitty's plans had also made some progress.

"It's been a most agitating week," she was saying. "If I look as battered as I feel I must be rather a sight. Who'd have thought it was such a difficult business to find a house to let."

"It's the 'to let' that's the difficulty," said Isobel, who was sitting with her work-basket beside her, placidly mending. "Everything is for sale, and you don't want to buy."

"I don't indeed. Even if I could afford to, what'd be the use of buying? It's different for people with children—and even they wouldn't buy a flat. What places we've seen! Are there really people who would live in a basement, always in artificial light, and be willing to pay £150 a year for the privilege? And these terrible new blocks like penitentiaries, with every new gadget, I grant you, but mere boxes! Personally I don't know any cat-slingers, but if any exist they

couldn’t indulge their hobby in these mansions. There’s no room for a pet; even a canary would feel itself *de trop*.”

“What about the one in Westminster?” Isobel asked. “It had quite good rooms.”

“But only two of them—one good living-room, one bedroom, an excellent bathroom, and a cupboard of a kitchen. It would mean never having a friend to stay, and, worse than that, no resident maid. Besides, I don’t like to eat in the room I sit in. What I’d like in Westminster would be one of those little old houses, but they again have basement kitchens, and, anyway, are seldom to be let. No, the only thing I can see myself in is that flat in Sloane Street, and it’s too expensive.”

“Have you thought it over carefully, and calculated what it would cost to run?” Isobel asked, looking with satisfaction at the eager face opposite to her, and thinking how beneficial a week of house-hunting had proved.

Kitty rescued a reel of silk and returned it to the work-basket.

“Yes,” she said, “I have, and I’m afraid I daren’t attempt it. My old nurse used to say of people who had too large and expensive a house, ‘I doubt it’ll burn them, not warm them,’ and there’s a lot of truth in the saying. Of course, in a flat you know more or less where you are. The rent covers everything in the way of taxes and, generally, central heating and constant hot water.”

Isobel nodded. “Compared with other flats we saw, I thought the Sloane Street one very reasonable. I liked the whole look of it. There was something so old-fashioned and settled-looking about everything, the entrance, the staircase, the lift. I am sure the people in the other flats are everything that is quiet and respectable. You wouldn’t like neighbours who entertained till all hours. And the rooms are large and airy—I expect your furniture would look just right in them—and the neighbourhood is so pleasant.”

“Temptress!” said Kitty. “You know quite well I’m simply longing to get that flat.”

“Well, go to your lawyer and lay it before him. He should know just what you can afford. Go this very morning. The flat may be snapped up any minute. If you like I’ll meet you somewhere for lunch, and we might look at some other places, supposing Mr. Johnson turns down your flat. But I don’t believe he will. I’ve a feeling in my bones that you were meant to live there.”

“Bless you for that,” said Kitty, rising with alacrity. “I’ll go now, this very minute. Where shall we meet?”

“Would Marshall’s be all right for you? And when we are out, what about getting some clothes? You said yourself you needed them, and to my mind there’s no tonic like a new hat.”

“If I get my flat,” said Kitty, “I shan’t ever again be able to afford any personal adornment. It’ll be old clothes indefinitely for me.”

Isobel folded up the garments she had mended, and said, “Shall we say one o’clock at Marshall’s luncheon-room? I’ll try to get a table at a window. Come right up, will you?”

It was nearly half-past one when Isobel, at her table in the window saw a small figure come in, glance round, and, on catching sight of her, come quickly forward.

“She’s got it,” said Isobel to herself.

“So sorry to have kept you,” Kitty began breathlessly, “but I couldn’t help it. Isobel, *it’s all right*. Mr. Johnson thinks I can just manage it, and he’s sending to see about it this afternoon. I’m not pretending that he was very keen about it, and he says they must find out exactly what state it’s in before anything’s settled, but . . . yes, anything you like. I’m too excited to eat. You know, although Mr. Johnson’s rather like a tortoise to look at, he’s really quite decent. I was surprised that a dry-as-dust old lawyer could be so human. He actually seemed to understand how much it meant to me, and I’m pretty sure he’ll manage to arrange it. It’s a

blessing I spent almost nothing all winter, for I've a good deal lying. Perhaps I'd better get some clothes as long as I have any money. How good these sweetbreads are! I didn't know I was so hungry."

While they ate, the conversation circled constantly round the flat.

"I thought," said Kitty, "that I'd examined every bit of it, but when Mr. Johnson asked me questions I found I knew practically nothing. I could tell him about the size and shape of the rooms, and their outlook, but I'd entirely neglected to notice the plumbing, what sort of kitchen stove there was, and so on. It was very shaming to be found so unpractical! Of course, I'll need fresh paint everywhere, whether I pay for it myself or not, and I would like running water in the bedrooms—but I fear that's beyond me. At least, Mr. Johnson says it is."

"And I suppose he ought to know," said Isobel. "Well, before you start squandering all you possess, let's go and look for clothes. I want some myself, and it's the perfect day for shopping, with a hopeful blue sky and a brisk feeling in the air."

As they got up to go, Kitty said, "I believe you love clothes, Isobel?"

"Well, hardly that; but I confess clothes are a great interest to me. I don't spend a great deal of money, but I spend quite a lot of time planning my wardrobe, and getting everything in keeping. And you know how fond I am of knitting, so I can copy jumpers that are too expensive to buy; and I can make blouses and underclothes. It's lucky for me that I've fairly clever hands, for work fills hours that might otherwise be very dull."

Kitty surveyed her friend. "Yes, you always look expensive—or is exclusive the word I want? I only wish I had your gift. I like good clothes, but I'm not clever about them. There is one thing, though, about being small and rather

plain, one is inconspicuous. No one notices what one wears. You are rather like a city set on a hill."

"What an awful thought! But you are very far from being either plain or dowdy, Kitty. All you need is to be more clothes-conscious. No, not self-conscious, quite the opposite. When you're sure your clothes are right you can forget all about them. When you're wrongly dressed you're miserably aware of it all the time. Clothes psychology is rather an interesting thing. Let's see what 'Christine' has to-day—round here in Hollis Street. She generally has something amusing."

"Christine," Isobel explained, "was run by a young woman, a friend of her own, whose husband had lost his health. She had to make a living for them both, and having a flair for clothes, had joined with another woman in taking a shop.

"Joyce Peyton supplied the capital, and Patty does all the work," Isobel finished.

"Joyce? Patty? Then who is Christine?" Kitty asked.

"Nobody. Only a name to trade under. I've known Patty Tisdal for years. She and her husband are such a devoted couple, and they've had awful luck. It's hard for him, poor chap, to lie on his back and see his wife work. He helps, though, in every way he can, keeps the books, and that's really a big help, for neither Patty nor Joyce has any head for figures."

When they reached the shop Mrs. Tisdal was just finishing with a customer, and in a few minutes joined them, greeting Isobel with pleasure.

"My dear, it's ages. Have you been away?"

"No, only leading my usual blameless life in Queen's Court. Patty, this is my friend Mrs. Baillie, also at present in Queen's Court. Have you time to show us some things, which we may, or may not, buy? How's business?"

"Brisking up," said Patty, smiling at Kitty, "at the thought of the Coronation. Not that it's been at all bad all winter; we

can’t complain. Come and see what I’ve got, Mrs. Baillie. Isobel, I never really thanked you for helping me out with that order for jumpers at Christmas-time. It was good of you insisting on the money going to the girl. It would have meant a big loss to the poor thing.”

“It was nothing,” Isobel said. “Is the girl stronger now?”

“She never looks well, but she’s never failed me except that once when she went down with influenza at Christmas.”

“Well!” said Isobel, “be sure and let me know if ever I can help you out. I love knitting jumpers, and sometimes I get a brain-wave and devise something new. If the girl—what’s her name, by the way? Alice Parsons—well, if she cared to come and see me any time, I might be able to pass on to her some ideas. That’s to say, if she’s not above taking a hint.”

“I’m sure she’d be only too glad, she admired what you made immensely. I’ll give her your message”; then, turning to Kitty, Mrs. Tisdal remarked, “Isobel’s a great helper.”

Before Kitty could reply, Isobel broke in, “And now what about clothes? Wouldn’t a frock and light coat be most useful to you, Kitty?”

Patty Tisdal considered. “Must it be all black, or could you wear this?”

She brought a soft black frock, the top lightly embroidered in white silk, saying, “The little frills give the fullness you need, and the coat is rather pretty.”

Kitty hesitated. “It looks expensive, and I can’t afford ——”

Mrs. Tisdal whisked round the price ticket. “It’s just in,” she said. “Twelve guineas. Is that too much?”

“I thought it would have been more,” said Kitty. “May I try it on? And I’d need a coat and skirt of sorts, wouldn’t I, Isobel? I’ve only got this coat, and it’s too heavy for summer.”

Isobel agreed. “Yes, a well-cut coat and skirt is a great standby. And you can step into it, lucky woman.”

Mrs. Tisdal told an assistant what to bring, and led the way to a fitting-room.

The frock was found to need very little altering, the coat nothing.

“It’s *very* pretty,” said Isobel. “Are these birds embroidered on the top? Rather a nice idea. Now, what sort of hat, I wonder?”

Hats were forthcoming, and one carefully chosen, smart, without being dressed-up: a hat for almost any occasion.

Kitty turned herself round before the mirror until she had seen herself from every angle, and then gave a satisfied sigh.

“I look nicer than I thought possible,” she said.

A coat and skirt were also found, and Patty Tisdal assured her that if everyone was as easy to suit and pleasant to serve life would be a great deal happier for shopkeepers.

“That’s all I need,” said Kitty, as they left the shop. “I’ve got lots of things to wear up in the house. If it’s a hot summer, I can wear my thin dresses: they’re mostly white. What have you to get?”

“The tailor wanted to try on that tweed again, you remember? and when we finish with him, would you mind poking about with me until I pick up some ideas?”

“I’d love it,” said Kitty.

There are few things more satisfying to the ordinary woman than a good “poke” round shops, and the two friends spent a thoroughly interesting afternoon in Bond Street and Regent Street, finishing up with tea, and a visit to an exhibition of pictures by an artist new to Isobel.

“Don’t you know Peter Scott’s pictures of wild birds?” Kitty asked. “Rob found them first. He was passing here, saw one in the window, and went in. He came home almost as excited as if he’d been left a fortune, and took me to see them next day. There was one we specially coveted—wild geese leaving the marshes in a winter sunrise—and I bought it for his birthday. It hung over the fireplace in our living-

room and Rob used to stand feasting his eyes on it. Have you that feeling about wild geese? To see them fly, to hear them cry, absolutely tugs at my heart-strings. The sound of a penny whistle, the smell of wood-smoke does the same. I can't tell you why."

Isobel was gazing at a picture.

"To me," she said, "wild swans are even more romantic. Look at that—wild swans flying in a snowstorm. It's the essence of every fairy-tale ever written. I love these pictures. If I'd a house of my own, I'd have a Peter Scott in each room."

"Isobel, why don't you? Have a house of your own, I mean?"

Isobel merely laughed and said, "Hadn't I better wait and see how your venture turns out?"

"Cautious Scot!"

"Scot yourself! D'you know, Kitty, although I'm absolutely pure Scots by blood, I was born in England, and I've only once crossed the Border, to spend a fortnight with some people who had rented a shooting in Perthshire."

" 'Breathes there the man with soul so dead'?" Kitty ejaculated, and went on, "I really am shocked. Don't you *want* to go to Scotland?"

"I suppose I ought to be ashamed to confess it, but I never have had much desire. If I had anyone to go with me —but as I told you, I've no initiative. My friends were in London, and in London I've stuck. The only remarkable thing about me is my faculty for 'staying put.' But what about you? You live in London when you might just as well live in Edinburgh."

"That's true," Kitty admitted. "The fact is, though I adore to *think* of Edinburgh, I prefer to *live* in London. Degenerate Scots, that's what we are, both of us. But I've always gone to Scotland part of every year, so I'm a shade less degenerate than you!"

“Oh, well,” said Isobel, “I daresay Scotland can make shift to do without us.”

After dinner that evening Isobel persuaded her friend to sit in the lounge instead of going straight upstairs, and they settled down on a couch, Isobel with her knitting.

A few of the visitors were staying in for the evening, but quite a number, birds of passage, were going out to theatres.

One woman, standing by the fire finishing her cup of coffee, said to Isobel, “It’s so comfortable to see you sitting there knitting. I’d rather sit down beside you than go out to the play to-night.”

“What are you going to see?” Kitty asked.

“Some musical thing. I forget the name. We all felt we needed a little relaxation after last night at *The Seagull*. That was terribly dreary, though the acting was fine.”

When she had gone, Kitty said, “I’d like to see *The Seagull*. Will you come with me? It’s more than two years since I last saw a play. . . . Isobel, I’m almost ashamed of feeling so pleased about those new clothes. When we were out to-day in the sunshine, all the shops so bright, and so many people with happy faces, I felt almost light-hearted.”

“And why,” said Isobel, letting her knitting lie in her lap, “should you feel ashamed? It’s only natural. When you came back from France last October you were like a plant beaten to the earth by storms, you couldn’t raise your head or take an interest in anything. You had had a great loss, and you were physically and mentally exhausted as well. Now the normal, healthy person that is you is emerging. You enjoyed life before, and, gradually, you’ll come to enjoy it again. Would your Rob want anything else? Because he has gone forward into a new life, must you go mourning all your days? It’s not a case of forgetting. You won’t forget, but you owe it to yourself and to the people you live among, to make the best of what’s left to you.”

Kitty was silent for a minute, then she said:

“I daresay you’re right. But I’m pretty old to start again. I’m forty-five.”

“That’s no crime,” said Isobel stoutly. “I believe that very smart good-looking woman who spoke to us just now is every bit of forty-five, and I’m very sure she doesn’t think herself at all old. And you aren’t the type that ages. When you tried on those things to-day you looked a mere girl. All you need is something to interest you, then your face lights up. To me it’s far more attractive than a sort of stolid handsomeness, or wooden prettiness.”

“Isobel,” said Kitty, “you’re one of the world’s comforters.”

CHAPTER III

Table of Contents

What I admire most is the total defiance of expense.

Dr. Johnson

It was the middle of the next week before everything was settled and the flat Kitty's. She had been getting anxious, fearing that her lawyer by over-caution was going to lose the chance, so it was with triumph that she ran into Isobel's room one morning and announced that all was well.

Isobel looked as pleased as she was expected to.

"Now we can get on," she said. "What a good thing it's vacant and the painters can start at once."

"Yes. Mr. Johnson says the lift-man or whatever he's called, has the keys. Isobel, could you come with me now? There's so much to see about."

Isobel was writing letters, but she laid down her pen and said:

"Of course I'll come. We'd better take a tape-measure and a pencil and note-book; you'll want to measure and see how you can place your furniture. Isn't this exciting?"

"Oh, *isn't* it? Do you happen to know any good paper-hanger?"

"I don't, never having required one, but the lift-man'll be able to tell us who usually does up the flats. We'd better get ready."

Isobel gathered her letters and put them tidily into a blotting book.

"I'm going to put a coat over an old frock that won't mind grubbiness."

“That’s wise. We’ll be messing about in cupboards and so forth. I’m all right, ‘dressed for drowning’ so to speak; this old rag won’t take any harm. Gracious! I feel like—I don’t know what I feel like!”

In a very short time they were ready; once outside, Isobel suggested that they should walk.

“It’s such a fine morning, and it isn’t very far and, as we approach it we can study the flat from all points, note the lie of the land, what shops are near, and so on.”

Everything and everybody that early April morning seemed to Kitty to be finding life amusing. The shop windows positively twinkled, the girls in the flower-shop at the corner were arranging spring flowers in a way to make the heart sing, the buses were swinging along as if they enjoyed doing it, even a blind man, standing with matches to sell, wore a smile.

“It’s a perfect day,” she told her companion.

Isobel agreed, and, in a minute, said, “You’ve only seen that flat once, haven’t you?”

“Yes, that time you went with me. We looked at it pretty searchingly, but then I was only a possible tenant; now I’ll look at it with entirely different eyes; it’s to be my home.”

As they approached Sloane Street, Isobel pointed out how convenient it would be to live so near shops, so much more amusing than living in a dreary square, or a long dull terrace; there was something, she said, so companionable about shops.

“Especially,” said Kitty, “when one is living alone. I’ll enjoy watching the traffic, and it’ll be company at night. I wonder where I could find a decent middle-aged woman who would do everything—cook, do the housework, and wait at table?”

“Ah, now you’re asking! People seek for such a thing as for hidden treasure. I’m told that if they’re at all capable they’ve generally fiendish tempers, and almost invariably drink.”

Kitty groaned. “And if I get a young one she’ll want to dance three nights a week, and probably bring home gangsters and have me murdered in my bed! How I wish I was one of those courageous women who don’t mind living alone. Life would be so simple then. All I’d need would be a day woman. I’d lock my door and go out, and come in without a qualm.”

“Oh, I know. Lots of people say they like having the house to themselves, but to me it sounds most uncomfortable. I don’t see how it could ever feel like a real home unless there was a settled person in the kitchen. There *must* be lots of decent women who would be glad of a quiet situation and a good home, and what we’ve got to do is to find one. Here we are! Kitty, it doesn’t look a bit like flats, does it? More like a very nice private house.”

A middle-aged man, with a limp and a row of medals, waited by the lift. His name, he told them, was Gordon, he came from Aberdeen, and had been in the flats since 1920.

“I was lucky to get the job,” he said, “and to keep it. We live on the premises, the wife and me, so whenever you want anything, Mum, you just let me know.”

Kitty thanked him, and asked, rather nervously, who had occupied the flat before her. It was what she much wanted to know, for, as she told Isobel, she liked to live in a house in which people had been happy. “It’s silly, I know, but I don’t believe I could live in a house where there had been a tragedy—it would haunt me.”

So now she waited, breathless, to know her fate.

Gordon put the key in the lock, and turned round to reply.

“To tell ye the truth, Mum, I could never tackle her name. I know what it looked like in writing, but ye dinna say it that way, so we just called her ‘the Countess.’ ”

Kitty’s mouth fell open. What shady foreigner had inhabited the flat that she had chosen for her own? What orgies had taken place within its door? What secret societies had hatched nefarious schemes?