



LEONARD MERRICK

THE "NOVELIST'S NOVELIST"

ESSENTIAL NOVELISTS

TACET BOOKS

ESSENTIAL NOVELISTS

Leonard Merrick

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August Nemo

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The Author

Leonard Merrick was born as Leonard Miller in Belsize Park, London of Jewish parentage. After schooling at Brighton College, he studied to be a solicitor in Brighton and studied law at Heidelberg, but he was forced to travel to South Africa at the age of eighteen after his father suffered a serious financial loss. There he worked as an overseer in the Kimberley diamond mine and in a solicitors office. After surviving a near-fatal case of "camp fever," he returned to London in the late 1880s and worked as an actor and actor-manager under the stage name of Leonard Merrick. He legally changed his name to Leonard Merrick in 1892. He later worked his experiences in South Africa and in the theatre into numerous works of fiction. Merrick's novels include *Mr Bazalgette's Agent* (1888), a detective story; *Violet Moses* (1891), about a Jewish financier and his troubled wife; *The Worldlings* (1900), a psychological investigation of a crime; *Conrad in Quest of His Youth* (1903), the tale of a disillusioned man who, at thirty-seven, sets out to pick up the romantic threads of his younger life, it is "judged his most successful work" according to John Sutherland. George Orwell thought that this is because it is one of the few of his books which is not set against a background of poverty.

Merrick was well regarded by other writers of his era. In 1918 fifteen writers, including famous authors such as H. G. Wells, J. M. Barrie, G. K. Chesterton and William Dean Howells, collaborated with publisher E. P. Dutton to issue "The Works of Leonard Merrick" in fifteen volumes, which were published between 1918 and 1922. Each volume in the series was selected and prefaced by one of the writers. In 2009 a biography was issued titled *Leonard Merrick: A Forgotten Novelist's Novelist* by William Baker and

Jeannettes Robert Shumaker. The title is taken in part from a quote by J. M. Barrie who called Merrick a "novelist's novelist." William Dean Howells wrote of Merrick "I can think of no recent fictionist of his nation who can quite match with Mr. Merrick in that excellence [of "shapeliness" or form in the novel]. This will seem great praise, possibly too great, to the few who have a sense of such excellence; but it will probably be without real meaning to most, though our public might well enjoy form if it could once be made to imagine it."

George Orwell, while describing Merrick as a "good bad writer", rather than a strictly good writer, admitted to a great admiration for his work; he particularly praised *Cynthia* (which was also a favourite of Chesterton's), the story of a struggling writer and his wife, and *The Position of Peggy Harper*, with its portrayal of the unromantic side of provincial theatre. In Orwell's view, nobody conveyed better than Merrick how dreary and dispiriting an actor's life can be. Graham Greene, another admirer, had recruited Orwell to write an introduction to any work by Merrick while Greene was publisher for Eyre & Spottiswoode in 1944. Orwell offered to write one for *The Position of Peggy Harper*, but it wasn't meant to be.

At least eleven of Merrick's stories have been adapted to screen, most in the 1920s, including *Conrad in Quest of His Youth* (1920) directed by William C. deMille. Later adaptations include a 1931 film *The Magnificent Lie* based on the story "Laurels and the Lady", and a 1952 TV episode called "Masquerade" for Lux Video Theatre based on the story "The Doll in the Pink Silk Dress".

Merrick died at the age of 75, in a London nursing home on 7 August 1939, just 12 days before the start of World War II.

One Man's View

CHAPTER I

The idea was so foreign to his temperament that Heriot was reluctant to believe that he had entertained it even during a few seconds. He continued his way past the big pink house and the girl on the balcony, surprised at the interest roused in him by this chance discovery of her address. Of what consequence was it where she was staying? He had noticed her on the terrace, by the band-stand one morning, and admired her. In other words, he had unconsciously attributed to the possessor of a delicious complexion, and a pair of grey eyes, darkly fringed, vague characteristics to which she was probably a stranger. He had seen her the next day also, and the next—even hoped to see her; speculated quite idly what her social position might be, and how she came beside the impossible woman who accompanied her. All that was nothing; his purpose in coming to Eastbourne was to be trivial. But why the sense of gratification with which he had learnt where she lived?

As to the idea which had crossed his brain, that was preposterous! Of course, since the pink house was a boarding establishment, he might, if he would, make her acquaintance by the simple expedient of removing there, but he did not know how he could have meditated such a step. It was the sort of semi-disreputable folly that a man a decade or so younger might commit and describe as a "lark." No doubt many men a decade or so younger would commit it. He could conceive that a freshly-painted balcony, displaying a pretty girl for an hour or two every afternoon, might serve to extend the clientèle of a boarding-house enormously, and wondered that more attention had not been paid to such a form of advertisement. For himself, however—— His hair was already thinning at the temples;

solicitors were deferential to him, and his clerk was taking a villa in Brixton; for himself, it would not do!

Eastbourne was depressing, he reflected, as he strolled towards the dumpy Wish Tower. He was almost sorry that he hadn't gone to Sandhills and quartered himself on his brother for a week or two instead. Francis was always pleased to meet him of recent years, and no longer remarked early in the conversation that he was "overdrawn at Cox's." On the whole, Francis was not a bad fellow, and Sandhills and pheasants would have been livelier.

He stifled a yawn, and observed with relief that it was near the dinner-hour. In the evening he turned over the papers in the smoking-room. He perceived, as he often did perceive in the vacations, that he was lonely. Vacations were a mistake: early in one's career one could not afford them, and by the time one was able to afford them, the taste for holidays was gone. This hotel was dreary, too. The visitors were dull, and the cooking was indifferent. What could be more tedious than the meal from which he had just risen?—the feeble soup, the flaccid fish, the uninterrupted view of the stout lady with the aquiline nose, and a red shawl across her shoulders. Now he was lolling on a morocco couch, fingering the *The Field*; two or three other men lay about, napping, or looking at the *The Graphic*. There was a great deal of tobacco-smoke, and a little whisky; he might as well have stopped in town and gone to the Club. He wondered what they did in Belle Vue Mansion after dinner. Perhaps there was music, and the girl sang? he could fancy that she sang well. Or they might have impromptu dances? Personally he did not care for dancing, but even to see others enjoying themselves would be comparatively gay. After all, why should he not remove to Belle Vue Mansion if he wished? He had attached a significance to the step that it did not possess, making it appear absurd by the very absurdity of

the consideration that he accorded it. He remembered the time when he would not have hesitated—those were the days when Francis was always "overdrawn at Cox's." Well, he had worked hard since then, and anything that Francis might have lent him had been repaid, and he had gradually acquired soberer views of life. Perhaps he might be said to have gone to an extreme, indeed, and taken the pledge! He sometimes felt old, and he was still in the thirties. Francis was the younger of the two of late, although he had a boy in the Brigade; but elder sons often kept young very long—it was easy for them, like the way of righteousness to a bishop.... A waiter cast an inquiring glance round the room, and, crossing to the sofa, handed him a card. Heriot read the name with astonishment; he had not seen the man for sixteen years, and even their irregular correspondence had died a natural death.

"My dear fellow!" he exclaimed in the hall. "Come inside."

In the past, of which he had just been thinking, he and Dick Cheriton had been staunch friends, none the less staunch because Cheriton was some years his senior. Dick had a studio in Howland Street then, and was going to set the Academy on fire. In the meanwhile he wore a yellow necktie, and married madly, and smoked a clay pipe; he could not guarantee that he would be an R.A., but at least he was resolved that he would be a bohemian. He had some of the qualifications for artistic success, but little talent. When he discovered the fact beyond the possibility of mistake, he accepted a relative's offer of a commercial berth in the United States, and had his hair cut. The valedictory supper in the studio, at which he had renounced ambition, and solemnly burned all his canvases that the dealers would not buy, had been a very affecting spectacle.

"My dear fellow!" cried Heriot. "Come inside. This is a tremendous pleasure. When did you arrive?"

"Came over in the *Germanic*, ten days ago. It *is* you, then; I saw 'George Heriot' in the Visitors' List, and strolled round on the chance. I scarcely hoped—— How are you, old man? I'm mighty glad to see you—fact!"

"You've been here ten days?"

"Not here, no; I've only been in Eastbourne a few hours."

"You should have looked me up in town."

"I tried. Your chambers were shut."

"The hall-porter at the Club——"

"What club? You forget what an exile I am!"

"Have a drink? Well, upon my word, this is very jolly! Sit down; try one of these."

"Would you have recognised me?" asked Cheriton, stretching his legs, and lighting the cigar.

"You've changed," admitted Heriot; "it's a long time. I've changed too."

They regarded each other with a gaze of friendly criticism. Heriot noted with some surprise that the other's appearance savoured little of the American man of business, or of the man of business outside America. His hair, though less disordered than it had been in the Howland Street period, was still rather longer than is customary in the City. It was now grey, and became him admirably. He wore a black velvet jacket, and showed a glimpse of a deep crimson tie. He no longer looked a bohemian, but he had acquired the air of a celebrity.

"Have you come home for good, Cheriton?"

Cheriton shook his head.

"I guess America has got me for life," he answered; "I'm only making a trip. And you? You're still at the Bar, eh?"

"Oh, yes," said Heriot drily; "I'm still at the Bar." It is not agreeable, when you have succeeded in a profession, to be asked if you are in it still. "I've travelled along the lines on which you left me—it doesn't make an exciting narrative. Chambers, court, and bed. A laundress or two has died in the interval. The thing pays better than it used to do, naturally; that's all."

"You're doing well?"

"I should have called it 'doing well' once; but we are all Olivers in our hearts. To-day——"

"Mistake!" said the elder man. "You wanted the Bar—you've got the Bar; you ought to be satisfied. Now /——"

"Yes?" said Heriot, as he paused. "How's the world used you, Cheriton? By the way, you never answered my last letter, I think."

"It was *you* who didn't answer *me*."

"I fancy not. You were going to Chicago, and I wrote——"

"I wrote after I arrived in Chicago."

"Well, it must be five years ago; we won't argue. What did you do in Chicago, Cheriton?"

"No good, sir. I went there with a patent horse-collar. Capital invention—not my own, I never invented anything!—but it didn't catch on. They seemed to take no interest in horse-collars; no money in it, not a cent! After the horse-collar I started in the dry-goods trade; but I was burned out. From Chicago I went to Duluth; I've an hotel there to-day."

"An hotel?"

"That's so. It isn't a distinguished career, running a little hotel, but it's fairly easy. Compared with hustling with horse-collars it's luxurious. Duluth is not ideal, but what would you have! I make my way, and that's all I ask now. If I had my life over again——" He sighed. "If we could have our lives over again, eh, Heriot?"

"Humph!" said Heriot doubtfully; he was wondering if he could make any better use of his own—if he would be any livelier the next time he was eight-and-thirty. "I suppose we all blunder, of course."

"*You* are a young man yet; it's different for you; and you're in the profession of your choice: it's entirely different. We don't look at the thing from the same standpoint, Heriot."

"You don't mean that you regret giving up Art?"

"Sir," said Cheriton mournfully, "it was the error I shall always regret. I wouldn't say as much to anybody else; I keep it here"—he tapped his velvet jacket—"but I had a gift, and I neglected it; I had power, and—and I run an hotel. When I reflect, man, there are hours—well, it's no use crying over spilt milk; but to think of the position I should have made, and to contrast it with what I am, is bitter!" He swept back his wavy hair impatiently, and in the momentary pose looked more like a celebrity still.

Heriot could see that the cherished delusion gave him a melancholy pleasure, and was at a loss how to reply. "It was uphill work," he said at last. "Who can tell? Luck——"

"I was a lad, an impetuous lad; and I was handicapped—I married." The man with a failure to explain is always grateful to have married. "But I had the stuff in me, I had the temperament. 'Had' it? I have it now! I may keep an

hotel, but I shall never be an hotel-keeper. God gave me my soul, sir; circumstances gave me an hotel. I mayn't paint any more, but an artist by nature I shall always be. I don't say it in any bragging spirit, Heriot; I should be happier if I didn't feel it. The commonplace man may be contented in the commonplace calling: he fills the rôle he was meant for. It's the poor devil like myself, who knows what he *might* have been, who suffers."

Heriot didn't pursue the subject; he puffed his cigar meditatively. After the effervescence subsides, such meetings must always have a little sadness; he looked at the wrinkles that had gathered on his friend's face, and realised the crow's-feet on his own.

"You lost your wife, you wrote me?" he remarked, breaking a rather lengthy silence.

"In New York, yes—pneumonia. *You* never married, eh?"

"No. Do you stay over here long?"

"A month or two; I can't manage more. But I shall leave my girl in London. I've brought her with me, and she'll remain."

"Of course," said Heriot, "you have a child—of course you have! I remember a little thing tumbling about in Howland Street. She must be a woman, Cheriton?"

"Mamie is twenty-one. I want to see if I can do anything for her before I go back. She loathes Duluth; and she has talent. She'll live with my sister. I don't think you ever saw my sister, did you? She's a widow, and stagnates in Wandsworth—Mamie will be company for her."

"Your daughter paints?"

"No, not paints; she wants to be an actress. I wasn't very keen on it; but she's got the material in her, and I concluded

I'd no right to say 'no.' Still, she's not very strong—takes after her mother, I'm afraid, a little; I'd rather she'd had a gift for something else."

"Was it necessary for her to have a gift at all?" asked Heriot, a shade sarcastically. "Couldn't she stop at home?"

"Well," said Cheriton, "she tried it, but it's a hard thing for a girl like Mamie to content herself with the life in Duluth. There isn't much art in that, Heriot; there isn't much anything. There's the lake, and Superior Street, and the storekeepers lounging in the doorways and spitting on the wooden sidewalks. And there's a theatre of a sort—which made her worse. For a girl panting to be famous, Duluth is a hell. She's been breaking her heart in it ever since she was sixteen; and after all, it's in the blood. It would have been odd if my daughter *hadn't* had the artistic temperament, I suppose!"

"I suppose it would," said Heriot. "Well, why doesn't she go on the stage in America? I shouldn't think she'd find it easy here."

"She wouldn't find it easy there. There's no stock company in Duluth; only the travelling companies come sometimes for a few nights. There's no bigger opportunity for her on the other side than on this. Besides, she wants the English stage. I wonder if you know anybody who could give her any introductions?"

"I? Not a soul!"

"I'm sorry to hear you say that," said Cheriton blankly; "I was counting on you some."

Heriot looked at him.

"You counted on *me*? For Heaven's sake, why?"

"Well, I don't know many people over here to-day, you see; the fellows I used to knock against have died, gone to the Colonies—fizzled out. You were solid; and you were a swell, with connections and all that. I understand the stage has become very fashionable in London—I thought you might meet actor-managers at dinners and things. That was the idea; I daresay it was very stupid, but I had it. I mentioned your name to Mamie as soon as it was settled we should come. However, we'll fix the matter somehow."

"I'm sorry to prove a disappointment," said Heriot. "Tell your daughter so for me. I'd do what you want with pleasure, if I were able. You know that, I'm sure?"

"Oh, I know that," said Cheriton; "it can't be helped. Yes, I'll tell her. She *will* be disappointed, of course; she understands how difficult the thing is without influence, and I've talked about you a lot."

"Do you think you were wise to—to——"

"Oh, it was a mistake as it turns out!"

"I don't mean that only. I mean, do you think you were wise to encourage her hopes in such a direction at all? Frankly, if I had a daughter—— Forgive me for speaking plainly."

"My dear fellow! your daughter and mine!—their paths would be as wide apart as the poles. And you don't know Mamie!"

"At all events I know that the stage is more overcrowded every year. Most girls are stage-struck at some time or other; and there are hundreds of actresses who can't earn bread-and-cheese. A man I know has his type-writing done by a woman who used to be on the stage. She played the best parts in the country, I believe, and, I daresay, nursed the expectation of becoming a Bernhardt. She gets a pound

a week in his office, he tells me, and was thankful to obtain the post."

"Mamie is bound to come to the front. She's got it—she's an artist born. I tell you, I should be brutal to stand in the way of her career; the girl is pining, really pining, for distinction! When you've talked to her you'll change your views."

"Perhaps," said Heriot, as the shortest way of ending the discussion; "very likely I'm wrong." The budding genius bored him. "Mind you explain to the young lady that my inability, and not my will, refuses, at any rate."

"That's all right," declared Cheriton, getting up. "I told her I was coming round to see if it was you." He laughed. "I bet she's picturing me coming back with a bushel of letters of introduction from you by now! Well, I must be going; it's getting late."

"You brought her down to Eastbourne to-day?"

"Oh, I've been dangling about town a little by myself; Mamie and my sister have been here a week. Good-night, old chap; shall I see you to-morrow? You might give us a look in if you will—say in the afternoon. Belle Vue Mansion; don't forget!"

"Where?" exclaimed Heriot, startled into interest.

"Belle Vue Mansion," repeated Cheriton, gripping his hand. "You can't miss it: a big pink house on the Esplanade."

CHAPTER II

Heriot betook himself there on the following day with a curious eagerness. If the girl he had noticed should prove to be Cheriton's daughter, how odd it would be! He at once hoped for the coincidence, and found the possibility a shade pathetic. It emphasised his years to think that the ill-kept child of the dirty studio might have become the girl he had admired. His progress during the interval appeared momentarily insignificant to him; he felt that while a brat became a woman he ought to have done much more. He was discouraged to reflect that he had not taken silk; for he had always intended to take silk, and had small misgivings that he would have cause to repent it. His practice had indicated for some time that he would not suffer by the step, and yet he had delayed his application. His motto had been, "Slow and sure," but it seemed to him suddenly that he had been too slow; his income as a Junior should not have contented him so long.

He pulled the bell, and was preceded up the stairs by a maid-servant, who opened a door, and announced him to the one occupant of the room. Heriot saw that she was the girl of the balcony and the terrace, and that she moved towards him smiling.

"I am Mamie Cheriton," she said. "My father is expecting you."

Her intonation was faintly American, but her voice was full and sweet. He took her hand with pleasure, and a touch of excitement that did not concord with his countenance, which was formal and impassive.

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Cheriton."

"Won't you sit down?" she said. "He will be here in a minute."

Heriot took a seat, and decided that her eyes were even lovelier than he had known.

"When I saw you last, you were a child," he remarked inaccurately.

"Yes; it must have astonished you meeting my father again after so many years. It was funny, your being here, wasn't it?... But perhaps you often come to Eastbourne?"

"No," said Heriot, "no, I don't often come. How does it strike you, Miss Cheriton? I suppose you can hardly remember England, can you?"

"Well, I shan't be sorry to be settled in London; it was London I was anxious to go to, not the sea-shore.... Do you say 'sea-shore' in Europe, or is it wrong? When I said 'sea-shore' this morning, I noticed that a woman stared at me."

"One generally says 'seaside' over here; I don't know that it's important."

"Well, the 'seaside' then. The seaside was my aunt's wish. Well—— Well, I'm saying 'well' too often, I guess?—that's American, too! I've got to be quite English—that's my first step. But at least I don't talk like Americans in your comic papers, do I?"

"You talk very delightfully, I think," he said, taken aback.

"I hope you mean it. My voice is most important, you know. It would be very cruel if I were handicapped by having anything the matter with my voice. I shall have difficulties enough without!"

"I'm afraid," he said, "that I'm unfortunate. I wish I could have done something to further the ambitions your father mentioned."

She smiled again, rather wistfully this time.

"They seem very absurd to you, I daresay?"

He murmured deprecation: "Why?"

"The stage-struck girl is always absurd."

Recognising his own phrase, he perceived that he had been too faithfully reported, and was embarrassed.

"I spoke hastily. In the abstract the stage-struck girl may be absurd, but so is a premature opinion."

"Thank you," she said. "But why 'stage-struck,' anyhow? it's a term I hate. I suppose you wanted to be a barrister, Mr. Heriot?"

"I did," he confessed, "certainly. There are a great many, but I thought there was room for one more."

"But you weren't described as 'bar-struck'?"

"I don't think I ever heard the expression."

"It would be a very foolish one?"

"It would sound so to me."

"Why 'stage-struck' then? Is it any more ridiculous to aspire to one profession than another? You don't say a person is 'paint-struck,' or 'ink-struck,' or anything else '-struck'; why the sneer when one is drawn towards the theatre? But perhaps *no* form of art appears to you necessary?"

"I think I should prefer to call it 'desirable,' since you ask the question," he said. "And 'art' is a word used to weight a great many trivialities too! Everybody who writes a novel is an artist in his own estimation, and personally, I find existence quite possible without novels."

"Did you ever read *Mademoiselle de Maupin*?" asked Miss Cheriton.

"Have *you*?" he said quickly.

"Oh yes; books are very cheap in America. 'I would rather grow roses than potatoes,' is one of the lines in the preface. *You* would rather grow potatoes than roses, eh?"

"You are an enthusiast," said Heriot; "I see!" He pitied her for being Dick Cheriton's daughter. She was inevitable: the pseudo-artist's discontent with realities—the inherited tendencies, fanned by thinly-veiled approval! He understood.

Cheriton came in after a few minutes, followed by the aunt, to whom Heriot was presented. He found her primitive, and far less educated than her brother. She was very happy to see dear Dick again, and she was sorry that she must lose him again so soon. Dear Mamie, though, would be a consolation. A third-rate suburban villa was stamped upon her; he could imagine her making hideous antimacassars for forbidding armchairs, and that a visit to an Eastbourne boarding-house was the event of her life. She wore jet earrings, and stirred her tea with vast energy. With the circulation of the tea, strangers drifted into the room, and the conversation was continued in undertones.

"Have you been talking to Mamie about her intentions?" Cheriton inquired.

"We've been chatting, yes. What steps do you mean to take, Miss Cheriton? What shall you do?"

"I propose to go to the dramatic agents," she said, "and ask them to hear me recite."

"Dramatic agents must be kept fairly busy, I should say. What if they don't consent?"

"I shall recite to them."

"You are firm!" he laughed.

"I am eager, Mr Heriot. I have longed till I am sick with longing. London has been my aim since I was a little girl. I have dreamt of it!—I've gone to sleep hoping that I might; I couldn't recall one of its streets, but in dreams I've reached it over and over again. The way was generally across Lincoln Park, in Chicago; and all of a sudden I was among theatres and lights, and it was London!"

"And you were an actress. And the audience showered bouquets!"

"I always woke up before I was an actress. But now I'm here really, I mean to try to wake London up."

"I hope you will," he said. Her faith in herself was a little infectious, since she was beautiful. If she had been plain, he would have considered her conceited.

"Have I gushed?" she said, colouring.

He was not sure but what she had.

"She's like her father," said Cheriton gaily; "get her on the subject of art, and her tongue runs away with her. We're all children, we artists—up in the skies, or down in the dumps.

No medium with us! She must recite to *you* one of these days, Heriot; I want you to hear her."

"Will you, Miss Cheriton?"

"If you like," she said.

"Dear Mamie must recite to *me*," murmured Mrs. Baines; "I'm quite looking forward to it. What sort of pieces do you say, dear? Nice pieces?"

"She knows the parts of Juliet, and Rosalind, and Pauline by heart," said Cheriton, ignoring his sister. "I think you'll say her Balcony Scene is almost as fine a rendering as you've ever heard. There's a delicacy, a spiritual——"

"Has she been trained?" asked Heriot; "I understood she was quite a novice."

"I've coached her myself," replied Cheriton complacently. "I don't pretend to be an elocutionist, of course; but I've been able to give her some hints. All the arts are related, you know, my boy—it's only a difference in the form of expression. They're playing *Romeo and Juliet* at the theatre here to-night, and we're going; she never loses an opportunity for study. It's been said that you can learn as much by watching bad acting as good. Will you come with us?" he added, lowering his voice. "You'll see how she warms up at the sight of the footlights."

"I don't mind," said Heriot, "if I shan't be in the way. Suppose we all dine together at the hotel, and go on from there? What do you say?" He turned to the ladies, and the widow faltered:

"Lor, I'm sure it's very kind of you to invite me, Mr. Heriot. That *would* be gay, wouldn't it!"

She smoothed her flat hair tremulously, and left the decision to her brother and her niece.

Heriot took his leave with the understanding that he was to expect them, and sauntered along the Parade more cheerfully than was his wont. The girl had not failed to impress him, though he disapproved of her tendencies; nor did these appear quite so preposterous to him now, albeit he thought them regrettable. He did not know whether he believed in her or not yet, but he was conscious that he wished to do so. His paramount reflection was that she would have been a wholly charming girl if she had had ordinary advantages—a finishing governess, and a London season, and a touch of conventionality. He disliked to use the word "conventionality," for it sounded priggish; but "conventionality" was what he meant.

At dinner, however, and more especially after it, he forgot his objections. In the theatre he watched Miss Cheriton more attentively than the stage. She herself sat with her eyes riveted on it, and he could see that she was the prey to strong excitement. He wondered whether this was created by the performance, which seemed to him indifferent, or by the thoughts that it awoke, and he resolved to ask her. When the curtain fell, and they went out, he wasn't sorry that Cheriton derided his suggestion of a cab and declared that the walk back would be agreeable. He kept by the girl's side, and the others followed.

She did not speak, and after a minute he said:

"Will it jar upon you if I say, 'Let us talk'?"

She turned to him with a slight start.

"Of course not! How can you think me so ridiculous?"

"Yet it did!" said Heriot; "I could see."

"I know exactly how I appear," she said constrainedly. "I look an affected idiot. If you knew how I hate to appear affected! I give you my word I don't put it on; I can't help it. The theatre gives me hot and cold shivers, and turns me inside out. That isn't prettily expressed, but it describes what I mean as nearly as possible. Am I 'enthusing' again?"

"I never said you 'enthused' before. You're not my idea of—of 'the gushing girl' at all."

"I'm glad to hear it. I was very ashamed when you had gone this afternoon." She hesitated painfully. "I wish I could explain myself, but I can't—without a pen. I can write what I feel much better than I can say it. I began to write a play once, and the girl said just what I felt. It was a bad play, but a big relief. I've sometimes thought that if I walked about with a pen in my hand, I should be a good conversationalist."

"Try to tell me what you feel without one," said Heriot.

"You encourage me to bore you. Mr. Heriot, I yearn, I crave, to do something clever. It isn't only vanity: half the craving is born of the desire to live among clever people. Ever since I can remember I've ached to know artists, and actors, and people who write, and do things. I've been cooped among storekeepers without an idea in their heads; I've never seen a man or woman of talent in my life, excepting my father; I've never heard anybody speak who knew what art or ambition meant. You may laugh, but if I had it, I would give five hundred dollars to go home with some of those actresses to-night, and sit mum in a corner and listen to them."

"Don't you think it very likely you might be disappointed?" he asked.

"I don't. I don't expect they would talk blank-verse at supper, but they would talk of their work, of their hopes. An artist must be an artist always—on the stage, or off it; in his studio, or in his club. My father is an instance: he could not be a philistine if he tried. He once said something I've always remembered; he said: 'God gave me my soul, child; circumstances gave me an hotel.' I thought it happily put."

Heriot perceived that Cheriton had thought so too, as the "impromptu" had been repeated.

"What a different world we should have lived in by now if he had kept in his profession!" she exclaimed. "I quiver when I realise what I've missed. People that I only know through their books, or the newspapers, would have been familiar friends. I should have seen Swinburne smoking cigars in our parlour; and Sarah Bernhardt would have dropped in to tea and chatted about the rehearsal she had just left, and showed me the patterns of the new costumes she was ordering. Isn't it wonderful?"

In sympathy for her he said:

"It's possible your father might have remained in England without becoming intimate with celebrities."

She looked doubtful. "Even if he hadn't—and one likes to believe in one's own father—the atmosphere would have been right. They mightn't have been Swinburnes and Bernhardts that were at home in our place—they might have been people the world hasn't heard of yet. But they would have talked of the time when the world was *going* to hear of them. One can respect an obscure genius as much as a famous one."

They had reached the door of Belle Vue Mansion; and when he was begged to go in for half an hour, Heriot did not demur. They had the drawing-room to themselves now, and

Cheriton descanted with relish on the qualifications for a successful actress. He had no knowledge of the subject, but possessed great fluency, and he spoke of "broad effects," and "communicable emotion," and "what he might call a matter of perspective" with an authority which came near to disguising the fact that there was little or no meaning in what he said. The girl sat pale and attentive, and Mrs. Baines listened vaguely, as she might have done to a discourse in Chinese. Relatives who came back from America and invited her to stay with them in a house where she cost two guineas a week, must be treated with deference; but the stage and the circus were of equal significance to her mind, and she would have simpered just as placidly if her niece had been anxious to jump through a hoop. Her chief emotion was pride at being in a room with a barrister who, she had learnt, was the brother of a baronet; and she watched him furtively, with the anticipation of describing the event in Lavender Street, Wandsworth, where the magnate was a gentleman who travelled in a brougham, and haberdashery.

"Would it be inconsiderate to ask you to recite to-night, Miss Cheriton?" inquired Heriot. "Don't, if you are too tired."

She rose at once, as if compelling herself to subdue reluctance, and moved towards the bay of the window slowly. For a second or two after she stood there she did not speak, only her lips trembled. Then she began Portia's speech on Mercy. In recitation her voice had the slight tremolo that is natural to many beginners who feel deeply; but its quality was delicious, and her obvious earnestness was not without effect. Conscious that her gestures were stiff, she had chosen a speech that demanded little action, and it was not until she came to "Therefore, Jew, though justice be thy plea," that her hands, which she had clasped lightly in front of her, fell apart. With the change of position

she seemed to acquire a dignity and confidence that made the climax triumphant, and though Heriot could see that she had much to learn, his compliments were sincere.

When he bade her good-night, she looked at him appealingly.

"Tell me the truth," she said under her breath; "I've only had my father's opinion. Tell me the truth!"

"I honestly believe you're clever," he answered. "I'm sure of it." He felt his words to be very cold compared with the sympathy that was stirring in him.

The proprietress, who had entered, hovered about with an eye on the gas, and he repeated his adieux hurriedly. The interest that he already took in the question of Miss Cheriton's success surprised him. The day had had a charm that was new, and he found that he was eagerly anticipating the morrow.

CHAPTER III

On the pavements of the Strand the snow had turned to slush; and from the river a fog was blowing up, which got into the girl's throat, and made her cough. She mounted a flight of gloomy stairs, and pulled a bell. Already her bearing had lost something that had distinguished it in the summer: something of courage. She rang the bell deprecatingly, as if ashamed.

The anteroom into which she passed had become painfully familiar to her, like the faces of many of the occupants. They all wore the same expression—an air of repressed eagerness, of diffidence striving to look assured. The walls were covered with theatrical photographs, and in a corner a pimply youth sat writing at a table. What he wrote nobody knew or cared. The crowd had but one thought—the door that communicated with the agent's private office, to which they prayed, though they were no longer sanguine, that they would gain admission. It was four o'clock, and at five the office would close. There were so many of them that it was impossible for Mr. Passmore to interview everybody. Which of them would be lucky to-day?

Mamie also looked towards the door, and from the door back to her companions in distress. A little fair woman in a light fawn costume—terribly unsuitable to the season, but her least shabby—met her eyes and spoke.

"Have you got an appointment?" she asked in a low voice.

"No."

"Oh, then you won't see him," said the little woman more cheerfully. "I thought, as you'd come in so late, that you had an appointment. I've been here since twelve."

The door opened, and Mr. Passmore appeared on the threshold. He did not say "good-afternoon" to his clients; he cast an indifferent gaze round the room, and signed to a cadaverous man who sat sucking the handle of his umbrella.

"Here! *You!*" he said, retiring again. The cadaverous man rose hurriedly, among envious glances, and twenty-five heads that had been lifted in expectation drooped dejectedly. The men whose watches were not pawned looked to see the time.

"What's your line?" said the little woman, addressing Mamie once more.

"I beg your pardon? Oh, I'm trying for my first engagement; I haven't acted yet at all."

The other showed surprise and some contempt.

"A novice, are you! Good Lord, it's no good your coming to the agents, my dear; they can't find shops for *us*."

"I paid Mr. Passmore the usual fee," said Mamie; "he promised he'd do what he could."

The little woman smiled, and turned her shoulder to her, declining further discussion. Another girl rang the bell, but withdrew with a sigh as she perceived the futility of waiting. The cadaverous man came out, with "an engagement" writ large upon his features. He stowed a type-written part into the pocket of his overcoat, and nodded good-bye to an acquaintance, whose cast of countenance proclaimed him a low comedian.

"Got anything, dear boy?" inquired the latter in a husky whisper.

"They want me for the *White Slaves Company*—the Father. Offered four. Of course I refused point-blank. 'No,' I said,