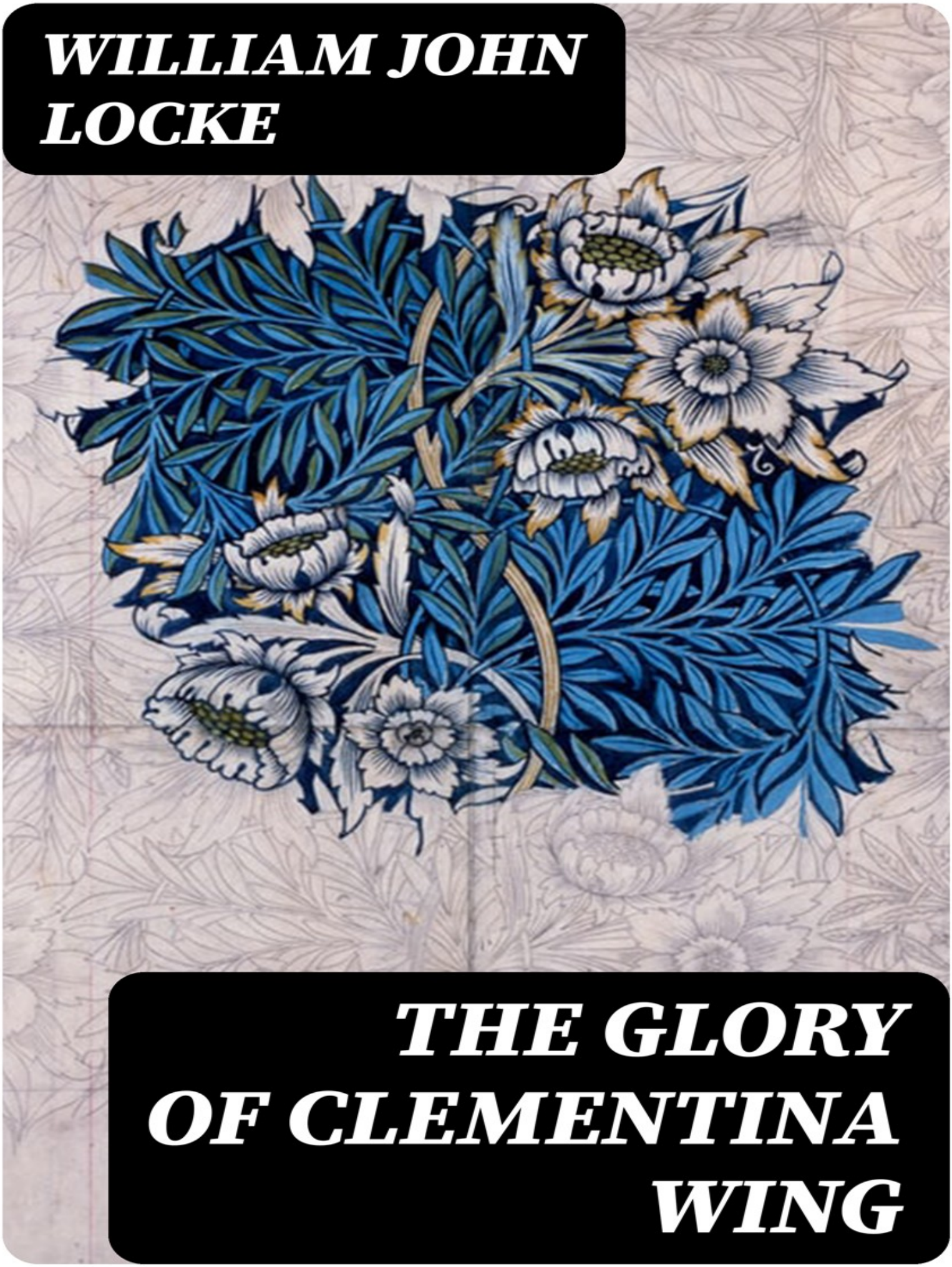
WILLIAM JOHN LOCKE



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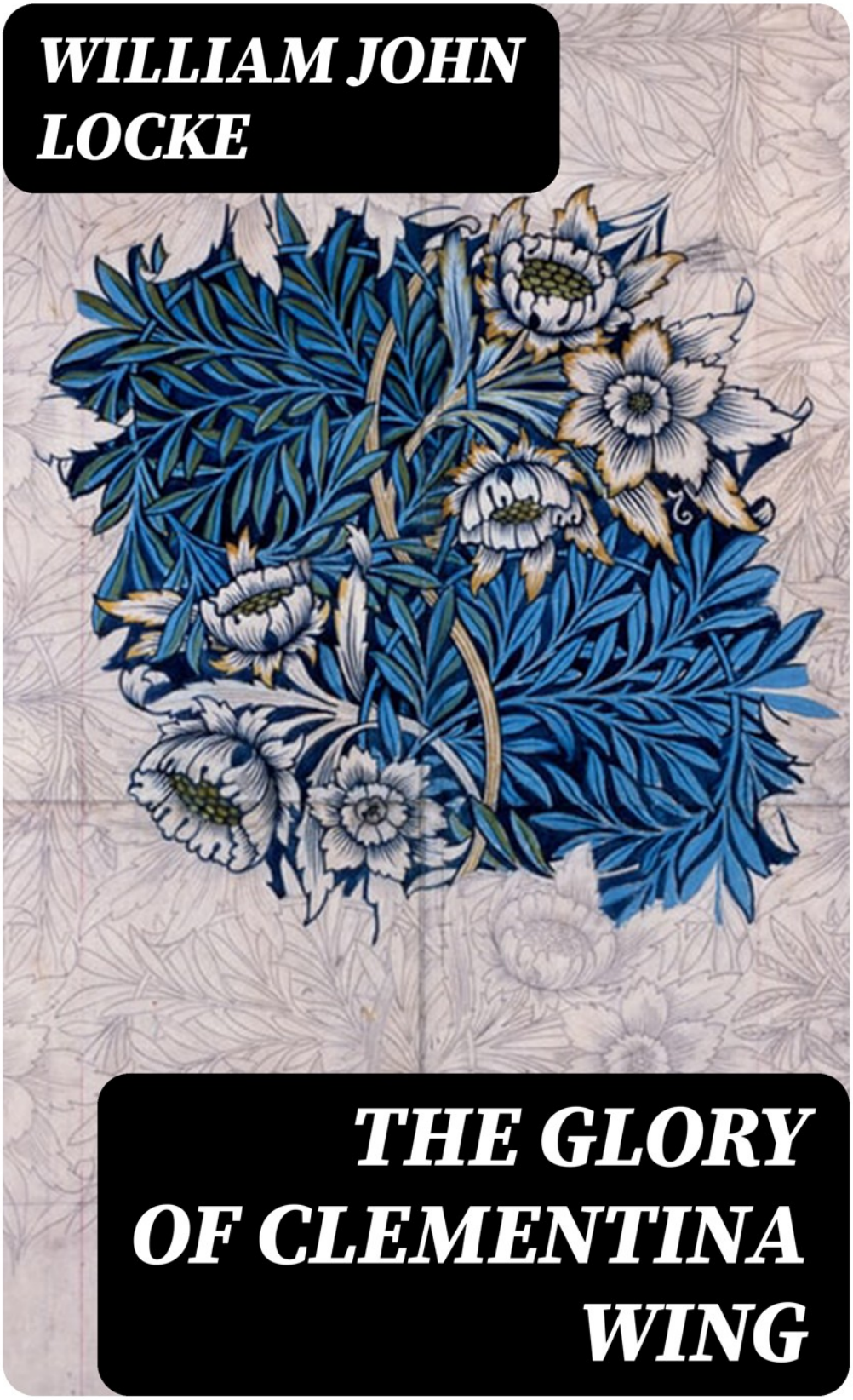

# THE GLORY OF CLEMENTINA WING

**William John Locke**

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# CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

Unless you knew that by taking a few turnings in any direction and walking for five minutes you would inevitably come into one of the great, clashing, shrieking thoroughfares of London, you might think that Romney Place, Chelsea, was situated in some world-forgotten cathedral city. Why it is called a “place,” history does not record. It is simply a street, or double terrace, the quietest, sedatest, most unruffled, most old-maidish street you can imagine. Its primness is painful. It is rigorously closed to organ-grinders and German bands; and itinerant vendors of coal would have as much hope of selling their wares inside the British Museum as of attracting custom in Romney Place by their raucous appeal. Little dogs on leads and lazy Persian cats are its genii loci. It consists of a double row of little Early Victorian houses, each having a basement protected by area railings, an entrance floor reached by a prim little flight of steps, and an upper floor. Three little houses close one end of the street, a sleepy little modern church masks the other. Each house has a tiny back garden which, on the south side, owing to the gradual slope of the ground riverwards, is on a level with the basement floor and thus on a lower level than the street. Some of the houses on this south side are constructed with a studio on the garden level running the whole height of the house. A sloping skylight in the roof admits the precious north light, and a French window leads on to the garden. A gallery runs round

the studio, on a level and in communication with the entrance floor; and from this to the ground is a spiral staircase.

From such a gallery did Tommy Burgrave, one November afternoon, look down into the studio of Clementina Wing. She was not alone, as he had expected; for in front of an easel carrying a nearly finished portrait stood the original, a pretty, dainty girl accompanied by a well-dressed, well-fed, bullet-headed, bull-necked, commonplace young man. Clementina, on hearing footsteps, looked up.

“I’m sorry——” he began. “They didn’t tell me——”

“Don’t run away. We’re quite through with the sitting. Come down. This is Mr. Burgrave, a neighbour of mine,” she explained. “Tries to paint, too—Miss Etta Concannon—Captain Hilyard.”

She performed perfunctory introductions. The group lingered round the portrait for a few moments, and then the girl and the young man went away. Clementina scrutinised the picture, sighed, pushed the easel to a corner of the studio and drew up another one into the light. Tommy sat on the model-throne and lit a cigarette.

“Who’s the man?”

“This?” asked Clementina, pointing to the new portrait, that of a stout and comfortable-looking gentleman.

“No. The man with Miss Etta Something. I like the name Etta.”

“He’s engaged to her. I told you his name, Captain Hilyard. He called for her. I don’t like him,” replied Clementina, whose language was abrupt.

“He looks rather a brute—and she’s as pretty as paint. It must be awful hard lines on a girl when she gets hold of a bad lot.”

“You’re right,” she said, gathering up palette and brushes. Then she turned on him. “What are you wasting precious daylight for? Why aren’t you at work?”

“I feel rather limp this afternoon, and want stimulating. So I thought I’d come in. Can I stay?”

“Oh Lord, yes, you can stay,” said Clementina, dabbing a vicious bit of paint on the canvas and stepping back to observe the effect. “Though you limp young men who need stimulating make me tired—as tired,” she added, with another stroke, “as this horrible fat man’s trousers.”

“I don’t see why you need have painted his trousers. Why not have made him half-length?”

“Because he’s the kind of cheesemonger that wants value for his money. If I cut him off at the waist he would think he was cheated. He pays to have his hideous trousers painted, and so I paint them.”

“But you’re an artist, Clementina.”

“I got over the disease long ago,” she replied grimly, still dabbing at the creases of the abominable and unmentionable garments. “A woman of my age and appearance hasn’t any illusions left. If she has, she’s a fool. I paint portraits for money, so that one of these days I may be able to retire from trade and be a lady. Bah! Art! Look at that!”

“Hi! Stop!” laughed Tommy, as soon as the result of the fresh brush-stroke was revealed. “Don’t make the infernal things more hideous than they are already.”

“That’s where I get ‘character,’ ” she said sarcastically. “People like it. They say ‘How rugged! How strong! How expressive!’ Look at the fat, self-satisfied old pig!—and they pay me in guineas where the rest of you high artistic people get shillings. If I had the courage of my convictions and painted him with a snout, they’d pay me in lacs of rupees. Art! Don’t talk of it. I’m sick of it.”

“All right,” said Tommy, calmly puffing away at his cigarette, “I won’t. Art is long and the talk about it is longer, thank God. So it will keep.”

He was a fresh-faced, fair-haired boy of two-and-twenty, and the chartered libertine of Clementina’s exclusive studio. His uncle, Ephraim Quixtus, had married a distant relation of Clementina, so, in a vague way, she was a family connection. To this fact he owed acquaintance with her—indeed, he had known her dimly from boyhood; but his intimacy he owed to a certain charm and candour of youth which found him favour in her not very tolerant eyes.

He sat on the model-throne, clasping his knee, and, wonderingly, admiringly, watched her paint. For all her cynical depreciation of her art, she was a portrait-painter of high rank, possessing the portrait-painter’s magical gift of getting at essentials, of splashing the very soul, miserable or noble, of the subject upon the canvas. She had a rough, brilliant method, direct and uncompromising as her speech. To see her at work was at once Tommy Burgrave’s delight and his despair. Had she been a young and pretty woman, his masculine vanity might have smarted. But Clementina, with her ugliness, gruffness, and untidiness, scarcely ranked as a woman in his disingenuous mind. You couldn’t possibly

fall in love with her; no one could ever have fallen in love with her. And she, of course, had never had the remotest idea of falling in love with anybody. To his boyish fancy, Clementina in love was a grotesque conception. Besides, she might be any age. He decided that she must be about fifty. But when you made allowances for her gruffness and eccentricities, you found that she was a good sort—and, there was no doubt about it, she could paint.

Of course, Clementina might have made herself look much younger and more prepossessing, and thereby have pleased the fancy of Tommy Burgrave. As a matter of fact she was only thirty-five. Many a woman with more years and even less foundation of beauty than Clementina flaunts about the world breaking men's hearts, obfuscating their common sense, and exerting all the bewildering influences of a seductive sex. She only has to do her hair, attend to her skin, and attire herself in more or less becoming raiment. Very little care suffices. Men are ludicrously easy to please in the way of female attractiveness—but they draw the line somewhere. It must be confessed that they drew it at Clementina Wing. Her coarse black hair straggled perpetually in uncared-for strands between fortuitous hair-pins. Her complexion was dark and oily; her nose had never been powdered since its early infancy; and her face, even when she walked abroad, was often disfigured, as it was now, by a smudge of paint. She had heedlessly suffered the invasion of lines and wrinkles. A deep vertical furrow had settled hard between her black, overhanging brows. She had intensified and perpetuated the crow's-feet between her eyes by a trick, when concentrating her painter's vision

on a sitter, of screwing her face into a monkey's myriad wrinkles. She dressed, habitually, in any old blouse, any old skirt, any old hat picked up at random in bedroom or studio, and picked up originally, with equal lack of selection, in any miscellaneous emporium of feminine attire. When her figure, which, as women acquaintances would whisper to each other, but never (not daring) to Clementina, had, after all, its possibilities, was hidden by a straight, shapeless, colour-smeared painting-smock, and all of Clementina as God made her that was visible, save her capable hands, was the swarthy face with its harsh contours, its high cheekbones, its unlovely, premature furrows, surmounted by the bedraggled hair that would have disgraced a wigwam, Tommy Burgrave may be pardoned for regarding her less as a woman than a painter of genius who somehow did not happen to be a man.

Presently she laid down palette and brushes and pushed the easel to one side.

"I can't do any more at it without a model. Besides, it's getting dark. Ring for tea."

She threw off her painting-smock, revealing herself in an old brown skirt and a soiled white blouse gaping at the back, and sank with a sigh of relief into a chair. It was good to sit down, she said. She had been standing all day. She would be glad to have some tea. It would take the taste of the trousers out of her mouth.

"If you dislike them so much, why did you rush at them, as soon as those people had gone?"

"To get the girl's face out of my mind. Look here, mon petit," she said, turning on him suddenly, "if you ask

questions I'll turn you into the street. I'm tired; give me something to smoke."

He disinterred a yellow, crumpled packet of French tobacco and cigarette-papers from among a litter on the table, and lit the cigarette for her when she had rolled it.

"I suppose you're the only woman in London who rolls her own cigarettes."

"Well?" asked Clementina.

He laughed. "That's all."

"It was an idiotic remark," said Clementina.

The maid brought in tea, and it was Tommy who played host. She softened a little as he waited on her.

"I was meant to be a lady, Tommy, and do nothing. This paint-brush walloping—after all, what is it? What's the good of painting these fools' portraits?"

"Each of them is work of genius," said Tommy.

"Rot and rubbish," said Clementina. "Let me clear your mind of a lot of foolish nonsense you hear at your high-art tea-parties, where women drivel and talk of their mission in the world. A woman has only one mission; to marry and get babies. Keep that fact in front of you when you're taking up with any of 'em. Genius! I can't be a genius for the simple reason that I'm a woman. Did you ever hear of a man-mother? No. It's a contradiction in terms. So there can't be a woman-genius."

"But surely," Tommy objected, more out of politeness, perhaps, than conviction, for every male creature loves to be conscious of his sex's superiority. "Surely there was Rosa Bonheur—and—and in your line, Madame Vigée Le Brun."

“Very pretty,” said Clementina, “but stick them beside Paul Potter and Gainsborough, and what do they look like? Could a woman have painted Paul Potter’s bull?”

“What’s your definition of genius?” asked Tommy, evading the direct question. He had visited The Hague, and stood in rapt wonder before what is perhaps the most essentially masculine bit of painting in the world. Certainly no woman could have painted it.

“Genius,” said Clementina, screwing up her face and looking at the tip of a discoloured thumb, “is the quality the creative spirit assumes as soon as it can liberate itself from the bond of the flesh.”

“Good,” said Tommy. “Did you make up that all at once? It knocks Carlyle’s definition silly. But I don’t see why it doesn’t apply equally to men and women.”

“Woman,” said Clementina, “has always her sex hanging round the neck of her spirit.”

Tommy stared. This was a new conception of woman which he was too young and candid to understand. For him women—or rather that class of the sex that counted for him as women, the mothers and sisters and wives of his friends, the women from whose midst one of these days he would select a wife himself—were very spiritual creatures indeed. That twilight region of their being in which their sex had a home was holy ground before entering which a man must take the shoes from off his feet. He took it for granted that every unmarried woman believed in the stork or gooseberry bush theory of the population of the world. A girl allowed you to kiss her because she was kind and good and altruistic, realising that it gave you considerable pleasure;

but as for the girl craving the kiss for the satisfaction of her own needs, that was undreamed of in his ingenuous philosophy. And here was Clementina laying it down as a fundamental axiom that woman has her sex always hanging round the neck of her spirit. He was both mystified and shocked.

“I’m afraid you don’t know what you’re talking about, Clementina,” he said at last, with some severity.

Indeed, how on earth could Clementina know?

“Perhaps I don’t, Tommy,” she said, with ironical meekness, realising the gulf between them and the reverence, which, as the Latin Grammar tells us, is especially due to tender youth. She looked into the fire, a half-smile playing round her grim, unsmiling lips, and there was silence for a few moments. Then she asked, brusquely;

“How’s that uncle of yours?”

“All right,” said Tommy. “I’m dining with him this evening.”

“I hear he has taken to calling himself Dr. Quixtus lately.”

“He’s entitled to do so. He’s a Ph.D. of Heidelberg. I wish you didn’t have your knife into him so much, Clementina. He’s the best and dearest chap in the world. Of course, he’s getting rather elderly and precise. He’ll be forty next birthday, you know——”

“Lord save us,” said Clementina.

“—— but one has to make allowances for that. Anyway,” he added, with a flash of championship, “he’s the most courtly gentleman I’ve ever met.”

“He’s civil enough,” said Clementina. “But if I were his wife, I’m sure I would throw him out of a window.”

Tommy stared again for a moment, and then laughed—more at the idea of the quaint old thing that was Clementina being married than at the picture of his uncle's grotesque ejectment.

"I don't think that's ever likely to happen," he remarked.

"Nor do I," said Clementina.

Soon after that Tommy departed as unceremoniously as he had entered. Not that Tommy Burgrave was by nature unceremonious, being a boy of excellent breeding; but no one stood on ceremony with Clementina; the elaborate politeness of the Petit Trianon was out of place in the studio of a lady who would tell you to go to the devil as soon as look at you.

When the door at the end of the gallery closed behind him she gave a sigh of relief, and rolled another cigarette. There are times when the most obstinate woman's nerves are set on edge, and she craves either solitude or a sympathetic presence. Now, she was very fond of Tommy; but what, save painting and cricket and the young animal's joy of life, could Tommy understand? She regretted having spoken of sex and spirit to his uncomprehending ears. Generally she held herself and even her unruly tongue under control. But this afternoon she had lost grip. The sitting had strangely affected her, for she had divined, as she had not done on previous occasions, the wistful terror that lurked in the depths of the young girl's soul—a divination that had been confirmed by the quick look of fear with which she had greeted the bullet-headed young man when he had arrived to escort her home. And Tommy, with his keen young vision, had summed him up in a few words.

She turned on the great lamp suspended in the middle of the studio, and drew the easel containing the girl's portrait into the light. She gazed at it for a while intently, and then, throwing herself into her chair by the fire, remained there motionless, with parted lips, in the attitude of a woman overwhelmed by memories.

They went back fifteen years, when she was this girl's age. She had not this girl's bearing and flower-like grace; but she had her youth and everything in it that stood for the promise of life. She had memories of her mirrored self—quite a dainty slip of a girl in spite of her homely face, her hair wound around a not unshapely head in glossy coils, and her figure set off by delicately fitting clothes. And there was a light in her eyes because a man loved her and she had given all the richness of herself to the man. They were engaged to be married. Yet, for all her tremulous happiness, terror lurked in the depths of her soul. Many a night she awoke, gripped by the nameless fear, unreasonable, absurd; for the man in her eyes was as handsome and debonair as any prince out of a fairy tale. Her mother and father, who were then both alive, came under the spell of the man's fascinations. He was of good family, fair private income, and was making a position for himself in the higher walks of journalism; a man too of unsullied reputation. A gallant lover, he loved her as in her dreams she had dreamed of being loved. The future held no flaw.

Suddenly, something so grotesque happened as to awaken all her laughter and indignation. Roland Thorne was arrested on a charge of theft. A lady, a stranger, the only other occupant of a railway-carriage in which he happened

to be travelling from Plymouth to London, missed some valuable diamonds from a jewel-case beside her on the seat. At Bath she had left the carriage for a minute to buy a novel at the bookstall, leaving the case in the compartment. She brought evidence to prove that the diamonds were there when she left Plymouth and were not there when she arrived at her destination in London. The only person, according to the prosecution, who could have stolen them was Roland Thorne, during her temporary absence at Bath. Thorne treated the matter as a ludicrous annoyance. So did Clementina, as soon as her love and anger gave place to her sense of humour. And so did the magistrate who dismissed the charge, saying that it ought never to have been brought.

With closed eyes, the woman in front of the fire recalled their first long passionate kiss after he had brought the news of his acquittal, and she shivered. She remembered how he had drawn back his handsome head and looked into her eyes.

“You never for one second thought me guilty?”

Something in his gaze checked the cry of scorn at her lips. The nameless terror clutched her heart. She drew herself slowly, gradually, out of his embrace, keeping her widened eyes fixed on him. He stood motionless as she recoiled. The horrible truth dawned on her. He was guilty. She sat on the nearest chair, white-lipped and shaken.

“You? You?”

Whether the man had meant to make the confession, probably he himself did not know. Overwrought nerves may have given way. But there he stood at that moment, self-

confessed. In a kind of dream paralysis she heard him make his apologia. He said something of sins of his youth, of blackmail, of large sums of money to be paid, so as to avert ruin; how he had idly touched the jewel-case, without thought of theft, how it had opened easily, how the temptation to slip the case of diamonds into his pocket had been irresistible. His voice seemed a toneless echo, far away. He said many things that she did not hear. Afterwards she had a confused memory that he pleaded for mercy at her hands. He had only yielded in a moment of desperate madness; he would make secret restitution of the diamonds. He threw himself on the ground at her feet and kissed her skirt, but she sat petrified, speechless, stricken to her soul. Then without a word or a sign from her, he went out.

The woman by the fire recalled the anguish of the hour of returning life. It returned with the pain of blood returning to frost-bitten flesh. She loved him with every quivering fibre. No crime or weakness in the world could alter that. Her place was by his side, to champion him through evil, to ward off temptation, to comfort him in his time of need. Her generous nature cried aloud for him, craved to take him into her arms and lay his head against her bosom. She scorned herself for having turned to him a heart of stone, for letting him go broken and desperate into the world. A touch would have changed his hell to heaven, and she had not given it. She rose and stood for a while, this girl of twenty, transfigured, vibrating with a great purpose—the woman of thirty-five remembered (ah God!) the thrill of it. The flames of the sunrise spread through her veins.

In a few minutes she was driving through the busy streets to the man’s chambers; in a few minutes more she reached them. She mounted the stairs. She had no need to ring, as the outer door stood open. She entered. Called:

“Roland, are you here?”

There was no reply. She crossed the hall and went into the sitting-room. There on the floor lay Roland Thorne with a revolver bullet through his head.

# CHAPTER II

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Such were the memories that overwhelmed Clementina Wing as she sat grim and lonely by the fire.

In the tragedy the girl Clementina perished, and from her ashes arose the phœnix of dingy plumage who had developed into the Clementina of to-day. As soon as she could envisage life again, she plunged into the strenuous art-world of Paris, living solitary, morose, and heedless of external things. The joyousness of the light-hearted crowd into which she was thrown jarred upon her. It was like Bacchanalian revelry at a funeral. She made no friends. Good-natured importunates she drove away with rough usage. The pairs of young men and maidens who flaunted their foolish happiness in places of public resort she regarded with misanthropic eye. She hated them—at one-and-twenty—because they were fools; because they deluded themselves into the belief that the world was rose and blue and gold, whereas she, of her own bitter knowledge, knew it to be drab. And from a drab world what was there more vain than the attempt to extract colour? Beauty left her unmoved because it had no basis in actuality. The dainty rags in which she had been accustomed to garb herself she threw aside with contempt. Sackcloth was the only wear.

It must be remembered that Clementina at this period was young, and that it is only given to youth to plumb the depths of existence. She was young, strong-fibred, desperately conscious of herself. She had left her home

rejecting sympathy. To no one could she exhibit the torture of her soul; to no one could she confess the remorse and shame that consumed her. She was a failure in essentials. She had failed the man in his hour of need. She had let him go forth to his death. She, Clementina Wing, was a failure. She, Clementina Wing, was the world. Therefore was the world a failure. She saw life drab. Her vision was infallible. Therefore life was drab. Syllogisms, with the eternal fallacy of youth in their minor premises. Work saved her reason. She went at it feverishly, indefatigably, unremittingly, as only a woman can—and only a woman who has lost sense of values. Her talent was great—in those days she did not scout the suggestion of genius—and by her indomitable pains she acquired the marvellous technique which had brought her fame. The years slipped away. Suddenly she awakened. A picture exhibited in the Salon obtained for her a gold medal, which pleased her mightily. She was not as dead as she had fancied, having still the power to feel the thrill of triumph. Money much more than would satisfy her modest wants jingled in her pockets with a jocund sound. Folks whom she had kept snarlingly at bay whispered honeyed flattery in her ears. Philosophy, which (of a bitter nature) she had cultivated during her period of darkness, enabled her to estimate the flattery at its true value; but no philosophy in the world could do away with the sweetness of it. So it came to pass that on her pleasant road to success, Clementina realised that there was such a thing as light and shade in life as well as in pictures. But though she came out of the underworld a different woman from the one who had sojourned there, she was still a far more different woman

from the girl who was flung herself into it headlong. She emerged cynical, rough, dictatorial, eccentric in speech, habits, and attire. As she had emancipated herself from the gloom of remorse and self-torture, so did she emancipate herself from convention. Youth had flown early, and with it the freshness that had given charm to her young face. Lines had come, bones had set, the mouth had hardened. She had lost the trick of personal adornment. Years of loose and casual corseting had ruined her figure. Even were she to preen and primp herself, what man would look at her with favour? As for women, she let them go hang. She was always impatient of the weaknesses, frailties, and vanities of her own sex, especially when they were marked by an outer show of strength. The helpless she had been known to take to her bosom as she would have taken a wounded bird —but her sex as a whole attracted her but little. Women could go hang, because she did not want them. Men could go hang likewise, because they did not want her. Thus dismissing from her horizon all the human race, she found compensation in the freedom so acquired. If she chose to run bareheaded and slipshod into the King's Road and come back with a lump of beef wrapped in a bloodstained bit of newspaper (as her acquaintance, Mrs. Venables, had caught her doing—"My dear, you never saw such an appalling sight in your life," she said when reporting the incident, "and she had the impudence to make me shake hands with her—and the hand, my dear, in which she had been holding the beef")—if she chose to do this, what mattered it to any one of God's creatures, save perhaps Mrs. Venables's glove-maker to whom it was an advantage? Her servant had a bad

cold, time—the morning light was precious—and the putting on of hat and boots a retarding vanity. If she chose to bring in a shivering ragamuffin from the streets and warm him before the fire and stuff him with the tomato sandwiches and plum-cake set out for a visitor's tea, who could say her nay? The visitor in revolt against the sight and smell of the ragamuffin, could get up and depart. It was a matter of no concern to Clementina. Eventually folks recognised Clementina's eccentricity, classed it in the established order of things, ceased to regard it—just as dwellers by a cataract lose the sound of the thunder, and as a human wife ceases to be conscious of the wart on her husband's nose. To this enviable height of freedom had Clementina risen.

She sat by the fire, overwhelmed by memories. They had been conjured up by the girl with the terror at the back of her eyes; but their mass was no longer crushing. They came over her like a weightless grey cloud that had arisen from some remote past with which she had no concern. She had grown to look upon the tragedy impersonally, as though it were a melodramatic tale written by a young and inexperienced writer, in which the characters were overdrawn and untrue to life. The reading of the tale left her with the impression that Roland Thorne was an unprincipled weakling, Clementina Wing an hysterical little fool.

Presently she rose, rubbed her face hard with both hands, a proceeding which had the effect of spreading the paint smudge into a bright gamboge over her cheeks, pushed the easel aside, and, taking down "Tristram Shandy" from her shelves, read the story of the King of Bohemia and

his Seven Castles, by way of a change of fiction, till her maid summoned her to her solitary dinner.

Early the next morning, as soon as she had entered the studio and had begun to set her palette, preparatory to the day's work, Tommy Burgrave appeared on the gallery, with a "Hullo, Clementina!" and ran down the spiral staircase. Clementina paused with a paint tube in her hand.

"Look, my young friend, you don't live here, you know," she said coolly.

"I'll clear out in half a second," he replied, smiling. "I'm bringing you news. You ought to be very grateful to me. I've got you a commission."

"Who's the fool?" asked Clementina.

"It isn't a fool," said Tommy, buttoning the belt of his Norfolk jacket, as if to brace himself to the encounter. "It's my uncle."

"Lord save us!" said Clementina.

"I thought I would give you a surprise," said Tommy.

Clementina shrugged her shoulders and went on squeezing paint out of tubes.

"He must have softening of the brain."

"Why?"

"First for wanting to have his portrait painted at all, and secondly for thinking of coming to me. Go back and tell him I'm not a caricaturist."

Tommy planted a painting-stool in the middle of the floor and sat upon it, with legs apart.

"Let us talk business, Clementina. In the first place, he has nothing to do with it. He doesn't want his portrait painted, bless you. It's the other prehistoric fossils he

foregathers with. I met chunks of them at dinner last night. They belong to the Anthropological Society, you know, they fool around with antediluvian stones and bones and bits of iron—and my uncle's president. They want to have his portrait to hang up in the cave where they meet. They were talking about it at my end of the table. They didn't know what painter to go to, so they consulted me. My uncle had introduced me as an artist, you know, and they looked on me as a sort of young prophet. I asked them how much they were prepared to give. They said about five hundred pounds—they evidently have a lot of money to throw about—one of them, all over gold chains and rings, seemed to perspire money, looked like a bucket-shop keeper. I think it's he who is presenting the Society with the portrait. Anyway that's about your figure, so I said there was only one person to paint my uncle and that was Clementina Wing. It struck them as a brilliant idea, and the end of it was that they told my uncle and requested me to sound you on the matter. I've sounded."

She looked at his confident boyish face, and uttered a grim sound, halfway between a laugh and a sniff, which was her nearest approach to exhibition of mirth, and might have betokened amusement or pity or contempt or any two of these taken together or the three combined. Then she turned away and, screwing up her eyes, looked out for a few moments into the sodden back garden.

"Did you ever hear of a barber refusing to shave a man because he didn't like the shape of his whiskers?"

"Only one," said Tommy, "and he cut the man's throat from ear to ear with the razor."

He laughed loud at his own jest, and, going up to the window where Clementina stood with her back to him, laid a hand on her shoulder.

“That means you’ll do it.”

“Guineas, not pounds,” said Clementina, facing him. “Five hundred guineas. I couldn’t endure Ephraim Quixtus for less.”

“Leave it to me, I’ll fix it up. So long.” He ran up the spiral staircase, in high good-humour. On the gallery he paused and leaned over the balustrade.

“I say, Clementina, if the ugly young man calls to-day for that pretty Miss Etta, and you want any murdering done, send for me.”

She looked up at him smiling down upon her, gay and handsome, so rich in his springtide, and she obeyed a sudden impulse.

“Come down, Tommy.”

When he had descended she unhooked from the wall over the fireplace a Della Robbia plaque—a child’s white head against a background of yellow and blue—a cherished possession—and thrust it into Tommy’s arms. He stared at her, but clutched the precious thing tight for fear of dropping it.

“Take it. You can give it as a wedding present to your wife when you have one. I want you to have it.”

He stammered, overwhelmed by her magnificent and unprecedented generosity. He could not accept the plaque. It was too priceless a gift.

“That’s why I give it to you, you silly young idiot,” she cried impatiently. “Do you think I’d give you a pair of

embroidered braces or a hymn-book? Take it and go."

What Tommy did then, nine hundred and ninety-nine young men out of a thousand would not have done. He held out his hand—"Rubbish," said Clementina; but she held out hers—he gripped it, swung her to him and gave her a good, full, sounding, honest kiss. Then, holding the thing of beauty against his heart he leaped up the stairs and disappeared, with an exultant "Good-bye," through the door.

A dark flush rose on the kissed spot on Clementina's cheek. Softness crept into her hard eyes. She looked at the vacant place on the wall where the cherished thing of beauty had hung. By some queer optical illusion it appeared even brighter than before.

Tommy, being a young man of energy and enthusiasm with modern notions as to the reckoning of time, rushed the Anthropologists, who were accustomed to reckon time by epochs instead of minutes, off their leisurely feet. His uncle had said words of protest at this indecent haste; "My dear Tommy, if you were more of a reflective human being and less of a whirlwind, it would frequently add to your peace and comfort." But Tommy triumphed. Within a very short period everything was settled, the formal letters had been exchanged, and Ephraim Quixtus found himself paying a visit, in a new character, to Clementina Wing.

She received him in her prim little drawing-room—as prim and old-maidish as Romney Place itself—a striking contrast to the chaotically equipped studio which, as Tommy declared, resembled nothing so much as a show-room after a bargain-sale. The furniture was the stiffest of Sheraton, the innocent colour engravings of Tomkins, Cipriani, and

Bartolozzi hung round the walls, and in a corner stood a spinning-wheel with a bunch of flax on the distaff. The room afforded Clementina perpetual grim amusement. Except when she received puzzled visitors she rarely sat in it from one year's end to the other.

"I haven't seen you since the Deluge, Ephraim," she said, as he bent over her hand in an old-fashioned un-English way. "How's prehistoric man getting on?"

"As well," said he, gravely, "as can be expected."

Ephraim Quixtus, Ph.D., was a tall gaunt man of forty, with a sallow complexion, raven black hair thinning at the temples and on the crown of his head, and great, mild, china-blue eyes. A reluctant moustache gave his face a certain lack of finish. Clementina's quick eye noted it at once. She screwed up her face and watched him.

"I could make a much more presentable thing of you if you were clean shaven," she said brusquely.

"I couldn't shave off my moustache."

"Why not?"

He started in alarm.

"I think the Society would prefer to have their President in the guise in which he presided over them."

"Umph!" said Clementina. She looked at him again, and with a touch of irony; "Perhaps it's just as well. Sit down."

"Thank you," said Quixtus, seating himself on one of the stiff Sheraton chairs. And then, courteously; "You have travelled far since we last met, Clementina. You are famous. I wonder what it feels like to be a celebrity."

She shrugged her shoulders. "In my case it feels like leading apes in hell. By the way, when did I last see you?"

“It was at poor Angela’s funeral, five years ago.”

“So it was,” said Clementina.

There was a short silence. Angela was his dead wife and her distant relation.

“What has become of Will Hammersley?” she asked suddenly. “He has given up writing to me.”

“Still in Shanghai, I think. He went out, you know, to take over the China branch of his firm—just before Angela’s death, wasn’t it? It’s a couple of years or more since I have heard from him.”

“That’s strange; he was an intimate friend of yours,” said Clementina.

“The only intimate friend I’ve ever had in my life. We were at school and at Cambridge together. Somehow, although I have many acquaintances and, so to speak, friends, yet I’ve never formed the intimacies that most men have. I suppose,” he added, with a sweet smile, “it’s because I’m rather a dry stick.”

“You’re ten years older than your age,” said Clementina, frankly. “You want shaking up. It’s a pity Will Hammersley isn’t here. He used to do you a lot of good.”

“I’m glad you think so much of Hammersley,” said Quixtus.

“I don’t think much of most people, do I?” she said. “But Hammersley was a friend in need. He was to me, at any rate.”

“Are you still fond of Sterne?” he asked. “I think you are the only woman who ever was.”

She nodded. “Why do you ask?”

“I was thinking,” he said, in his quiet, courtly way, “that we have many bonds of sympathy, after all; Angela, Hammersley, Sterne, and my scapegrace nephew, Tommy.”

“Tommy is a good boy,” said Clementina, “and he’ll learn to paint some day.”

“I must thank you for your very great kindness to him.”

“Bosh!” said Clementina.

“It’s a great thing for a young fellow—wild and impulsive like Tommy—to have a good friend in a woman older than himself.”

“If you think, my good man,” snapped Clementina, reverting to her ordinary manner, “that I look after his morals, you are very much mistaken. What has it got to do with me if he kisses models and takes them out to dinner in Soho?”

The lingering Eve in her resented the suggestion of a maternal attitude towards the boy. After all, she was not five-and-fifty; she was younger, five years younger than the stick of an uncle who was talking to her as if he had stepped out of the pages of a Sunday-school prize.

“He never tells me of the models,” replied Quixtus, “and I’m very glad he tells you. It shows there is no harm in it.”

“Let us talk sense,” said Clementina, “and not waste time. You’ve come to me to have your portrait painted. I’ve been looking at you. I think a half-length, sitting down, would be the best—unless you want to stand up in evening-dress behind a table, with presidential gold chains and badges of office and hammers and water-bottles——”

“Heaven forbid!” cried Quixtus, who was as modest a man as ever stepped. “What you suggest will quite do.”

“I suppose you will wear that frock-coat and turn-down collar? Don’t you ever wear a narrow black tie?”

“My dear Clementina,” he cried horrified, “I may not be the latest thing in dandyism, but I’ve no desire to look like a Scotch deacon in his Sunday clothes.”

“Vanity again,” said Clementina. “I could have got something much better out of you in a narrow black tie. Still, I daresay I’ll manage—though what your bone-digging friends want with a portrait of you at all for, I’m blest if I can understand.”

With which gracious remark she dismissed him, after having arranged a date for the first sitting.

“A poor creature,” muttered Clementina, when the door closed behind him.

The poor creature, however, walked smartly homewards through the murky November evening, perfectly contented with God and man—even with Clementina herself. In this well-ordered world, even the tongue of an eccentric woman must serve some divine purpose. He mused whimsically on the purpose. Well, at any rate, she belonged to a dear and regretted past, which without throwing an absolute glamour around Clementina still shed upon her its softening rays. His thoughts were peculiarly retrospective this evening. It was a Tuesday, and his Tuesday nights for some years had been devoted to a secret and sacred gathering of pale ghosts. His Tuesday nights were mysteries to all his friends. When pressed for the reason of this perennial weekly engagement, he would say vaguely; “It’s a club to which I belong.” But what was the nature of the club, what the grim and ghastly penalty if he skipped a meeting, those were questions which