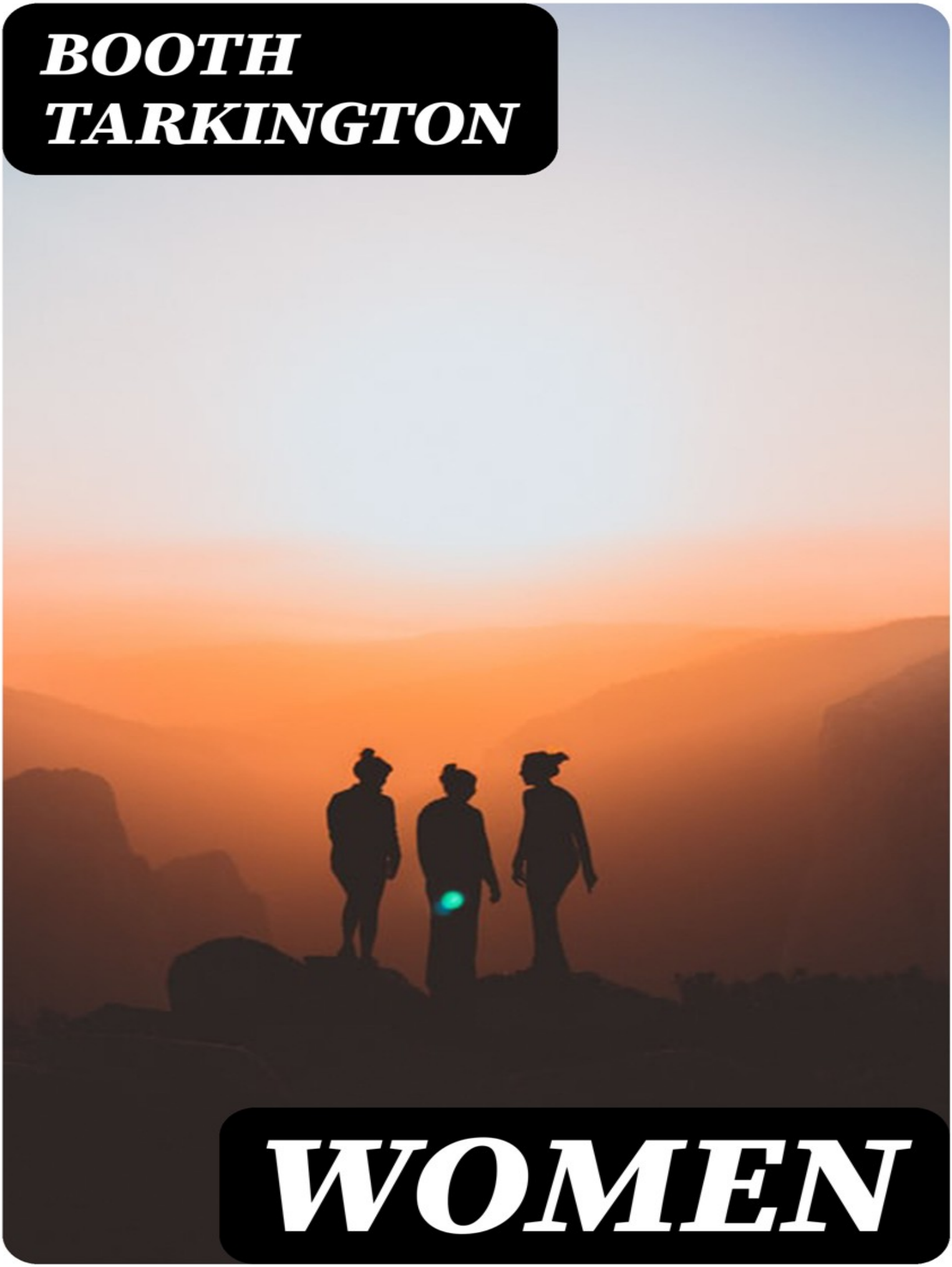
BOOTH TARKINGTON



WOMEN

Booth Tarkington

Women

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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PREAMBLE

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“BUT why not?” Mrs. Dodge said, leading the “Discussion” at the Woman’s Saturday Club after the reading of Mrs. Cromwell’s essay, “Women as Revealed in Some Phases of Modern Literature.” “Why shouldn’t something of the actual life of such women as ourselves be the subject of a book?” Mrs. Dodge inquired. “Mrs. Cromwell’s paper has pointed out to us that in a novel a study of women must have a central theme, must focus upon a central figure or ‘heroine,’ and must present her as a principal participant in a centralized conflict or drama of some sort, in relation to a limited group of other ‘characters.’ Now, so far as I can see, my own life has no such centralizations, and I’m pretty sure Mrs. Cromwell’s hasn’t, either, unless she is to be considered merely as a mother; but she has other important relations in life besides her relations to her three daughters, just as I have others besides that I bear to my one daughter. In fact, I can’t find any central theme in Mrs. Cromwell’s life or my own; I can’t find any centralized drama in her life or mine, and I doubt if many of you can find such things in yours. Our lives seem to be made up of apparently haphazard episodes, some meaningless, others important, and although we do live principally with our families and friends and neighbours, I find that people I hardly know have sometimes walked casually into my life, and influenced it, and then walked out of it as casually as they came in. All in all, I can’t see in our

actual lives the cohesion that Mrs. Cromwell says is the demand of art. It appears to me that this very demand might tend to the damage of realism, which I take to mean lifelikeness and to be the most important demand of all. So I say: Why shouldn't a book about women, or about a type of women, take for its subject some of the actual thoughts and doings of women like ourselves? Why should such a book be centralized and bound down to a single theme, a single conflict, a single heroine? The lives of most of us here consist principally of our thoughts and doings in relation to our children, our neighbours, and the people who casually walk into our lives and our children's and neighbours' lives and out again. It seems to me a book about us should be concerned with all of these almost as much as with ourselves."

"You haven't mentioned husbands," Mrs. Cromwell suggested. "Wouldn't they——"

"They should be included," Mrs. Dodge admitted. "But I would have husbands and suitors represented in their proper proportion; that is to say, only in the proportion that they affect *our* thoughts and doings. In challenging the rules for centralization that you have propounded, Mrs. Cromwell, I do not propose that all rules of whatever nature should be thrown over. One in particular I should hold most advisable."

"What rule is it?" a member of the club inquired, for at this point Mrs. Dodge paused and the expression of her mouth was somewhat grim.

"It is that a book about women should not be too long," Mrs. Dodge replied. "Especially if it should be by a man, he would be wise to use brevity as a means of concealing what

he doesn’t know. And besides,” she added, more leniently, “by brevity, he might hope to placate us a little. It might be his best form of apology.”

WOMEN

I
MRS. DODGE AND MRS. CROMWELL

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WE LEARNED in childhood that appearances are deceitful, and our subsequent scrambling about upon this whirling globe has convinced many of us that the most deceptive of all appearances are those of peace. The gentlest looking liquor upon the laboratory shelves was what removed the east wing of the Chemical Corporation's building on Christmas morning; it was the stillest Sunday noon of a drowsy August when, without even the courtesy of a little introductory sputtering, the gas works blew up; and both of these disturbances were thought to be peculiarly outrageous because of the previous sweet aspects that prevented any one from expecting trouble. Yet those aspects, like the flat calm of the summer of 1914, should have warned people of experience that outbreaks were impending.

What could offer to mortal eye a picture of more secure placidity than three smiling ladies walking homeward together after a club meeting? The particular three in mind, moreover, were in a visibly prosperous condition of life; for, although the afternoon was brightly cold, their furs afforded proof of expenditures with which any moderate woman would be satisfied, and their walk led them into the most luxurious stretch of the long thoroughfare that was called the handsome suburb's finest street. The three addressed

one another in the caressively amiable tones that so strikingly characterize the élite of their sex in converse; and their topic, which had been that of the club paper, was impersonal. In fact, it was more than impersonal, it was celestial. “Sweetness and Light: Essay. Mrs. Roderick Brooks Battle”—these were the words printed in the club’s year book beneath the date of that meeting, and Mrs. Roderick Brooks Battle was the youngest of the three placid ladies.

“You’re all so sweet to say such lovely things about it,” she said, as they walked slowly along. “I only wish I deserved them, but of course, as everyone must have guessed, it was all Mr. Battle. I don’t suppose I could write a single connected paragraph without his telling me how, and if he hadn’t kept helping me I just wouldn’t have been ready with any paper at all. Never in the world!”

“Oh, yes, you would, Amelia,” the elder of the two other ladies assured her. “For instance, dear, that beautiful thought about the ‘bravery of silence’—about how much nobler it is never to answer an attack—I thought it was the finest thought in the whole paper, and I’m sure that was your own and not your husband’s, Amelia.”

“Oh, no, Mrs. Cromwell,” Mrs. Battle returned, and although her manner was deferential to the older woman she seemed to be gently shocked;—her voice became a little protesting. “I could never in the world have experienced a thought like that just by myself. It was every bit Mr. Battle’s. In fact, he almost as much as dictated that whole paragraph to me, word for word. It seemed a shame for me to sit up there and appear to take the credit for it; but I knew, of course, that everybody who knows us the

least bit intimately would understand I could never write anything and it was all Mr. Battle."

"My dear, you'll never persuade us of it," the third lady said. "There were thoughts in your paper so characteristically feminine that no one but a woman could possibly——"

"Oh, but *he* could!" Mrs. Battle interrupted with an eagerness that was more than audible, for it showed itself vividly in her brightened eyes and the sudden glow of pink beneath them. "That's one of the most wonderful things about Mr. Battle: his intellect is just as feminine as it is masculine, Mrs. Dodge. He's absolutely—well, the only way I can express it is in his own words. Mr. Battle says no one can be great who isn't universal in his thinking. And you see that's where he excels so immensely;—Mr. Battle is absolutely universal in his thinking. It seems to me it's one of the great causes of Mr. Battle's success; he not only has the most powerful reasoning faculties I ever knew in any man but he's absolutely gifted with a woman's intuition." She paused to utter a little murmur of fond laughter, as if she herself had so long and helplessly marvelled over Mr. Battle that she tolerantly found other people's incredulous amazement at his prodigiousness natural but amusing. "You see, an intellect like Mr. Battle's can't be comprehended from knowing other men, Mrs. Dodge," she added. "Other men look at things simply in a masculine way, of course. Mr. Battle says that's only seeing half. Mr. Battle says women live on one hemisphere of a globe and men on the other, and neither can look round the circle, but from the stars the whole globe is seen—so that's why we should keep our eyes

among the stars! I wanted to work that thought into my paper, too. Isn’t it beautiful, the idea of keeping our eyes among the stars? But he said there wasn’t a logical opening for it, so I didn’t. Mr. Battle says we should never use a thought that doesn’t find its own logical place. That is, not in writing, he says. But don’t you think it’s wonderful—that idea of the globe and the two hemispheres and all?”

“Lovely,” Mrs. Dodge agreed. “Yet I don’t see how it proves Mr. Battle has a feminine mind.”

“Oh, but I don’t mean just that alone,” Mrs. Battle returned eagerly. “It’s the thousand and one things in my daily contact with him that prove it. Of course, I know how hard it must be for other women to understand. I suppose no one could hope to realize what Mr. Battle’s mind is like at all without the great privilege of being married to him.”

“And that,” Mrs. Cromwell remarked, “has been denied to so many of us, my dear!”

Mrs. Dodge laughed a little brusquely, but the consort of the marvellous Battle was herself so marvellous that she merely looked preoccupied. “I know,” she said, gravely, while Mrs. Dodge and Mrs. Cromwell stared with widening eyes, first at her and then at each other. “How often I’ve thought of it!” she went on, her own eyes fixed earnestly upon the distance where, in perspective, the two curbs of the long, straight street appeared to meet. “It grows stranger and stranger to me how such a miracle could have happened to a commonplace little woman like me! I never shall understand why I should have been the one selected.”

Thereupon, having arrived at her own gate, it was with this thought that she left them. From the gate a path of

mottled flagstones led through a smooth and snowy lawn to a house upon which the architect had chastely indulged his Latin pleasure in stucco and wrought iron; and as Mrs. Battle took her way over the flagstones she received from her two friends renewed congratulations upon her essay, as well as expressions of parting endearment; and she replied to these cheerfully; but all the while the glowing, serious eyes of the eager little brown-haired woman remained preoccupied with the miracle she had mentioned.

Mrs. Cromwell and Mrs. Dodge went on their way with some solemnity, and were silent until the closing door of the stucco house let them know they were out of earshot. Then Mrs. Cromwell, using a hushed voice, inquired: “Do you suppose she ever had a painting made of the Annunciation?”

“The Annunciation?” Mrs. Dodge did not follow her.

“Yes. When the miracle was announced to her that she should be the wife of Roderick Brooks Battle. Of course, she must have been forewarned by an angel that she was ‘the one selected.’ If Battle had just walked in and proposed to her it would have been too much for her!”

“I know one thing,” Mrs. Dodge said, emphatically. “I’ve stood just about as much of her everlasting ‘Mr. Battle says’ as I intend to! You can’t go anywhere and get away from it; you can hear it over all the chatter at a dinner; you can hear it over fifty women gabbing at a tea—‘Mr. Battle says this,’ ‘Mr. Battle says that,’ ‘Mr. Battle says this *and* that’! When Belloni was singing at the Fortnightly Afternoon Music last week you could hear her ‘Mr. Battle says’ to all the women around her, even during that loud Puccini suite, and she

treed Belloni on his way out, after the concert, to tell him Mr. Battle's theory of music. She hadn't listened to a note the man sang, and Belloni understands about two words of English, but Amelia kept right on Mr. Battle-says-ing him for half an hour! For my part, I've had all I can stand of it, and I'm about ready to do something about it!"

"I don't see just what one could do," Mrs. Cromwell said, laughing vaguely.

"*I* do!" her companion returned. Then both were silent for a few thoughtful moments and wore the air of people who have introduced a subject upon which they are not yet quite warm enough to speak plainly. Mrs. Cromwell evidently decided to slide away from it, for the time being, at least. "I don't think Amelia's looking well," she said. "She's rather lost her looks these last few years, I'm afraid. She seems pretty worn and thin to me;—she's getting a kind of skimpy look."

"What else could you expect? She's made herself the man's slave ever since they were married. She was his valet, his cook, and his washerwoman night and day for years. I wonder how many times actually and literally she's blacked his boots for him! How could you expect her *not* to get worn out and skimpy-looking?"

"Oh, I know," Mrs. Cromwell admitted;—"but all that was in their struggling days, and she certainly doesn't need to do such things now. I hear he has twenty or thirty houses to build this year, and just lately an immense contract for two new office buildings. Besides, he's generous with her; she dresses well enough nowadays."

“Yes,” Mrs. Dodge said, grimly. “They’d both see to that for *his* credit; but if he comes in with wet feet you needn’t tell me she doesn’t get down on her knees before him and take off his shoes herself. I know her! Yes, and I know him, too! Rich or poor, she’d be his valet and errand girl just the same as she always was.”

“Perhaps,” said Mrs. Cromwell. “But it seems to me her most important office for him is the one she’s just been filling.”

“Press agent? I should say so! She may stop blacking his boots, but she’ll never stop that. It’s just why she makes me so confounded tired, too! She thinks she’s the only woman that ever got married!”

“Amelia *is* rather that way,” the other said, musingly. “She certainly never seems to realize that any of the rest of us have husbands of our own.”

“ ‘Mr. Battle can’t be comprehended from knowing other men!’ ” Here Mrs. Dodge somewhat bitterly mimicked the unfortunate Amelia’s eager voice. “ ‘Other men look at things in simply a masculine way!’ ‘I know how hard it must be for other women to understand a god like my husband just from knowing their own poor little imitation husbands!’ ”

“Oh, no,” Mrs. Cromwell protested. “She didn’t quite say that.”

“But isn’t it what she meant? Isn’t it exactly what she felt?”

“Well—perhaps.”

“It does make me tired!” Mrs. Dodge said, vigorously, and with the repetition she began to be more than vigorous. Under the spell of that rancour which increases in people

when they mull over their injuries, she began to be indignant. “For one thing, outside of the shamelessness of it, some of the rest of us could just possibly find a few enthusiastic things to say of our husbands if we didn’t have some regard for not boring one another to death! I’ve got a fairly good husband of my own I’d like to mention once in a while, but——”

“But, of course, you’ll never get the chance,” Mrs. Cromwell interrupted. “Not if Amelia’s in your neighbourhood when you attempt it.”

“What I *can’t* understand, though,” Mrs. Dodge went on, “is her never having the slightest suspicion what a nuisance it is. I should think the man himself would stop her.”

But Mrs. Cromwell laughed and shook her head. “In the first place, of course, he agrees with her. He thinks Amelia’s just stating facts—facts that ought to be known. In the second, don’t you suppose he understands how useful her press-agenting is to him?”

“But it isn’t. It makes us all sick of him.”

“Oh, it may have that effect on you and me, Lydia, but I really wonder——” Mrs. Cromwell paused, frowning seriously, then continued: “Of course, he’d never take such a view of it. He instinctively knows it’s useful, but he’d never take the view of it that——”

“The view of it that what?” Mrs. Dodge inquired, as her friend paused again.

“Why, that it may be actually the principal reason for his success. When he left the firm that employed him as a draughtsman and started out for himself, with not a thing coming in for him to do, don’t you remember that even then

everybody had the impression, somehow, that he was a genius and going to do wonders when the chance came? How do you suppose that got to be the general impression except through Amelia's touting it about? And then, when he did put up a few little houses, don't you remember hearing it said that they represented the first real Architecture with a capital 'A' ever seen in the whole city? Now, almost nobody really *knows* anything about architecture, though we all *talk* about it as glibly as if we did, and pretty soon—don't you remember?—we were all raving over those little houses of Roderick Brooks Battle's. What do you suppose made us rave? We must have been wrong, because Amelia says now that Battle thinks those first houses of his were 'rather bad'—he's 'grown so tremendously in his art.' Well, since they were bad, what except Amelia made us think then that they were superb? And look at what's happened to Battle these last few years. In spite of Amelia's boring us to death about him, isn't it true that there's somehow a wide impression that he's a great man? Of course there is!"

"And yet," Mrs. Dodge interposed, "he's not done anything that proves it. Battle's a good architect, certainly, but there are others as good, and he's not a bit better as an architect than Mr. Cromwell is as a lawyer or than my husband is as a consulting engineer."

"Not a bit," Mrs. Cromwell echoed, carrying on the thought she had been following. "But Mr. Dodge and Mr. Cromwell haven't had anybody to go about, day after day for years, proclaiming them and building up a legend about

them. Nobody has any idea that they're great men, poor things! Don't you see where that puts you and me, Lydia?"

"No, I don't."

"My dear!" Mrs. Cromwell exclaimed. "Why, even Battle himself didn't know that he was a great man until he married Amelia and *she* believed he was—and *told* him he was—and started her long career of going about making everybody else sort of believe it, too."

"I think it's simply her own form of egoism," said the emphatic Mrs. Dodge. "She'd have done exactly the same whoever she married."

"Precisely! It's Amelia's way of being in love—she's a born idolizer. But you didn't answer me when I asked you where that puts *us*."

"You and me?" Mrs. Dodge inquired, frowning.

"Don't you see, if she'd married my husband, for instance, instead of Battle, everybody'd be having the impression by this time that Mr. Cromwell is a great man? He'd have felt that way himself, too, and I'm afraid it would give him a great deal of pleasure. Haven't we failed as wives when we see what Amelia's done for *her* husband?"

"What an idea!" The two ladies had been walking slowly as they talked;—now they came to a halt at their parting place before Mrs. Cromwell's house, which was an important, even imposing, structure of the type called Georgian, and in handsome conventional solidity not unlike the lady who lived in it. Across the broad street was a newer house, one just finished, a pinkish stucco interpretation of Mediterranean gaiety, and so fresh of colour that it seemed rather a showpiece, not yet actually inhabited though

glamoured with brocaded curtains and transplanted arbor vitæ into the theatrical semblance of a dwelling in use. Mrs. Dodge glanced across at it with an expression of disfavour. “I call the whole thing perfectly disgusting!” she said.

II
A LADY ACROSS THE STREET

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MRS. CROMWELL also looked at the new house; then she shook her head. “It’s painful, rather,” she said, and evidently referred to something more than the house itself.

“Outright disgusting!” her friend insisted. “I suppose he’s there as much as ever?”

“Oh, yes. Rather more.”

“Well, I’ll say one thing,” Mrs. Dodge declared; “Amelia Battle won’t get any sympathy from me!”

“Sympathy? My dear, you don’t suppose she dreams she needs *sympathy*! Doesn’t she show the rest of us every day how she pities us because we’re not married to Roderick Brooks Battle?”

“Yes, and that’s what makes me so furious. But she *will* need sympathy,” Mrs. Dodge persisted, with a dark glance at the new house across the street. “She will when she knows about that!”

“But maybe she’ll never know.”

“What!” Mrs. Dodge laughed scornfully. “My dear, when a woman builds a man into a god he’s going to assume the privileges of a god.”

“And behave like the devil?”

“Just that,” Mrs. Dodge returned, grimly. “Especially when his idolater has burnt up her youth on his altar and her friends begin to notice she’s getting a skimpy look. What chance has a skimpy-looking slave against a glittering

widow rich enough to build a new house every time she wants to have tête-à-têtes with a godlike architect?”

“But she’s only built one,” Mrs. Cromwell cried, protesting.

“So far!” her pessimistic companion said; then laughed at her own extravagance, and became serious again. “I think Amelia ought to know.”

“Oh, no!”

“Yes, she ought,” Mrs. Dodge insisted. “In the first place, she ought to be saved from making herself so horribly ridiculous. Of course, she’s always been ridiculous; but the way she raves about him when *he’s* raving about another woman—why, it’s *too* ridiculous! In the second place, if she knew something about the Mrs. Sylvester affair now it might help her to bear a terrific jolt later.”

“What terrific jolt, Lydia?”

“If he leaves her,” Mrs. Dodge said, gravely. “If Mrs. Sylvester decides to make him a permanent fixture. Men do these things nowadays, you know.”

“Yes, I know they do.” Mrs. Cromwell looked as serious as her friend did, though her seriousness was more sympathetically a troubled one than Mrs. Dodge’s. “Poor Amelia! To wear her youth out making a man into such a brilliant figure that a woman of the Sylvester type might consider him worth while taking away from her——”

“*Look!*” Mrs. Dodge interrupted in a thrilled voice.

A balustraded stone terrace crossed the façade of the new house, and two people emerged from a green door and appeared upon the terrace. One was a man whose youthful figure made a pleasing accompaniment to a fine and

scholarly head;—he produced, moreover, an impression of success and distinction obvious to the first glance of a stranger, though what was most of all obvious about him at the present moment was his devoted, even tender, attention to the woman at his side. She was a tall and graceful laughing creature, so sparklingly pretty as to approach the contours and colours of a Beauty. Her rippling hair glimmered with a Venetian ruddiness, and the blue of her twinkling eyes was so vivid that a little flash of it shot clear across the street and was perceptible to the two observant women as brightest azure.

Upon her lovely head she had a little sable hat, and, over a dress of which only a bit of gray silk could be glimpsed at throat and ankle, she wore a sable coat of the kind and dimensions staggering to moderate millionaires. She had the happy and triumphant look of a woman confident through experience that no slightest wish of hers would ever be denied by anybody, herself distinctly included; and, all in all, she was dazzling, spoiled, charming, and fearless.

Certainly she had no fear of the two observant women, neither of their opinion nor of what she might give them cause to tell;—that sparkle of azure she sent across the intervening street was so carelessly amused it was derisive, like the half nod to them with which she accompanied it. She and her companion walked closely together, absorbed in what they were saying, her hand upon his arm; and, when they came to the terrace steps, where a closed foreign car waited, with a handsome young chauffeur at the wheel and a twin of him at attention beside the door, she did a thing

that Mrs. Dodge and Mrs. Cromwell took to be final and decisive.

Her companion had evidently offered some light pleasantry or witticism at which she took humorous offense, for she removed her white-gloved hand from his arm and struck him several times playfully upon the shoulder—but with the last blow allowed her hand to remain where it was; and, although she might have implied that it was to aid her movement into the car, the white fingers could still be seen remaining upon the shoulder of the man's brown overcoat as he, moving instantly after her, took his seat beside her in the gray velvet interior. Thus, what appeared to be a playful gesture protracted itself into a caress, and a caress of no great novelty to the participants.

At least, it was so interpreted across the street, where Mrs. Dodge gave utterance to a sound vocal but incoherent, and Mrs. Cromwell said "Oh, *my*!" in a husky whisper. The French car glided by them, passing them as they openly stared at it, or indeed glared at it, and a moment later it was far down the street, leaving them to turn their glares upon each other.

"That settles it," Mrs. Dodge gasped. "It ought to have been a gondola."

"A gondola?"

"A Doge's wife carrying on with a fool poet or something; —she always has that air to me. What a comedy!"

Mrs. Cromwell shook her head; her expression was of grief and shock. "It's tragedy, Lydia."

"Just as you choose to look at it. The practical point of view is that it's going to happen to Amelia, and pretty soon,

too! Some day before long that man's going to walk in and tell her she's got to step aside and let him marry somebody else. Doesn't what we just saw prove it? That woman did it deliberately in our faces, and she knows we're friends of his wife's. She deliberately showed us she didn't care what we saw. And as for him——"

"He didn't see us, I think," Mrs. Cromwell murmured.

"*See* us? He wouldn't have seen Amelia herself if she'd been with us—and she might have been! That's why I say she ought to know."

"Oh, I don't think I'd like to——"

"*Somebody* ought to," Mrs. Dodge said, firmly. "Somebody ought to tell her, and right away, at that."

"Oh, but——"

"Oughtn't she to be given the chance to prepare herself for what's coming to her?" Mrs. Dodge asked, testily. "She's made that man think he's Napoleon, and so she's going to get what Napoleon's wife got. I think she ought to be warned at once, and a true friend would see to it."

In genuine distress, Mrs. Cromwell shrank from the idea. "Oh, but I could never——"

"Somebody's *got* to," Mrs. Dodge insisted, implacably. "If you won't, then somebody else."

"Oh, but you—you wouldn't take such a responsibility, would you? You—you *wouldn't*, would you, Lydia?"

The severe matron, Lydia Dodge, thus flutteringly questioned, looked more severe than ever. "I shouldn't care to take such a burden on my shoulders," she said. "Looking after my own burdens is quite enough for me, and it's time I was on my way to them." She moved in departure, but

when she had gone a little way, spoke over her shoulder, "*Some*body's got to, though! Good-bye."

Mrs. Cromwell, murmuring a response, entered her own domain and walked slowly up the wide brick path; then halted, turned irresolutely, and glanced to where her friend marched northward upon the pavement. To Mrs. Cromwell the outlines of Mrs. Dodge, thus firmly moving on, expressed something formidable and imminent. "But, Lydia ——" the hesitant lady said, impulsively, though she knew that Lydia was already too distant to hear her. Mrs. Cromwell took an uncertain step or two, as if to follow and remonstrate, but paused, turned again, and went slowly into her house.

A kind-hearted soul, and in a state of sympathetic distress for Amelia Battle, she was beset by compassion and perplexity during what remained of the afternoon; and her husband and daughters found her so preoccupied at the dinner-table that they accused her of concealing a headache. But by this time what she concealed was an acute anxiety; she feared that Lydia's sense of duty might lead to action, and that the action might be precipitate and destructive. For Mrs. Cromwell knew well enough that Amelia's slavery was Amelia's paradise—the only paradise Amelia knew how to build for herself—and paradises are, of all structures, the most perilously fragile.

Mrs. Cromwell was the more fearful because, being a woman, she understood that more than a sense of duty would impel Lydia to action: Lydia herself might interpret her action as the prompting of duty, but the vital incentive was likely to be something much more human; for within the

race is a profound willingness to see a proud head lowered, particularly if that head be one that has displayed its pride. Amelia had displayed hers too long and too gallingly for Lydia's patience;—Lydia had "really *meant* it," Mrs. Cromwell thought, recalling the fierceness of Mrs. Dodge's "I've had all I can stand of it!" that afternoon. A sense of duty with gall behind it is indeed to be feared; and the end of Mrs. Cromwell's anxieties was the conclusion that Amelia's paradise of slavery was more imminently threatened by the virtuous Lydia than by that gorgeous pagan, Mrs. Sylvester.

III
PERVERSITY OF A TELEPHONE

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THE troubled lady began to wish devoutly that the sight of Mrs. Sylvester caressing Mr. Battle had not shocked her into a fluttering and indecisive state of mind;—she should have discussed the event more calmly with Lydia; should have argued against anything precipitate;—and so, as soon as she could, after her preoccupied dinner, she went to the telephone and gave Mrs. Dodge's number.

Mr. and Mrs. Dodge were dining in town, she was informed; they were going to the theatre afterward and were not expected to return until midnight. This blank wall at once increased Mrs. Cromwell's inward disturbance, for she was a woman readily tortured by her imagination; and in her mind she began to design terrible pictures of what might now be happening in the house of the Battles. Until she went to the telephone she thought it unlikely that Lydia had acted with such promptness; but after receiving through the instrument the information that no information was to be had for the present, Mrs. Cromwell became certain that Mrs. Dodge had already destroyed Amelia's peace of mind.

She went away from the telephone, then came back to it, and again sat before the little table that bore it; but she did not at once put its miraculous powers into operation. Instead, she sat staring at it, afraid to employ it, while her imaginings became more piteous and more horrifying. Amelia had no talk except "Mr. Battle says"; she had no

thought except “Mr. Battle thinks”; she had no life at all except as part of her husband’s life; and if that were taken away from her, what was left? She had made no existence whatever of her own and for herself, and if brought to believe that she had lost him, she was annihilated.

If the great Battle merely died, Amelia could live on, as widows of the illustrious sometimes do, to be his monument continually reinscribed with mourning tributes; but if a Venetian beauty carried him off in a gondola, Amelia would be so extinct that the act of self-destruction might well be thought gratuitous;—and yet Mrs. Cromwell’s imagination pictured Amelia in the grisly details of its commission by all the usual processes. She saw Amelia drown herself variously; saw her with a razor, with a pistol, with a rope, with poison, with a hat-pin.

Naturally, it became impossible to endure such pictures, and Mrs. Cromwell tremulously picked up the telephone, paused before releasing the curved nickel prong, but did release it, and when a woman’s voice addressed her, “What number, please?” she returned the breathless inquiry: “Is that you, Amelia?” Then she apologized, pronounced a number, and was presently greeted by the response: “Mr. Roderick Battle’s residence. Who is it, please?”

“Mrs. Cromwell. May I speak to Mrs. Battle?”

“I think so, ma’am.”

In the interval of silence Mrs. Cromwell muttered, “I *think* so” to herself. The maid wasn’t certain;—that was bad; for it might indicate a state of prostration.

“Yes?” said the little voice in the telephone. “Is it Mrs. Cromwell?”

Mrs. Cromwell with a great effort assumed her most smiling and reassuring expression. “Amelia? Is it you, Amelia?”

“Yes.”

“I just wanted to tell you again what a lovely impression your essay made on me, dear. I’ve been thinking of it ever since, and I felt you might like to know it.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Cromwell.”

“Lydia Dodge and I kept on talking about it after you left us this afternoon,” Mrs. Cromwell continued, beaming fondly upon the air above the telephone. “We both said we thought it was the best paper ever read at the club. I—I just wondered if—if Lydia called you up to tell you so, too. Did she?”

“No. No, she didn’t call me up.”

“Oh, didn’t she? I just thought she might have because she was so enthusiastic.”

“No. She didn’t.”

Mrs. Cromwell listened intently, seeking to detect emotion that might indicate Amelia’s state of mind, but Amelia’s voice revealed nothing whatever. It was one of those voices obscured and dwindled by the telephone into dry little metallic sounds; language was communicated, but nothing more, and a telegram from her would have conveyed as much personal revelation. “No, Mrs. Dodge didn’t call me up,” she said again.

Mrs. Cromwell offered some manifestations of mirth, though she intended them to express a tender cordiality rather than amusement; and the facial sweetness with which she was favouring the air before her became less

strained; a strong sense of relief was easing her. “Well, I just thought Lydia *might*, you know,” she said, continuing to ripple her gentle laughter into the mouthpiece. “She was so enthusiastic, I just thought——”

“No, she didn’t call me up,” the small voice in the telephone interrupted.

“Well, I’m gl——” But Mrs. Cromwell checked herself sharply, having begun too impulsively. “I hope I’m not keeping you from anything you were doing,” she said hastily, to change the subject.

“No, I’m all alone. Mr. Battle is spending the evening with Mrs. Sylvester.”

“What!” Mrs. Cromwell exclaimed, and her almost convivial expression disappeared instantly; her face became a sculpture of features only. “He is?”

“Yes. He’s finishing the interior of her new house. With important clients like that he always interprets them into their houses you know. He makes a study of their personalities.”

“I—see!” Mrs. Cromwell said. Then, recovering herself, she was able to nod pleasantly and beam again, though now her beaming was rigidly automatic. “Well, I mustn’t keep you. I just wanted to tell you again how immensely we all admired your beautiful essay, and I thought possibly Lydia might have called you up to say so, too, because she fairly raved over it when we were——”

“No.” The metallic small voice said; and it informed her for the fourth time: “She didn’t call me up.” Then it added: “She came here.”

“No!” Mrs. Cromwell cried.