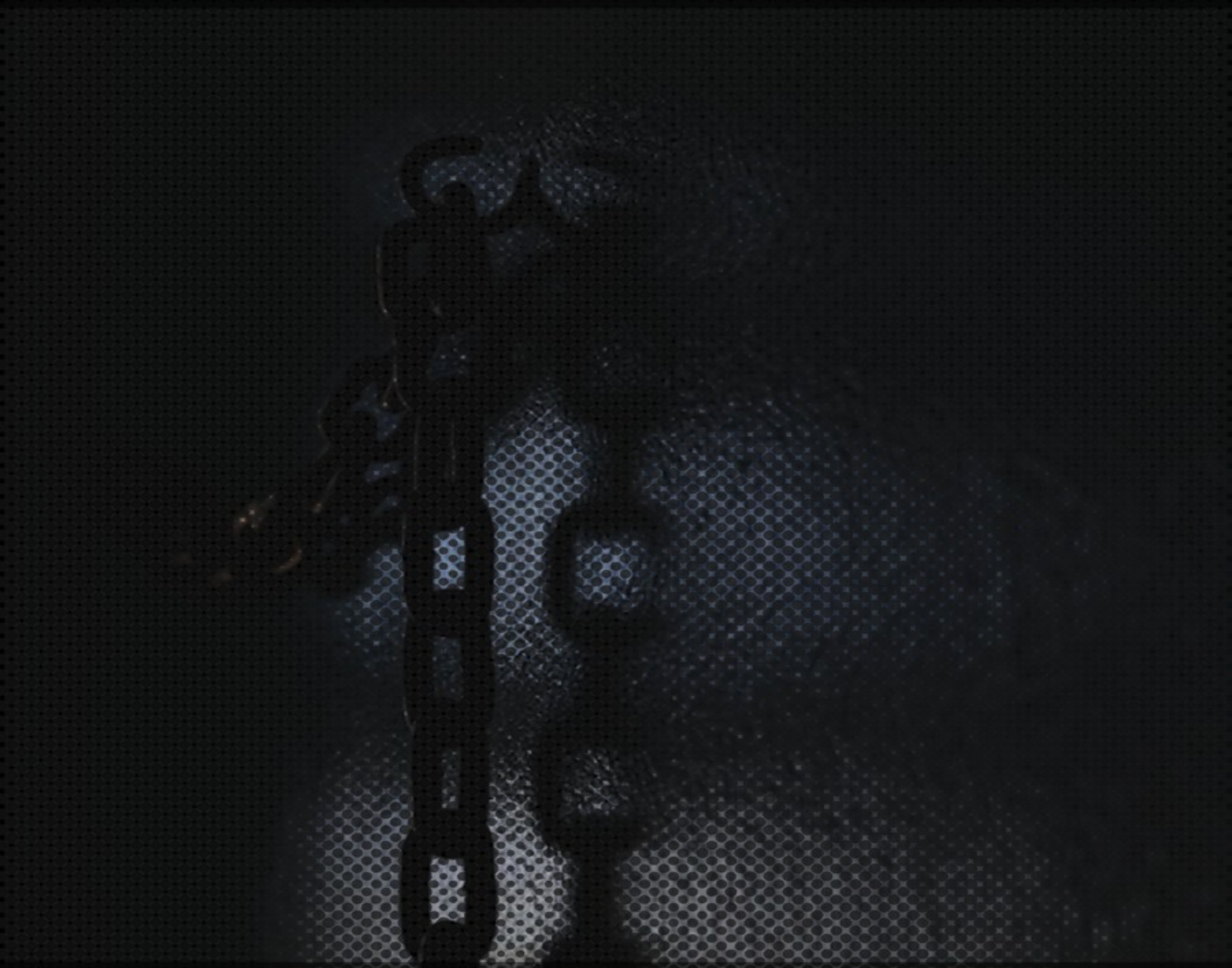
Allen Upward



The Slaves of Society

Allen Upward

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A Comedy in Covers

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SCENE I
A MOTHER'S CARES

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"AFTER all," sighed the marchioness, as she conveyed a three-cornered piece of muffin from the silver chafing-dish to her mouth, and nibbled delicately at one of the corners —"after all, what are we but slaves of society?"

Mr. Despencer extended a hand almost as white and slender as the marchioness's own, and abstracted a small cube of sugar from the porcelain basin, of the thinness and transparency of a sea-shell, on the marchioness's silver tray, while he meditated a becoming response.

"Yes," he exclaimed, giving his head a slow, mournful movement from side to side, "you are right. We are no better off than prisoners on the treadmill. Even you are but a bird of paradise held captive in a gilded cage."

The bird of paradise removed the piece of muffin from its beak to turn a pair of bright, steel-blue eyes on the speaker, gazing at him for some moments as though in doubt whether to accept this beautiful sentiment as a tribute or to rebuke it as a familiarity.

The cage so feelingly referred to was one of a set of drawing-rooms on the first floor of a mansion in Berkeley Square—that is to say, in the heart of that restricted area within which society requires its bond-servants to reside during the spring and early summer. The gilding consisted in a mural decoration of the very latest and most artistic design, representing a number of Japanese dragons going

through a kind of dragon drill, apparently adapted to develop their tail muscles according to the system of Mr. Sandow; in curtains of lemon-colored silk on each side of the window and other curtains of lemon-colored plush across the doorways; in a carpet of that rich but chaotic pattern which has been compared to the poetical style of the late Robert Montgomery, and in a thicket of fantastic and inconvenient chairs, of china-laden cabinets and palms in Satsuma jars, which would have rendered it extremely hazardous for the gymnastic dragons to have come down from the walls and transferred their exercises to the floor of the apartment.

The inhabitant of this dungeon was a handsome young woman of forty, or possibly forty-five, with the fresh complexion and vivacious expression of a girl, united with a certain massiveness of outline, the inseparable distinction of the British matron. Just at this moment, moreover, her features were hardened into that business-like aspect which the British matron assumes when she is engaged in doing that duty which England expects of her no less than of its sea-faring population.

Her companion looked even younger than the marchioness. A rather pale face, set off by a carefully cultivated black mustache, gave him that air of concealed wickedness which women find so interesting. His attire was a little too elegant to be in perfect taste. His bow was tied with an artistic grace repugnant to the feelings of an English gentleman. He was a typical specimen of that class of man whom men instinctively taboo and women instinctively confide in; who are blackballed in the best clubs and invited

to all the best country-houses, who have no male friends, and are on intimate terms with half our peeresses. Sometimes these men end by getting found out, and sometimes they marry a dowager countess with money—and a temper. As yet neither fate had overtaken Mr. Despencer.

The marchioness decided that her companion had been familiar.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” she said, with some sharpness. “I sent for you because I want your assistance.”

Despencer meekly submitted to the reproof.

“You know I am always at your disposal,” he murmured.

The marchioness glanced at him with a questioning air, much as King John may be supposed to have glanced at Hubert before proceeding to introduce the subject of Prince Arthur’s eyes.

“They tell me you are horribly wicked,” she remarked, in the tone of one who pays a distinguished compliment, “so I feel I can rely on you.”

“In that case I must positively ask you to go into another room,” returned Despencer, with his best smile. “In your presence I find my better instincts overpower me.”

The marchioness leaned back in her chair, and half closed her eyes with an expression of well-bred fatigue.

“Please don’t begin to say clever things. I want to talk sensibly.” She reopened her eyes. “You see, I can’t speak to the marquis because—well, he is rather old-fashioned in some of his ideas; so I have to fall back on you.”

Despencer slightly shrugged his shoulders.

“Lord Severn is certainly a trifle out of date. He belongs to the solid-tire period.”

“Exactly!” exclaimed the marchioness, with some eagerness. The next moment she recollected herself and frowned. Even the fireside cat will sometimes protrude its claws from under their velvet caps, and the marchioness was not quite sure that she had not felt a scratch. She frowned beautifully—the marchioness’s frown was celebrated. Then she observed: “Though I think it is extremely impertinent of you to say so. Please to remember that the marquis is my husband.”

“Ah! to be sure he is. I apologize. It is so difficult to keep in mind these legal distinctions.”

This time the marchioness felt certain she had been scratched. She glanced furtively at her companion, who preserved the composure of entire innocence as he set down his empty teacup on a small ebony stool, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and made himself more at ease by drawing back into his chair and crossing his superbly trousered legs. After a little pause, she asked suddenly:

“You know Mr. Hammond?”

“No.” The word was spoken with a touch of disdain.

“Not know Mr. Hammond! Why, I thought Hammond’s ales were drunk in all the clubs?”

“It doesn’t follow that you know a man because you drink his beer. But I have heard of him. Isn’t he rather an outsider?”

The marchioness looked indignant.

“He is run after by all the best people,” she remonstrated.

“Yes, but is he worth it?” returned Despencer.

“He is worth two millions,” retorted the marchioness.

Despencer sat up in his chair and glanced at her.

“Rather a loud kind of man, they tell me,” he observed.

“They tell me it is the thing to be loud now,” said his companion.

“The sort of man that takes ballet-girls to Richmond?”

“The sort of man that every mother in England would welcome as a son-in-law.”

Despencer smiled compassionately and leaned back in his chair again.

“Oh, quite so. There could be no possible objection to him as a son-in-law. I thought you meant as an acquaintance.”

“Don’t be so insolent,” said the marchioness; “but listen. A man like that ought to marry, and to marry well. If he were to fall into the clutches of some vulgar adventuress, I should regard it as a misfortune for society.”

“This is very noble of you,” murmured her companion.

She went on: “We are all so wretchedly poor in society now that we can’t afford to lose two millions. Besides, with his money and a seat in Parliament, they are sure to make him a peer.”

“I should think that very likely. The House of Lords is the one club in London where you can’t be blackballed.”

The marchioness condescended to smile.

“How wretchedly jealous and spiteful you are to-day! To come to the point. I have determined to do my duty to society by marrying Victoria to this man.”

“Congratulations! Let me see, ought I to call you a Spartan mother, or a Roman one? I really forget.”

The marchioness raised her hand in languid remonstrance.

“I begged you just now not to be clever. Unfortunately, there is an obstacle in the way.”

“Ah! I think I have heard something about a gallant cousin?” Despencer suggested.

“No, no. Victoria has far too much sense for that sort of thing. Besides, I don’t allow Gerald here now. No, the obstacle I mean is not a man, but a woman.”

“Ah! now I see it is going to be serious. Who is she?”

“Belle Yorke.”

“Belle Yorke!” Even Despencer’s careful training did not enable him to hide his stupefaction on hearing the name. “The celebrated Belle Yorke?” he asked, staring hard at the marchioness.

“The notorious Belle Yorke,” was the scornful answer. “I understand she is all the rage at the music-halls just now, and Mr. Hammond is among her admirers.”

“He is not the only one,” said Despencer, dryly.

“Why do you look like that?” demanded the marchioness. “Is there some mystery about Belle Yorke?”

“Oh no! Oh, dear no! Very little mystery, I should say,” and Despencer smiled.

The marchioness detected a history in the smile.

“Then there is some scandal?” she asked, eagerly, lowering her voice as people do when they do not wish to be overheard by their conscience. “I felt sure of it. I read in a

paper only the other day that all those people on the stage were alike. Ahem! Mr. Despencer—what do people *say*?"

Despencer gave another light shrug. He shrugged consummately. Despencer's shrugs were as celebrated as the marchioness's frowns.

"What do people generally say? It is the usual story: the usual little cottage at Hammersmith, the usual widowed mother, and the usual friend who pays the rent."

The marchioness's look of horror would have deceived experts.

"How utterly depraved and shocking! I never dreamed it was so bad as that! I almost wish you hadn't told me anything about it. Ahem! Mr. Despencer—what do they say is the friend's name?"

"Oh, really!" For a moment Despencer looked startled, then he smiled queerly. "That is not at all a nice question. I really don't think you ought to ask me that. I have such a dislike for scandal."

"So have I, except when I am listening to it in the interest of propriety," was the firm answer. "I insist on knowing the friend's name."

"Well, I have heard the lease is in the name of a Mr. Brown."

"Brown? Nonsense! That must be an assumed name."

"Very likely. In these cases I believe it is not usual to put the gentleman's real name in the lease."

"Then—then—Mr. Despencer, what is the real name?"

"Oh, marchioness!" Despencer drew back and shook his head reproachfully. "Really, you will bore me if you go on. I couldn't even guess the gentleman's real name. It might be

anything—Smith, or Jones, or President Kruger. It might be Hammond."

The marchioness shook her head with conviction.

"It isn't Hammond. I see you don't understand the situation." An ironical smile played for a moment on her companion's face. "No, if it were only idle folly, I should try to shut my eyes to it. But I haven't told you the worst. I hear that Mr. Hammond's admiration for this person is perfectly honorable."

"That does sound bad!" Despencer returned, gravely. "But I warned you against the man. I told you he was an outsider."

"You are not to be so flippant," said the marchioness, crossly. "Remember, you are talking to a mother whose child's happiness is at stake, and tell me what I am to do. You see, the poor man evidently believes that this girl is perfectly proper."

"Oh, he won't believe *that* long, you may be quite sure."

"The question is, who will undertake to open his eyes? It will really be doing him a kindness."

"Yes; but people are so ungrateful for kindness," objected the other. "Does this man Hammond know the marquis?" he asked, after a little hesitation.

"I expect so. But it is quite useless to think of him. He mustn't be brought into it."

Despencer smiled discreetly, as if he thought it might be rather difficult to keep the marquis out.

"Now, Mr. Despencer, you are my only hope," pursued the marchioness. "I appeal to you in the interests of society."

“You know I am your slave, marchioness. But it will be a difficult thing to manage. I almost think—”

Despencer broke off, and gazed thoughtfully at his companion.

“Well, what is it? What do you suggest?”

“I fancy that the best thing you can do, if you wish to bring matters to a head, is to have Miss Yorke here.”

“Mr. Despencer!”

“Why not? You see, it isn’t as though she weren’t quite respectable. There may be rumors about her, but then there are rumors about everybody. If we paid attention to rumors, we should all have to shut ourselves up like hermits; except you, there is not a woman in London whom I could visit. As long as nothing is *known* about her, you will be quite safe in having her here—of course, I mean professionally.”

The marchioness looked a little relieved.

“That doesn’t sound quite so bad,” she admitted. “I could have her at my concert, and let her sing something. I suppose she wouldn’t be altogether too frightfully improper?”

“Oh, dear no! you needn’t fear anything of that kind. Improper songs are quite gone out at the halls now. All Belle Yorke’s are about seamstresses who starve to death in the East End, and ragged boys who insist on taking off their jackets to wrap them round their little sisters on doorsteps in the snow. She makes people cry like anything. I have seen a stockbroker sobbing in the stalls of the Empire as if his heart would break when the ragged boy gets frozen to death, and the little sister wonders why he doesn’t answer her any more.”

“How sweetly touching! I shall insist on her singing that one here. I am sure I shall cry.” The marchioness lifted a small gold watch, the size of a bean, that swung from a brooch on her left shoulder. “Can you reach the bell? I must speak to Victoria before anybody comes.”

Despencer rose, and walked across the room to press a small malachite knob placed in the wall beside the fireplace, in accordance with that mysterious law of connection which every one must have observed, though we believe it has never been decided whether the bell is an acquired characteristic of the fireplace, or the fireplace an acquired characteristic of the bell.

A perfectly constructed machine, bearing considerable resemblance to a human being, attired in a chocolate-colored suit relieved with pink braid, opened the door, and glided noiselessly into the room, stopping with a slight jerk, as though the clockwork had run down, at about three paces inside.

“That is settled, then,” the marchioness was saying when the machine entered. “I shall get her here, and see what she is like.” Her ladyship turned to the machine. “Go and find Lady Victoria, and tell her I want to speak to her.”

The machine made an inclination, revolved on its castors, and noiselessly disappeared. The marchioness continued:

“I must have Mr. Hammond here as well, I suppose?”

“That is indispensable,” was the answer. “And, by the way, I think it will be better not to say anything beforehand to Lord Severn.”

The marchioness looked surprised.

“Why?” she demanded.

Despencer gave another shrug.

“I thought we agreed just now that he was a trifle Early Victorian in some of his ideas. He may have heard the rumors, you know.”

The marchioness had caught a step approaching. She raised her hand with a warning gesture.

“Not a word before Victoria!”

SCENE II
THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE

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WHILE the marchioness was confiding her maternal anxieties to Mr. Despencer's sympathetic ear, her daughter, Lady Victoria Mauleverer, was engaged in calmly defying her affectionate parent's behests.

She was now in the adjoining room; but the dust which yet lingered on her small and delicately made shoes of dark green kid would have revealed to the eye of one of those marvels of astuteness who formerly flourished, and, for aught we know, flourish still in the pages of the popular monthlies, that she had recently returned from out of doors. Her perfectly plain skirt, not quite long enough to conceal the shoes already mentioned, might have suggested further that the excursion had not been wholly unconnected with a bicycle. Further incriminating evidence was supplied by a dark cloth jacket, similar in design to that worn by the steward on board a yacht, but ornamented with a number of oxidized steel buttons of the size of crown pieces, and by a straw hat indistinguishable from those ordinarily worn by undergraduates.

In spite of these evidences of that removal of the barrier between the sexes which is the crowning triumph of our civilization, Lady Victoria was a most attractive girl. She was not quite so youthful as the marchioness, but that could hardly have been expected. At twenty, one is usually a hardened woman of the world; at forty, one begins to be an innocent little thing.