Sharp Ink

WILLIAM JOHN LOCKE

WHERE LOVE IS

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Chapter I—THE FIRST GLIMPSE

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HAVE you dined at Ranelagh lately?” asked Norma Hardacre.

“I have never been there in my life,” replied Jimmie Padgate. “In fact,” he added simply, “I am not quite sure whether I know where it is.”

“Yours is the happier state. It is one of the dullest spots in a dull world.”

“Then why on earth do people go there?”

The enquiry was so genuine that Miss Hardacre relaxed her expression of handsome boredom and laughed.

“Because we are all like the muttons of Panurge,” she said. “Where one goes, all go. Why are we here to-night?”

“To enjoy ourselves. How could one do otherwise in Mrs. Deering's house?”

“You have known her a long time, I believe,” remarked Norma, taking the opportunity of directing the conversation to a non-contentious topic.

“Since she was in short frocks. She is a cousin of King's—that's the man who took you down to dinner—”

She nodded. “I have known Mr. King many weary ages.”

“And he has never told me about you!”

“Why should he?”

She looked him full in the face, with the stony calm of the fashionable young woman accustomed to take excellent care of herself. Her companion met her stare in whimsical confusion. Even so ingenuous a being as Jimmie Padgate could not tell a girl he had met for the first time that she

was beautiful, adorable, and graced with divine qualities above all women, and that intimate acquaintance with her must be the startling glory of a lifetime.

“If I had known you for ages,” he replied prudently, “I should have mentioned your name to Morland King.”

“Are you such friends then?”

“Fast friends: we were at school together, and as I was a lonely little beggar I used to spend many of my holidays with his people. That is how I knew Mrs. Deering in short frocks.”

“It's odd, then, that I have n't met you about before,” said the girl, giving him a more scrutinising glance than she had hitherto troubled to bestow upon him. A second afterwards she felt that her remark might have been in the nature of an indiscretion, for her companion had not at all the air of a man moving in the smart world to which she belonged. His dress-suit was old and of lamentable cut; his shirt-cuffs were frayed; a little bone stud, threatening every moment to slip the button-hole, precariously secured his shirt-front. His thin, iron-grey hair was untidy; his moustache was ragged, innocent of wax or tongs or any of the adventitious aids to masculine adornment. His aspect gave the impression, if not of poverty, at least of narrow means and humble ways of life. Although he had sat next her at dinner, she had paid little attention to him, finding easier entertainment in her conversation with King on topics of common interest, than in possible argument with a strange man whom she heard discussing the functions of art and other such head-splitting matters with his right-hand neighbour. Indeed, her question about Ranelagh when she

found him by her side, later, in the drawing-room was practically the first she had addressed to him with any show of interest.

She hastened to repair her maladroit observation by adding before he could reply,—

“That is rather an imbecile thing to say considering the millions of people in London. But one is apt to talk in an imbecile manner after a twelve hours' day of hard racket in the season. Don't you think so? One's stock of ideas gets used up, like the air at the end of a dance.”

“Not if you keep your soul properly ventilated,” he answered.

The words were, perhaps, not so arresting as the manner in which they were uttered. Norma Hardacre was startled. A little shutter in the back of her mind seemed to have flashed open for an elusive second, and revealed a prospect wide, generous, alive with free-blowing airs. Then all was dark again before she could realise the vision. She was disconcerted, and in a much more feminine way than was habitual with her she glanced at him again. This time she lost sight of the poor, untidy garments, and found a sudden interest in the man's kind, careworn face, and his eyes, wonderfully blue and bright, set far apart in the head, that seemed to look out on the world with a man's courage and a child's confidence. She was uncomfortably conscious of being in contact with a personality widely different from that of her usual masculine associates. This her training and habit of mind caused her to resent; despising the faint spiritual shock, she took refuge in flippancy.

“I fear our Tobin tubes get choked up in London,” she said with a little laugh. “Even if they did n't they are wretched things, which create draughts; so anyway our souls are free from chills. Look at that woman over there talking to Captain Orton—every one knows he's paymaster-general. A breath of fresh air in Mrs. Chance's soul would give it rheumatic fever.”

The abominable slander falling cynically from young lips brought a look of disapproval into Jimmie Padgate's eyes.

“Why do you say such things?” he asked. “You know you don't believe them.”

“I do believe them,” she replied defiantly. “Why shouldn't one believe the bad things one hears of one's neighbours? It's a vastly more entertaining faith than belief in their virtues. Virtue—being its own reward—is deadly stale to one's friends and unprofitable to oneself.”

“Cynicism seems cheap to-day,” said Jimmie, with a smile that redeemed his words from impertinence. “Won't you give me something of yourself a little more worth having?”

Norma, who was leaning back in her chair fanning herself languidly, suddenly bent forward, with curious animation in her cold face.

“I don't know who you are or what you are,” she exclaimed. “Why should you want more than the ordinary futilities of after-dinner talk?”

“Because one has only to look at you,” he replied, “to see that it must be very easy to get. You have beauty inside as well as outside, and everybody owes what is beautiful and good in them to their fellow-creatures.”

“I don't see why. According to you, women ought to go about like mediaeval saints.”

“Every woman is a saint in the depths of her heart,” said Jimmie.

“You are an astonishing person,” replied Norma.

The conversation ended there, for Morland King came up with Constance Deering: he florid, good-looking, perfectly groomed and dressed, the type of the commonplace, well-fed, affluent Briton; she a pretty, fragile butterfly of a woman. Jimmie rose and was led off to another part of the room by his hostess. King dropped into the chair Jimmie had vacated.

“I see you have been sampling my friend Jimmie Padgate. What do you make of him?”

“I have just told him he was an astonishing person,” said Norma.

“Dear old Jimmie! He's the best fellow in the world,” said King, laughing. “A bit Bohemian and eccentric—artists generally are—”

“Oh, he's an artist?” inquired Norma.

“He just manages to make a living by it, poor old chap! He has never come off, somehow.”

“Another neglected genius?”

“I don't know about that,” replied Morland King in a matter-of-fact way, not detecting the sneer in the girl's tone. “I don't think he's a great swell—I'm no judge, you know. But he has had a bad time. Anyway, he always comes up smiling. The more he gets knocked the more cheerful he seems to grow. I never met any one like him. The most generous, simple-minded beggar living.”

“He must be wonderful to make you enthusiastic,” said Norma.

“Look at him now, talking to the Chance woman as if she were an angel of light.”

Norma glanced across the room and smiled contemptuously.

“She seems to like it. She's preening herself as if the wings were already grown. Connie,” she called to her hostess, who was passing by, “why have you hidden Mr. Padgate from me all this time?”

The butterfly lady laughed. “He is too precious. I can only afford to give my friends a peep at him now and then. I want to keep him all to myself.”

She fluttered away. Norma leaned back and hid a yawn with her fan; then, rousing herself with an effort, made conversation with her companion. Presently another man came up and King retired.

“How is it getting on?” whispered Mrs. Deering.

“Oh, steady,” he replied with his hands in his pockets.

“Lucky man!”

Morland King shrugged his shoulders. “The only thing against it is papa and mamma—chiefly mamma. A Gorgon of a woman!”

“You'll never get a wife to do you more credit than Norma. With that face I wonder she is n't a duchess by now. There *was* a duke once, but a fair American eagle came and swooped him off under Norma's nose. You see, she's not the sort of girl to give a man much encouragement.”

“Oh, I can't stand a woman who throws herself at your head,” said King, emphatically.

“What a funny way men have nowadays of confessing to the tender passion!” said Mrs. Deering, laughing.

“What would you have a fellow do?” he asked. “Spout blank verse about the stars and things, like a Shakespearean hero?”

“It would be prettier, anyhow.”

“Well, if you will have it, I'm about as hard hit as a man ever was—there!”

“I 'm delighted to hear it,” said his cousin.

A short while afterwards the dinner-party broke up.

“I don't know whether you care to mix with utter worldlings like us, Mr. Padgate,” said Norma, as she bade him good-bye, “but we are always in on Tuesdays.”

“I'll tie him hand and foot and bring him,” said King. “Good-night, old chap. I'm giving Miss Hardacre a lift home in the brougham.”

Before Jimmie could say yes or no, they were gone. He found himself the last.

“You are certainly not going for another hour, Jimmie,” said Mrs. Deering, as he came forward to take leave. “You will sit in that chair and smoke and tell me all about yourself and make me feel good and pretty.”

“Very well,” he assented, laughing. “Turn me out when it's time for me to go.”

It had been the customary formula between them for many years; for Jimmie Padgate lacked the sense of time and kept eccentric hours, and although Connie Deering delighted in her rare confidential chats with him, a woman with a heavy morrow of engagements must go to bed at a reasonable period of the night. She was a woman in the

middle thirties, a childless widow after a brief and almost forgotten married life, rich, pleasure-loving, in the inner circle of London society, and possessing the gayest, kindest, most charitable heart in the world. Her friendship with Norma Hardacre had been a thing of recent date.

She had cultivated it first on account of her cousin Morland King; she had ended in enthusiastic admiration.

“It is awfully good of you,” she said, when they were comfortably settled down to talk, “to waste your time with my unintelligent conversation.”

“There's no such thing as unintelligent conversation,” he declared.

“For a man like you there must be.”

“I could hold an intelligent conversation with a rabbit,” said Jimmie.

Norma Hardacre, on arriving home, entered the drawing-room, where her mother was reading a novel.

“Well?” said Mrs. Hardacre, looking up.

Norma threw her white silk cloak over the back of a chair.

“Connie sent her love to you.”

“Is that all you have to say?” asked her mother, sharply. She was a faded woman who had once possessed beauty of a cold, severe type; but the years had pinched and hardened her features, as they had pinched and hardened her heart. Her eyes were of that steel grey which the light of laughter seldom softens, and her smile was but a contraction of the muscles of the lips. Even this perfunctory tribute to politeness which had greeted Norma's entrance vanished at the second question.

“Morland King drove me home. What a difference there is between a private brougham and the beastly things we get from the livery-stable!”

“He has said nothing?”

“Of course not. I should have told you if he had.”

“Whose fault is it?”

Norma made a gesture of impatience. “My fault, if you like. I don't lay traps to catch him. I don't keep him dangling about me, and I don't flatter his vanities or make appeal to his senses, I suppose. I can't do it.”

“Don't behave like a fool, Norma,” said Mrs. Hardacre, rapping her book with a paper-knife. “You have got to marry him. You know you have. Your father and I are coming to the end of things. You ought to have married years ago, and when one thinks of the chances you have missed, it makes one mad. Here have we been pinching and scraping—”

“And borrowing and mortgaging,” Norma interjected.

“—to give you a brilliant position,” Mrs. Hardacre continued, unheeding the interruption, “and you cast all our efforts in our teeth. It's sheer ingratitude. Why you threw over Lord Wyniard I could never make out.”

“You seem to forget that, after all, there is a physical side to marriage,” said Norma, with a little shudder of disgust.

“I hate indelicacy in young girls,” said Mrs. Hardacre, freezingly. “One would think you had been brought up in a public house.”

“Then let us avoid indelicate subjects,” retorted Norma, opening the first book to her hand. “Where is papa?”

“Oh, how should I know?” said Mrs. Hardacre, irritably.

There was silence. Norma pretended to read, but her thoughts, away from the printed lines, caused her face to harden and her lips to curl scornfully. She had been used to such scenes with her mother ever since she had worn a long frock, and that was seven years ago, when she came out as a young beauty of eighteen. The story of financial embarrassment had lost its fine edge of persuasion by overtelling. She had almost ceased to believe in it, and the lingering grain of credence she put aside with the cynical feeling that it was no great concern of hers, so long as her usual round of life went on. She had two hundred a year of her own, all of which she spent in dress, so that in that one particular at least, if she chose to be economical, she was practically independent. Money for other wants was generally procurable, with or without unpleasant dunning of her parents. She lived very little in their home in Wiltshire, a beautiful and stately young woman of fashion being a decorative adjunct to smart country-house parties. In London, if she sighed for a more extensive establishment and a more luxurious style of living, it was what she always had done. She had hated the furnished house or flat and the livery-stable carriage ever since her first season. In the same way she had always considered the omission from her scheme of life of a yacht and a villa at Cannes and diamonds at discretion as a culpable oversight on the part of the Creator. But the sordid makeshift of existence to which she was condemned was not a matter of yesterday. In spite of the financial embarrassments of the maternal fable she had noticed no cutting down of customary expenditure. Her father still played the fool on the stock exchange, her

mother still attired herself elaborately and disdained to eat otherwise than *à la carte* at expensive restaurants, and she, Norma, went whithersoever the smart set drifted her. She had nothing to do with the vulgarity of financial embarrassments.

As to the question of marriage she was as fully determined as her mother that she should make a brilliant match. She had had two or three disappointments—the unwary duke, for instance. On the other hand she had refused eligibles like Lord Wyniard out of sheer caprice.

The only man who had given her a moment's stir of the pulses, a moment's thought of throwing her cap over the windmills, was a young soldier in the Indian Staff Corps. But he belonged to her second season, before she had really seen the world and grasped the inner meaning of life. Besides, her mother had almost beaten her; and in an encounter between the dragon who guarded the gold of her daughter's affections and the young Siegfried, it was the hero that barely escaped destruction; he fled to India for his life. Norma lost all sight and count of him for three years. Then she heard that he had married a schoolfellow of hers and was a month-old father. It was with feelings of peculiar satisfaction and sense of deliverance that she sent her congratulations to him, her love to his wife, and a set of baby shoes to the child. She had cultivated by this time a helpful sardonic humour.

There was now Morland King, within reasonable distance of a proposal. Her experience detected the signs, although little of sentimentality had passed between them. He was young, as marrying men go—a year or two under forty—of

good family, fairly good-looking, very well off, with a safe seat in Parliament being kept warm for him by a valetudinarian ever on the point of retirement. Norma meant to accept him. She contemplated the marriage as coldly and unemotionally as King contemplated the seat in Parliament. But through the corrupted tissue of her being ran one pure and virginal thread. She used no lures. She remained chastely aloof, the arts of seduction being temperamentally repugnant to her. Knowledge she had of good and evil (a euphemism, generally, for an exclusive acquaintance with the latter), and she was cynical enough in her disregard of concealment of her knowledge; but she revolted from using it to gain any advantage over a man. At this period of her life she set great store by herself, and though callously determined on marriage condescended with much disdain to be wooed. Her mother, bred in a hard school, was not subtle enough to perceive this antithesis. Hence the constant scenes of which Norma bitterly resented the vulgarity. “We pride ourselves on being women of the world, mother,” she said, “but that does n't prevent our remembering that we are gentlefolk.” Whereat, on one occasion, Mr. Hardacre, in his flustering, feeble way, had told Norma not to be rude to her mother, only to draw upon himself the vials of his wife's anger.

He came in now, during the silence that had fallen on the two women—a short, stout, red-faced man, with a bald head, and a weak chin, and a drooping foxy moustache turning grey. He was bursting with an interminable tale of scandal that he had picked up at his club—a respectable institution with an inner coterie of vapid, middle-aged

dullards whose cackle was the terror of half London society. It is a superstition among good women that man is too noble a creature to descend to gossip. Ten minutes in the members' smoking-room of the Burlington Club would paralyse the most scandal-mongering tabby of Bath, Cheltenham, or Tunbridge Wells.

“We were sure she was a wrong 'un from the first,” he explained in a thick, jerky voice to his listless auditors. “And now it turns out that she was in thick with poor Billy Withers, you know, and when Billy broke his neck—that was through another blessed woman—I'll tell you all about her by'm bye—when Billy broke his neck, his confounded valet got hold of Mrs. Jack's letters, and how she paid for 'em's the cream of the story—”

“We need not have that now, Benjamin,” said Mrs. Hardacre, with a warning indication that reverence was due to the young.

“Well, of course that's the end of it,” replied Mr. Hardacre, in some confusion.

But Norma rose with a laugh of hard mockery.

“The valet entered the service of Lord Wyniard, and now there's a pretty little divorce case in the air, with Jack Dugdale as petitioner and Lord Wyniard as corespondent. Are n't you sorry, mother, I did n't marry Wyniard and reform him, and save society this terrible scandal?”

Turning from her disconcerted parents, Norma pulled back the thick curtains from the French window and opened one of the doors.

“What are you doing that for?” cried Mrs. Hardacre irritably, as the cold air of a wet May night swept through

the room.

“I'm going to try to ventilate my soul,” said Norma, stepping on to the balcony.

Chapter II—THE FOOL'S WISDOM

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LIKE the inexplicable run on a particular number at the roulette-table, there often seems to be a run on some particular phenomenon thrown up by the wheel of daily life. Such a recurrent incident was the meeting of Norma and Jimmie Padgate during the next few weeks. She met him at Mrs. Deering's, she ran across him in the streets. Going to spend a weekend out of town, she found him on the platform of Paddington Station. The series of sheer coincidences established between them a certain familiarity. When next they met, it was in the crush of an emptying theatre. They found themselves blocked side by side, and they laughed as their eyes met.

“This seems to have got out of the domain of vulgar chance and become Destiny,” she said lightly.

“I am indeed favoured by the gods,” he replied.

“You don't deserve their good will because you have never come to see me.”

Jimmie replied that he was an old bear who loved to growl selfishly in his den. Norma retorted with a reference to Constance Deering. In her house he could growl altruistically.

“She pampers me with honey,” he explained.

“I am afraid you'll get nothing so Arcadian with us,” she replied, “but I can provide you with some excellent glucose.”

They were moved a few feet forward by the crowd, and then came to a halt again.

“This is my ward, Miss Aline Marden,” he said, presenting a pretty slip of a girl of seventeen, who had hung back shyly during the short dialogue, and looked with open-eyed admiration at Jimmie's new friend. “That is how she would be described in a court of law, but I don't mind telling you that really she is my nurse and foster-mother.”

The girl blushed at the introduction, and gave him an imperceptible twitch of the arm. Norma smiled at her graciously and asked her how she had liked the play.

“It was heavenly,” she said with a little sigh. “Did n't you think so?”

Norma, who had characterised the piece as the most dismal performance outside a little Bethel, was preparing a mendacious answer, when a sudden thinning in the crush brought to her side Mrs. Hardacre, from whom she had been separated. Mrs. Hardacre inquired querulously for Morland King, who had gone in search of the carriage. Norma reassured her as to his ability to find it, and introduced Jimmie and Aline. Mr. Padgate was Mr. King's oldest friend. Mrs. Hardacre bowed disapprovingly, took in with a hard glance the details of Aline's cheap, homemade evening frock, and the ready-made cape over her shoulders, and turned her head away with a sniff. She had been put out of temper the whole evening by Norma's glacial treatment of King, and was not disposed to smile at the nobodies whom it happened to please Norma to patronise.

At last King beckoned to them from the door, and they crushed through the still waiting crowd to join him. By the time Jimmie Padgate and his ward had reached the pavement they had driven off.

“Wonder if we can get a cab,” said Jimmie.

“Cab!” cried the girl, taking his arm affectionately. “One would think you were a millionaire. You can go in a cab if you like, but I'm going home in a 'bus. Come along. We'll get one at Piccadilly Circus.”

She hurried him on girlishly, talking of the play they had just seen. It was heavenly, she repeated. She had never been in the stalls before. She wished kind-hearted managers would send them seats every night. Then suddenly:

“Why did n't you tell me how beautiful she was?”

“Who, dear?”

“Why, Miss Hardacre. I think she is the loveliest thing I have ever seen. I could sit and look at her all day long. Why don't you paint her portrait—in that wonderful ivory-satin dress she was wearing to-night? And the diamond star in her hair that made her look like a queen—did you notice it? Why, Jimmie, you are not paying the slightest attention!”

“My dear, I could repeat verbatim every word you have said,” he replied soberly. “She is indeed one of the most beautiful of God's creatures.”

“Then you'll paint her portrait?”

“Perhaps, deary,” said Jimmie, “perhaps.”

Meanwhile in the brougham King was giving Norma an account of Jimmie's guardianship. She had asked him partly out of curiosity, partly to provide him with a subject of conversation, and partly to annoy her mother, whose disapproving sniff she had noted with some resentment. And this in brief is the tale that King told.

Some ten years ago, John Marden, a brother artist of Jimmie Padgate's, died penniless, leaving his little girl of

seven with the alternative of fighting her way alone through an unsympathetic world, or of depending on the charity of his only sister, a drunken shrew of a woman, the wife of a small apothecary, and the casual mother of a vague and unwashed family. Common decency made the first alternative impossible. On their return to the house after the funeral, the aunt announced her intention of caring for the orphan as her own flesh and blood. Jimmie, who had taken upon himself the functions of the intestate's temporary executor, acquiesced dubiously. The lady, by no means sober, shed copious tears and a rich perfume of whisky. She called Aline to her motherly bosom. The child, who had held Jimmie's hand throughout the mournful proceedings, for he had been her slave and playfellow for the whole of her little life, advanced shyly. Her aunt took her in her arms. But the child, with instinctive repugnance to the smell of spirits, shrank from her kisses. The shrew arose in the woman; she shook her vindictively, and gave her three or four resounding slaps on face and shoulders. Jimmie leaped from his chair, tore the scared little girl from the vixen's clutches, and taking her bodily in his arms, strode with her out of the house, leaving the apothecary and his wife to settle matters between them. It was only when he had walked down the street and hailed a cab that he began to consider the situation.

“What on earth am I to do with you?” he asked whimsically.

The small arms tightened round his neck. “Take me to live with you,” sobbed the child.

“Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings we learn wisdom. So be it,” said Jimmie, and he drove home with his charge.

As neither aunt nor uncle nor any human being in the wide world claimed the child, she became mistress of Jimmie's home from that hour. Her father's pictures and household effects were sold off to pay his creditors, and a little bundle of torn frocks and linen was Aline's sole legacy.

“I happened to look in upon him the evening of her arrival,” said King, by way of conclusion to his story. “In those days he managed with a charwoman who came only in the mornings, so he was quite alone in the place with the kid. What do you think I found him doing? Sitting cross-legged on the model-platform with a great pair of scissors and needles and thread, cutting down one of his own night garments so as to fit her, while the kid in a surprising state of *déshabillé* was seated on a table, kicking her bare legs and giving him directions. His explanation was that Miss Marden's luggage had not yet arrived and she must be made comfortable for the night! But you never saw anything so comic in your life.”

He leaned back and laughed at the reminiscence, not unkindly. Mrs. Hardacre, bored by the unprofitable tale, stared at the dim streets out of the brougham window. Norma, on friendlier terms with King, the little human story having perhaps drawn them together, joined in the laugh.

“And now, I suppose, when she grows a bit older, Mr. Padgate will marry her and she will be a dutiful little wife and they will live happy and humdrum ever after.”

“I hope he will provide her with some decent rags to put on,” said Mrs. Hardacre. “Those the child was wearing to-night were fit for a servant maid.”

“Jimmie would give her his skin if she could wear it,” said Morland, somewhat tartly.

This expression of feeling gave him, for the first time, a special place in Norma's esteem. After all, a woman desires to like the man who in a few months' time may be her husband, and hitherto Morland had presented a negativity of character which had baffled and irritated her. The positive trait of loyalty to a friend she welcomed instinctively, although if charged with the emotion she would have repudiated the accusation. When the carriage stopped at the awning and red strip of carpet before the house in Eaton Square where a dance awaited her, and she took leave of him, she returned his handshake with almost a warm pressure and sent him away, a sanguine lover, to his club.

The next morning Constance Deering, taking her on a round of shopping, enquired how the romance was proceeding.

“He has had me on probation,” replied Norma, “and has been examining all my points. I rather think he finds me satisfactory, and is about to make an offer.”

“What an idyllic pair you are!” laughed her friend.

Norma took the matter seriously.

“The man is perfectly right. He is on the lookout for a woman who can keep up or perhaps add to his social prestige, who can conduct the affairs of a large establishment when he enters political life, who can possibly give him a son to inherit his estate, and who can wear his

family diamonds with distinction—and it does require a woman of presence to do justice to family diamonds, you know. He looks round society and sees a girl that may suit him. Naturally he takes his time and sizes her up. I have learned patience and so I let him size to his heart's content. On the other hand, what he can give me falls above the lower limit of my requirements, and personally I don't dislike him.”

“Mercy on us!” cried Constance Deering, “the man is head over ears in love with you!”

“Then I like him all the better for dissembling it so effectually,” said Norma, “and I hope he'll go on dissembling to the end of the chapter. I hate sentiment.”

They were walking slowly down Bond Street, and happened to pause before a picture-dealer's window, where a print of a couple of lovers bidding farewell caught Mrs. Deering's attention.

“I call that pretty,” she said. “Do you hate love too?”

Norma twirled her parasol and moved away, waiting for the other.

“Love, my dear Connie, is an appetite of the lower middle classes.”

“My dear Norma!” the other exclaimed, “I do wish Jimmie Padgate could hear you!”

Norma started at the name. “What has he got to do with the matter?”

“That's one of his pictures.”

“Oh, is it?” said Norma, indifferently. But feminine curiosity compelled a swift parting glance at the print.

“I imagine our guileless friend has a lot to learn,” she added. “A few truths about the ways of this wicked world would do him good.”

“I promised to go and look round his studio to-morrow morning; will you come and give him his first lesson?” asked Mrs. Deering, mischievously.

“Certainly not,” replied Norma.

But the destiny she had previously remarked upon seemed to be fulfilling itself. A day or two afterwards his familiar figure burst upon her at a Private View in a small picture-gallery. His eyes brightened as she withdrew from her mother, who was accompanying her, and extended her hand.

“Dear me, who would have thought of seeing you here? Do you care for pictures? Why have n't you told me? I am so glad.”

“Love of Art did n't bring me here, I assure you,” replied Norma.

“Then what did?”

Jimmie in his guilelessness had an uncomfortable way of posing fundamental questions. In that respect he was like a child. Norma smiled in silent contemplation of the real object of their visit. At first her mother had tossed the cards of invitation into the waste-paper basket. It was advertising impudence on the part of the painter man, whom she had met but once, to take her name in vain on the back of an envelope. Then hearing accidentally that the painter man had painted the portraits of many high-born ladies, including that of the Duchess of Wiltshire, and that the Duchess of Wiltshire herself—their own duchess, who gave Mrs.

Hardacre the tip of her finger to shake and sometimes the tip of a rasping tongue to meditate upon, whom Mrs. Hardacre had tried any time these ten years to net for Heddon Court, their place in the country—had graciously promised to attend the Private View, in her character of Lady Patroness-in-Chief of the painter man, Mrs. Hardacre had hurried home and had set the servants' hall agog in search of the cards. Eventually they had been discovered in the dust-bin, and she had spent half an hour in cleansing them with bread-crumbs, much to Norma's sardonic amusement. The duchess not having yet arrived, Mrs. Hardacre had fallen back upon the deaf Dowager Countess of Solway, who was discoursing to her in a loud voice on her late husband's method of breeding prize pigs. Norma had broken away from this exhilarating lecture to greet Jimmie.

He kept his eager eyes upon her, still waiting for an answer to his question:

“What did?”

Norma, fairly quick-witted, indicated the walls with a little comprehensive gesture.

“Do you call this simpering, uninspired stuff Art?” she said, begging the question.

“Oh, it's not that,” cried Jimmie, falling into the trap. “It's really very good of its kind. Amazingly clever. Of course it's not highly finished. It's impressionistic. Look at that sweeping line from the throat all the way down to the hem of the skirt,” indicating the picture in front of them and following the curve, painter fashion, with bent-back thumb; “how many of your fellows in the Academy could get that so clean and true?”

“I have just met Mr. Porteous, who said he could n't stay any longer because such quackery made him sick,” said Norma.

Jimmie glanced round the walls. Porteous, the Royal Academician, was right. The colour was thin, the modelling flat, the drawing tricky, the invention poor. A dull soullessness ran through the range of full-length portraits of women. He realised, with some distress, the clever insincerity of the painting; but he had known Foljambe, the author of these coloured crimes, as a fellow-student at the Beaux-Arts in Paris, and having come to see his work for the first time, could not bear to judge harshly. It was characteristic of him to expatiate on the only merit the work possessed.

“Mr. Porteous even said,” continued Norma, “that it was scandalous such a man should be making thousands when men of genius were making hundreds. It was taking the bread out of their mouths.”

“I am sorry he said that,” said Jimmie. “I think we ought rather to be glad that a man of poor talent has been so successful. So many of them go to the wall.”

“Do you always find the success of your inferior rivals so comforting?” asked Norma. “I don't.” She thought of the depredatory American.

Jimmie pushed his hat to the back of his head—a discoloured Homburg hat that had seen much wear—and rammed his hands in his pockets.

“It's horrible to regard oneself and one's fellow-creatures as so many ghastly fishes tearing one another to pieces so

as to get at the same piece of offal. That's what it all comes to, does n't it?”

The picture of the rapt duke as garbage floating on the tide of London Society brought with it a certain humourous consolation. That of her own part in the metaphor did not appear so soothing. Jimmie's proposition being, however, incontrovertible, she changed the subject and enquired after Aline. Why had n't he brought her?

“I am afraid we should have argued about Foljambe's painting,” said Jimmie, with innocent malice.

“And we should have agreed about it,” replied Norma. She talked about Aline. Morland King had been tale-bearing. It was refreshing, she confessed, once in a way to hear good of one's fellow-creatures: like getting up at six in the morning in the country and drinking milk fresh from the cow. It conferred a sense of unaccustomed virtue. The mention of milk reminded her that she was dying for tea. Was it procurable?

“There's a roomful of it. Can I take you?” asked Jimmie, eagerly.

She assented. Jimmie piloted her through the chattering crowd. On the way they passed by Mrs. Hardacre, still devoting the pearls of her attention to the pigs. She acknowledged his bow distantly and summoned her daughter to her side.

“What are you *affiché*-ing yourself with that nondescript man for?” she asked in a cross whisper.

Norma moved away with a shrug, and went with Jimmie into the crowded tea-room. There, while he was fighting for tea at the buffet, she fell into a nest of acquaintances.

Presently he emerged from the crush victorious, and, as he poured out the cream for her, became the unconscious target of sharp feminine glances.

“Who is your friend?” asked one lady, as Jimmie retired with the cream-jug.

“I will introduce him if you like,” she replied. He reappeared and was introduced vaguely. Then he stood silent, listening to a jargon he was at a loss to comprehend. The women spoke in high, hard voices, with impure vowel sounds and a clipping of final consonants. The conversation gave him a confused impression of Ascot, a horse, a foreign prince, and a lady of fashion who was characterised as a “rotter.” Allusion was also made to a princely restaurant, which Jimmie, taken thither one evening by King, regarded as a fairy-land of rare and exquisite flavours, and the opinion was roundly expressed that you could not get anything fit to eat in the place and that the wines were poison.

Jimmie listened wonderingly. No one seemed disposed to controvert the statement, which was made by quite a young girl. Indeed one of her friends murmured that she had had awful filth there a few nights before. A smartly dressed woman of forty who had drawn away from the general conversation asked Jimmie if he had been to Cynthia yet. He replied that he very seldom went to theatres. The lady burst out laughing, and then seeing the genuine enquiry on his face, checked herself.

“I thought you were trying to pull my leg,” she explained. “I mean Cynthia, the psychic, the crystal gazer. Why, every