

Jerome K. Jerome

(1859-1927)

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THE ABSENT-MINDED MAN

The following short story is reprinted from Sketches in Lavender, Blue and Green. Jerome K. Jerome. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897.

You ask him to dine with you on Thursday to meet a few people who are anxious to know him.

“Now don’t make a muddle of it,” you say, recollectful of former mishaps, “and come on the Wednesday.”

He laughs good-naturedly as he hunts through the room for his diary.

“Shan’t be able to come Wednesday,” he says, “shall be at the Mansion House, sketching dresses, and on Friday I start for Scotland, so as to be at the opening of the Exhibition on Saturday. It’s bound to be all right this time. Where the deuce is that diary! Never mind, I’ll make a note of it on this—you can see me do it.”

You stand over him while he writes the appointment down on a sheet of foolscap, and watch him pin it up over his desk. Then you come away contented.

“I do hope he’ll turn up,” you say to your wife on the Thursday evening, while dressing.

“Are you sure you made it clear to him?” she replies, suspiciously, and you instinctively feel that whatever happens she is going to blame you for it.

Eight o’clock arrives, and with it the other guests. At half-past eight your wife is beckoned mysteriously out of the room, where the parlour-maid informs her that the cook has expressed a determination, in case of further delay, to wash her hands, figuratively speaking, of the whole affair.

Your wife, returning, suggests that if the dinner is to be eaten at all it had better be begun. She evidently considers that in pretending to expect him you have been merely playing a part, and that it would have been manlier and more straightforward for you to have admitted at the beginning that you had forgotten to invite him.

During the soup and the fish you recount anecdotes of his unpunctuality. By the time the entrée arrives the empty chair has begun to cast a gloom over the dinner, and with the joint the conversation drifts into talk about dead relatives.

On Friday, at a quarter past eight, he dashes to the door and rings violently. Hearing his voice in the hall, you go to meet him.

“Sorry I’m late,” he sings out cheerily. “Fool of a cabman took me to Alfred Place instead of—”

“Well, what do you want now you are come?” you interrupt, feeling anything but genially inclined towards him. He is an old friend, so you can be rude to him.

He laughs, and slaps you on the shoulder.

“Why, my dinner, my dear boy, I’m starving.”

“Oh,” you grunt in reply. “Well, you go and get it somewhere else, then. You’re not going to have it here.”

“What the devil do you mean?” he says. “You asked me to dinner.”

“I did nothing of the kind,” you tell him. “I asked you to dinner on Thursday, not on Friday.”

He stares at you incredulously.

“How did I get Friday fixed in my mind?” inquiringly.

“Because yours is the sort of mind that would get Friday firmly fixed into it, when Thursday was the day,” you explain. “I thought you had to be off to Edinburgh to-night,” you add.

“Great Scott!” he cries, “so I have.”

And without another word he dashes out, and you hear him rushing down the road, shouting for the cab he has just dismissed.

As you return to your study you reflect that he will have to travel all the way to Scotland in evening dress, and will have to send out the hotel porter in the morning to buy him a suit of ready-made clothes, and are glad.

Matters work out still more awkwardly when it is he who is the host. I remember being with him on his house-boat one day. It was a little after twelve, and we were sitting on the edge of the boat, dangling our feet in the river—the spot was a lonely one, half-way between Wallingford and Day’s Lock. Suddenly round the bend appeared two skiffs, each one containing six elaborately-dressed persons. As soon as they caught sight of us they began waving handkerchiefs and parasols.

“Hullo!” I said, “here’s some people hailing you.”

“Oh, they all do that about here,” he answered, without looking up. “Some beanfeast from Abingdon, I expect.”

The boats draw nearer. When about two hundred yards off an elderly gentleman raised himself up in the prow of the leading one and shouted to us.

McQuae heard his voice, and gave a start that all but pitched him into the water.

“Good God!” he cried, “I’d forgotten all about it.”

“About what?” I asked.

“Why, it’s the Palmers and the Grahams and the Hendersons. I’ve asked them all over to lunch, and there’s not a blessed thing on board but two mutton chops and a pound of potatoes, and I’ve given the boy a holiday.”

Another day I was lunching with him at the Junior Hogarth, when a man named Hallyard, a mutual friend, strolled across to us.

“What are you fellows going to do this afternoon?” he asked, seating himself the opposite side of the table.

“I’m going to stop here and write letters,” I answered.

“Come with me if you want something to do,” said McQuae. “I’m going to drive Leena down to Richmond.” (“Leena” was the young lady he recollected being engaged to. It transpired afterwards that he was engaged to three girls at the time. The other two he had forgotten all about.) “It’s a roomy seat at the back.”

“Oh, all right,” said Hallyard, and they went away together in a hansom.

An hour and a half later Hallyard walked into the smoking-room looking depressed and worn, and flung himself into a chair.

“I thought you were going to Richmond with McQuae,” I said.

“So did I,” he answered.

“Had an accident?” I asked.

“Yes.”

He was decidedly curt in his replies.

“Cart upset?” I continued.

“No, only me.”

His grammar and his nerves seemed thoroughly shaken.

I waited for an explanation, and after a while he gave it.

“We got to Putney,” he said, “with just an occasional run into a tram-car, and were going up the hill, when suddenly he turned a corner. You know his style at a corner—over the curb, across the road, and into the opposite lamp-post. Of course, as a rule one is prepared for it, but I never reckoned on his turning up there, and the first thing I recollect is finding myself sitting in the middle of the street with a dozen fools grinning at me.

“It takes a man a few minutes in such a case to think where he is and what has happened, and when I got up they were some distance away. I ran after them for a quarter of a mile, shouting at the top of my voice, and accompanied by a mob of boys, all yelling like hell on a Bank Holiday. But one might as well have tried to hail the dead, so I took the ’bus back.

“They might have guessed what had happened,” he added, “by the shifting of the cart, if they’d had any sense. I’m not a light-weight.”

He complained of soreness, and said he would go home. I suggested a cab, but he replied that he would rather walk.

I met McQuae in the evening at the St. James’s Theatre. It was a first night, and he was taking sketches for The Graphic. The moment he saw me he made his way across to me.

“The very man I wanted to see,” he said. “Did I take Hallyard with me in the cart to Richmond this afternoon?”

“You did,” I replied.

“So Leena says,” he answered, greatly bewildered, “but I’ll swear he wasn’t there when we got to the Queen’s Hotel.”

“It’s all right,” I said, “you dropped him at Putney.”

“Dropped him at Putney!” he repeated. “I’ve no recollection of doing so.”

“He has,” I answered. “You ask him about it. He’s full of it.”

Everybody said he never would get married; that it was absurd to suppose he ever would remember the day, the church, and the girl, all in one morning; that if he did get as far as the altar he would forget what he had come for, and would give the bride away to his own best man. Hallyard had an idea that he was already

married, but that the fact had slipped his memory. I myself felt sure that if he did marry he would forget all about it the next day.

But everybody was wrong. By some miraculous means the ceremony got itself accomplished, so that if Hallyard's idea be correct (as to which there is every possibility), there will be trouble. As for my own fears, I dismissed them the moment I saw the lady. She was a charming, cheerful little woman, but did not look the type that would let him forget all about it.

I had not seen him since his marriage, which had happened in the spring. Working my way back from Scotland by easy stages, I stopped for a few days at Scarborough. After table d'hôte I put on my mackintosh, and went out for a walk. It was raining hard, but after a month in Scotland one does not notice English weather, and I wanted some air. Struggling along the dark beach with my head against the wind, I stumbled over a crouching figure, seeking to shelter itself a little from the storm under the lee of the Spa wall.

I expected it to swear at me, but it seemed too broken-spirited to mind anything.

"I beg your pardon," I said. "I did not see you."

At the sound of my voice it started to its feet.

"Is that you, old man?" it cried.

"McQuae!" I exclaimed.

"By Jove!" he said, "I was never so glad to see a man in all my life before."

And he nearly shook my hand off.

"But what in thunder!" I said, "are you doing here? Why, you're drenched to the skin."

He was dressed in flannels and a tennis-coat.

"Yes," he answered. "I never thought it would rain. It was a lovely morning."

I began to fear he had overworked himself into a brain fever.

"Why don't you go home?" I asked.

"I can't," he replied. "I don't know where I live. I've forgotten the address."

"For heaven's sake," he said, "take me somewhere, and give me something to eat. I'm literally starving."

“Haven’t you any money?” I asked him, as we turned towards the hotel.

“Not a sou,” he answered. “We got in here from York, the wife and I, about eleven. We left our things at the station, and started to hunt for apartments. As soon as we were fixed, I changed my clothes and came out for a walk, telling Maud I should be back at one to lunch. Like a fool, I never took the address, and never noticed the way I was going.

“It’s an awful business,” he continued. “I don’t see how I’m ever going to find her. I hoped she might stroll down to the Spa in the evening, and I’ve been hanging about the gates ever since six. I hadn’t the threepence to go in.”

“But have you no notion of the sort of street or the kind of house it was?” I enquired.

“Not a ghost,” he replied. “I left it all to Maud, and didn’t trouble.”

“Have you tried any of the lodging-houses?” I asked.

“Tried!” he exclaimed bitterly. “I’ve been knocking at doors, and asking if Mrs. McQuae lives there steadily all the afternoon, and they slam the door in my face, mostly without answering. I told a policeman—I thought perhaps he might suggest something—but the idiot only burst out laughing, and that made me so mad that I gave him a black eye, and had to cut. I expect they’re on the lookout for me now.”

“I went into a restaurant,” he continued gloomily, “and tried to get them to trust me for a steak. But the proprietress said she’d heard that tale before, and ordered me out before all the other customers. I think I’d have drowned myself if you hadn’t turned up.”

After a change of clothes and some supper, he discussed the case more calmly, but it was really a serious affair. They had shut up their flat, and his wife’s relatives were travelling abroad. There was no one to whom he could send a letter to be forwarded; there was no one with whom she would be likely to communicate. Their chance of meeting again in this world appeared remote.

Nor did it seem to me—fond as he was of his wife, and anxious as he undoubtedly was to recover her—that he looked forward to the actual meeting, should it ever arrive, with any too pleasurable anticipation.

“She will think it strange,” he murmured reflectively, sitting on the edge of the bed, and thoughtfully pulling off his socks. “She is sure to think it strange.”

The following day, which was Wednesday, we went to a solicitor, and laid the case before him, and he instituted inquiries among all the lodging-house keepers in Scarborough, with the result that on Thursday afternoon McQuae was restored (after the manner of an Adelphi hero in the last act) to his home and wife.

I asked him next time I met him what she had said.

“Oh, much what I expected,” he replied.

But he never told me what he had expected.

BLASÉ BILLY

The following short story is reprinted from Sketches in Lavender, Blue and Green. Jerome K. Jerome. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897.

It was towards the end of August. He and I appeared to be the only two men left to the Club. He was sitting by an open window, the Times lying on the floor beside him. I drew my chair a little closer and remarked:—
“Good morning.”

He suppressed a yawn, and replied “Mornin’”—dropping the “g.” The custom was just coming into fashion; he was always correct.

“Going to be a very hot day, I am afraid,” I continued.

“Fraid so,” was the response, after which he turned his head away and gently closed his eyes.

I opined that conversation was not to his wish, but this only made me more determined to talk, and to talk to him above all others in London. The desire took hold of me to irritate him—to break down the imperturbable calm within which he moved and had his being; and I gathered myself together, and settled down to the task.

“Interesting paper the Times,” I observed.

“Very,” he replied, taking it from the floor and handing it to me. “Won’t you read it?”

I had been careful to throw into my voice an aggressive cheeriness which I had calculated would vex him, but his manner remained that of a man who is simply bored. I argued with him politely concerning the paper; but he insisted, still with the same weary air, that he had done with it. I thanked him effusively. I judged that he hated effusiveness.

“They say that to read a Times leader,” I persisted, “is a lesson in English composition.”

“So I’ve been told,” he answered tranquilly. “Personally I don’t take them.”

The Times, I could see, was not going to be of much assistance to me. I lit a cigarette, and remarked that he was not shooting. He admitted the fact. Under the circumstances, it would have taxed him to deny it, but the necessity for confession aroused him.

“To myself,” he said, “a tramp through miles of mud, in company with four gloomy men in black velveteen, a couple of depressed-looking dogs, and a heavy gun, the entire cavalcade being organised for the purpose of killing some twelve-and-sixpence worth of poultry, suggests the disproportionate.”

I laughed boisterously, and cried, “Good, good—very good!”

He was the type of man that shudders inwardly at the sound of laughter. I had the will to slap him on the back, but I thought maybe that would send him away altogether.

I asked him if he hunted. He replied that fourteen hours’ talk a day about horses, and only about horses tired him, and that in consequence he had abandoned hunting.

“You fish?” I said.

“I was never sufficiently imaginative,” he answered.

“You travel a good deal,” I suggested.

He had apparently made up his mind to abandon himself to his fate, for he turned towards me with a resigned air. An ancient nurse of mine had always described me as the most “wearing” child she had ever come across. I prefer to speak of myself as persevering.

“I should go about more,” he said, “were I able to see any difference between one place and another.”

“Tried Central Africa?” I inquired.

“Once or twice,” he answered. “It always reminds me of Kew Gardens.”

“China?” I hazarded.

“Cross between a willow-pattern plate and a New York slum,” was his comment.

“The North Pole?” I tried, thinking the third time might be lucky.

“Never got quite up to it,” he returned. “Reached Cape Hakluyt once.”

“How did that impress you?” I asked.

“It didn’t impress me,” he replied.

The talk drifted to women and bogus companies, dogs, literature, and such-like matters. I found him well informed upon and bored by all.

“They used to be amusing,” he said, speaking of the first named, “until they began to take themselves seriously. Now they are merely silly.”

I was forced into closer companionship with “Blasé Billy” that autumn, for by chance a month later he and I found ourselves the guests of the same delightful hostess, and I came to liking him better. He was a useful man to have about one. In matters of fashion one could always feel safe following his lead. One knew that his necktie, his collar, his socks, if not the very newest departure, were always correct; and upon social paths, as guide, philosopher, and friend, he was invaluable. He knew every one, together with his or her previous convictions. He was acquainted with every woman’s past, and shrewdly surmised every man’s future. He could point you out the coal-shed where the Countess of Glenleman had gambolled in her days of innocence, and would take you to breakfast at the coffee-shop off the Mile End Road where “Sam. Smith, Estd. 1820,” own brother to the world-famed society novelist, Smith-Stratford, lived an uncriticised, unparagraphed, unphotographed existence upon the profits of “rashers” at three-ha’pence and “door-steps” at two a penny. He knew at what houses it was inadvisable to introduce soap, and at what tables it would be bad form to denounce political jobbery. He could tell you offhand what trade-mark went with what crest, and remembered the price paid for every baronetcy created during the last twenty-five years.

Regarding himself, he might have made claim with King Charles never to have said a foolish thing, and never to have done a wise one. He despised, or affected to despise, most of his fellow-men, and those of his fellow-men whose opinion was most worth having unaffectedly despised him.

Shortly described, one might have likened him to a Gaiety Johnny with brains. He was capital company after dinner, but in the early morning one avoided him.

So I thought of him until one day he fell in love; or to put it in the words of Teddy Tidmarsh, who brought the news to us, “got mashed on Gerty Lovell.”

“The red-haired one,” Teddy explained, to distinguish her from her sister, who had lately adopted the newer golden shade.

“Gerty Lovell!” exclaimed the captain, “why, I’ve always been told the Lovell girls hadn’t a penny among them.”

“The old man’s stone broke, I know for a certainty,” volunteered Teddy, who picked up a mysterious but, in other respects, satisfactory income in an office near Hatton Garden, and who was candour itself concerning the private affairs of everybody but himself.

“Oh, some rich pork-packing or diamond-sweating uncle has cropped up in Australia, or America, or one of those places,” suggested the captain, “and Billy’s got wind of it in good time. Billy knows his way about.”

We agreed that some such explanation was needed, though in all other respects Gerty Lovell was just the girl that Reason (not always consulted on these occasions) might herself have chosen for “Blasé Billy’s” mate.

The sunlight was not too kind to her, but at evening parties, where the lighting has been well considered, I have seen her look quite girlish. At her best she was not beautiful, but at her worst there was about her an air of breeding and distinction that always saved her from being passed over, and she dressed to perfection. In character she was the typical society woman: always charming, generally insincere. She went to Kensington for her religion and to Mayfair for her morals; accepted her literature from Mudie’s and her art from the Grosvenor Gallery; and could and would gabble philanthropy, philosophy, and politics with equal fluency at every five-o’clock tea-table she visited. Her ideas could always be guaranteed as the very latest, and her opinion as that of the person to whom she was talking. Asked by a famous novelist one afternoon, at the Pioneer Club, to give him some idea of her, little Mrs. Bund, the painter’s wife, had remained for a few moments with her pretty lips pursed, and had then said:

“She is a woman to whom life could bring nothing more fully satisfying than a dinner invitation from a duchess, and whose nature would be incapable of sustaining deeper suffering than that caused by an ill-fitting costume.”

At the time I should have said the epigram was as true as it was cruel, but I suppose we none of us quite know each other.

I congratulated “Blasé Billy,” or to drop his Club nickname and give him the full benefit of his social label, “The Hon. William Cecil Wychwood Stanley Drayton,” on the occasion of our next meeting, which happened upon the steps of the Savoy Restaurant, and I thought—unless a quiver of the electric light deceived me—that he blushed.

“Charming girl,” I said. “You’re a lucky dog, Billy.”

It was the phrase that custom demands upon such occasions, and it came of its own accord to my tongue without costing me the trouble of composition, but he seized upon it as though it had been a gem of friendly sincerity.

“You will like her even more when you know her better,” he said. “She is so different from the usual woman that one meets. Come and see her to-morrow afternoon, she will be so pleased. Go about four, I will tell her to expect you.”

I rang the bell at ten minutes past five. Billy was there. She greeted me with a little tremor of embarrassment, which sat oddly upon her, but which was not altogether unpleasing. She said it was kind of me to come so

early. I stayed for about half an hour, but conversation flagged, and some of my cleverest remarks attracted no attention whatever.

When I rose to take my leave, Billy said that he must be off too, and that he would accompany me. Had they been ordinary lovers, I should have been careful to give them an opportunity of making their adieus in secret; but in the case of the Honourable William Drayton and the eldest Miss Lovell I concluded that such tactics were needless, so I waited till he had shaken hands, and went downstairs with him.

But in the hall Billy suddenly ejaculated, "By Jove! Half a minute," and ran back up the stairs three at a time. Apparently he found what he had gone for on the landing, for I did not hear the opening of the drawing-room door. Then the Honourable Billy redescended with a sober, nonchalant air.

"Left my gloves behind me," he explained, as he took my arm. "I am always leaving my gloves about."

I did not mention that I had seen him take them from his hat and slip them into his coat-tail pocket.

We at the Club did not see very much of Billy during the next three months, but the captain, who prided himself upon his playing of the rôle of smoking-room cynic—though he would have been better in the part had he occasionally displayed a little originality—was of opinion that our loss would be more than made up to us after the marriage. Once in the twilight I caught sight of a figure that reminded me of Billy's, accompanied by a figure that might have been that of the eldest Miss Lovell; but as the spot was Battersea Park, which is not a fashionable evening promenade, and the two figures were holding each other's hands, the whole picture being suggestive of the closing chapter of a London Journal romance, I concluded I had made an error.

But I did see them in the Adelphi stalls one evening, rapt in a sentimental melodrama. I joined them between the acts, and poked fun at the play, as one does at the Adelphi, but Miss Lovell begged me quite earnestly not to spoil her interest, and Billy wanted to enter upon a serious argument as to whether a man was justified in behaving as Will Terriss had just behaved towards the woman he loved. I left them and returned to my own party, to the satisfaction, I am inclined to think, of all concerned.

They married in due course. We were mistaken on one point. She brought Billy nothing. But they both seemed quite content on his not too extravagant fortune. They took a tiny house not far from Victoria Station, and hired a brougham for the season. They did not entertain very much, but they contrived to be seen everywhere it was right and fashionable they should be seen. The Honourable Mrs. Drayton was a much younger and brighter person than had been the eldest Miss Lovell, and as she continued to dress charmingly, her social position rose rapidly. Billy went everywhere with her, and evidently took a keen pride in her success. It was even said that he designed her dresses for her, and I have myself seen him earnestly studying the costumes in Russell and Allen's windows.

The captain's prophecy remained unfulfilled. "Blasé Billy"—if the name could still be applied to him—hardly ever visited the Club after his marriage. But I had grown to like him, and, as he had foretold, to like his wife. I found their calm indifference to the burning questions of the day a positive relief from the strenuous atmosphere of literary and artistic circles. In the drawing-room of their little house in Eaton Row, the comparative merits of George Meredith and George R. Sims were not considered worth discussion. Both were regarded as persons who afforded a certain amount of amusement in return for a certain amount of cash. And on any Wednesday afternoon, Henrick Ibsen and Arthur Roberts would have been equally welcome, as adding piquancy to the small gathering. Had I been compelled to pass my life in such a house, this Philistine attitude might have palled upon me; but, under the circumstances, it refreshed me, and I made use of my welcome, which I believe was genuine, to its full extent.

As months went by, they seemed to me to draw closer to one another, though I am given to understand that such is not the rule in fashionable circles. One evening I arrived a little before my time, and was shown up into the drawing-room by the soft-footed butler. They were sitting in the dusk with their arms round one another. It was impossible to withdraw, so I faced the situation and coughed. A pair of middle-class lovers could not have appeared more awkward or surprised.

But the incident established an understanding between us, and I came to be regarded as a friend before whom there was less necessity to act.

Studying them, I came to the conclusion that the ways and manners of love are very same-like throughout the world, as though the foolish boy, unheeding of human advance, kept but one school for minor poet and East End shop-boy, for Girton girl and little milliner; taught but the one lesson to the end-of-the-nineteenth-century Johnny that he taught to bearded Pict and Hun four thousand years ago.

Thus the summer and the winter passed pleasantly for the Honourable Billy, and then, as luck would have it, he fell ill just in the very middle of the London season, when invitations to balls and dinner parties, luncheons and "At Homes," were pouring in from every quarter; when the lawns at Hurlingham were at their smoothest, and the paddocks at their smartest.

It was unfortunate, too, that the fashions that season suited the Honourable Mrs. Billy as they had not suited her for years. In the early spring, she and Billy had been hard at work planning costumes calculated to cause a flutter through Mayfair, and the dresses and the bonnets—each one a work of art—were waiting on their stands to do their killing work. But the Honourable Mrs. Billy, for the first time in her life, had lost interest in such things.

Their friends were genuinely sorry, for society was Billy's element, and in it he was interesting and amusing. But, as Lady Gower said, there was no earthly need for his wife to constitute herself a prisoner. Her shutting herself off from the world could do him no good and it would look odd.

Accordingly the Honourable Mrs. Drayton, to whom oddness was a crime, and the voice of Lady Gower as the voice of duty, sacrificed her inclinations on the social shrine, laced the new costumes tight across her aching heart, and went down into society.

But the Honourable Mrs. Drayton achieved not the success of former seasons. Her small talk grew so very small, that even Park Lane found it unsatisfying. Her famous laugh rang mechanically. She smiled at the wisdom of dukes, and became sad at the funny stories of millionaires. Society voted her a good wife but bad company, and confined its attentions to cards of inquiry. And for this relief the Honourable Mrs. Drayton was grateful, for Billy waned weaker and weaker. In the world of shadows in which she moved, he was the one real thing. She was of very little practical use, but it comforted her to think that she was helping to nurse him.

But Billy himself it troubled.

"I do wish you would go out more," he would say. "It makes me feel that I'm such a selfish brute, keeping you tied up here in this dismal little house. Besides," he would add, "people miss you; they will hate me for keeping you away." For, where his wife was concerned, Billy's knowledge of the world availed him little. He really thought society craved for the Honourable Mrs. Drayton, and would not be comforted where she was not.

"I would rather stop with you, dear," would be the answer; "I don't care to go about by myself. You must get well quickly and take me."

And so the argument continued, until one evening, as she sat by herself, the nurse entered softly, closed the door behind her, and came over to her.

"I wish you would go out to-night, ma'am," said the nurse, "just for an hour or two. I think it would please the master; he is worrying himself because he thinks it is his fault that you do not; and just now"—the woman hesitated for a moment—"just now I want to keep him very quiet."

"Is he weaker, nurse?"

"Well, he is not stronger, ma'am, and I think—I think we must humour him."

The Honourable Mrs. Drayton rose, and, crossing to the window, stood for a while looking out.

"But where am I to go, nurse?" she said at length, turning with a smile. "I've no invitations anywhere."

“Can’t you make believe to have one?” said the nurse. “It is only seven o’clock. Say you are going to a dinner-party; you can come home early then. Go and dress yourself, and come down and say good-bye to him, and then come in again about eleven, as though you had just returned.”

“You think I must, nurse?”

“I think it would be better, ma’am. I wish you would try it.”

The Honourable Mrs. Drayton went to the door, then paused.

“He has such sharp ears, nurse; he will listen for the opening of the door and the sound of the carriage.”

“I will see to that,” said the nurse. “I will tell them to have the carriage here at ten minutes to eight. Then you can drive to the end of the street, slip out, and walk back. I will let you in myself.”

“And about coming home?” asked the other woman.

“You must slip out for a few minutes before eleven, and the carriage must be waiting for you at the corner again. Leave all that to me.”

In half an hour the Honourable Mrs. Drayton entered the sick-room, radiant in evening dress and jewels. Fortunately the lights were low, or “Blasé-Billy” might have been doubtful as to the effect his wife was likely to produce. For her face was not the face that one takes to dinner-parties.

“Nurse tells me you are going to the Grevilles this evening. I am so glad. I’ve been worrying myself about you, moped up here right through the season.”

He took her hands in his and held her out at arm’s length from him.

“How handsome you look, dear!” he said. “How they must have all been cursing me for keeping you shut up here, like a princess in an ogre’s castle! I shall never dare to face them again.”

She laughed, well pleased at his words.

“I shall not be late,” she said. “I shall be so anxious to get back and see how my boy has behaved. If you have not been good I shan’t go again.”

They kissed and parted, and at eleven she returned to the room. She told him what a delightful evening it had been, and bragged a little of her own success.

The nurse told her that he had been more cheerful that evening than for many nights.

So every day the farce was played for him. One day it was to a luncheon that she went, in a costume by Redfern; the next night to a ball, in a frock direct from Paris; again to an "At Home," or concert, or dinner-party. Loafers and passers-by would stop to stare at a haggard, red-eyed woman, dressed as for a drawing-room, slipping thief-like in and out of her own door.

I heard them talking of her one afternoon, at a house where I called, and I joined the group to listen.

"I always thought her heartless, but I gave her credit for sense," a woman was saying. "One doesn't expect a woman to be fond of her husband, but she needn't make a parade of ignoring him when he is dying."

I pleaded absence from town to inquire what was meant, and from all lips I heard the same account. One had noticed her carriage at the door two or three evenings in succession. Another had seen her returning home. A third had seen her coming out, and so on.

I could not fit the fact in with my knowledge of her, so the next evening I called. The door was opened instantly by herself.

"I saw you from the window," she said. "Come in here; don't speak."

I followed her, and she closed the door behind her. She was dressed in a magnificent costume, her hair sparkling with diamonds, and I looked my questions.

She laughed bitterly.

"I am supposed to be at the opera to-night," she explained. "Sit down, if you have a few minutes to spare."

I said it was for a talk that I had come; and there, in the dark room, lighted only by the street lamp without, she told me all. And at the end she dropped her head on her bare arms; and I turned away and looked out of the window for a while.

"I feel so ridiculous," she said, rising and coming towards me. "I sit here all the evening dressed like this. I'm afraid I don't act my part very well; but, fortunately, dear Billy never was much of a judge of art, and it is good enough for him. I tell him the most awful lies about what everybody has said to me, and what I've said to everybody, and how my gowns were admired. What do you think of this one?"

For answer I took the privilege of a friend.

"I'm glad you think well of me," she said. "Billy has such a high opinion of you. You will hear some funny tales. I'm glad you know."

I had to leave London again, and Billy died before I returned. I heard that she had to be fetched from a ball, and was only just in time to touch his lips before they were cold. But her friends excused her by saying that the end had come very suddenly.

I called on her a little later, and before I left I hinted to her what people were saying, and asked her if I had not better tell them the truth.

“I would rather you didn’t,” she answered. “It seems like making public the secret side of one’s life.”

“But,” I urged, “they will think—”

She interrupted me.

“Does it matter very much what they think?”

Which struck me as a very remarkable sentiment, coming from the Hon. Mrs. Drayton, née the elder Miss Lovell.

A CHARMING WOMAN

The following short story is reprinted from Sketches in Lavender, Blue and Green. Jerome K. Jerome. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897.

“Not the Mr. ---, really?”

In her deep brown eyes there lurked pleased surprise, struggling with wonder. She looked from myself to the friend who introduced us with a bewitching smile of incredulity, tempered by hope.

He assured her, adding laughingly, “The only genuine and original,” and left us.

“I’ve always thought of you as a staid, middle-aged man,” she said, with a delicious little laugh, then added in low soft tones, “I’m so very pleased to meet you, really.”

The words were conventional, but her voice crept round one like a warm caress.

“Come and talk to me,” she said, seating herself upon a small settee, and making room for me.

I sat down awkwardly beside her, my head buzzing just a little, as with one glass too many of champagne. I was in my literary childhood. One small book and a few essays and criticisms, scattered through various obscure periodicals had been as yet my only contributions to current literature. The sudden discovery that I was the Mr. Anybody, and that charming women thought of me, and were delighted to meet me, was a brain-disturbing thought.

“And it was really you who wrote that clever book?” she continued, “and all those brilliant things, in the magazines and journals. Oh, it must be delightful to be clever.”

She gave breath to a little sigh of vain regret that went to my heart. To console her I commenced a laboured compliment, but she stopped me with her fan. On after reflection I was glad she had—it would have been one of those things better expressed otherwise.

“I know what you are going to say,” she laughed, “but don’t. Besides, from you I should not know quite how to take it. You can be so satirical.”

I tried to look as though I could be, but in her case would not.

She let her ungloved hand rest for an instant upon mine. Had she left it there for two, I should have gone down on my knees before her, or have stood on my head at her feet—have made a fool of myself in some way or another before the whole room full. She timed it to a nicety.

“I don’t want you to pay me compliments,” she said, “I want us to be friends. Of course, in years, I’m old enough to be your mother.” (By the register I should say she might have been thirty-two, but looked twenty-six. I was twenty-three, and I fear foolish for my age.) “But you know the world, and you’re so different to the other people one meets. Society is so hollow and artificial; don’t you find it so? You don’t know how I long sometimes to get away from it, to know someone to whom I could show my real self, who would understand me. You’ll come and see me sometimes—I’m always at home on Wednesdays—and let me talk to you, won’t you, and you must tell me all your clever thoughts.”

It occurred to me that, maybe, she would like to hear a few of them there and then, but before I had got well started a hollow Society man came up and suggested supper, and she was compelled to leave me. As she disappeared, however, in the throng, she looked back over her shoulder with a glance half pathetic, half comic, that I understood. It said, “Pity me, I’ve got to be bored by this vapid, shallow creature,” and I did.

I sought her through all the rooms before I went. I wished to assure her of my sympathy and support. I learned, however, from the butler that she had left early, in company with the hollow Society man.

A fortnight later I ran against a young literary friend in Regent Street, and we lunched together at the Monico.

“I met such a charming woman last night,” he said, “a Mrs. Clifton Courtenay, a delightful woman.”

“Oh, do you know her?” I exclaimed. “Oh, we’re very old friends. She’s always wanting me to go and see her. I really must.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you knew her,” he answered. Somehow, the fact of my knowing her seemed to lessen her importance in his eyes. But soon he recovered his enthusiasm for her.

“A wonderfully clever woman,” he continued. “I’m afraid I disappointed her a little though.” He said this, however, with a laugh that contradicted his words. “She would not believe I was the Mr. Smith. She imagined from my book that I was quite an old man.”

I could see nothing in my friend’s book myself to suggest that the author was, of necessity, anything over eighteen. The mistake appeared to me to display want of acumen, but it had evidently pleased him greatly.

“I felt quite sorry for her,” he went on, “chained to that bloodless, artificial society in which she lives. ‘You can’t tell,’ she said to me, ‘how I long to meet someone to whom I could show my real self—who would understand me.’ I’m going to see her on Wednesday.”

I went with him. My conversation with her was not as confidential as I had anticipated, owing to there being some eighty other people present in a room intended for the accommodation of eight; but after surging round

for an hour in hot and aimless misery—as very young men at such gatherings do, knowing as a rule only the man who has brought them, and being unable to find him—I contrived to get a few words with her.

She greeted me with a smile, in the light of which I at once forgot my past discomfort, and let her fingers rest, with delicious pressure, for a moment upon mine.

“How good of you to keep your promise,” she said. “These people have been tiring me so. Sit here, and tell me all you have been doing.”

She listened for about ten seconds, and then interrupted me with—

“And that clever friend of yours that you came with. I met him at dear Lady Lennon’s last week. Has he written anything?”

I explained to her that he had.

“Tell me about it?” she said. “I get so little time for reading, and then I only care to read the books that help me,” and she gave me a grateful look more eloquent than words.

I described the work to her, and wishing to do my friend justice I even recited a few of the passages upon which, as I knew, he especially prided himself.

One sentence in particular seemed to lay hold of her. “A good woman’s arms round a man’s neck is a lifebelt thrown out to him from heaven.”

“How beautiful!” she murmured. “Say it again.”

I said it again, and she repeated it after me.

Then a noisy old lady swooped down upon her, and I drifted away into a corner, where I tried to look as if I were enjoying myself, and failed.

Later on, feeling it time to go, I sought my friend, and found him talking to her in a corner. I approached and waited. They were discussing the latest east-end murder. A drunken woman had been killed by her husband, a hard-working artizan, who had been maddened by the ruin of his home.

“Ah,” she was saying, “what power a woman has to drag a man down or lift him up. I never read a case in which a woman is concerned without thinking of those beautiful lines of yours: ‘A good woman’s arms round a man’s neck is a lifebelt thrown out to him from heaven.’”

Opinions differed concerning her religion and politics. Said the Low Church parson: “An earnest Christian woman, sir, of that unostentatious type that has always been the bulwark of our Church. I am proud to know that woman, and I am proud to think that poor words of mine have been the humble instrument to wean that true woman’s heart from the frivolities of fashion, and to fix her thoughts upon higher things. A good Churchwoman, sir, a good Churchwoman, in the best sense of the word.”

Said the pale aristocratic-looking young Abbé to the Comtesse, the light of old-world enthusiasm shining from his deep-set eyes: “I have great hopes for our dear friend. She finds it hard to sever the ties of time and love. We are all weak, but her heart turns towards our mother Church as a child, though suckled among strangers, yearns after many years for the bosom that has borne it. We have spoken, and I, even I, may be the voice in the wilderness leading the lost sheep back to the fold.”

Said Sir Harry Bennett, the great Theosophist lecturer, writing to a friend: “A singularly gifted woman, and a woman evidently thirsting for the truth. A woman capable of willing her own life. A woman not afraid of thought and reason, a lover of wisdom. I have talked much with her at one time or another, and I have found her grasp my meaning with a quickness of perception quite unusual in my experience; and the arguments I have let fall, I am convinced, have borne excellent fruit. I look forward to her becoming, at no very distant date, a valued member of our little band. Indeed, without betraying confidence, I may almost say I regard her conversion as an accomplished fact.”

Colonel Maxim always spoke of her as “a fair pillar of the State.”

“With the enemy in our midst,” said the florid old soldier, “it behoves every true man—aye, and every true woman—to rally to the defence of the country; and all honour, say I, to noble ladies such as Mrs. Clifton Courtenay, who, laying aside their natural shrinking from publicity, come forward in such a crisis as the present to combat the forces of disorder and disloyalty now rampant in the land.”

“But,” some listener would suggest, “I gathered from young Jocelyn that Mrs. Clifton Courtenay held somewhat advanced views on social and political questions.”

“Jocelyn,” the Colonel would reply with scorn; “pah! There may have been a short space of time during which the fellow’s long hair and windy rhetoric impressed her. But I flatter myself I’ve put my spoke in Mr. Jocelyn’s wheel. Why, damme, sir, she’s consented to stand for Grand Dame of the Bermondsey Branch of the Primrose League next year. What’s Jocelyn to say to that, the scoundrel!”

What Jocelyn said was:—

“I know the woman is weak. But I do not blame her; I pity her. When the time comes, as soon it will, when woman is no longer a puppet, dancing to the threads held by some brainless man—when a woman is not

threatened with social ostracism for daring to follow her own conscience instead of that of her nearest male relative—then will be the time to judge her. It is not for me to betray the confidence reposed in me by a suffering woman, but you can tell that interesting old fossil, Colonel Maxim, that he and the other old women of the Bermondsey Branch of the Primrose League may elect Mrs. Clifton Courtenay for their President, and make the most of it; they have only got the outside of the woman. Her heart is beating time to the tramp of an onward-marching people; her soul's eyes are straining for the glory of a coming dawn.”

But they all agreed she was a charming woman.

THE CHOICE OF CYRIL HARJOHN

The following short story is reprinted from Sketches in Lavender, Blue and Green. Jerome K. Jerome. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897.

Between a junior resident master of twenty-one, and a backward lad of fifteen, there yawns an impassable gulf. Between a struggling journalist of one-and-thirty, and an M.D. of twenty-five, with a brilliant record behind him, and a career of exceptional promise before him, a close friendship is however permissible.

My introduction to Cyril Harjohn was through the Rev. Charles Fauerberg.

“Our young friend,” said the Rev. Mr. Fauerberg, standing in the most approved tutorial attitude, with his hand upon his pupil’s shoulder, “our young friend has been somewhat neglected, but I see in him possibilities warranting hope—warranting, I may say, very great hope. For the present he will be under my especial care, and you will not therefore concern yourself with his studies. He will sleep with Milling and the others in dormitory number two.”

The lad formed a liking for me, and I think, and hope, I rendered his sojourn at “Alpha House” less irksome than otherwise it might have been. The Reverend Charles’ method with the backward was on all fours with that adopted for the bringing on of geese; he cooped them up and crammed them. The process is profitable to the trainer, but painful to the goose.

Young Harjohn and myself left “Alpha House” at the end of the same term; he bound for Brasenose, I for Bloomsbury. He made a point of never coming up to London without calling on me, when we would dine together in one of Soho’s many dingy, garlic-scented restaurants, and afterwards, over our bottle of cheap Beaune, discuss the coming of our lives; and when he entered Guy’s I left John Street, and took chambers close to his in Staple Inn. Those were pleasant days. Childhood is an over-rated period, fuller of sorrow than of joy. I would not take my childhood back, were it a gift, but I would give the rest of my life to live the twenties over again.

To Cyril I was the man of the world, and he looked to me for wisdom, not seeing always, I fear, that he got it; while from him I gathered enthusiasm, and learnt the profit that comes to a man from the keeping of ideals.

Often as we have talked, I have felt as though a visible light came from him, framing his face as with the halo of some pictured saint. Nature had wasted him, putting him into this nineteenth century of ours. Her victories are accomplished. Her army of heroes, the few sung, the many forgotten, is disbanded. The long peace won by their blood and pain is settled on the land. She had fashioned Cyril Harjohn for one of her soldiers. He would have been a martyr, in the days when thought led to the stake, a fighter for the truth, when to speak one’s mind

meant death. To lead some forlorn hope for Civilisation would have been his true work; Fate had condemned him to sentry duty in a well-ordered barrack.

But there is work to be done in the world, though the labour lies now in the vineyard, not on the battlefield. A small but sufficient fortune purchased for him freedom. To most men an assured income is the grave of ambition; to Cyril it was the foundation of desire. Relieved from the necessity of working to live, he could afford the luxury of living to work. His profession was to him a passion; he regarded it, not with the cold curiosity of the scholar, but with the imaginative devotion of the disciple. To help to push its frontiers forward, to carry its flag farther into the untravelled desert that ever lies beyond the moving boundary of human knowledge, was his dream.

One summer evening, I remember, we were sitting in his rooms, and during a silence there came to us through the open window the moaning of the city, as of a tired child. He rose and stretched his arms out towards the darkening streets, as if he would gather to him all the toiling men and women and comfort them.

“Oh, that I could help you!” he cried, “my brothers and my sisters. Take my life, oh God, and spend it for me among your people.”

The speech sounds theatrical, as I read it, written down, but to the young such words are not ridiculous, as to us older men.

In the natural order of events, he fell in love, and with just the woman one would expect him to be attracted by. Elspeth Grant was of the type from which the world, by instinct rather than by convention, has drawn its Madonnas and its saints. To describe a woman in words is impossible. Her beauty was not a possession to be catalogued, but herself. One felt it as one feels the beauty of a summer’s dawn breaking the shadows of a sleeping city, but one cannot set it down. I often met her, and, when talking to her, I knew myself—I, hack-journalist, frequenter of Fleet Street bars, retailer of smoke-room stories—a great gentleman, incapable of meanness, fit for all noble deeds.

In her presence life became a thing beautiful and gracious; a school for courtesy, and tenderness, and simplicity.

I have wondered since, coming to see a little more clearly into the ways of men, whether it would not have been better had she been less spiritual, had her nature possessed a greater alloy of earth, making it more fit for the uses of this work-a-day world. But at the time, these two friends of mine seemed to me to have been created for one another.

She appealed to all that was highest in Cyril's character, and he worshipped her with an unconcealed adoration that, from any man less high-minded, would have appeared affectation, and which she accepted with the sweet content that Artemis might have accorded to the homage of Endymion.

There was no formal engagement between them. Cyril seemed to shrink from the materialising of his love by any thought of marriage. To him she was an ideal of womanhood rather than a flesh-and-blood woman. His love for her was a religion; it had no taint of earthly passion in its composition.

Had I known the world better I might have anticipated the result; for the red blood ran in my friend's veins; and, alas, we dream our poems, not live them. But at the time, the idea of any other woman coming between them would have appeared to me folly. The suggestion that that other woman might be Geraldine Fawley I should have resented as an insult to my intelligence: that is the point of the story I do not understand to this day.

That he should be attracted by her, that he should love to linger near her, watching the dark flush come and go across her face, seeking to call the fire into her dark eyes was another matter, and quite comprehensible; for the girl was wonderfully handsome, with a bold, voluptuous beauty which invited while it dared. But considered in any other light than that of an animal, she repelled. At times when, for her ends, it seemed worth the exertion, she would assume a certain wayward sweetness, but her acting was always clumsy and exaggerated, capable of deceiving no one but a fool.

Cyril, at all events, was not taken in by it. One evening, at a Bohemian gathering, the entrée to which was notoriety rather than character, they had been talking together for some considerable time when, wishing to speak to Cyril, I strolled up to join them. As I came towards them she moved away, her dislike for me being equal to mine for her; a thing which was, perhaps, well for me.

"Miss Fawley prefers two as company to three," I observed, looking after her retreating figure.

"I am afraid she finds you what we should call an anti-sympathetic element," he replied, laughing.

"Do you like her?" I asked him, somewhat bluntly.

His eyes rested upon her as she stood in the doorway, talking to a small, black-bearded man who had just been introduced to her. After a few moments she went out upon his arm, and then Cyril turned to me.

"I think her," he replied, speaking, as was necessary, very low, "the embodiment of all that is evil in womanhood. In old days she would have been a Cleopatra, a Theodora, a Delilah. To-day, lacking opportunity, she is the 'smart woman' grubbing for an opening into society—and old Fawley's daughter. I'm tired; let us go home."

His allusion to her parentage was significant. Few people thought of connecting clever, handsome Geraldine Fawley with “Rogue Fawley,” Jew renegade, ex-gaol bird, and outside broker; who, having expectations from his daughter, took care not to hamper her by ever being seen in her company. But no one who had once met the father could ever forget the relationship while talking to the daughter. The older face, with its cruelty, its cunning, and its greed stood reproduced, feature for feature, line for line. It was as though Nature, for an artistic freak, had set herself the task of fashioning hideousness and beauty from precisely the same materials. Between the leer of the man and the smile of the girl, where lay the difference? It would have puzzled any student of anatomy to point it out. Yet the one sickened, while to gain the other most men would have given much.

Cyril’s answer to my question satisfied me for the time. He met the girl often, as was natural. She was a singer of some repute, and our social circle was what is commonly called “literary and artistic.” To do her justice, however, she made no attempt to fascinate him, nor even to be particularly agreeable to him. Indeed, she seemed to be at pains to show him her natural—in other words, her most objectionable side.

Coming out of the theatre one first night, we met her in the lobby. I was following Cyril at some little distance, but as he stopped to speak to her the movement of the crowd placed me just behind them.

“Will you be at Leightons’ to-morrow?” I heard him ask her in a low tone.

“Yes,” she answered, “and I wish you wouldn’t come.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re a fool, and you bore me.”

Under ordinary circumstances I should have taken the speech for badinage—it was the kind of wit the woman would have indulged in. But Cyril’s face clouded with anger and vexation. I said nothing. I did not wish him to know that I had overheard. I tried to believe that he was amusing himself, but my own explanation did not satisfy me.

Next evening I went to Leightons’ by myself. The Grants were in town, and Cyril was dining with them. I found I did not know many people, and cared little for those I did. I was about to escape when Miss Fawley’s name was announced. I was close to the door, and she had to stop and speak to me. We exchanged a few commonplaces. She either made love to a man or was rude to him. She generally talked to me without looking at me, nodding and smiling meanwhile to people around. I have met many women equally ill-mannered, and without her excuse. For a moment, however, she turned her eyes to mine.

“Where’s your friend, Mr. Harjohn?” she asked. “I thought you were inseparables.”

I looked at her in astonishment.

“He is dining out to-night,” I replied. “I do not think he will come.”

She laughed. I think it was the worst part about the woman, her laugh; it suggested so much cruelty.

“I think he will,” she said.

It angered me into an indiscretion. She was moving away. I stepped in front of her and stopped her.

“What makes you think so?” I asked, and my voice, I know, betrayed the anxiety I felt as to her reply. She looked me straight in the face. There was one virtue she possessed—the virtue that animals hold above mankind—truthfulness. She knew I disliked her—hate would be, perhaps, a more exact expression, did not the word sound out of date, and she made no pretence of not knowing it and returning the compliment.

“Because I am here,” she answered. “Why don’t you save him? Have you no influence over him? Tell the Saint to keep him; I don’t want him. You heard what I said to him last night. I shall only marry him for the sake of his position, and the money he can earn if he likes to work and not play the fool. Tell him what I have said; I shan’t deny it.”

She passed on to greet a decrepit old lord with a languishing smile, and I stood staring after her with, I fear, a somewhat stupid expression, until some young fool came up grinning, to ask me whether I had seen a ghost or backed a “wrong ’un.”

There was no need to wait; I felt no curiosity. Something told me the woman had spoken the truth. It was mere want of motive that made me linger. I saw him come in, and watched him hanging round her, like a dog, waiting for a kind word, or failing that, a look. I knew she saw me, and I knew it added to her zest that I was there. Not till we were in the street did I speak to him. He started as I touched him. We were neither of us good actors. He must have read much in my face, and I saw that he had read it; and we walked side by side in silence, I thinking what to say, wondering whether I should do good or harm, wishing that we were anywhere but in these silent, life-packed streets, so filled with the unseen. It was not until we had nearly reached the Albert Hall that we broke the silence. Then it was he who spoke:

“Do you think I haven’t told myself all that?” he said. “Do you think I don’t know I’m a damned fool, a cad, a liar! What the devil’s the good of talking about it?”

“But I can’t understand it,” I said.

“No,” he replied, “because you’re a fool, because you have only seen one side of me. You think me a grand gentleman, because I talk big, and am full of noble sentiment. Why, you idiot, the Devil himself could take

you in. He has his fine moods, I suppose, talks like a saint, and says his prayers with the rest of us. Do you remember the first night at old Fauerberg's? You poked your silly head into the dormitory, and saw me kneeling by the bedside, while the other fellows stood by grinning. You closed the door softly—you thought I never saw you. I was not praying, I was trying to pray.”

“It showed that you had pluck, if it showed nothing else,” I answered. “Most boys would not have tried, and you kept it up.”

“Ah, yes,” he answered, “I promised the Mater I would, and I did. Poor old soul, she was as big a fool as you are. She believed in me. Don't you remember, finding me one Saturday afternoon all alone, stuffing myself with cake and jam?”

I laughed at the recollection, though Heaven knows I was in no laughing mood. I had found him with an array of pastry spread out before him, sufficient to make him ill for a week, and I had boxed his ears, and had thrown the whole collection into the road.

“The Mater gave me half-a-crown a week for pocket-money,” he continued, “and I told the fellows I had only a shilling, so that I could gorge myself with the other eighteenpence undisturbed. Pah! I was a little beast even in those days!”

“It was only a schoolboy trick,” I argued, “it was natural enough.”

“Yes,” he answered, “and this is only a man's trick, and is natural enough; but it is going to ruin my life, to turn me into a beast instead of a man. Good God! do you think I don't know what that woman will do for me? She will drag me down, down, down, to her own level. All my ideas, all my ambition, all my life's work will be bartered for a smug practice, among paying patients. I shall scheme and plot to make a big income that we may live like a couple of plump animals, that we may dress ourselves gaudily and parade our wealth. Nothing will satisfy her. Such women are leeches; their only cry is ‘give, give, give.’ So long as I can supply her with money she will tolerate me, and to get it for her I shall sell my heart, and my brain, and my soul. She will load herself with jewels, and go about from house to house, half naked, to leer at every man she comes across: that is ‘life’ to such women. And I shall trot behind her, the laughing stock of every fool, the contempt of every man.”

His vehemence made any words I could say sound weak before they were uttered. What argument could I show stronger than that he had already put before himself? I knew his answer to everything I could urge.

My mistake had been in imagining him different from other men. I began to see that he was like the rest of us: part angel, part devil. But the new point he revealed to me was that the higher the one, the lower the other. It seems as if nature must balance her work; the nearer the leaves to heaven, the deeper the roots striking down

into the darkness. I knew that his passion for this woman made no change in his truer love. The one was a spiritual, the other a mere animal passion. The memory of incidents that had puzzled me came back to enlighten me. I remembered how often on nights when I had sat up late, working, I had heard his steps pass my door, heavy and uncertain; how once in a dingy quarter of London, I had met one who had strangely resembled him. I had followed him to speak, but the man's bleared eyes had stared angrily at me, and I had turned away, calling myself a fool for my mistake. But as I looked at the face beside me now, I understood.

And then there rose up before my eyes the face I knew better, the eager noble face that to merely look upon had been good. We had reached a small, evil-smelling street, leading from Leicester Square towards Holborn. I caught him by the shoulders and turned him round with his back against some church railings. I forget what I said. We are strange mixtures. I thought of the shy, backward boy I had coached and bullied at old Fauerberg's, of the laughing handsome lad I had watched grow into manhood. The very restaurant we had most frequented in his old Oxford days—where we had poured out our souls to one another, was in this very street where we were standing. For the moment I felt towards him as perhaps his mother might have felt; I wanted to scold him and to cry with him; to shake him and to put my arms about him. I pleaded with him, and urged him, and called him every name I could put my tongue to. It must have seemed an odd conversation. A passing policeman, making a not unnatural mistake, turned his bull's-eye upon us, and advised us sternly to go home. We laughed, and with that laugh Cyril came back to his own self, and we walked on to Staple Inn more soberly. He promised me to go away by the very first train the next morning, and to travel for some four or five months, and I undertook to make all the necessary explanations for him.

We both felt better for our talk, and when I wished him good-night at his door, it was the real Cyril Harjohn whose hand I gripped—the real Cyril, because the best that is in a man is his real self. If there be any future for man beyond this world, it is the good that is in him that will live. The other side of him is of the earth; it is that he will leave behind him.

He kept his word. In the morning he was gone, and I never saw him again. I had many letters from him, hopeful at first, full of strong resolves. He told me he had written to Elspeth, not telling her everything, for that she would not understand, but so much as would explain; and from her he had had sweet womanly letters in reply. I feared she might have been cold and unsympathetic, for often good women, untouched by temptation themselves, have small tenderness for those who struggle. But her goodness was something more than a mere passive quantity; she loved him the better because he had need of her. I believe she would have saved him from himself, had not fate interfered and taken the matter out of her hands. Women are capable of big sacrifices; I think this woman would have been content to lower herself, if by so doing she could have raised him.

But it was not to be. From India he wrote to me that he was coming home. I had not met the Fawley woman for some time, and she had gone out of my mind until one day, chancing upon a theatrical paper, some weeks old, I read that "Miss Fawley had sailed for Calcutta to fulfil an engagement of long standing."

I had his last letter in my pocket. I sat down and worked out the question of date. She would arrive in Calcutta the day before he left. Whether it was chance or intention on her part I never knew; as likely as not the former, for there is a fatalism in this world shaping our ends.

I heard no more from him, I hardly expected to do so, but three months later a mutual acquaintance stopped me on the Club steps.

"Have you heard the news," he said, "about young Harjohn?"

"No," I replied. "Is he married?"

"Married," he answered, "No, poor devil, he's dead!"

"Thank God," was on my lips, but fortunately I checked myself. "How did it happen?" I asked.

"At a shooting party, up at some Rajah's place. Must have caught his gun in some brambles, I suppose. The bullet went clean through his head."

"Dear me," I said, "how very sad!" I could think of nothing else to say at the moment.

THE DANCING PARTNER

The following short story was originally published in Novel Notes. Jerome K. Jerome. London: Leadenhall Press, 1893.

"This story," commenced MacShaughnassy, "comes from Furtwangen, a small town in the Black Forest. There lived there a very wonderful old fellow named Nicholas Geibel. His business was the making of mechanical toys, at which work he had acquired an almost European reputation. He made rabbits that would emerge from the heart of a cabbage, flop their ears, smooth their whiskers, and disappear again; cats that would wash their faces, and mew so naturally that dogs would mistake them for real cats and fly at them; dolls with phonographs concealed within them, that would raise their hats and say, 'Good morning; how do you do?' and some that would even sing a song.

"But, he was something more than a mere mechanic; he was an artist. His work was with him a hobby, almost a passion. His shop was filled with all manner of strange things that never would, or could, be sold -- things he had made for the pure love of making them. He had contrived a mechanical donkey that would trot for two hours by means of stored electricity, and trot, too, much faster than the live article, and with less need for exertion on the part of the driver, a bird that would shoot up into the air, fly round and round in a circle, and drop to earth at the exact spot from where it started; a skeleton that, supported by an upright iron bar, would dance a hornpipe, a life-size lady doll that could play the fiddle, and a gentleman with a hollow inside who could smoke a pipe and drink more lager beer than any three average German students put together, which is saying much.

"Indeed, it was the belief of the town that old Geibel could make a man capable of doing everything that a respectable man need want to do. One day he made a man who did too much, and it came about in this way:

"Young Doctor Follen had a baby, and the baby had a birthday. Its first birthday put Doctor Follen's household into somewhat of a flurry, but on the occasion of its second birthday, Mrs. Doctor Follen gave a ball in honour of the event. Old Geibel and his daughter Olga were among the guests.

"During the afternoon of the next day some three or four of Olga's bosom friends, who had also been present at the ball, dropped in to have a chat about it. They naturally fell to discussing the men, and to criticizing their dancing. Old Geibel was in the room, but he appeared to be absorbed in his newspaper, and the girls took no notice of him.

"'There seem to be fewer men who can dance at every ball you go to,' said one of the girls.

"'Yes, and don't the ones who can give themselves airs,' said another; 'they make quite a favor of asking you.'

"And how stupidly they talk,' added a third. 'They always say exactly the same things: "How charming you are looking to-night." "Do you often go to Vienna? Oh, you should, it's delightful." "What a charming dress you have on." "What a warm day it has been." "Do you like Wagner?" I do wish they'd think of something new.'

"Oh, I never mind how they talk,' said a fourth. 'If a man dances well he may be a fool for all I care.'

"He generally is,' slipped in a thin girl, rather spitefully.

"I go to a ball to dance,' continued the previous speaker, not noticing the interruption. 'All I ask is that he shall hold me firmly, take me round steadily, and not get tired before I do.'

"A clockwork figure would be the thing for you,' said the girl who had interrupted.

"Bravo!' cried one of the others, clapping her hands, 'what a capital idea!'

"What's a capital idea?' they asked.

"Why, a clockwork dancer, or, better still, one that would go by electricity and never run down.'

"The girls took up the idea with enthusiasm.

"Oh, what a lovely partner he would make,' said one; 'he would never kick you, or tread on your toes.'

"Or tear your dress,' said another.

"Or get out of step.'

"Or get giddy and lean on you.'

"And he would never want to mop his face with his handkerchief. I do hate to see a man do that after every dance.'

"And wouldn't want to spend the whole evening in the supper-room.'

"Why, with a phonograph inside him to grind out all the stock remarks, you would not be able to tell him from a real man,' said the girl who had first suggested the idea.

"Oh yes, you would,' said the thin girl, 'he would be so much nicer.'

"Old Geibel had laid down his paper, and was listening with both his ears. On one of the girls glancing in his direction, however, he hurriedly hid himself again behind it.

"After the girls were gone, he went into his workshop, where Olga heard him walking up and down, and every now and then chuckling to himself; and that night he talked to her a good deal about dancing and dancing men -- asked what dances were most popular -- what steps were gone through, with many other questions bearing on the subject.

"Then for a couple of weeks he kept much to his factory, and was very thoughtful and busy, though prone at unexpected moments to break into a quiet low laugh, as if enjoying a joke that nobody else knew of.

"A month later another ball took place in Furtwangen. On this occasion it was given by old Wenzel, the wealthy timber merchant, to celebrate his niece's betrothal, and Geibel and his daughter were again among the invited.

"When the hour arrived to set out, Olga sought her father. Not finding him in the house, she tapped at the door of his workshop. He appeared in his shirt-sleeves, looking hot but radiant.

"Don't wait for me,' he said, 'you go on, I'll follow you. I've got something to finish.'

"As she turned to obey he called after her, 'Tell them I'm going to bring a young man with me -- such a nice young man, and an excellent dancer. All the girls will like him.' Then he laughed and closed the door.

"Her father generally kept his doings secret from everybody, but she had a pretty shrewd suspicion of what he had been planning, and so, to a certain extent, was able to prepare the guests for what was coming.

Anticipation ran high, and the arrival of the famous mechanist was eagerly awaited.

"At length the sound of wheels was heard outside, followed by a great commotion in the passage, and old Wenzel himself, his jolly face red with excitement and suppressed laughter, burst into the room and announced in stentorian tones:

"Herr Geibel -- and a friend.'

"Herr Geibel and his 'friend' entered, greeted with shouts of laughter and applause, and advanced to the centre of the room.

"Allow me, ladies and gentlemen,' said Herr Geibel, 'to introduce you to my friend, Lieutenant Fritz. Fritz, my dear fellow, bow to the ladies and gentlemen.'

"Geibel placed his hand encouragingly on Fritz's shoulder, and the Lieutenant bowed low, accompanying the action with a harsh clicking noise in his throat, unpleasantly suggestive of a death-rattle. But that was only a detail.

"'He walks a little stiffly' (old Geibel took his arm and walked him forward a few steps. He certainly did walk stiffly), 'but then, walking is not his forte. He is essentially a dancing man. I have only been able to teach him the waltz as yet, but at that he is faultless. Come, which of you ladies may I introduce him to as a partner? He keeps perfect time; he never gets tired; he won't kick you or tread on your dress; he will hold you as firmly as you like, and go as quickly or as slowly as you please; he never gets giddy; and he is full of conversation. Come, speak up for yourself, my boy.'

"The old gentleman twisted one of the buttons at the back of his coat, and immediately Fritz opened his mouth, and in thin tones that appeared to proceed from the back of his head, remarked suddenly, 'May I have the pleasure?' and then shut his mouth again with a snap.

"That Lieutenant Fritz had made a strong impression on the company was undoubted, yet none of the girls seemed inclined to dance with him. They looked askance at his waxen face, with its staring eyes and fixed smile, and shuddered. At last old Geibel came to the girl who had conceived the idea.

"'It is your own suggestion, carried out to the letter,' said Geibel, 'an electric dancer. You owe it to the gentleman to give him a trial.'

"She was a bright, saucy little girl, fond of a frolic. Her host added his entreaties, and she consented.

"Her Geibel fixed the figure to her. Its right arm was screwed round her waist, and held her firmly; its delicately jointed left hand was made to fasten upon her right. The old toymaker showed her how to regulate its speed, and how to stop it, and release herself.

"'It will take you round in a complete circle,' he explained; 'be careful that no one knocks against you, and alters its course.'

"The music struck up. Old Geibel put the current in motion, and Annette and her strange partner began to dance.

"For a while everyone stood watching them. The figure performed its purpose admirably. Keeping perfect time and step, and holding its little partner tight clasped in an unyielding embrace, it revolved steadily, pouring forth at the same time a constant flow of squeaky conversation, broken by brief intervals of grinding silence.

"'How charming you are looking tonight,' it remarked in its thin, far-away voice. 'What a lovely day it has been. Do you like dancing? How well our steps agree. You will give me another, won't you? Oh, don't be so cruel. What a charming gown you have on. Isn't waltzing delightful? I could go on dancing for ever -- with you. Have you had supper?'

"As she grew more familiar with the uncanny creature, the girl's nervousness wore off, and she entered into the fun of the thing.

"'Oh, he's just lovely,' she cried, laughing; 'I could go on dancing with him all my life.'

"Couple after couple now joined them, and soon all the dancers in the room were whirling round behind them. Nicholas Geibel stood looking on, beaming with childish delight at his success.

"Old Wenzel approached him, and whispered something in his ear. Geibel laughed and nodded, and the two worked their way quietly towards the door.

"'This is the young people's house to-night,' said Wenzel, as soon as they were outside; 'you and I will have a quiet pipe and glass of hock, over in the counting-house.'

"Meanwhile the dancing grew more fast and furious. Little Annette loosened the screw regulating her partner's rate of progress, and the figure flew round with her swifter and swifter. Couple after couple dropped out exhausted, but they only went the faster, till at length they remained dancing alone.

"Madder and madder became the waltz. The music lagged behind: the musicians, unable to keep pace, ceased, and sat staring. The younger guests applauded, but the older faces began to grow anxious.

"'Hadn't you better stop, dear,' said one of the women, 'you'll make yourself so tired.'

"But Annette did not answer.

"'I believe she's fainted,' cried out a girl who had caught sight of her face as it was swept by.

"One of the men sprang forward and clutched at the figure, but its impetus threw him down on to the floor, where its steel-cased feet laid bare his cheek. The thing evidently did not intend to part with its prize so easily.

"Had any one retained a cool head, the figure, one cannot help thinking, might easily have been stopped. Two or three men acting in concert might have lifted it bodily off the floor, or have jammed it into a corner. But few human heads are capable of remaining cool under excitement. Those who are not present think how stupid must have been those who were; those who are reflect afterwards how simple it would have been to do this, that, or the other, if only they had thought of it at the time.

"The women grew hysterical. The men shouted contradictory directions to one another. Two of them made a bungling rush at the figure, which had the end result of forcing it out of its orbit at the centre of the room, and sending it crashing against the walls and furniture. A stream of blood showed itself down the girl's white frock,

and followed her along the floor. The affair was becoming horrible. The women rushed screaming from the room. The men followed them.

"One sensible suggestion was made: 'Find Geibel -- fetch Geibel.'

"No one had noticed him leave the room, no one knew where he was. A party went in search of him. The others, too unnerved to go back into the ballroom, crowded outside the door and listened. They could hear the steady whir of the wheels upon the polished floor as the thing spun round and round; the dull thud as every now and again it dashed itself and its burden against some opposing object and ricocheted off in a new direction.

"And everlastingly it talked in that thin ghostly voice, repeating over and over the same formula: 'How charming you look to-night. What a lovely day it has been. Oh, don't be so cruel. I could go on dancing for ever -- with you. Have you had supper?'

"Of course they sought Geibel everywhere but where he was. They looked in every room in the house, then they rushed off in a body to his own place, and spent precious minutes waking up his deaf old housekeeper. At last it occurred to one of the party that Wenzel was missing also, and then the idea of the counting-house across the yard presented itself to them, and there they found him.

"He rose up, very pale, and followed them; and he and old Wenzel forced their way through the crowd of guests gathered outside, and entered the room, and locked the door behind them.

"From within there came the muffled sound of low voices and quick steps, followed by a confused scuffling noise, then silence, then the low voices again.

"After a time the door opened, and those near it pressed forward to enter, but old Wenzel's broad head and shoulders barred the way.

"I want you -- and you, Bekler,' he said, addressing a couple of the elder men. His voice was calm, but his face was deadly white. 'The rest of you, please go -- get the women away as quickly as you can.'

"From that day old Nicholas Geibel confined himself to the making of mechanical rabbits, and cats that mewed and washed their faces."