The Passing of the Third Floor Back

by Jerome K. Jerome

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PASSING OF THE THIRD FLOOR BACK

By Jerome K. Jerome

Author of “Paul Kelver,” “Three Men in a Boat,” etc., etc.

New York

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The neighbourhood of Bloomsbury Square towards four o'clock of a November afternoon is not so crowded as to secure to the stranger, of appearance anything out of the common, immunity from observation. Tibb's boy, screaming at the top of his voice that she was his honey, stopped suddenly, stepped backwards on to the toes of a voluble young lady wheeling a perambulator, and remained deaf, apparently, to the somewhat personal remarks of the voluble young lady. Not until he had reached the next corner—and then more as a soliloquy than as information to the street—did Tibb's boy recover sufficient interest in his own affairs to remark that he was her bee. The voluble young lady herself, following some half-a-dozen yards behind, forgot her wrongs in contemplation of the stranger's back. There was this that was peculiar about the stranger's back: that instead of being flat it presented a decided curve. "It ain't a 'ump, and it don't look like kervitcher of the spine," observed the voluble young lady to herself. "Blimy if I don't believe 'e's taking 'ome 'is washing up his back."

The constable at the corner, trying to seem busy doing nothing, noticed the stranger's approach with gathering interest. "That's an odd sort of a walk of yours, young man," thought the constable. "You take care you don't fall down and tumble over yourself."

"Thought he was a young man," murmured the constable, the stranger having passed him. "He had a young face right enough."

The daylight was fading. The stranger, finding it impossible to read the name of the street upon the corner house, turned back.

“Why, ‘tis a young man,” the constable told himself; “a mere boy.”

“I beg your pardon,” said the stranger; “but would you mind telling me my way to Bloomsbury Square.”

“This is Bloomsbury Square,” explained the constable; “leastways round the corner is. What number might you be wanting?”

The stranger took from the ticket pocket of his tightly buttoned overcoat a piece of paper, unfolded it and read it out: “Mrs. Pennycherry. Number Forty-eight.”

“Round to the left,” instructed him the constable; “fourth house. Been recommended there?”

“By—by a friend,” replied the stranger. “Thank you very much.”

“Ah,” muttered the constable to himself; “guess you won’t be calling him that by the end of the week, young—”

“Funny,” added the constable, gazing after the retreating figure of the stranger. “Seen plenty of the other sex as looked young behind and old in front. This cove looks young in front and old behind. Guess he’ll look old all round if he stops long at mother Pennycherry’s: stingy old cat.”

Constables whose beat included Bloomsbury Square had their reasons for not liking Mrs. Pennycherry. Indeed it might have been difficult to discover any human being with reasons for liking that sharp-featured lady. Maybe the keeping of second-rate boarding houses in the neighbourhood of Bloomsbury does not tend to develop the virtues of generosity and amiability.

Meanwhile the stranger, proceeding upon his way, had rung the bell of Number Forty-eight. Mrs. Pennycherry, peeping from the area and catching a glimpse, above the railings, of a handsome if somewhat effeminate masculine face, hastened to

readjust her widow's cap before the looking-glass while directing Mary Jane to show the stranger, should he prove a problematical boarder, into the dining-room, and to light the gas.

"And don't stop gossiping, and don't you take it upon yourself to answer questions. Say I'll be up in a minute," were Mrs. Pennycherry's further instructions, "and mind you hide your hands as much as you can."

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"What are you grinning at?" demanded Mrs. Pennycherry, a couple of minutes later, of the dingy Mary Jane.

"Wasn't grinning," explained the meek Mary Jane, "was only smiling to myself."

"What at?"

"Dunno," admitted Mary Jane. But still she went on smiling.

"What's he like then?" demanded Mrs. Pennycherry.

"'E ain't the usual sort," was Mary Jane's opinion.

"Thank God for that," ejaculated Mrs. Pennycherry piously.

"Says 'e's been recommended, by a friend."

"By whom?"

"By a friend. 'E didn't say no name."

Mrs. Pennycherry pondered. "He's not the funny sort, is he?"

Not that sort at all. Mary Jane was sure of it.

Mrs. Pennycherry ascended the stairs still pondering. As she entered the room the stranger rose and bowed. Nothing could have been simpler than the stranger's bow, yet there came with it to Mrs. Pennycherry a rush of old sensations long forgotten. For one brief moment Mrs. Pennycherry saw herself an amiable well-bred lady, widow of a solicitor: a visitor had called to see her. It was but a momentary fancy.

The next instant Reality reasserted itself. Mrs. Pennycherry, a lodging-house keeper, existing precariously upon a daily round of petty meannesses, was prepared for contest with a possible new boarder, who fortunately looked an inexperienced young gentleman.

“Someone has recommended me to you,” began Mrs. Pennycherry; “may I ask who?”

But the stranger waved the question aside as immaterial.

“You might not remember—him,” he smiled. “He thought that I should do well to pass the few months I am given—that I have to be in London, here. You can take me in?”

Mrs. Pennycherry thought that she would be able to take the stranger in.

“A room to sleep in,” explained the stranger, “—any room will do—with food and drink sufficient for a man, is all that I require.”

“For breakfast,” began Mrs. Pennycherry, “I always give—”

“What is right and proper, I am convinced,” interrupted the stranger. “Pray do not trouble to go into detail, Mrs. Pennycherry. With whatever it is I shall be content.”

Mrs. Pennycherry, puzzled, shot a quick glance at the stranger, but his face, though the gentle eyes were smiling, was frank and serious.

“At all events you will see the room,” suggested Mrs. Pennycherry, “before we discuss terms.”

“Certainly,” agreed the stranger. “I am a little tired and shall be glad to rest there.”

Mrs. Pennycherry led the way upward; on the landing of the third floor, paused a moment undecided, then opened the door of the back bedroom.

“It is very comfortable,” commented the stranger.

“For this room,” stated Mrs. Pennycherry, “together with full board, consisting of—”

“Of everything needful. It goes without saying,” again interrupted the stranger with his quiet grave smile.

“I have generally asked,” continued Mrs. Pennycherry, “four pounds a week. To you—” Mrs. Pennycherry’s voice, unknown to her, took to itself the note of aggressive generosity—“seeing you have been recommended here, say three pounds ten.”

“Dear lady,” said the stranger, “that is kind of you. As you have divined, I am not a rich man. If it be not imposing upon you I accept your reduction with gratitude.”

Again Mrs. Pennycherry, familiar with the satirical method, shot a suspicious glance upon the stranger, but not a line was there, upon that smooth fair face, to which a sneer could for a moment have clung. Clearly he was as simple as he looked.

“Gas, of course, extra.”

“Of course,” agreed the Stranger.

“Coals—”

“We shall not quarrel,” for a third time the stranger interrupted. “You have been very considerate to me as it is. I feel, Mrs. Pennycherry, I can leave myself entirely in your hands.”

The stranger appeared anxious to be alone. Mrs. Pennycherry, having put a match to the stranger’s fire, turned to depart. And at this point it was that Mrs. Pennycherry, the holder hitherto of an unbroken record for sanity, behaved in a manner she herself, five minutes earlier in her career, would have deemed impossible—that no living soul who had ever known her would have believed, even had Mrs. Pennycherry gone down upon her knees and sworn it to them.

“Did I say three pound ten?” demanded Mrs. Pennycherry of the stranger, her hand upon the door. She spoke crossly. She was feeling cross, with the stranger, with herself—particularly with herself.

“You were kind enough to reduce it to that amount,” replied the stranger; “but if upon reflection you find yourself unable—”

“I was making a mistake,” said Mrs. Pennycherry, “it should have been two pound ten.”

“I cannot—I will not accept such sacrifice,” exclaimed the stranger; “the three pound ten I can well afford.”

“Two pound ten are my terms,” snapped Mrs. Pennycherry. “If you are bent on paying more, you can go elsewhere. You’ll find plenty to oblige you.”

Her vehemence must have impressed the stranger. “We will not contend further,” he smiled. “I was merely afraid that in the goodness of your heart—”

“Oh, it isn’t as good as all that,” growled Mrs. Pennycherry.

“I am not so sure,” returned the stranger. “I am somewhat suspicious of you. But wilful woman must, I suppose, have her way.”

The stranger held out his hand, and to Mrs. Pennycherry, at that moment, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to take it as if it had been the hand of an old friend and to end the interview with a pleasant laugh—though laughing was an exercise not often indulged in by Mrs. Pennycherry.

Mary Jane was standing by the window, her hands folded in front of her, when Mrs. Pennycherry re-entered the kitchen. By standing close to the window one caught a glimpse of the trees in Bloomsbury Square and through their bare branches of the sky beyond.

“There’s nothing much to do for the next half hour, till Cook comes back. I’ll see to the door if you’d like a run out?” suggested Mrs. Pennycherry.

“It would be nice,” agreed the girl so soon as she had recovered power of speech; “it’s just the time of day I like.”

“Don’t be longer than the half hour,” added Mrs. Pennycherry.

Forty-eight Bloomsbury Square, assembled after dinner in the drawing-room, discussed the stranger with that freedom and frankness characteristic of Forty-eight Bloomsbury Square, towards the absent.

“Not what I call a smart young man,” was the opinion of Augustus Longcord, who was something in the City.

“Thpeaking for mythelf,” commented his partner Isidore, “hav’n’th any uthe for the thmart young man. Too many of him, ath it ith.”

“Must be pretty smart if he’s one too many for you,” laughed his partner.

There was this to be said for the repartee of Forty-eight Bloomsbury Square: it was simple of construction and easy of comprehension.

“Well it made me feel good just looking at him,” declared Miss Kite, the highly coloured. “It was his clothes, I suppose—made me think of Noah and the ark—all that sort of thing.”

“It would be clothes that would make you think—if anything,” drawled the languid Miss Devine. She was a tall, handsome girl, engaged at the moment in futile efforts to recline with elegance and comfort combined upon a horsehair sofa. Miss Kite, by reason of having secured the only easy-chair, was unpopular that evening; so that Miss Devine’s remark received from the rest of the company more approbation than perhaps it merited.

“Is that intended to be clever, dear, or only rude?” Miss Kite requested to be informed.

“Both,” claimed Miss Devine.

“Myself? I must confess,” shouted the tall young lady’s father, commonly called the Colonel, “I found him a fool.”

“I noticed you seemed to be getting on very well together,” purred his wife, a plump, smiling little lady.

“Possibly we were,” retorted the Colonel. “Fate has accustomed me to the society of fools.”

“Isn’t it a pity to start quarrelling immediately after dinner, you two,” suggested their thoughtful daughter from the sofa, “you’ll have nothing left to amuse you for the rest of the evening.”

“He didn’t strike me as a conversationalist,” said the lady who was cousin to a baronet; “but he did pass the vegetables before he helped himself. A little thing like that shows breeding.”

“Or that he didn’t know you and thought maybe you’d leave him half a spoonful,” laughed Augustus the wit.

“What I can’t make out about him—” shouted the Colonel.

The stranger entered the room.

The Colonel, securing the evening paper, retired into a corner. The highly coloured Kite, reaching down from the mantelpiece a paper fan, held it coyly before her face. Miss Devine sat upright on the horse-hair sofa, and rearranged her skirts.

“Know anything?” demanded Augustus of the stranger, breaking the somewhat remarkable silence.

The stranger evidently did not understand. It was necessary for Augustus, the witty, to advance further into that odd silence.

“What’s going to pull off the Lincoln handicap? Tell me, and I’ll go out straight and put my shirt upon it.”

“I think you would act unwisely,” smiled the stranger; “I am not an authority upon the subject.”

“Not! Why they told me you were Captain Spy of the Sporting Life—in disguise.”

It would have been difficult for a joke to fall more flat. Nobody laughed, though why Mr. Augustus Longcord could not understand, and maybe none of his audience

could have told him, for at Forty-eight Bloomsbury Square Mr. Augustus Longcord passed as a humorist. The stranger himself appeared unaware that he was being made fun of.

“You have been misinformed,” assured him the stranger.

“I beg your pardon,” said Mr. Augustus Longcord.

“It is nothing,” replied the stranger in his sweet low voice, and passed on.

“Well what about this theatre,” demanded Mr. Longcord of his friend and partner; “do you want to go or don’t you?” Mr. Longcord was feeling irritable.

“Goth the ticketh—may ath well,” thought Isidore.

“Damn stupid piece, I’m told.”

“Motht of them thupid, more or leth. Pity to wathte the ticketh,” argued Isidore, and the pair went out.

“Are you staying long in London?” asked Miss Kite, raising her practised eyes towards the stranger.

“Not long,” answered the stranger. “At least I do not know. It depends.”

An unusual quiet had invaded the drawing-room of Forty-eight Bloomsbury Square, generally noisy with strident voices about this hour. The Colonel remained engrossed in his paper. Mrs. Devine sat with her plump white hands folded on her lap, whether asleep or not it was impossible to say. The lady who was cousin to a baronet had shifted her chair beneath the gasolier, her eyes bent on her everlasting crochet work. The languid Miss Devine had crossed to the piano, where she sat fingering softly the tuneless keys, her back to the cold barely-furnished room.

“Sit down!” commanded saucily Miss Kite, indicating with her fan the vacant seat beside her. “Tell me about yourself. You interest me.” Miss Kite adopted a pretty authoritative air towards all youthful-looking members of the opposite sex. It harmonised with the peach complexion and the golden hair, and fitted her about as

well.

“I am glad of that,” answered the stranger, taking the chair suggested. “I so wish to interest you.”

“You’re a very bold boy.” Miss Kite lowered her fan, for the purpose of glancing archly over the edge of it, and for the first time encountered the eyes of the stranger looking into hers. And then it was that Miss Kite experienced precisely the same curious sensation that an hour or so ago had troubled Mrs. Pennycherry when the stranger had first bowed to her. It seemed to Miss Kite that she was no longer the Miss Kite that, had she risen and looked into it, the fly-blown mirror over the marble mantelpiece would, she knew, have presented to her view; but quite another Miss Kite—a cheerful, bright-eyed lady verging on middle age, yet still good-looking in spite of her faded complexion and somewhat thin brown locks. Miss Kite felt a pang of jealousy shoot through her; this middle-aged Miss Kite seemed, on the whole, a more attractive lady. There was a wholesomeness, a broadmindedness about her that instinctively drew one towards her. Not hampered, as Miss Kite herself was, by the necessity of appearing to be somewhere between eighteen and twenty-two, this other Miss Kite could talk sensibly, even brilliantly: one felt it. A thoroughly “nice” woman this other Miss Kite; the real Miss Kite, though envious, was bound to admit it. Miss Kite wished to goodness she had never seen the woman. The glimpse of her had rendered Miss Kite dissatisfied with herself.

“I am not a boy,” explained the stranger; “and I had no intention of being bold.”

“I know,” replied Miss Kite. “It was a silly remark. Whatever induced me to make it, I can’t think. Getting foolish in my old age, I suppose.”

The stranger laughed. “Surely you are not old.”

“I’m thirty-nine,” snapped out Miss Kite. “You don’t call it young?”

“I think it a beautiful age,” insisted the stranger; “young enough not to have lost the joy of youth, old enough to have learnt sympathy.”

“Oh, I daresay,” returned Miss Kite, “any age you’d think beautiful. I’m going to bed.” Miss Kite rose. The paper fan had somehow got itself broken. She threw the fragments into the fire.

“It is early yet,” pleaded the stranger, “I was looking forward to a talk with you.”

“Well, you’ll be able to look forward to it,” retorted Miss Kite. “Good-night.”

The truth was, Miss Kite was impatient to have a look at herself in the glass, in her own room with the door shut. The vision of that other Miss Kite—the clean-looking lady of the pale face and the brown hair had been so vivid, Miss Kite wondered whether temporary forgetfulness might not have fallen upon her while dressing for dinner that evening.

The stranger, left to his own devices, strolled towards the loo table, seeking something to read.

“You seem to have frightened away Miss Kite,” remarked the lady who was cousin to a baronet.

“It seems so,” admitted the stranger.

“My cousin, Sir William Bosster,” observed the crocheting lady, “who married old Lord Egham’s niece—you never met the Eghams?”

“Hitherto,” replied the stranger, “I have not had that pleasure.”

“A charming family. Cannot understand—my cousin Sir William, I mean, cannot understand my remaining here. ‘My dear Emily’—he says the same thing every time he sees me: ‘My dear Emily, how can you exist among the sort of people one meets with in a boarding-house.’ But they amuse me.”

A sense of humour, agreed the stranger, was always of advantage.

“Our family on my mother’s side,” continued Sir William’s cousin in her placid monotone, “was connected with the Tatton-Joneses, who when King George the Fourth—” Sir William’s cousin, needing another reel of cotton, glanced up, and met

the stranger's gaze.

"I'm sure I don't know why I'm telling you all this," said Sir William's cousin in an irritable tone. "It can't possibly interest you."

"Everything connected with you interests me," gravely the stranger assured her.

"It is very kind of you to say so," sighed Sir William's cousin, but without conviction; "I am afraid sometimes I bore people."

The polite stranger refrained from contradiction.

"You see," continued the poor lady, "I really am of good family."

"Dear lady," said the stranger, "your gentle face, your gentle voice, your gentle bearing, all proclaim it."

She looked without flinching into the stranger's eyes, and gradually a smile banished the reigning dulness of her features.

"How foolish of me." She spoke rather to herself than to the stranger. "Why, of course, people—people whose opinion is worth troubling about—judge of you by what you are, not by what you go about saying you are."

The stranger remained silent.

"I am the widow of a provincial doctor, with an income of just two hundred and thirty pounds per annum," she argued. "The sensible thing for me to do is to make the best of it, and to worry myself about these high and mighty relations of mine as little as they have ever worried themselves about me."

The stranger appeared unable to think of anything worth saying.

"I have other connections," remembered Sir William's cousin; "those of my poor husband, to whom instead of being the 'poor relation' I could be the fairy god-mama. They are my people—or would be," added Sir William's cousin tartly, "if I wasn't a vulgar snob."

She flushed the instant she had said the words and, rising, commenced preparations

for a hurried departure.

“Now it seems I am driving you away,” sighed the stranger.

“Having been called a ‘vulgar snob,’” retorted the lady with some heat, “I think it about time I went.”

“The words were your own,” the stranger reminded her.

“Whatever I may have thought,” remarked the indignant dame, “no lady—least of all in the presence of a total stranger—would have called herself—” The poor dame paused, bewildered. “There is something very curious the matter with me this evening, that I cannot understand,” she explained, “I seem quite unable to avoid insulting myself.”

Still surrounded by bewilderment, she wished the stranger good-night, hoping that when next they met she would be more herself. The stranger, hoping so also, opened the door and closed it again behind her.

“Tell me,” laughed Miss Devine, who by sheer force of talent was contriving to wring harmony from the reluctant piano, “how did you manage to do it? I should like to know.”

“How did I do what?” inquired the stranger.

“Contrive to get rid so quickly of those two old frumps?”

“How well you play!” observed the stranger. “I knew you had genius for music the moment I saw you.”

“How could you tell?”

“It is written so clearly in your face.”

The girl laughed, well pleased. “You seem to have lost no time in studying my face.”

“It is a beautiful and interesting face,” observed the stranger.

She swung round sharply on the stool and their eyes met.

“You can read faces?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me, what else do you read in mine?”

“Frankness, courage—”

“Ah, yes, all the virtues. Perhaps. We will take them for granted.” It was odd how serious the girl had suddenly become. “Tell me the reverse side.”

“I see no reverse side,” replied the stranger. “I see but a fair girl, bursting into noble womanhood.”

“And nothing else? You read no trace of greed, of vanity, of sordidness, of—” An angry laugh escaped her lips. “And you are a reader of faces!”

“A reader of faces.” The stranger smiled. “Do you know what is written upon yours at this very moment? A love of truth that is almost fierce, scorn of lies, scorn of hypocrisy, the desire for all things pure, contempt of all things that are contemptible—especially of such things as are contemptible in woman. Tell me, do I not read aright?”

I wonder, thought the girl, is that why those two others both hurried from the room? Does everyone feel ashamed of the littleness that is in them when looked at by those clear, believing eyes of yours?

The idea occurred to her: “Papa seemed to have a good deal to say to you during dinner. Tell me, what were you talking about?”

“The military looking gentleman upon my left? We talked about your mother principally.”

“I am sorry,” returned the girl, wishful now she had not asked the question. “I was hoping he might have chosen another topic for the first evening!”

“He did try one or two,” admitted the stranger; “but I have been about the world so little, I was glad when he talked to me about himself. I feel we shall be friends. He

spoke so nicely, too, about Mrs. Devine."

"Indeed," commented the girl.

"He told me he had been married for twenty years and had never regretted it but once!"

Her black eyes flashed upon him, but meeting his, the suspicion died from them. She turned aside to hide her smile.

"So he regretted it—once."

"Only once," explained the stranger, "in a passing irritable mood. It was so frank of him to admit it. He told me—I think he has taken a liking to me. Indeed he hinted as much. He said he did not often get an opportunity of talking to a man like myself—he told me that he and your mother, when they travel together, are always mistaken for a honeymoon couple. Some of the experiences he related to me were really quite amusing." The stranger laughed at recollection of them—"that even here, in this place, they are generally referred to as 'Darby and Joan.'"

"Yes," said the girl, "that is true. Mr. Longcord gave them that name, the second evening after our arrival. It was considered clever—but rather obvious I thought myself."

"Nothing—so it seems to me," said the stranger, "is more beautiful than the love that has weathered the storms of life. The sweet, tender blossom that flowers in the heart of the young—in hearts such as yours—that, too, is beautiful. The love of the young for the young, that is the beginning of life. But the love of the old for the old, that is the beginning of—of things longer."

"You seem to find all things beautiful," the girl grumbled.

"But are not all things beautiful?" demanded the stranger.

The Colonel had finished his paper. "You two are engaged in a very absorbing conversation," observed the Colonel, approaching them.

“We were discussing Darbies and Joans,” explained his daughter. “How beautiful is the love that has weathered the storms of life!”

“Ah!” smiled the Colonel, “that is hardly fair. My friend has been repeating to cynical youth the confessions of an amorous husband’s affection for his middle-aged and somewhat—” The Colonel in playful mood laid his hand upon the stranger’s shoulder, an action that necessitated his looking straight into the stranger’s eyes. The Colonel drew himself up stiffly and turned scarlet.

Somebody was calling the Colonel a cad. Not only that, but was explaining quite clearly, so that the Colonel could see it for himself, why he was a cad.

“That you and your wife lead a cat and dog existence is a disgrace to both of you. At least you might have the decency to try and hide it from the world—not make a jest of your shame to every passing stranger. You are a cad, sir, a cad!”

Who was daring to say these things? Not the stranger, his lips had not moved. Besides, it was not his voice. Indeed it sounded much more like the voice of the Colonel himself. The Colonel looked from the stranger to his daughter, from his daughter back to the stranger. Clearly they had not heard the voice—a mere hallucination. The Colonel breathed again.

Yet the impression remaining was not to be shaken off. Undoubtedly it was bad taste to have joked to the stranger upon such a subject. No gentleman would have done so.

But then no gentleman would have permitted such a jest to be possible. No gentleman would be forever wrangling with his wife—certainly never in public. However irritating the woman, a gentleman would have exercised self-control.

Mrs. Devine had risen, was coming slowly across the room. Fear laid hold of the Colonel. She was going to address some aggravating remark to him—he could see it in her eye—which would irritate him into savage retort.

Even this prize idiot of a stranger would understand why boarding-house wits had

dubbed them “Darby and Joan,” would grasp the fact that the gallant Colonel had thought it amusing, in conversation with a table acquaintance, to hold his own wife up to ridicule.

“My dear,” cried the Colonel, hurrying to speak first, “does not this room strike you as cold? Let me fetch you a shawl.”

It was useless: the Colonel felt it. It had been too long the custom of both of them to preface with politeness their deadliest insults to each other. She came on, thinking of a suitable reply: suitable from her point of view, that is. In another moment the truth would be out. A wild, fantastic possibility flashed through the Colonel’s brain: If to him, why not to her?

“Letitia,” cried the Colonel, and the tone of his voice surprised her into silence, “I want you to look closely at our friend. Does he not remind you of someone?”

Mrs. Devine, so urged, looked at the stranger long and hard. “Yes,” she murmured, turning to her husband, “he does, who is it?”

“I cannot fix it,” replied the Colonel; “I thought that maybe you would remember.”

“It will come to me,” mused Mrs. Devine. “It is someone—years ago, when I was a girl—in Devonshire. Thank you, if it isn’t troubling you, Harry. I left it in the dining-room.”

It was, as Mr. Augustus Longcord explained to his partner Isidore, the colossal foolishness of the stranger that was the cause of all the trouble. “Give me a man, who can take care of himself—or thinks he can,” declared Augustus Longcord, “and I am prepared to give a good account of myself. But when a helpless baby refuses even to look at what you call your figures, tells you that your mere word is sufficient for him, and hands you over his cheque-book to fill up for yourself—well, it isn’t playing the game.”

“Auguthuth,” was the curt comment of his partner, “you’re a fool.”

“All right, my boy, you try,” suggested Augustus.

“Jutht what I mean to do,” asserted his partner.

“Well,” demanded Augustus one evening later, meeting Isidore ascending the stairs after a long talk with the stranger in the dining-room with the door shut.

“Oh, don’t arth me,” retorted Isidore, “thilly ath, thath what he ith.”

“What did he say?”

“What did he thay! talked about the Jewth: what a grand rathe they were—how people mithjudged them: all that thort of rot.

“Thaid thome of the motht honorable men he had ever met had been Jewth. Thought I wath one of ‘em!”

“Well, did you get anything out of him?”

“Get anything out of him. Of courthe not. Couldn’t very well thell the whole rathe, ath it were, for a couple of hundred poundth, after that. Didn’t theem worth it.”

There were many things Forty-eight Bloomsbury Square came gradually to the conclusion were not worth the doing:—Snatching at the gravy; pouncing out of one’s turn upon the vegetables and helping oneself to more than one’s fair share; manoeuvering for the easy-chair; sitting on the evening paper while pretending not to have seen it—all such-like tiresome bits of business. For the little one made out of it, really it was not worth the bother. Grumbling everlastingly at one’s food; grumbling everlastingly at most things; abusing Pennycherry behind her back; abusing, for a change, one’s fellow-boarders; squabbling with one’s fellow-boarders about nothing in particular; sneering at one’s fellow-boarders; talking scandal of one’s fellow-boarders; making senseless jokes about one’s fellow-boarders; talking big about oneself, nobody believing one—all such-like vulgarities. Other boarding-houses might indulge in them: Forty-eight Bloomsbury Square had its dignity to consider.

The truth is, Forty-eight Bloomsbury Square was coming to a very good opinion of itself: for the which not Bloomsbury Square so much as the stranger must be blamed. The stranger had arrived at Forty-eight Bloomsbury Square with the preconceived idea—where obtained from Heaven knows—that its seemingly commonplace, mean-minded, coarse-fibred occupants were in reality ladies and gentlemen of the first water; and time and observation had apparently only strengthened this absurd idea. The natural result was, Forty-eight Bloomsbury Square was coming round to the stranger's opinion of itself.

Mrs. Pennycherry, the stranger would persist in regarding as a lady born and bred, compelled by circumstances over which she had no control to fill an arduous but honorable position of middle-class society—a sort of foster-mother, to whom were due the thanks and gratitude of her promiscuous family; and this view of herself Mrs. Pennycherry now clung to with obstinate conviction. There were disadvantages attaching, but these Mrs. Pennycherry appeared prepared to suffer cheerfully. A lady born and bred cannot charge other ladies and gentlemen for coals and candles they have never burnt; a foster-mother cannot palm off upon her children New Zealand mutton for Southdown. A mere lodging-house-keeper can play these tricks, and pocket the profits. But a lady feels she cannot: Mrs. Pennycherry felt she no longer could.

To the stranger Miss Kite was a witty and delightful conversationalist of most attractive personality. Miss Kite had one failing: it was lack of vanity. She was unaware of her own delicate and refined beauty. If Miss Kite could only see herself with his, the stranger's eyes, the modesty that rendered her distrustful of her natural charms would fall from her. The stranger was so sure of it Miss Kite determined to put it to the test. One evening, an hour before dinner, there entered the drawing-room, when the stranger only was there and before the gas was lighted, a pleasant, good-looking lady, somewhat pale, with neatly-arranged brown hair, who demanded of the stranger if he knew her. All her body was trembling, and her voice

seemed inclined to run away from her and become a sob. But when the stranger, looking straight into her eyes, told her that from the likeness he thought she must be Miss Kite's younger sister, but much prettier, it became a laugh instead: and that evening the golden-haired Miss Kite disappeared never to show her high-coloured face again; and what perhaps, more than all else, might have impressed some former habitue of Forty-eight Bloomsbury Square with awe, it was that no one in the house made even a passing inquiry concerning her.

Sir William's cousin the stranger thought an acquisition to any boarding-house. A lady of high-class family! There was nothing outward or visible perhaps to tell you that she was of high-class family. She herself, naturally, would not mention the fact, yet somehow you felt it. Unconsciously she set a high-class tone, diffused an atmosphere of gentle manners. Not that the stranger had said this in so many words; Sir William's cousin gathered that he thought it, and felt herself in agreement with him.

For Mr. Longcord and his partner, as representatives of the best type of business men, the stranger had a great respect. With what unfortunate results to themselves has been noted. The curious thing is that the Firm appeared content with the price they had paid for the stranger's good opinion—had even, it was rumoured, acquired a taste for honest men's respect—that in the long run was likely to cost them dear. But we all have our pet extravagance.

The Colonel and Mrs. Devine both suffered a good deal at first from the necessity imposed upon them of learning, somewhat late in life, new tricks. In the privacy of their own apartment they condoled with one another.

"Tomfool nonsense," grumbled the Colonel, "you and I starting billing and cooing at our age!"

"What I object to," said Mrs. Devine, "is the feeling that somehow I am being made to do it."

“The idea that a man and his wife cannot have their little joke together for fear of what some impertinent jackanapes may think of them! it’s damn ridiculous,” the Colonel exploded.

“Even when he isn’t there,” said Mrs. Devine, “I seem to see him looking at me with those vexing eyes of his. Really the man quite haunts me.”

“I have met him somewhere,” mused the Colonel, “I’ll swear I’ve met him somewhere. I wish to goodness he would go.”

A hundred things a day the Colonel wanted to say to Mrs. Devine, a hundred things a day Mrs. Devine would have liked to observe to the Colonel. But by the time the opportunity occurred—when nobody else was by to hear—all interest in saying them was gone.

“Women will be women,” was the sentiment with which the Colonel consoled himself. “A man must bear with them—must never forget that he is a gentleman.”

“Oh, well, I suppose they’re all alike,” laughed Mrs. Devine to herself, having arrived at that stage of despair when one seeks refuge in cheerfulness. “What’s the use of putting oneself out—it does no good, and only upsets one.” There is a certain satisfaction in feeling you are bearing with heroic resignation the irritating follies of others. Colonel and Mrs. Devine came to enjoy the luxury of much self-approbation.

But the person seriously annoyed by the stranger’s bigoted belief in the innate goodness of everyone he came across was the languid, handsome Miss Devine. The stranger would have it that Miss Devine was a noble-souled, high-minded young woman, something midway between a Flora Macdonald and a Joan of Arc. Miss Devine, on the contrary, knew herself to be a sleek, luxury-loving animal, quite willing to sell herself to the bidder who could offer her the finest clothes, the richest foods, the most sumptuous surroundings. Such a bidder was to hand in the person of a retired bookmaker, a somewhat greasy old gentleman, but exceedingly rich and undoubtedly fond of her.

Miss Devine, having made up her mind that the thing had got to be done, was anxious that it should be done quickly. And here it was that the stranger's ridiculous opinion of her not only irritated but inconvenienced her. Under the very eyes of a person—however foolish—convinced that you are possessed of all the highest attributes of your sex, it is difficult to behave as though actuated by only the basest motives. A dozen times had Miss Devine determined to end the matter by formal acceptance of her elderly admirer's large and flabby hand, and a dozen times—the vision intervening of the stranger's grave, believing eyes—had Miss Devine refused decided answer. The stranger would one day depart. Indeed, he had told her himself, he was but a passing traveller. When he was gone it would be easier. So she thought at the time.

One afternoon the stranger entered the room where she was standing by the window, looking out upon the bare branches of the trees in Bloomsbury Square. She remembered afterwards, it was just such another foggy afternoon as the afternoon of the stranger's arrival three months before. No one else was in the room. The stranger closed the door, and came towards her with that curious, quick-leaping step of his. His long coat was tightly buttoned, and in his hands he carried his old felt hat and the massive knotted stick that was almost a staff.

"I have come to say good-bye," explained the stranger. "I am going."

"I shall not see you again?" asked the girl.

"I cannot say," replied the stranger. "But you will think of me?"

"Yes," she answered with a smile, "I can promise that."

"And I shall always remember you," promised the stranger, "and I wish you every joy—the joy of love, the joy of a happy marriage."

The girl winced. "Love and marriage are not always the same thing," she said.

"Not always," agreed the stranger, "but in your case they will be one."

She looked at him.

“Do you think I have not noticed?” smiled the stranger, “a gallant, handsome lad, and clever. You love him and he loves you. I could not have gone away without knowing it was well with you.”

Her gaze wandered towards the fading light.

“Ah, yes, I love him,” she answered petulantly. “Your eyes can see clearly enough, when they want to. But one does not live on love, in our world. I will tell you the man I am going to marry if you care to know.” She would not meet his eyes. She kept her gaze still fixed upon the dingy trees, the mist beyond, and spoke rapidly and vehemently: “The man who can give me all my soul’s desire—money and the things that money can buy. You think me a woman, I’m only a pig. He is moist, and breathes like a porpoise; with cunning in place of a brain, and the rest of him mere stomach. But he is good enough for me.”

She hoped this would shock the stranger and that now, perhaps, he would go. It irritated her to hear him only laugh.

“No,” he said, “you will not marry him.”

“Who will stop me?” she cried angrily.

“Your Better Self.”

His voice had a strange ring of authority, compelling her to turn and look upon his face. Yes, it was true, the fancy that from the very first had haunted her. She had met him, talked to him—in silent country roads, in crowded city streets, where was it? And always in talking with him her spirit had been lifted up: she had been—what he had always thought her.

“There are those,” continued the stranger (and for the first time she saw that he was of a noble presence, that his gentle, child-like eyes could also command), “whose Better Self lies slain by their own hand and troubles them no more. But yours, my

child, you have let grow too strong; it will ever be your master. You must obey. Flee from it and it will follow you; you cannot escape it. Insult it and it will chastise you with burning shame, with stinging self-reproach from day to day." The sternness faded from the beautiful face, the tenderness crept back. He laid his hand upon the young girl's shoulder. "You will marry your lover," he smiled. "With him you will walk the way of sunlight and of shadow."

And the girl, looking up into the strong, calm face, knew that it would be so, that the power of resisting her Better Self had passed away from her for ever.

"Now," said the stranger, "come to the door with me. Leave-takings are but wasted sadness. Let me pass out quietly. Close the door softly behind me."

She thought that perhaps he would turn his face again, but she saw no more of him than the odd roundness of his back under the tightly buttoned coat, before he faded into the gathering fog.

Then softly she closed the door.

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