

'Looks a harmless lunatic,' I commented disapprovingly.

'Oh, he's not a bad sort in his way, is the Hon. Bertie Wimpole. Perhaps that's why he's so keen about becoming my brother-in-law. We've known him some time now, and his gov, Lord Corbury, has a fine place about six miles from here. By most people he is regarded as a great parti.'

How could I guess that Wimpole was a red herring drawn across another trail? I was only conscious of a rising resentment against one more of these matrimonial conspirators against my happiness. This time of the male sex, to be sure. But then Kit was as dear an old chum as any, and if she went—well, I felt I'd go and be a fakir in the Himalayas, or something equally blaze. However, after pausing to glare somewhat glumly into the fire, all I remarked was,

'And Mistress Kit, how does she regard the matter?' I don't know if Jim imagined he was doing a little thought reading, but as I looked up he was regarding me from the depths of his armchair with a sort of introspective glance about his screwed up eyes, a slight smile radiating to the corners of his mouth from the cigar between his teeth in the centre.

'Oh, I fancy she likes him,' he replied. 'She would have all a girl could want from a worldly point of view, and, of course, we must remember that marriage is much more the natural corollary of a woman's existence than of a man's—like you or me, for instance.'

'Hother it, yes,' I responded recklessly. 'For me, however, it has been a sort of abyss, that has swallowed up nearly every old association I ever had, and I bear it no goodwill.'

'Now, Jack,' returned Jim in more serious tones, 'I'm afraid you've got a bit of a dog in the manger. You'd made all your pals old maids and bachelors if you had your way. They may, no doubt, all love you very much; but just think, it's rather hard on the girls, for instance. You won't marry 'em yourself, and you'd like to stop every other fellow doing so. You know I believe celibacy to be a great and grand thing, but it should help you to contemplate with philosophy the prospect of splendid isolation at last. I fear discontent or repining would look too much like a disbelief in your creed. Kit is a dear old girl, and I'll be awfully sorry when she goes, and go she's bound to some day. But, there, cheer up, old man, when all is lost you'll always have me to fall back on.'

It was all very well.

III.

A fortnight sped delightfully and brought us within two days of Christmas. The frost had stopped the hounds, so Jim and I took to our guns, and Kit, who could stand any amount of exertion, generally came with us. But latterly Jim began to have a terrible lot of business about the estate, and couldn't often turn out. Accordingly, Kit and I made expeditions alone.

I couldn't expect him to neglect his work, of course, but it was entirely his fault if I began to miss him less than I felt I should his sister if she were carried off by that ass Wimpole, or some other interloper. Separated or not, Jim and I had always stuck together in the old days, but he ought to have realised that Kit's companionship had grown since her short petticoat days into a serious rivalry if he still expected the same devotion from me.

Of course this was all part of a delusion and a snare, from which in due time there was to be an awakening, but which, when it came, was to leave me not discontented. Meanwhile, I didn't swing Kit any more, as the rope had long since come down from the old tree; neither did I throw her up to catch apples in the orchard. But to have this symmetrically young piece of womanhood for my daily companion, to hear my name fall familiarly from such pretty lips, was more than compensation for the lost joys of childhood.

The only note of discord was the growing thought that it would all soon be over. That I could not enjoy such a monopoly for ever; that when my lease ended I must say good-bye. Jim might or not stick to celibacy;

but, as he said, Kit would doubtless marry, and our happy triad would come to an end for evermore. I began to hate the man who was to work all this mischief, and Mr Bertie Wimpole, whose visits were persistent about this time, did not find he made much progress in my good graces. In fact, there is no doubt, I was guilty of a little irritation just now, for the interloper rode over twice and had an innings with Babs, when I particularly wanted her.

One night, I am conscious, I was unusually surly. We had been for a long bike ride, and while Wimpole had paired off with Kit Jim kept me behind with him the whole of the afternoon. In proportion as I grew less companionable the more Jim's spirits seemed to rise, and it looked to me uncommonly like a conspiracy in favour of the Hon. Bertie.

'Of course, you know your own affairs best,' I said, 'but it seems to me a beastly shame to let such a chap as that clear off with a splendid girl like Kitty. Hang me, if it isn't.'

'Well, old man, there's one way to get rid of him for good and all,' laughed Jimmy, as he left me for the night.

'Let's have it then, for goodness sake,' I demanded eagerly, sitting up in bed.

'Cut him out!' with which parting shot he bolted and left me to my own reflections.

IV.

My heart gave a jump into my mouth as I sat up gazing blankly at the door by which my friend had disappeared. Whatever did Jim mean? Was he actually serious in suggesting a measure so much at variance with all our joint professions? For some time I lay awake and watched the play of the firelight on the walls and ceiling, while all the time Jim's parting jest acquired a more sober appearance from the undoubted seriousness of the situation.

The more I reflected the more I began to realise how circumstances might alter cases. Even the wind howling over the bleak country without, and the snow drifting against the window panes, seemed to add strength to the idea through a sense of isolation from the world which they created. It was an isolation I was well contented with, but now the world was threatening to invade our little circle and steal away all of its magic charm.

And then I fell asleep, and dreamed that it was Christmas Day, and that we were all walking across the fields to the little church at Daring. Whereupon things seemed to resolve themselves into a wedding service, in which Wimpole suddenly appeared dragging Kitty towards the altar, while Jim, who marched behind, made a grimace at me, and said, 'There's a chance for you yet, you old juggins. Look sharp, or you'll be too late.'

Then I thought I stepped forward and touched Kit on the shoulder, and in a trice we were out in the park without anyone seeming to notice it. Away we went over a sort of half English, half Indian landscape, our steed, an enormous elephant, seeming to fly every obstacle, while endless laughter sounded from behind. Somehow my late scruples had completely vanished. Joy! Kit was going to marry me instead of that fool Wimpole. And when Jim all at once came past us in a tikka gurry with his beautiful aunt, who I knew was Mrs Jack all the time, I laughed out in his face.

Upon that everything faded away, and I opened my eyes to find a frosty sun was shining through the windows and that someone was knocking at my door.

It was not an ordinary maternal knock, such as might herald the arrival of the man with our hot water, but a continued tapping which never left off, while for a moment I strove to realise the normal condition of things. At my answering about the door at once came open, and, to my great surprise, a little curly-headed fellow in tiny pink pyjamas trotted up to my bedside, and solemnly inspected me. This was not all, for he was immediately followed by a diminutive maiden in similarly coloured night gear, who shouldered a big doll, and seemed a little less confident of her reception.

'Hullo, old man,' I exclaimed with a laugh, 'who are you, and what's

your name?' I had never heard of any children at Daring, and much wondered who these two lovely little atoms could be.

'My name is Jacky, and this is Maudy, and please will 'oo forgive papa?' petitioned the curly-headed mite, looking up at me with his big blue eyes.

'Ess, will 'oo forgive papa?' shyly echoed the little maid, holding on to her brother's waistband behind.

I am very fond of youngsters, and these were specially charming, yet I was mystified.

'But I don't know who your papa is, my darlings,' I replied, 'and has he been very naughty?'

'Vewy naughty I flink,' nodded the little spokesman with serious wide open eyes. 'Cos, cos, when we saw 'oo wiv Aunty Kit 'esterday papa said 'oo would be vewy cross wiv him if 'oo saw me and Maudy. But 'oo won't be cross, will 'oo? Papa says he touldn't help it,' pleaded Jacky, and encouraged by my smiling face, he boldly clambered up on to my bed, and putting his arms round my neck clinched the matter at once with a little kiss upon my nose.

I laughed outright, and little Maud, evidently thinking I was no longer dangerous, at once struggled to reach the same point of vantage as her brother.

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