Jane

W. Somerset Maugham

I REMEMBER very well the occasion on which I first saw Jane Fowler. It is indeed only because the details of the glimpse I had of her then are so clear that I trust my recollection at all, for, looking back, I must confess that I find it hard to believe that it has not played me a fantastic trick. I had lately returned to London from China and was drinking a dish of tea with Mrs Tower. Mrs Tower had been seized with the prevailing passion for decoration; and with the ruthlessness of her sex had sacrificed chairs in which she had comfortably sat for years, tables, cabinets, ornaments on which her eyes had dwelt in peace since she was married, pictures that had been familiar to her for a generation; and delivered herself into the hands of an expert. Nothing remained in her drawing-room with which she had any association, or to which any sentiment was attached; and she had invited me that day to see the fashionable glory in which she now lived. Everything that could be pickled was pickled and what couldn’t be pickled was painted. Nothing matched, but everything harmonized.

“Do you remember that ridiculous drawing-room suite that I used to have?” asked Mrs Tower.

The curtains were sumptuous yet severe; the sofa was covered with Italian brocade; the chair on which I sat was in petit point. The room was beautiful, opulent without garishness, and original without affectation; yet to me it lacked something; and while I praised with my lips I asked myself why I so much preferred the rather shabby chintz of the despised suite, the Victorian watercolours that I had known so long, and the ridiculous Dresden china that had adorned the chimney-piece. I wondered what it was that I missed in all these rooms that the decorators were turning out with a profitable industry. Was it heart? But Mrs Tower looked about her happily.

“Don’t you like my alabaster lamps?” she said. “They give such a soft light.”

“Personally I have a weakness for a light that you can see by,” I smiled.

“It’s so difficult to combine that with a light that you can’t be too much seen by,” laughed Mrs Tower.

I had no notion what her age was. When I was quite a young man she was a married woman a good deal older than I, but now she treated me as her contemporary. She constantly said that she made no secret of her age, which was forty, and then added with a smile that all women took five years off. She never sought to conceal the fact that she dyed her hair (it was a very pretty brown with reddish tints), and she said she did this because hair was hideous while it was going grey; as soon as hers was white she would cease to dye it.

“Then they’ll say what a young face I have.”

Meanwhile it was painted, though with discretion, and her eyes owed not a little of their vivacity to art. She was a handsome woman, exquisitely gowned, and in the sombre glow of the alabaster lamps did not look a day more than the forty she gave herself.

“It is only at my dressing-table that I can suffer the naked brightness of a thirty-two-candle electric bulb,” she added with smiling cynicism. “There I need it to tell me the first hideous truth and then to enable me to take the necessary steps to correct it.”

We gossiped pleasantly about our common friends and Mrs Tower brought me up to date in the scandal of the day. After roughing it here and there it was very agreeable to sit in a comfortable chair, the fire burning brightly on the hearth, charming tea-things set out on a charming table, and talk with this amusing, attractive woman. She treated me as a prodigal returned from his husks and was disposed to make much of me. She prided herself on her dinnerparties; she took no less trouble to have her guests suitably assorted than to give them excellent food; and there were few persons who did not look upon it as a treat to be bidden to one of them. Now she fixed a date and asked me whom I would like to meet.

“There’s only one thing I must tell you. If Jane Fowler is still here I shall have to put it off.”

“Who is Jane Fowler?” I asked.

Mrs Tower gave a rueful smile.

“Jane Fowler is my cross.”

“Oh!”

“Do you remember a photograph that I used to have on the piano before I had my room done, of a woman in a tight dress with tight sleeves and a gold locket, with her hair drawn back from a broad forehead and her ears showing and spectacles on a rather blunt nose? Well, that was Jane Fowler.”

“You had so many photographs about the room in your unregenerate days,” I said, vaguely.

“It makes me shudder to think of them. I’ve made them into a huge brown-paper parcel and hidden them in an attic’

“Well, who is Jane Fowler?” I asked again, smiling.

“She’s my sister-in-law. She was my husband’s sister and she married a manufacturer in the North. She’s been a widow for many years, and she’s very well-to-do.”

“And why is she your cross?”

“She’s worthy, she’s dowdy, she’s provincial. She looks twenty years older than I do and she’s quite capable of telling anyone she meets that we were at school together. She has an overwhelming sense of family affection and because I am her only living connexion she’s devoted to me. When she comes to London it never occurs to her that she should stay anywhere but here-she thinks it would hurt my feelings-and she’ll pay me visits of three or four weeks. We sit here and she knits and reads. And sometimes she insists on taking me to dine at Claridge’s and she looks like a funny old charwoman and everyone I particularly don’t want to be seen by is sitting at the next table. When we are driving home she says she loves giving me a little treat. With her own hands she makes me tea-cosies that I am forced to use when she is here and doilies and centrepieces for the dining-room table.”

Mrs Tower paused to take breath.

“I should have thought a woman of your tact would find a way to deal with a situation like that.”

“Ah, but don’t you see, I haven’t a chance. She’s so immeasurably kind. She has a heart of gold. She bores me to death, but I wouldn’t for anything let her suspect it.”

“And when does she arrive?”

“Tomorrow.”

But the answer was hardly out of Mrs Tower’s mouth when the bell rang. There were sounds in the hall of a slight commotion and in a minute or two the butler ushered in an elderly lady.

“Mrs Fowler,” he announced.

“Jane,” cried Mrs Tower, springing to her feet. “I wasn’t expecting you today.”

“So your butler has just told me. I certainly said today in my letter.”

Mrs Tower recovered her wits.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. I’m very glad to see you whenever you come. Fortunately I’m doing nothing this evening.”

“You mustn’t let me give you any trouble. If I can have a boiled egg for my dinner, that’s all I shall want.”

A faint grimace for a moment distorted Mrs Tower’s handsome features. A boiled egg!

“Oh, I think we can do a little better than that.”

I chuckled inwardly when I recollected that the two ladies were contemporaries. Mrs Fowler looked a good fifty-five. She was a rather big woman; she wore a black straw hat with a wide brim and from it a black lace veil hung over her shoulders, a cloak that oddly combined severity with fussiness, a long black dress, voluminous as though she wore several petticoats under it, and stout boots. She was evidently short-sighted, for she looked at you through large gold-rimmed spectacles.

“Won’t you have a cup of tea?” asked Mrs Tower.

“If it wouldn’t be too much trouble. I’ll take off my mantle.”

She began by stripping her hands of the black gloves she wore, and then took off her cloak. Round her neck was a solid gold chain from which hung a large gold locket in which I felt certain was a photograph of her deceased husband. Then she took off her hat and placed it neatly with her gloves and cloak on the sofa corner. Mrs Tower pursed her lips. Certainly those garments did not go very well with the austere but sumptuous beauty of Mrs Tower’s redecorated drawing-room. I wondered where on earth Mrs Fowler had found the extraordinary clothes she wore. They were not old and the materials were expensive. It was astounding to think that dressmakers still made things that had not been worn for a quarter of a century. Mrs Fowler’s grey hair was very plainly done, showing all her forehead and her ears, with a parting in the middle. It had evidently never known the tongs of Monsieur Marcel. Now her eyes fell on the tea-table with its teapot of Georgian silver and its cups in Old Worcester.

“What have you done with the tea-cosy I gave you last time I came up, Marion?” she asked. “Don’t you use it?”

“Yes, I used it every day, Jane,” answered Mrs Tower glibly. “Unfortunately we had an accident with it a little while ago. It got burnt.”

“But the last one I gave you got burnt.”

“I’m afraid you’ll think us very careless.”

“It doesn’t really matter,” smiled Mrs Fowler. “I shall enjoy making you another. I’ll go to Liberty’s tomorrow and buy some silks.”

Mrs Tower kept her face bravely.

“I don’t deserve it, you know. Doesn’t your vicar’s wife need one?”

“Oh, I’ve just made her one,” said Mrs Fowler brightly.

I noticed that when she smiled she showed white, small, and regular teeth. They were a real beauty. Her smile was certainly very sweet.

But I felt it high time for me to leave the two ladies to themselves, so I took my leave.

Early next morning Mrs Tower rang me up and I heard at once from her voice that she was in high spirits.

“I’ve got the most wonderful news for you,” she said. “Jane is going to be married.”

“Nonsense.”

“Her fiance is coming to dine here tonight to be introduced to me and I want you to come too.”

“Oh, but I shall be in the way.”

“No, you won’t. Jane suggested herself that I should ask you. Do come.”

She was bubbling over with laughter.

“Who is he?”

“I don’t know. She tells me he’s an architect. Can you imagine the sort of man Jane would marry?”

I had nothing to do and I could trust Mrs Tower to give me a good dinner.

When I arrived Mrs Tower, very splendid in a tea-gown a little too young for her, was alone.

“Jane is putting the finishing touches to her appearance. I’m longing for you to see her. She’s all in a flutter. She says he adores her. His name is Gilbert and when she speaks of him her voice gets all funny and tremulous. It makes me want to laugh.”

“I wonder what he’s like.”

“Oh, I’m sure I know. Very big and massive, with a bald head and an immense gold chain across an immense tummy. A large, fat, clean-shaven, red face and a booming voice.”

Mrs Fowler came in. She wore a very stiff black silk dress with a wide skirt and a train. At the neck it was cut into a timid V and the sleeves came down to the elbows. She wore a necklace of diamonds set in silver. She carried in her hands a long pair of black gloves and a fan of black ostrich feathers. She managed (as so few people do) to look exactly what she was. You could never have thought her anything in the world but the respectable relict of a North-country manufacturer of ample means.

“You’ve really got quite a pretty neck, Jane,” said Mrs Tower with a kindly smile.

It was indeed astonishingly young when you compared it with her weather-beaten face. It was smooth and unlined and the skin was white. And I noticed then that her head was very well placed on her shoulders.

“Has Marion told you my news?” she said, turning to me with that really charming smile of hers as if we were already old friends.

“I must congratulate you,” I said.

“Wait to do that till you’ve seen my young man.”

“I think it’s too sweet to hear you talk of your young man,” smiled Mrs Tower.

Mrs Fowler’s eyes certainly twinkled behind her preposterous spectacles.

“Don’t expect anyone too old. You wouldn’t like me to marry a decrepit old gentleman with one foot in the grave, would you?”

This was the only warning she gave us. Indeed there was no time for any further discussion, for the butler flung open the door and in a loud voice announced:

“Mr Gilbert Napier.”

There entered a youth in a very well-cut dinner jacket. He was slight, not very tall, with fair hair in which there was a hint of a natural wave, cleanshaven, and blue-eyed. He was not particularly good-looking, but he had a pleasant, amiable face. In ten years he would probably be wizened and sallow; but now, in extreme youth, he was fresh and clean and blooming. For he was certainly not more than twenty-four. My first thought was that this was the son of Jane Fowler’s fiance (I had not known he was a widower) come to say that his father was prevented from dining by a sudden attack of gout. But his eyes fell immediately on Mrs Fowler, his face lit up, and he went towards her with both hands outstretched. Mrs Fowler gave him hers, a demure smile on her lips, and turned to her sister-in-law.

“This is my young man, Marion,” she said.

He held out his hand.

“I hope you’ll like me, Mrs Tower,” he said. “Jane tells me you’re the only relation she has in the world.”

Mrs Tower’s face was wonderful to behold. I saw then to admiration how bravely good breeding and social usage could combat the instincts of the natural woman. For the astonishment and then the dismay that for an instant she could not conceal were quickly driven away, and her face assumed an expression of affable welcome. But she was evidently at a loss for words. It was not unnatural if Gilbert felt a certain embarrassment and I was too busy preventing myself from laughing to think of anything to say. Mrs Fowler alone kept perfectly calm.

“I know you’ll like him, Marion. There’s no one enjoys good food more than he does.” She turned to the young man. “Marion’s dinners are famous.”

“I know,” he beamed.

Mrs Tower made some quick rejoinder and we went downstairs. I shall not soon forget the exquisite comedy of that meal. Mrs Tower could not make up her mind whether the pair of them were playing a practical joke on her or whether Jane by wilfully concealing her fiancé”s age had hoped to make her look foolish. But then Jane never jested and she was incapable of doing a malicious thing. Mrs Tower was amazed, exasperated, and perplexed. But she had recovered her self-control, and for nothing would she have forgotten that she was a perfect hostess whose duty it was to make her party go. She talked vivaciously; but I wondered if Gilbert Napier saw how hard and vindictive was the expression of her eyes behind the mask of friendliness that she turned to him. She was measuring him. She was seeking to delve into the secret of his soul. I could see that she was in a passion, for under her rouge her cheeks glowed with an angry red.

“You’ve got a very high colour, Marion,” said Jane, looking at her amiably through her great round spectacles.

“I dressed in a hurry. I dare say I put on too much rouge.”

“Oh, is it rouge? I thought it was natural. Otherwise I shouldn’t have mentioned it.” She gave Gilbert a shy little smile. “You know, Marion and I were at school together. You would never think it to look at us now, would you? But of course I’ve lived a very quiet life.”

I do not know what she meant by these remarks; it was almost incredible that she made them in complete simplicity; but anyhow they goaded Mrs Tower to such a fury that she flung her own vanity to the winds. She smiled brightly.

“We shall neither of us see fifty again, Jane,” she said.

If the observation was meant to discomfit the widow it failed.

“Gilbert says I mustn’t acknowledge to more than forty-nine for his sake,” she answered blandly.

Mrs Tower’s hands trembled slightly, but she found a retort.

“There is of course a certain disparity of age between you,” she smiled.

“Twenty-seven years,” said Jane. “Do you think it’s too much? Gilbert says I’m very young for my age. I told you I shouldn’t like to marry a man with one foot in the grave.”

I was really obliged to laugh and Gilbert laughed too. His laughter was frank and boyish. It looked as though he were amused at everything Jane said. But Mrs Tower was almost at the end of her tether and I was afraid that unless relief came she would for once forget that she was a woman of the world. I came to the rescue as best I could.

“I suppose you’re very busy buying your trousseau,” I said.

“No. I wanted to get my things from the dressmaker in Liverpool I’ve been to ever since I was first married. But Gilbert won’t let me. He’s very masterful, and of course he has wonderful taste.”

She looked at him with a little affectionate smile, demurely, as though she were a girl of seventeen.

Mrs Tower went quite pale under her make-up.

“We’re going to Italy for our honeymoon. Gilbert has never had a chance of studying Renaissance architecture and of course it’s important for an architect to see things for himself. And we shall stop in Paris on the way and get my clothes there.”

“Do you expect to be away long?”

“Gilbert has arranged with his office to stay away for six months. It will be such a treat for him, won’t it? You see, he’s never had more than a fortnight’s holiday before.”

“Why not?” asked Mrs Tower in a tone that no effort of will could prevent from being icy.

“He’s never been able to afford it, poor dear.”

“Ah!” said Mrs Tower, and into the exclamation put volumes.

Coffee was served and the ladies went upstairs. Gilbert and I began to talk in the desultory way in which men talk who have nothing whatever to say to one another; but in two minutes a note was brought in to me by the butler. It was from Mrs Tower and ran as follows:

Come upstairs quickly and then go as soon as you can. Take him with you. Unless I have it out with Jane at once I shall have a fit.

I told a facile lie.

“Mrs Tower has a headache and wants to go to bed. I think if you don’t mind we’d better clear out.”

“Certainly,” he answered.

We went upstairs and five minutes later were on the doorstep. I called a taxi and offered the young man a lift.

“No, thanks,” he answered. “I’ll just walk to the corner and jump on a bus.”

Mrs Tower sprang to the fray as soon as she heard the front door close behind us.

“Are you crazy, Jane?” she cried.

“Not more than most people who don’t habitually live in a lunatic asylum, I trust,” Jane answered blandly.

“May I ask why you’re going to marry this young man?” asked Mrs Tower with formidable politeness.

“Partly because he won’t take no for an answer. He’s asked me five times. I grew positively tired of refusing him.”

“And why do you think he’s so anxious to marry you?”

“I amuse him.”

Mrs Tower gave an exclamation of annoyance.

“He’s an unscrupulous rascal. I very nearly told him so to his face.”

“You would have been wrong, and it wouldn’t have been very polite.”

“He’s penniless and you’re rich. You can’t be such a besotted fool as not to see that he’s marrying you for your money.”

Jane remained perfectly composed. She observed her sister-in-law’s agitation with detachment.

“I don’t think he is, you know,” she replied. “I think he’s very fond of me.”

“You’re an old woman, Jane.”

“I’m the same age as you are, Marion,” she smiled.

“I’ve never let myself go. I’m very young for my age. No one would think I was more than forty. But even I wouldn’t dream of marrying a boy twenty years younger than myself.”

“Twenty-seven,” corrected Jane.

“Do you mean to tell me that you can bring yourself to believe that it’s possible for a young man to care for a woman old enough to be his mother?”

“I’ve lived very much in the country for many years. I dare say there’s a great deal about human nature that I don’t know. They tell me there’s a man called Freud, an Austrian, I believe …”

But Mrs Tower interrupted her without any politeness at all.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Jane. It’s so undignified. It’s so ungraceful. I always thought you were a sensible woman. Really you’re the last person I should ever have thought likely to fall in love with a boy.”

“But I’m not in love with him. I’ve told him that. Of course I like him very much or I wouldn’t think of marrying him. I thought it only fair to tell him quite plainly what my feelings were towards him.”

Mrs Tower gasped. The blood rushed to her head and her breathing oppressed her. She had no fan, but she seized the evening paper and vigorously fanned herself with it.

“If you’re not in love with him why do you want to marry him?”

“I’ve been a widow a very long time and I’ve led a very quiet life. I thought I’d like a change.”

“If you want to marry just to be married why don’t you marry a man of your own age?”

“No man of my own age has asked me five times. In fact no man of my own age has asked me at all.”

Jane chuckled as she answered. It drove Mrs Tower to the final pitch of frenzy.

“Don’t laugh, Jane, I won’t have it. I don’t think you can be right in your mind. It’s dreadful.”

It was altogether too much for her and she burst into tears. She knew that at her age it was fatal to cry, her eyes would be swollen for twenty-four hours and she would look a sight. But there was no help for it. She wept. Jane remained perfectly calm. She looked at Marion through her large spectacles and reflectively smoothed the lap of her black silk dress.

“You’re going to be so dreadfully unhappy,” Mrs Tower sobbed, dabbing her eyes cautiously in the hope that the black on her lashes would not smudge.

“I don’t think so, you know,” Jane answered in those equable, mild tones of hers, as if there were a little smile behind the words. “We’ve talked it over very thoroughly. I always think I’m a very easy person to live with. I think I shall make Gilbert very happy and comfortable. He’s never had anyone to look after him properly. We’re only marrying after mature consideration. And we’ve decided that if either of us wants his liberty the other will place no obstacles in the way of his getting it.”

Mrs Tower had by now recovered herself sufficiently to make a cutting remark.

“How much has he persuaded you to settle on him?”

“I wanted to settle a thousand a year on him, but he wouldn’t hear of it. He was quite upset when I made the suggestion. He says he can earn quite enough for his own needs.”

“He’s more cunning than I thought,” said Mrs Tower acidly.

Jane paused a little and looked at her sister-in-law with kindly but resolute eyes.

“You see, my dear, it’s different for you,” she said. “You’ve never been so very much a widow, have you?”

Mrs Tower looked at her. She blushed a little. She even felt slightly uncomfortable. But of course Jane was much too simple to intend an innuendo. Mrs Tower gathered herself together with dignity.

“I’m so upset that I really must go to bed,” she said. “We’ll resume the conversation tomorrow morning.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be very convenient, dear. Gilbert and I are going to get the licence tomorrow morning.”

Mrs Tower threw up her hands in a gesture of dismay, but she found nothing more to say.

The marriage took place at a registrar’s office. Mrs Tower and I were the witnesses. Gilbert in a smart blue suit looked absurdly young and he was obviously nervous. It is a trying moment for any man. But Jane kept her admirable composure. She might have been in the habit of marrying as frequently as a woman of fashion. Only a slight colour on her cheeks suggested that beneath her calm was some faint excitement. It is a thrilling moment for any woman. She wore a very full dress of silvery grey velvet in the cut of which

I recognized the hand of the dressmaker in Liverpool (evidently a widow of unimpeachable character) who had made her gowns for so many years; but she had so far succumbed to the frivolity of the occasion as to wear a large picture hat covered with blue ostrich feathers. Her gold-rimmed spectacles made it extraordinarily grotesque. When the ceremony was over the registrar (somewhat taken aback, I thought, by the difference of age between the pair he was marrying) shook hands with her, tendering his strictly official congratulations; and the bridegroom, blushing slightly, kissed her. Mrs Tower, resigned but implacable, kissed her; and then the bride looked at me expectantly. It was evidently fitting that I should kiss her too. I did. I confess that I felt a little shy as we walked out of the registrar’s office past loungers who waited cynically to see the bridal pairs, and it was with relief that I stepped into Mrs Tower’s car. We drove to Victoria Station, for the happy couple were to go over to Paris by the two o’clock train, and Jane had insisted that the wedding-breakfast should be eaten at the station restaurant. She said it always made her nervous not to be on the platform in good time. Mrs Tower, present only from a strong sense of family duty, was able to do little to make the party go off well; she ate nothing (for which I could not blame her, since the food was execrable, and anyway I hate champagne at luncheon) and talked in a strained voice. But Jane went through the menu conscientiously.

“I always think one should make a hearty meal before starting out on a journey,” she said.

We saw them off, and I drove Mrs Tower back to her house.

“How long do you give it?” she said. “Six months?”

“Let’s hope for the best,” I smiled.

“Don’t be so absurd. There can be no ‘best’. You don’t think he’s marrying her for anything but her money, do you? Of course it can’t last. My only hope is that she won’t have to go through as much suffering as she deserves.”

I laughed. The charitable words were spoken in such a tone as to leave me in small doubt of Mrs Tower’s meaning.

“Well, if it doesn’t last you’ll have the consolation of saying: ‘I told you so’,” I said.

“I promise you I’ll never do that.”

“Then you’ll have the satisfaction of congratulating yourself on your self-control in not saying: ‘I told you so’.”

“She’s old and dowdy and dull.”

“Are you sure she’s dull?” I said. “It’s true she doesn’t say very much, but when she says anything it’s very much to the point.”

“I’ve never heard her make a joke in my life.”

I was once more in the Far East when Gilbert and Jane returned from their honeymoon and this time I remained away for nearly two years. Mrs Tower was a bad correspondent and though I sent her an occasional picture-postcard I received no news from her. But I met her within a week of my return to London; I was dining out and found that I was seated next to her. It was an immense party, I think we were four-and-twenty, like the blackbirds in the pie, and, arriving somewhat late, I was too confused by the crowd in which I found myself to notice who was there. But when we sat down, looking round the long table I saw that a good many of my fellow-guests were well known to the public from their photographs in the illustrated papers. Our hostess had a weakness for the persons technically known as celebrities and this was an unusually brilliant gathering. When Mrs Tower and I had exchanged the conventional remarks that two people make when they have not seen one another for a couple of years I asked about Jane.

“She’s very well,” said Mrs Tower with a certain dryness.

“How has the marriage turned out?”

Mrs Tower paused a little and took a salted almond from the dish in front of her.

“It appears to be quite a success.”

“You were wrong then?”

“I said it wouldn’t last and I still say it won’t last. It’s contrary to human nature.”

“Is she happy?”

“They’re both happy.”

“I suppose you don’t see very much of them.”

“At first I saw quite a lot of them. But now …” Mrs Tower pursed her lips a little. “Jane is becoming very grand.”

“What do you mean?” I laughed.

“I think I should tell you that she’s here tonight.”

“Here?”

I was startled. I looked round the table again. Our hostess was a delightful and an entertaining woman, but I could not imagine that she would be likely to invite to a dinner such as this the elderly and dowdy wife of an obscure architect. Mrs Tower saw my perplexity and was shrewd enough to see what was in my mind. She smiled thinly.

“Look on the left of our host.”

I looked. Oddly enough the woman who sat there had by her fantastic appearance attracted my attention the moment I was ushered into the crowded drawing-room. I thought I noticed a gleam of recognition in her eye, but to the best of my belief I had never seen her before. She was not a young woman, for her hair was iron-grey; it was cut very short and clustered thickly round her well-shaped head in tight curls. She made no attempt at youth, for she was conspicuous in that gathering by using neither lipstick, rouge, nor powder. Her face, not a particularly handsome one, was red and weather-beaten; but because it owed nothing to artifice had a naturalness that was very pleasing. It contrasted oddly with the whiteness of her shoulders. They were really magnificent. A woman of thirty might have been proud of them. But her dress was extraordinary. I had not often seen anything more audacious. It was cut very low, with short skirts, which were then the fashion, in black and yellow; it had almost the effect of fancy-dress and yet so became her that though on anyone else it would have been outrageous, on her it had the inevitable simplicity of nature. And to complete the impression of an eccentricity in which there was no pose and of an extravagance in which there was no ostentation she wore, attached by a broad black ribbon, a single eyeglass.

“You’re not going to tell me that is your sister-in-law,” I gasped.

“That is Jane Napier,” said Mrs Tower icily.

At that moment she was speaking. Her host was turned towards her with an anticipatory smile. A baldish white-haired man, with a sharp, intelligent face, who sat on her left, was leaning forward eagerly, and the couple who sat opposite, ceasing to talk with one another, listened intently. She said her say and they all, with a sudden movement, threw themselves back in their chairs and burst into vociferous laughter. From the other side of the table a man addressed Mrs Tower: I recognized a famous statesman.

“Your sister-in-law has made another joke, Mrs Tower,” he said.

Mrs Tower smiled.

“She’s priceless, isn’t she?”

“Let me have a long drink of champagne and then for heaven’s sake tell me all about it,” I said.

Well, this is how I gathered it had all happened. At the beginning of their honeymoon Gilbert took Jane to various dressmakers in Paris and he made no objection to her choosing a number of “gowns’ after her own heart; but he persuaded her to have a “frock’ or two made according to his own design. It appeared that he had a knack for that kind of work. He engaged a smart French maid. Jane had never had such a thing before. She did her own mending and when she wanted “doing up’ was in the habit of ringing for the housemaid. The dresses Gilbert had devised were very different from anything she had worn before; but he had been careful not to go too far too quickly, and because it pleased him she persuaded herself, though not without misgivings, to wear them in preference to those she had chosen herself. Of course she could not wear them with the voluminous petticoats she had been in the habit of using, and these, though it cost her an anxious moment, she discarded.

“Now if you please,” said Mrs Tower, with something very like a sniff of disapproval, “she wears nothing but thin silk tights. It’s a wonder to me she doesn’t catch her death of cold at her age.”

Gilbert and the French maid taught her how to wear her clothes, and, unexpectedly enough, she was very quick at learning. The French maid was in raptures over Madame’s arms and shoulders. It was a scandal not to show anything so fine.

“Wait a little, Alphonsine,” said Gilbert. “The next lot of clothes I design for Madame we’ll make the most of her.”

The spectacles of course were dreadful. No one could look really well in gold-rimmed spectacles. Gilbert tried some with tortoiseshell rims. He shook his head.

“They’d look all right on a girl,” he said. “You’re too old to wear spectacles, Jane.” Suddenly he had an inspiration. “By George, I’ve got it. You must wear an eyeglass.”

“Oh, Gilbert, I couldn’t.”

She looked at him and his excitement, the excitement of the artist, made her smile. He was so sweet to her she wanted to do what she could to please him.

“I’ll try,” she said.

When they went to an optician and, suited with the right size, she placed an eyeglass jauntily in her eye Gilbert clapped his hands. There and then, before the astonished shopman, he kissed her on both cheeks.

“You look wonderful,” he cried.

So they went down to Italy and spent happy months studying Renaissance and Baroque architecture. Jane not only grew accustomed to her changed appearance, but found she liked it. At first she was a little shy when she went into the dining-room of an hotel and people turned round to stare at her, no one had ever raised an eyelid to look at her before, but presently she found that the sensation was not disagreeable. Ladies came up to her and asked her where she got her dress.

“Do you like it?” she answered demurely. “My husband designed it for me.”

“I should like to copy it if you don’t mind.”

Jane had certainly for many years lived a very quiet life, but she was by no means lacking in the normal instincts of her sex. She had her answer ready.

“I’m so sorry, but my husband’s very particular and he won’t hear of anyone copying my frocks. He wants me to be unique.”

She had an idea that people would laugh when she said this, but they didn’t; they merely answered:

“Oh, of course I quite understand. You are unique.”

But she saw them making mental notes of what she wore, and for some reason this quite “put her about’. For once in her life that she wasn’t wearing what everybody else did, she reflected, she didn’t see why everybody else should want to wear what she did.

“Gilbert,” said she, quite sharply for her, “next time you’re designing dresses for me I wish you’d design things that people can’t copy.”

“The only way to do that is to design things that only you can wear.”

“Can’t you do that?”

“Yes, if you’ll do something for me.”

“What is it?”

“Cut off your hair.”

I think this was the first time that Jane jibbed. Her hair was long and thick and as a girl she had been quite vain of it; to cut it off was a very drastic proceeding. This really was burning her boats behind her. In her case it was not the first step that cost so much, it was the last; but she took it (“I know Marion will think me a perfect fool, and I shall never be able to go to Liverpool again,” she said), and when they passed through Paris on their way home Gilbert led her (she felt quite sick, her heart was beating so fast) to the best hairdresser in the world. She came out of this shop with a jaunty, saucy, impudent head of crisp grey curls. Pygmalion had finished his fantastic masterpiece: Galatea was come to life.

“Yes,” I said, “but that isn’t enough to explain why Jane is here tonight amid this crowd of duchesses, Cabinet Ministers, and suchlike; nor why she is sitting on one side of her host with an Admiral of the Fleet on the other.”

“Jane is a humorist,” said Mrs Tower. “Didn’t you see them all laughing at what she said?”

There was no doubt now of the bitterness in Mrs Tower’s heart.

“When Jane wrote and told me they were back from their honeymoon I thought I must ask them both to dinner. I didn’t much like the idea, but I felt it had to be done. I knew the party would be deadly and I wasn’t going to sacrifice any of the people who really mattered. On the other hand I didn’t want Jane to think I hadn’t any nice friends. You know I never have more than eight, but on this occasion I thought it would make things go better if I had twelve. I’d been too busy to see Jane until the evening of the party. She kept us all waiting a little-that was Gilbert’s cleverness-and at last she sailed in. You could have knocked me down with a feather. She made the rest of the women look dowdy and provincial. She made me feel like a painted old trollop.”

Mrs Tower drank a little champagne.

“I wish I could describe the frock to you. It would have been quite impossible on anyone else; on her it was perfect. And the eyeglass! I’d known her for thirty-five years and I’d never seen her without spectacles.”

“But you knew she had a good figure.”

“How should I? I’d never seen her except in the clothes you first saw her in. Did you think she had a good figure? She seemed not to be unconscious of the sensation she made but to take it as a matter of course. I thought of my dinner and I heaved a sigh of relief. Even if she was a little heavy in hand, with that appearance it didn’t so very much matter. She was sitting at the other end of the table and I heard a good deal of laughter. I was glad to think that the other people were playing up well; but after dinner I was a good deal taken aback when no less than three men came up to me and told me that my sister-in-law was priceless, and did I think she would allow them to call on her? I didn’t quite know whether I was standing on my head or my heels. Twenty-four hours later our hostess of tonight rang me up and said she had heard my sister-in-law was in London and she was priceless and would I ask her to luncheon to meet her? She has an infallible instinct, that woman: in a month everyone was talking about Jane. I am here tonight, not because I’ve known our hostess for twenty years and have asked her to dinner a hundred times, but because I’m Jane’s sister-in-law.”

Poor Mrs Tower. The position was galling, and though I could not help being amused, for the tables were turned on her with a vengeance, I felt that she deserved my sympathy.

“People never can resist those who make them laugh,” I said, trying to console her.

“She never makes me laugh.”

Once more from the top of the table I heard a guffaw and guessed that Jane had said another amusing thing.

“Do you mean to say that you are the only person who doesn’t think her funny?” I asked, smiling.

“Had it struck you that she was a humorist?”

“I’m bound to say it hadn’t.”

“She says just the same things as she’s said for the last thirty-five years, I laugh when I see everyone else does because I don’t want to seem a perfect fool, but I am not amused.”

“Like Queen Victoria,” I said.

It was a foolish jest and Mrs Tower was quite right sharply to tell me so. I tried another tack.

“Is Gilbert here?” I asked, looking down the table.

“Gilbert was asked because she won’t go out without him, but tonight he’s at a dinner of the Architects’ Institute or whatever it’s called.”

“I’m dying to renew my acquaintance with her.”

“Go and talk to her after dinner. She’ll ask you to her Tuesdays.”

“Her Tuesdays?”

“She’s at home every Tuesday evening. You’ll meet there everyone you ever heard of. They’re the best parties in London. She’s done in one year what I’ve failed to do in twenty.”

“But what you tell me is really miraculous. How has it been done?”

Mrs Tower shrugged her handsome but adipose shoulders.

“I shall be glad if you’ll tell me,” she replied.

After dinner I tried to make my way to the sofa on which Jane was sitting, but I was intercepted and it was not till a little later that my hostess came up to me and said:

“I must introduce you to the star of my party. Do you know Jane Napier? She’s priceless. She’s much more amusing than your comedies.”

I was taken up to the sofa. The admiral who had been sitting beside her at dinner was with her still. He showed no sign of moving and Jane, shaking hands with me, introduced me to him.

“Do you know Sir Reginald Frobisher?”

We began to chat. It was the same Jane as I had known before, perfectly simple, homely and unaffected, but her fantastic appearance certainly gave a peculiar savour to what she said. Suddenly I found myself shaking with laughter. She had made a remark, sensible and to the point, but not in the least witty, which her manner of saying and the bland look she gave me through her eyeglass made perfectly irresistible. I felt light-hearted and buoyant. When I left her she said to me:

“If you’ve got nothing better to do, come and see us on Tuesday evening. Gilbert will be so glad to see you.”

“When he’s been a month in London he’ll know that he can have nothing better to do,” said the admiral.

So, on Tuesday but rather late, I went to Jane’s. I confess I was a little surprised at the company. It was quite a remarkable collection of writers, painters and politicians, actors, great ladies and great beauties: Mrs Tower was right, it was a grand party; I had seen nothing like it in London since Stafford House was sold. No particular entertainment was provided. The refreshments were adequate without being luxurious. Jane in her quiet way seemed to be enjoying herself; I could not see that she took a great deal of trouble with her guests, but they seemed to like being there and the gay, pleasant party did not break up till two in the morning. After that I saw much of her. I not only went often to her house, but seldom went out to luncheon or to dinner without meeting her. I am an amateur of humour and I sought to discover in what lay her peculiar gift. It was impossible to repeat anything she said, for the fun, like certain wines, would not travel. She had no gift for epigram. She never made a brilliant repartee. There was no malice in her remarks nor sting in her rejoinders. There are those who think that impropriety, rather than brevity, is the soul of wit; but she never said a thing that could have brought a blush to a Victorian cheek. I think her humour was unconscious and I am sure it was unpremeditated. It flew like a butterfly from flower to flower, obedient only to its own caprice and pursuivant of neither method nor intention. It depended on the way she spoke and on the way she looked. Its subtlety gained by the flaunting and extravagant appearance that Gilbert had achieved for her; but her appearance was only an element in it. Now of course she was the fashion and people laughed if she but opened her mouth. They no longer wondered that Gilbert had married a wife so much older than himself. They saw that Jane was a woman with whom age did not count. They thought him a devilish lucky young fellow. The admiral quoted Shakespeare to me: “Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety.” Gilbert was delighted with her success. As I came to know him better I grew to like him. It was quite evident that he was neither a rascal nor a fortune-hunter. He was not only immensely proud of Jane but genuinely devoted to her. His kindness to her was touching. He was a very unselfish and sweet-tempered young man.

“Well, what do you think of Jane now?” he said to me once, with boyish triumph.

“I don’t know which of you is more wonderful,” I said. “You or she.”

“Oh, I’m nothing.”

“Nonsense. You don’t think I’m such a fool as not to see that it’s you, and you only, who’ve made Jane what she is.”

“My only merit is that I saw what was there when it wasn’t obvious to the naked eye,” he answered.

“I can understand your seeing that she had in her the possibility of that remarkable appearance, but how in the world have you made her into a humorist?”

“But I always thought the things she said a perfect scream. She was always a humorist.”

“You’re the only person who ever thought so.”

Mrs Tower, not without magnanimity, acknowledged that she had been mistaken in Gilbert. She grew quite attached to him. But notwithstanding appearances she never faltered in her opinion that the marriage could not last. I was obliged to laugh at her.

“Why, I’ve never seen such a devoted couple,” I said.

“Gilbert is twenty-seven now. It’s just the time for a pretty girl to come along. Did you notice the other evening at Jane’s that pretty little niece of Sir Reginald’s? I thought Jane was looking at them both with a good deal of attention, and I wondered to myself.”

“I don’t believe Jane fears the rivalry of any girl under the sun.”

“Wait and see,” said Mrs Tower.

“You gave it six months.”

“Well, now I give it three years.”

When anyone is very positive in an opinion it is only human nature to wish him proved wrong. Mrs Tower was really too cocksure. But such a satisfaction was not mine, for the end that she had always and confidently predicted to the ill-assorted match did in point of fact come. Still, the fates seldom give us what we want in the way we want it, and though Mrs Tower could flatter herself that she had been right, I think after all she would sooner have been wrong. For things did not happen at all in the way she expected.

One day I received an urgent message from her and fortunately went to see her at once. When I was shown into the room Mrs Tower rose from her chair and came towards me with the stealthy swiftness of a leopard stalking his prey. I saw that she was excited.

“Jane and Gilbert have separated,” she said.

“Not really? Well, you were right after all.”

Mrs Tower looked at me with an expression I could not understand.

“Poor Jane,” I muttered.

“Poor Jane!” she repeated, but in tones of such derision that I was dumbfounded.

She found some difficulty in telling me exactly what had occurred.

Gilbert had left her a moment before she leaped to the telephone to summon me. When he entered the room, pale and distraught, she saw at once that

something terrible-had happened. She knew what he was going to say before

he said it.

“Marion, Jane has left me.”

She gave him a little smile and took his hand.

“I knew you’d behave like a gentleman. It would have been dreadful for her for people to think that you had left her.”

“I’ve come to you because I knew I could count on your sympathy.”

“Oh, I don’t blame you, Gilbert,” said Mrs Tower, very kindly. “It was bound to happen.” He sighed.

“I suppose so. I couldn’t hope to keep her always. She was too wonderful and I’m a perfectly commonplace fellow.”

Mrs Tower patted his hand. He was really behaving beautifully. “And what’s going to happen now?”

“Well, she’s going to divorce me.”

“Jane always said she’d put no obstacle in your way if ever you wanted to marry a girl.”

“You don’t think it’s likely I should ever be willing to marry anyone else after being Jane’s husband,” he answered. Mrs Tower was puzzled. “Of course you mean that you’ve left Jane.”

“I? That’s the last thing I should ever do.”

“Then why is she divorcing you?”

“She’s going to marry Sir Reginald Frobisher as soon as the decree is made absolute.”

Mrs Tower positively screamed. Then she felt so faint that she had to get her smelling salts.

“After all you’ve done for her?”

“I’ve done nothing for her.”

“Do you mean to say you’re going to allow yourself to be made use of like that?”

“We arranged before we married that if either of us wanted his liberty the other should put no hindrance in the way.”

“But that was done on your account. Because you were twenty-seven years younger that she was.”

“Well, it’s come in very useful for her,” he answered bitterly.

Mrs Tower expostulated, argued, and reasoned; but Gilbert insisted that no rules applied to Jane, and he must do exactly what she wanted. He left Mrs Tower prostrate. It relieved her a good deal to give me a full account of this interview. It pleased her to see that I was as surprised as herself and if I was not so indignant with Jane as she was she ascribed that to the criminal lack of morality incident to my sex. She was still in a state of extreme agitation when the door was opened and the butler showed in-Jane herself. She was dressed in black and white as no doubt befitted her slightly ambiguous position, but in a dress so original and fantastic, in a hat so striking, that I positively gasped at the sight of her. But she was as ever bland and collected. She came forward to kiss Mrs Tower, but Mrs Tower withdrew herself with icy dignity.

“Gilbert has been here,” she said.

“Yes, I know,” smiled Jane. “I told him to come and see you. I’m going to Paris tonight and I want you to be very kind to him while I’m away. I’m afraid just at first he’ll be rather lonely and I shall feel more comfortable if I can count on your keeping an eye on him.”

Mrs Tower clasped her hands.

“Gilbert has just told me something that I can hardly bring myself to believe. He tells me that you’re going to divorce him to marry Reginald Frobisher.”

“Don’t you remember, before I married Gilbert you advised me to marry a man of my own age? The admiral is fifty-three.”

“But, Jane, you owe everything to Gilbert,” said Mrs Tower indignantly. “You wouldn’t exist without him. Without him to design your clothes, you’ll be nothing.”

“Oh, he’s promised to go on designing my clothes,” Jane answered blandly.

“No woman could want a better husband. He’s always been kindness itself to you.”

“Oh, I know he’s been sweet.”

“How can you be so heartless?”

“But I was never in love with Gilbert,” said Jane. “I always told him that. I’m beginning to feel the need of the companionship of a man of my own age. I think I’ve probably been married to Gilbert long enough. The young have no conversation.” She paused a little and gave us both a charming smile. “Of course I shan’t lose sight of Gilbert. I’ve arranged that with Reginald. The admiral has a niece that would just suit him. As soon as we’re married we’ll ask them to stay with us at Malta-you know that the admiral is to have the Mediterranean Command-and I shouldn’t be at all surprised if they fell in love with one another.”

Mrs Tower gave a little sniff.

“And have you arranged with the admiral that if you want your liberty neither should put any hindrance in the way of the other?”

“I suggested it,” Jane answered with composure. “But the admiral says he knows a good thing when he sees it and he won’t want to marry anyone else, and if anyone wants to marry me-he has eight twelve-inch guns on his flagship and he’ll discuss the matter at short range.” She gave us a look through her eyeglass which even the fear of Mrs Tower’s wrath could not prevent me from laughing at. “I think the admiral’s a very passionate man.”

Mrs Tower gave me an angry frown.

“I never thought you funny, Jane,” she said. “I never understood why people laughed at the things you said.”

“I never thought I was funny myself, Marion,” smiled Jane, showing her bright, regular teeth. “I am glad to leave London before too many people come round to our opinion.”

“I wish you’d tell me the secret of your astonishing success,” I said.

She turned to me with that bland, homely look I knew so well.

“You know, when I married Gilbert and settled in London and people began to laugh at what I said no one was more surprised than I was. I’d said the same things for thirty years and no one ever saw anything to laugh at. I thought it must be my clothes or my bobbed hair or my eyeglass. Then I discovered it was because I spoke the truth. It was so unusual that people thought it humorous. One of these days someone else will discover the secret and when people habitually tell the truth of course there’ll be nothing funny in it.”

“And why am I the only person not to think it funny?” asked Mrs Tower.

Jane hesitated a little as though she were honestly searching for a satisfactory explanation.

“Perhaps you don’t know the truth when you see it, Marion dear,” she answered in her mild good-natured way.

It certainly gave her the last word. I felt that Jane would always have the last word. She was priceless.