The Creative Impulse

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I SUPPOSE that very few people know how Mrs Albert Forrester came to write The Achilles Statue; and since it has been acclaimed as one of the great novels of our time I cannot but think that a brief account of the circumstances that gave it birth must be of interest to all serious students of literature; and indeed, if, as the critics say, this is a book that will live, the following narrative, serving a better purpose than to divert an idle hour, may be regarded by the historian of the future as a curious footnote to the literary annals of our day.

Everyone of course remembers the success that attended the publication of The Achilles Statue. Month after month printers were kept busy printing, binders were kept busy binding, edition after edition; and the publishers, both in England and America, were hard put to it to fulfil the pressing orders of the booksellers. It was promptly translated into every European tongue and it has been recently announced that it will soon be possible to read it in Japanese and in Urdu. But it had previously appeared serially in magazines on both sides of the Atlantic and from the editors of these Mrs Albert Forrester’s agent had wrung a sum that can only be described as thumping. A dramatization of the work was made, which ran for a season in New York, and there is little doubt that when the play is produced in London it will have an equal success. The film rights have been sold at a great price. Though the amount that Mrs Albert Forrester is reputed (in literary circles) to have made is probably exaggerated, there can be no doubt that she will have earned enough money from this one book to save her for the rest of her life from any financial anxiety.

It is not often that a book meets with equal favour from the public and the critics, and that she, of all persons, had (if I may so put it) squared the circle must have proved the more gratifying to Mrs Albert Forrester, since, though she had received the commendation of the critics in no grudging terms (and indeed had come to look upon it as her due) the public had always remained strangely insensible to her merit. Each work she published, a slender volume beautifully printed and bound in white buckram, was hailed as a masterpiece, always to the length of a column, and in the weekly reviews which you see only in the dusty library of a very long-established club even to the extent of a page; and well-read persons read and praised it. But well-read persons apparently do not buy books, and she did not sell. It was indeed a scandal that so distinguished an author, with an imagination so delicate and a style so exquisite, should remain neglected of the vulgar. In America she was almost completely unknown; and though Mr Carl van Vechten had written an article berating the public for its obtuseness, the public remained callous. Her agent, a warm admirer of her genius, had blackmailed an American publisher into taking two of her books by refusing, unless he did so, to let him have others (trashy novels doubtless) that he badly wanted, and they had been duly published. The reception they received from the press was flattering and showed that in America the best minds were sensitive to her talent; but when it came to the third book the American publisher (in the coarse way publishers have) told the agent that any money he had to spare he preferred to spend on synthetic gin.

Since The Achilles Statue Mrs Albert Forrester’s previous books have been republished (and Mr Carl van Vechten has written another article pointing out sadly, but firmly, that he had drawn the attention of the reading world to the merits of this exceptional writer fully fifteen years ago), and they have been so widely advertised that they can scarcely have escaped the cultured reader’s attention. It is unnecessary, therefore, for me to give an account of them; and it would certainly be no more than cold potatoes after those two subtle articles by Mr Carl van Vechten. Mrs Albert Forrester began to write early. Her first work (a volume of elegies) appeared when she was a maiden of eighteen; and from then on she published, every two or three years, for she had too exalted a conception of her art to hurry her production, a volume either of verse or prose. When The Achilles Statue was written she had reached the respectable age of fifty-seven, so that it will be readily surmised that the number of her works was considerable. She had given the world half a dozen volumes of verse, published under Latin titles, such as Felicitas, Pax Maris, and Aes Triplex, all of the graver kind, for her muse, disinclined to skip on a light, fantastic toe, trod a somewhat solemn measure. She remained faithful to the Elegy, and the Sonnet claimed much of her attention; but her chief distinction was to revive the Ode, a form of poetry that the poets of the present day somewhat neglect; and it may be asserted with confidence that her Ode to President Fallieres will find a place in every anthology of English verse. It is admirable not only for the noble sonority of its rhythms, but also for its felicitous description of the pleasant land of France. Mrs Albert Forrester wrote of the valley of the Loire with its memories of du Bellay, of Chartres and the jewelled windows of its cathedral, of the sun-swept cities of Provence, with a sympathy all the more remarkable since she had never penetrated further into France than Boulogne, which she visited shortly after her marriage on an excursion steamer from Margate. But the physical mortification of being extremely seasick and the intellectual humiliation of discovering that the inhabitants of that popular seaside resort could not understand her fluent and idiomatic French made her determine not to expose herself a second time to experiences that were at once undignified and unpleasant; and she never again embarked on the treacherous element which she, however, sang (Pax Maris) in numbers both grave and sweet.

There are some fine passages too in the Ode to Woodrow Wilson, and I regret that, owing to a change in her sentiments towards that no doubt excellent man, the author decided not to reprint it. But I think it must be admitted that Mrs Albert Forrester’s most distinguished work was in prose. She wrote several volumes of brief, but perfectly constructed, essays on such subjects as Autumn in Sussex, Queen Victoria, Death, Spring in Norfolk, Georgian Architecture, Monsieur de Diaghileff, and Dante; she also wrote works, both erudite and whimsical, on the Jesuit Architecture of the Seventeenth Century and on the Literary Aspect of the Hundred Years War. It was her prose that gained her that body of devoted admirers, fit though few, as with her rare gift of phrase she herself put it that proclaimed her the greatest master of the English language that this century has seen. She admitted herself that it was her style, sonorous yet racy, polished yet eloquent, that was her strong point; and it was only in her prose that she had occasion to exhibit the delicious, but restrained, humour that her readers found so irresistible. It was not a humour of ideas, nor even a humour of words; it was much more subtle than that, it was a humour of punctuation: in a flash of inspiration she had discovered the comic possibilities of the semi-colon, and of this she had made abundant and exquisite use. She was able to place it in such a way that if you were a person of culture with a keen sense of humour, you did not exactly laugh through a horse-collar, but you giggled delightedly, and the greater your culture the more delightedly you giggled. Her friends said that it made every other form of humour coarse and exaggerated. Several writers had tried to imitate her; but in vain: whatever else you might say about Mrs Albert Forrester you were bound to admit that she was able to get every ounce of humour out of the semi-colon and no one else could get within a mile of her.

Mrs Albert Forrester lived in a flat not far from the Marble Arch, which combined the advantage of a good address and a moderate rent. It had a handsome drawing-room on the street and a large bedroom for Mrs Albert Forrester, a darkish dining-room at the back, and a small poky bedroom, next door to the kitchen, for Mr Albert Forrester, who paid the rent. It was in the handsome drawing-room that Mrs Albert Forrester every Tuesday afternoon received her friends. It was a severe and chaste apartment. On the walls was a paper designed by William Morris himself, and on this, in plain black frames, mezzotints collected before mezzotints grew expensive; the furniture was of the Chippendale period, but for the roll-top desk, vaguely Louis XVI in character, at which Mrs Albert Forrester wrote her works. This was pointed out to visitors the first time they came to see her, and there were few who looked at it without emotion. The carpet was thick and the lights discreet. Mrs Albert Forrester sat in a straight-backed grandfather’s chair covered with red damask. There was nothing ostentatious about it, but since it was the only comfortable chair in the room it set her apart as it were and above her guests. Tea was dispensed by a female of uncertain age, silent and colourless, who was never introduced to anyone but who was known to look upon it as a privilege to be allowed to save Mrs Albert Forrester from the irksome duty of pouring out tea. She was thus able to devote herself entirely to conversation, and it must be admitted that her conversation was excellent. It was not sprightly; and since it is difficult to indicate punctuation in speech it may have seemed to some slightly lacking in humour, but it was of wide range, solid, instructive, and interesting. Mrs Albert Forrester was well acquainted with social science, jurisprudence, and theology. She had read much and her memory was retentive. She had a pretty gift for quotation, which is a serviceable substitute for wit, and having for thirty years known more or less intimately a great many distinguished people she had a great many interesting anecdotes to tell, which she placed with tact and which she did not repeat more than was pardonable. Mrs Albert Forrester had the gift of attracting the most varied persons and you were liable at one and the same time to meet in her drawing-room an ex-Prime Minister, a newspaper proprietor, and the ambassador of a First Class Power. I always imagined that these great people came because they thought that here they rubbed shoulders with Bohemia, but with a Bohemia sufficiently neat and clean for them to be in no danger that the dirt would come off on them. Mrs Albert Forrester was deeply interested in politics and I myself heard a Cabinet Minister tell her frankly that she had a masculine intelligence. She had been opposed to Female Suffrage, but when it was at last granted to women she began to dally with the idea of going into Parliament. Her difficulty was that she did not know which party to choose.

“After all,” she said, with a playful shrug of her somewhat massive shoulders, “I cannot form a party of one.”

Like many serious patriots, in her inability to know for certain which way the cat would jump she held her political opinions in suspense; but of late she had been definitely turning towards Labour as the best hope of the country, and if a safe seat were offered her it was felt fairly certain that she would not hesitate to come out into the open as a champion of the oppressed proletariat.

Her drawing-room was always open to foreigners, to Czecho-Slovaks, Italians, and Frenchmen, if they were distinguished, and to Americans even if they were obscure. But she was not a snob and you seldom met there a duke unless he was of a peculiarly serious turn and a peeress only if in addition to her rank she had the passport of some small social solecism such as having been divorced, written a novel, or forged a cheque, which might give her claim to Mrs Albert Forrester’s catholic sympathies. She did not much care for painters, who were shy and silent; and musicians did not interest her: even if they consented to play, and if they were celebrated they were too often reluctant, their music was a hindrance to conversation: if people wanted music they could go to a concert; for her part she preferred the more subtle music of the soul. But her hospitality to writers, especially if they were promising and little known, was warm and constant. She had an eye for budding talent and there were few of the famous writers who from time to time drank a dish of tea with her whose first efforts she had not encouraged and whose early steps she had not guided. Her own position was too well assured for her to be capable of envy, and she had heard the word genius attached to her name too often to feel a trace of jealousy because the talents of others brought them a material success that was denied to her.

Mrs Albert Forrester, confident in the judgement of posterity, could afford to be disinterested. With these elements then it is no wonder that she had succeeded in creating something as near the French salon of the eighteenth century as our barbarous nation has ever reached. To be invited to “eat a bun and drink a cup of tea on Tuesday’ was a privilege that few failed to recognize; and when you sat on your Chippendale chair in the discreetly lit but austere room, you could not but feel that you were living literary history. The American Ambassador once said to Mrs Albert Forrester:

“A cup of tea with you, Mrs Forrester, is one of the richest intellectual treats which it has ever been my lot to enjoy.”

It was indeed on occasion a trifle overwhelming. Mrs Albert Forrester’s taste was so perfect, she so inevitably admired the right thing and made the just observation about it, that sometimes you almost gasped for air. For my part I found it prudent to fortify myself with a cocktail or two before I exposed myself to the rarefied atmosphere of her society. Indeed, I very nearly found myself for ever excluded from it, for one afternoon, presenting myself at the door, instead of asking the maid who opened it: “Is Mrs Forrester at home?” I asked: “Is there Divine Service today?”

Of course it was said in pure inadvertence, but it was unfortunate that the maid sniggered, and one of Mrs Albert Forrester’s most devoted admirers, Ellen Hannaway, happened to be at the moment in the hall taking off her goloshes. She told my hostess what I had said before I got into the drawing-room, and as I entered Mrs Albert Forrester fixed me with an eagle eye.

“Why did you ask if there was Divine Service today?” she inquired.

I explained that I was absent-minded, but Mrs Albert Forrester held me with a gaze that I can only describe as compelling.

“Do you mean to suggest that my parties are …” she searched for a word. “Sacramental?”

I did not know what she meant, but did not like to show my ignorance before so many clever people, and I decided that the only thing was to seize my trowel and the butter.

“Your parties are like you, dear lady, perfectly beautiful and perfectly divine.”

A little tremor passed through Mrs Albert Forrester’s substantial frame. She was like a man who enters suddenly a room filled with hyacinths; the perfume is so intoxicating that he almost staggers. But she relented.

“If you were trying to be facetious,” she said, “I should prefer you to exercise

your facetiousness on my guests rather than on my maids\_\_\_\_Miss Warren will

give you some tea.”

Mrs Albert Forrester dismissed me with a wave of the hand, but she did not dismiss the subject, since for the next two or three years whenever she introduced me to someone she never failed to add:

“You must make the most of him, he only comes here as a penance. When he comes to the door he always asks: Is there Divine Service today? So amusing, isn’t he?”

But Mrs Albert Forrester did not confine herself to weekly tea-parties: every Saturday she gave a luncheon of eight persons; this according to her opinion being the perfect number for general conversation and her dining-room conveniently holding no more. If Mrs Albert Forrester flattered herself upon anything it was not that her knowledge of English prosody was unique, but that her luncheons were celebrated. She chose her guests with care, and an invitation to one of them was more than a compliment, it was a consecration. Over the luncheon-table it was possible to keep the conversation on a higher level than in the mixed company of a tea-party and few can have left her dining-room without taking away with them an enhanced belief in Mrs Albert Forrester’s ability and a brighter faith in human nature. She only asked men, since, stout enthusiast for her sex as she was and glad to see women on other occasions, she could not but realize that they were inclined at table to talk exclusively to their next-door neighbours and thus hinder the general exchange of ideas that made her own parties an entertainment not only of the body but of the soul. For it must be said that Mrs Albert Forrester gave you uncommonly good food, excellent wine, and a first-rate cigar. Now to anyone who has partaken of literary hospitality this must appear very remarkable, since literary persons for the most part think highly and live plainly; their minds are occupied with the things of the spirit and they do not notice that the roast mutton is underdone and the potatoes cold: the beer is all right, but the wine has a sobering effect, and it is unwise to touch the coffee. Mrs Albert Forrester was pleased enough to receive compliments on the fare she provided.

“If people do me the honour to break bread with me,” she said, “it is only fair that I should give them as good food as they can get at home.”

But if the flattery was excessive she deprecated it.

“You really embarrass me when you give me a meed of praise which is not my due. You must praise Mrs Bulfinch.”

“Who is Mrs Bulfinch?”

“My cook.”

“She’s a treasure then, but you’re not going to ask me to believe that she’s responsible for the wine.”

“Is it good? I’m terribly ignorant of such things; I put myself entirely in the hands of my wine merchant.”

But if mention was made of the cigars Mrs Albert Forrester beamed.

“Ah, for them you must compliment Albert. It is Albert who chooses the cigars and I am given to understand that no one knows more about a cigar than Albert.”

She looked at her husband, who sat at the end of the table, with the proud bright eyes of a pedigree hen (a Buff Orpington for choice) looking at her only chick. Then there was a quick flutter of conversation as the guests, anxious to be civil to their host and relieved at length to find an occasion, expressed their appreciation of his peculiar merit.

“You’re very kind,” he said. “I’m glad you like them.”

Then he would give a little discourse on cigars, explaining the excellencies he sought and regretting the deterioration in quality which had followed on the commercialization of the industry. Mrs Albert Forrester listened to him with a complacent smile, and it was plain that she enjoyed this little triumph of his. Of course you cannot go on talking of cigars indefinitely and as soon as she perceived that her guests were growing restive she broached a topic of more general, and it may be of more significant, interest. Albert subsided into silence. But he had had his moment.

It was Albert who made Mrs Forrester’s luncheons to some less attractive than her tea-parties, for Albert was a bore; but though without doubt perfectly conscious of the fact, she made a point that he should come to them and in fact had fixed upon Saturdays (for the rest of the week he was busy) in order that he should be able to. Mrs Albert Forrester felt that her husband’s presence on these festive occasions was an unavoidable debt that she paid to her own self-respect. She would never by a negligence admit to the world that she had married a man who was not spiritually her equal, and it may be that in the silent watches of the nights she asked herself where indeed such could have been found. Mrs Albert Forrester’s friends were troubled by no such reticence and they said it was dreadful that such a woman should be burdened with such a man. They asked each other how she had ever come to marry him and (being mostly celibate) answered despairingly that no one ever knew why anybody married anybody else.

It was not that Albert was a verbose and aggressive bore; he did not buttonhole you with interminable stories or pester you with pointless jokes; he did not crucify you on a platitude or hamstring you with a commonplace; he was just dull. A cipher. Clifford Boyleston, for whom the French Romantics had no secrets and who was himself a writer of merit, had said that when you looked into a room into which Albert had just gone there was nobody there. This was thought very clever by Mrs Albert Forrester’s friends, and Rose Waterford, the well-known novelist and the most fearless of women, had ventured to repeat it to Mrs Albert Forrester. Though she pretended to be annoyed, she had not been able to prevent the smile that rose to her lips. Her behaviour towards Albert could not but increase the respect in which her friends held her. She insisted that whatever in their secret hearts they thought of him, they should treat him with the decorum that was due to her husband. Her own demeanour was admirable. If he chanced to make an observation she listened to him with a pleasant expression and when he fetched her a book that she wanted or gave her his pencil to make a note of an idea that had occurred to her, she always thanked him. Nor would she allow her friends pointedly to neglect him, and though, being a woman of tact, she saw that it would be asking too much of the world if she took him about with her always, and she went out much alone, yet her friends knew that she expected them to ask him to dinner at least once a year. He always accompanied her to public banquets when she was going to make a speech, and if she delivered a lecture she took care that he should have a seat on the platform.

Albert was, I believe, of average height, but perhaps because you never thought of him except in connexion with his wife (of imposing dimensions) you only thought of him as a little man. He was spare and frail and looked older than his age. This was the same as his wife’s. His hair, which he kept very short, was white and meagre, and he wore a stubby white moustache; his was a face, thin and lined, without a noticeable feature; and his blue eyes, which once might have been attractive, were now pale and tired. He was always very neatly dressed in pepper-and-salt trousers, which he chose always of the same pattern, a black coat, and a grey tie with a small pearl pin in it. He was perfectly unobtrusive, and when he stood in Mrs Albert Forrester’s drawing-room to receive the guests whom she had asked to luncheon you noticed him as little as you noticed the quiet and gentlemanly furniture. He was well mannered and it was with a pleasant, courteous smile that he shook hands with them.

“How do you do? I’m very glad to see you,” he said if they were friends of some standing. “Keeping well, I hope?”

But if they were strangers of distinction coming for the first time to the house, he went to the door as they entered the drawing-room, and said:

“I am Mrs Albert Forrester’s husband. I will introduce you to my wife.”

Then he led the visitor to where Mrs Albert Forrester stood with her back to the light, and she with a glad and eager gesture advanced to make the stranger welcome.

It was agreeable to see the demure pride he took in his wife’s literary reputation and the self-effacement with which he furthered her interests. He was always there when he was wanted and never when he wasn’t. His tact, if not deliberate, was instinctive. Mrs Albert Forrester was the first to acknowledge his merits.

“I really don’t know what I should do without him,” she said. “He’s invaluable to me. I read him everything I write and his criticisms are often very useful.”

“Moliere and his cook,” said Miss Waterford.

“Is that funny, dear Rose?” asked Mrs Forrester, somewhat acidly.

When Mrs Albert Forrester did not approve of a remark, she had a way that put many persons to confusion of asking you whether it was a joke which she was too dense to see. But it was impossible to embarrass Miss Waterford. She was a lady who in the course of a long life had had many affairs, but only one passion, and this was for printer’s ink. Mrs Albert Forrester tolerated rather than approved her.

“Come, come, my dear,” she replied, “you know very well that he wouldn’t exist without you. He wouldn’t know us. It must be wonderful to him to come in contact with all the best brains and the most distinguished people of our day.”

“It may be that the bee would perish without the hive which shelters it, but the bee nevertheless has a significance of its own.”

And since Mrs Albert Forrester’s friends, though they knew all about art and literature, knew little about natural history, they had no reply to this observation. She went on:

“He doesn’t interfere with me. He knows subconsciously when I don’t want to be disturbed and, indeed, when I am following out a train of thought I find his presence in the room a comfort rather than a hindrance to me.”

“Like a Persian cat,” said Miss Waterford.

“But like a very well-trained, well-bred, and well-mannered Persian cat,” answered Mrs Forrester severely, thus putting Miss Waterford in her place.

But Mrs Albert Forrester had not finished with her husband.

“We who belong to the intelligentsia,” she said, “are apt to live in a world too exclusively our own. We are interested in the abstract rather than in the concrete, and sometimes I think that we survey the bustling world of human affairs in too detached a manner and from too serene a height. Do you not think that we stand in danger of becoming a little inhuman? I shall always be grateful to Albert because he keeps me in contact with the man in the street.”

It was on account of this remark, to which none of her friends could deny the rare insight and subtlety that characterized so many of her utterances, that for some time Albert was known in her immediate circle as The Man in the Street. But this was only for a while, and it was forgotten. He then became known as The Philatelist. It was Clifford Boyleston, with his wicked wit, who invented the name. One day, his poor brain exhausted by the effort to sustain a conversation with Albert, he had asked in desperation:

“Do you collect stamps?”

“No,” answered Albert mildly. “I’m afraid I don’t.”

But Clifford Boyleston had no sooner asked the question than he saw its possibilities. He had written a book on Baudelaire’s aunt by marriage, which had attracted the attention of all who were interested in French literature, and was well known in his exhaustive studies of the French spirit to have absorbed a goodly share of the Gallic quickness and the Gallic brilliancy. He paid no attention to Albert’s disclaimer, but at the first opportunity informed Mrs Albert Forrester’s friends that he had at last discovered Albert’s secret. He collected stamps. He never met him afterwards without asking him:

“Well, Mr Forrester, how is the stamp collection?” Or: “Have you been buying any stamps since I saw you last?”

It mattered little that Albert continued to deny that he collected stamps, the invention was too apt not to be made the most of; Mrs Albert Forrester’s friends insisted that he did, and they seldom spoke to him without asking him how he was getting on. Even Mrs Albert Forrester, when she was in a specially gay humour, would sometimes speak of her husband as The Philatelist. The name really did seem to fit Albert like a glove. Sometimes they spoke of him thus to his face and they could not but appreciate the good nature with which he took it; he smiled unresentfully and presently did not even protest that they were mistaken.

Of course Mrs Albert Forrester had too keen a social sense to jeopardize the success of her luncheons by allowing her more distinguished guests to sit on either side of Albert. She took care that only her older and more intimate friends should do this, and when the appointed victims came in she would say to them:

“I know you won’t mind sitting by Albert, will you?”

They could only say that they would be delighted, but if their faces too plainly expressed their dismay she would pat their hands playfully and add:

“Next time you shall sit by me. Albert is so shy with strangers and you know so well how to deal with him.”

They did: they simply ignored him. So far as they were concerned the chair in which he sat might as well have been empty. There was no sign that it annoyed him to be taken no notice of by persons who after all were eating food he paid for, since the earnings of Mrs Forrester could certainly not have provided her guests with spring salmon and forced asparagus. He sat quiet and silent, and if he opened his mouth it was only to give a direction to one of the maids. If a guest were new to him he would let his eyes rest on him in a stare that would have been embarrassing if it had not been so childlike. He seemed to be asking himself what this strange creature was; but what answer his mild scrutiny gave him he never revealed. When the conversation grew animated he would look from one speaker to the other, but again you could not tell from his thin, lined face what he thought of the fantastic notions that were bandied across the table.

Clifford Boyleston said that all the wit and wisdom he heard passed over his head like water over a duck’s back. He had given up trying to understand and now only made a semblance of listening. But Harry Oakland, the versatile critic, said that Albert was taking it all in; he found it all too, too marvellous, and with his poor, muddled brain he was trying desperately to make head or tail of the wonderful things he heard. Of course in the City he must boast of the distinguished persons he knew, perhaps there he was a light of learning and letters, an authority on the ideal; it would be perfectly divine to hear what he made of it all. Harry Oakland was one of Mrs Albert Forrester’s staunchest admirers, and had written a brilliant and subtle essay on her style. With his refined and even beautiful features he looked like a San Sebastian who had had an accident with a hair-restorer; for he was uncommonly hirsute. He was a very young man, not thirty, but he had been in turn a dramatic critic, and a critic of fiction, a musical critic, and a critic of painting. But he was getting a little tired of art and threatened to devote his talents in future to the criticism of sport.

Albert, I should explain, was in the city and it was a misfortune that Mrs Forrester’s friends thought she bore with meritorious fortitude that he was not even rich. There would have been something romantic in it if he had been a merchant prince who held the fate of nations in his hand or sent argosies, laden with rare spices, to those ports of the Levant the names of which have provided many a poet with so rich and rare a rhyme. But Albert was only a currant merchant and was supposed to make no more than just enabled Mrs

Albert Forrester to conduct her life with distinction and even with liberality. Since his occupation kept him in his office till six o’clock he never managed to get to Mrs Albert Forrester’s Tuesdays till the most important visitors were gone. By the time he arrived, there were seldom more than three or four of her more intimate friends in the drawing-room, discussing with freedom and humour the guests who had departed, and when they heard Albert’s key in the front door they realized with one accord that it was late. In a moment he opened the door in his hesitating way and looked mildly in. Mrs Albert Forrester greeted him with a bright smile.

“Come in, Albert, come in. I think you know everybody here.”

Albert entered and shook hands with his wife’s friends.

“Have you just come from the City?” she asked eagerly, though she knew there was nowhere else he could have come from. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

“No, thank you, my dear. I had tea in my office.”

Mrs Albert Forrester smiled still more brightly and the rest of the company thought she was perfectly wonderful with him.

“Ah, but I know you like a second cup. I will pour it out for you myself.”

She went to the tea-table and, forgetting that the tea had been stewing for an hour and a half and was stone cold, poured him out a cup and added milk and sugar. Albert took it with a word of thanks, and meekly stirred it, but when Mrs Forrester resumed the conversation which his appearance had interrupted, without tasting it put it quietly down. His arrival was the signal for the party finally to break up, and one by one the remaining guests took their departure. On one occasion, however, the conversation was so absorbing and the point at issue so important that Mrs Albert Forrester would not hear of their going.

“It must be settled once for all. And after all,” she remarked in a manner that for her was almost arch, “this is a matter on which Albert may have something to say. Let us have the benefit of his opinion.”

It was when women were beginning to cut their hair and the subject of discussion was whether Mrs Albert Forrester should or should not shingle. Mrs Albert Forrester was a woman of authoritative presence. She was large-boned and her bones were well covered; had she not been so tall and strong it might have suggested itself to you that she was corpulent. But she carried her weight gallantly. Her features were a little larger than life-size and it was this that gave her face doubtless the look of virile intellectuality that it certainly possessed. Her skin was dark and you might have thought that she had in her veins some trace of Levantine blood: she admitted that she could not but think there was in her a gypsy strain and that would account, she felt, for the wild and lawless passion that sometimes characterized her poetry. Her eyes were large and black and bright, her nose like the great Duke of Wellington’s, but more fleshy, and her chin square and determined. She had a big mouth, with full red lips, which owed nothing to cosmetics, for of these Mrs Albert Forrester had never deigned to make use; and her hair, thick, solid, and grey, was piled on top of her head in such a manner as to increase her already commanding height. She was in appearance an imposing, not to say an alarming, female.

She was always very suitably dressed in rich materials of sombre hue and she looked every inch a woman of letters; but in her discreet way (being after all human and susceptible to vanity) she followed the fashions and the cut of her gowns was modish. I think for some time she had hankered to shingle her hair, but she thought it more becoming to do it at the solicitation of her friends than on her own initiative.

“Oh, you must, you must,” said Harry Oakland, in his eager, boyish way. “You’d look too, too wonderful.”

Clifford Boyleston, who was now writing a book on Madame de Maintenon, was doubtful. He thought it a dangerous experiment.

“I think,” he said, wiping his eye-glasses with a cambric handkerchief, “I think when one has made a type one should stick to it. What would Louis XIV have been without his wig?”

“I’m hesitating,” said Mrs Forrester. “After all, we must move with the times. I am of my day and I do not wish to lag behind. America, as Wilhelm Meister said, is here and now.” She turned brightly to Albert. “What does my lord and master say about it? What is your opinion, Albert? To shingle or not to shingle, that is the question.”

“I’m afraid my opinion is not of great importance, my dear,” he answered mildly.

“To me it is of the greatest importance,” answered Mrs Albert Forrester, flatteringly.

She could not but see how beautifully her friends thought she treated The Philatelist.

“I insist,” she proceeded, “I insist. No one knows me a you do, Albert. Will it suit me?”

“It might,” he answered. “My only fear is that with your-statuesque appearance short hair would perhaps suggest-well, shall we say, the Isle of Greece where burning Sappho loved and sung.”

There was a moment’s embarrassed pause. Rose Waterford smothered a giggle, but the others preserved a stony silence. Mrs Forrester’s smile froze on her lips. Albert had dropped a brick.

“I always thought Byron a very mediocre poet,” said Mrs Albert Forrester at last.

The company broke up. Mrs Albert Forrester did not shingle, nor indeed was the matter ever again referred to.

It was towards the end of another of Mrs Albert Forrester’s Tuesdays that the event occurred that had so great an influence on her literary career.

It had been one of her most successful parties. The leader of the Labour Party had been there and Mrs Albert Forrester had gone as far as she could without definitely committing herself to intimate to him that she was prepared to throw in her lot with Labour. The time was ripe and if she was ever to adopt a political career she must come to a decision. A member of the French Academy had been brought by Clifford Boyleston and, though she knew he was wholly unacquainted with English, it had gratified her to receive his affable compliment on her ornate and yet pellucid style. The American Ambassador had been there and a young Russian prince whose authentic Romanoff blood alone prevented him from looking a gigolo. A duchess who had recently divorced her duke and married a jockey had been very gracious; and her strawberry leaves, albeit sere and yellow, undoubtedly added tone to the assembly. There had been quite a galaxy of literary lights. But now all, all were gone but Clifford Boyleston, Harry Oakland, Rose Waterford, Oscar Charles, and Simmons. Oscar Charles was a little, gnome-like creature, young but with the wizened face of a cunning monkey, with gold spectacles, who earned his living in a government office but spent his leisure in the pursuit of literature.

He wrote little articles for the sixpenny weeklies and had a spirited contempt for the world in general. Mrs Albert Forrester liked him, thinking he had talent, but though he always expressed the keenest admiration for her style (it was indeed he who had named her the mistress of the semi-colon), his acerbity was so general that she also somewhat feared him. Simmons was her agent; a round-faced man who wore glasses so strong that his eyes behind them looked strange and misshapen. They reminded you of the eyes of some uncouth crustacean that you had seen in an aquarium. He came regularly to Mrs Albert Forrester’s parties, partly because he had the greatest admiration for her genius and partly because it was convenient for him to meet prospective clients in her drawing-room.

Mrs Albert Forrester, for whom he had long laboured with but a trifling recompense, was not sorry to put him in the way of earning an honest penny, and she took care to introduce him, with warm expressions of gratitude, to anyone who might be supposed to have literary wares to sell. It was not without pride that she remembered that the notorious and vastly lucrative memoirs of Lady St Swithin had been first mooted in her drawing-room.

They sat in a circle of which Mrs Albert Forrester was the centre and discussed brightly and, it must be confessed, somewhat maliciously the various persons who had been that day present. Miss Warren, the pallid female who had stood for two hours at the tea-table, was walking silently round the room collecting cups that had been left here and there. She had some vague employment, but was always able to get off in order to pour out tea for Mrs Albert Forrester, and in the evening she typed Mrs Albert Forrester’s manuscripts. Mrs Albert Forrester did not pay her for this, thinking quite rightly that as it was she did a great deal for the poor thing; but she gave her the seats for the cinema that were sent her for nothing and often presented her with articles of clothing for which she had no further use.

Mrs Albert Forrester in her rather deep, full voice was talking in a steady flow and the rest were listening to her with attention. She was in good form and the words that poured from her lips could have gone straight down on paper without alteration. Suddenly there was a noise in the passage as though something heavy had fallen and then the sound of an altercation.

Mrs Albert Forrester stopped and a slight frown darkened her really noble brow.

“I should have thought they knew by now that I will not have this devastating racket in the flat. Would you mind ringing the bell, Miss Warren, and asking what is the reason of this tumult?”

Miss Warren rang the bell and in a moment the maid appeared. Miss Warren at the door, in order not to interrupt Mrs Albert Forrester, spoke to her in undertones. But Mrs Albert Forrester somewhat irritably interrupted herself.

“Well, Carter, what is it? Is the house falling down or has the Red Revolution at last broken out?”

“If you please, ma’am, it’s the new cook’s box,” answered the maid. “The porter dropped it as he was bringing it in and the cook got all upset about it.”

“What do you mean by ‘the new cook’?”

“Mrs Bulfinch went away this afternoon, ma’am,” said the maid.

Mrs Albert Forrester stared at her.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it. Had Mrs Bulfinch given notice? The moment Mr Forrester comes in tell him that I wish to speak to him.”

“Very good, ma’am.”

The maid went out and Miss Warren slowly returned to the tea-table. Mechanically, though nobody wanted them, she poured out several cups of tea.

“What a catastrophe!” cried Miss Waterford.

“You must get her back,” said Clifford Boyleston. “She’s a treasure, that woman, a remarkable cook, and she gets better and better every day.”

But at that moment the maid came in again with a letter on a small plated salver and handed it to her mistress.

“What is this?” said Mrs Albert Forrester.

“Mr Forrester said I was to give you this letter when you asked for him, ma’am,” said the maid.

“Where is Mr Forrester then?”

“Mr Forrester’s gone, ma’am,” answered the maid as though the question surprised her.

“Gone? That’ll do. You can go.”

The maid left the room and Mrs Albert Forrester, with a look of perplexity on her large face, opened the letter. Rose Waterford has told me that her first thought was that Albert, fearful of his wife’s displeasure at the departure of Mrs Bulfinch, had thrown himself in the Thames. Mrs Albert Forrester read the letter and a look of consternation crossed her face.

“Oh, monstrous,” she cried. “Monstrous! Monstrous!”

“What is it, Mrs Forrester?”

Mrs Albert Forrester pawed the carpet with her foot like a restive, high-spirited horse pawing the ground, and crossing her arms with a gesture that is indescribable (but that you sometimes see in a fishwife who is going to make the very devil of a scene) bent her looks upon her curious and excessively startled friends.

“Albert has eloped with the cook.”

There was a gasp of dismay. Then something terrible happened. Miss Warren, who was standing behind the tea-table, suddenly choked. Miss Warren, who never opened her mouth and whom no one ever spoke to, Miss Warren, whom not one of them, though he had seen her every week for three years, would have recognized in the street, Miss Warren suddenly burst into uncontrollable laughter. With one accord, aghast, they turned and stared at her. They felt as Balaam must have felt when his ass broke into speech. She positively shrieked with laughter. There was a nameless horror about the sight, as though something had on a sudden gone wrong with a natural phenomenon, and you were just as startled as though the chairs and tables without warning began to skip about the floor in an antic dance. Miss Warren tried to contain herself, but the more she tried the more pitilessly the laughter shook her, and seizing a handkerchief she stuffed it in her mouth and hurried from the room. The door slammed behind her.

“Hysteria,” said Clifford Boyleston.

“Pure hysteria, of course,” said Harry Oakland.

But Mrs Albert Forrester said nothing.

The letter had dropped at her feet and Simmons, the agent, picked it up and handed it to her. She would not take it

“Read it,” she said. “Read it aloud.”

Mr Simmons pushed his spectacles up on his forehead and holding the letter very close to his eyes read as follows:

My Dear—

Mrs Bulfinch is in need of a change and has decided to leave, and as I do not feel inclined to stay on here without her I am going too. I have had all the literature I can stand and I am fed up with art.

Mrs Bulfinch does not care about marriage, but if you care to divorce me she is willing to marry me. I hope you will find the new cook satisfactory. She has excellent references. It may save you trouble if I inform you that Mrs Bulfinch and I are living at 411 Kennington Road, S.E.

Albert

No one spoke. Mr Simmons slipped his spectacles back on to the bridge of his nose. The fact was that none of them, brilliant as they were and accustomed to find topics of conversation to suit every occasion, could think of an appropriate remark. Mrs Albert Forrester was not the kind of woman to whom you could offer condolences and each was too much afraid of the other’s ridicule to venture upon the obvious. At last Clifford Boyleston came bravely to the rescue.

“One doesn’t know what to say,” he observed.

There was another silence and then Rose Waterford spoke.

“What does Mrs Bulfinch look like?” she asked.

“How should I know?” answered Mrs Albert Forrester, somewhat peevishly. “I never looked at her. Albert always engaged the servants, she just came in for a moment so that I could see if her aura was satisfactory.”

“But you must have seen her every morning when you did the housekeeping.”

“Albert did the housekeeping. It was his own wish, so that I might be free to devote myself to my work. In this life one has to limit oneself.”

“Did Albert order your luncheons?” asked Clifford Boyleston.

“Naturally. It was his province.”

Clifford Boyleston slightly raised his eyebrows. What a fool he had been never to guess that it was Albert who was responsible for Mrs Forrester’s beautiful food! And of course it was owing to him that the excellent Chablis was always just sufficiently chilled to run coolly over the tongue, but never so cold as to lose its bouquet and its savour.

“He certainly knew good food and good wine.”

“I always told you he had his points,” answered Mrs Albert Forrester, as though he were reproaching her. “You all laughed at him. You would not believe me when I told you that I owed a great deal to him.”

There was no answer to this and once more silence, heavy and ominous, fell on the party. Suddenly Mr Simmons flung a bombshell.

“You must get him back.”

So great was her surprise that if Mrs Albert Forrester had not been standing against the chimney-piece she would undoubtedly have staggered two paces to the rear.

“What on earth do you mean?” she cried. “I will never see him again as long as I live. Take him back? Never. Not even if he came and begged me on his bended knees.”

“I didn’t say take him back; I said, get him back.”

But Mrs Albert Forrester paid no attention to the misplaced interruption.

“I have done everything for him. What would he be without me? I ask you. I have given him a position which never in his remotest dreams could he have aspired to.”

None could deny that there was something magnificent in the indignation of Mrs Albert Forrester, but it appeared to have little effect on Mr Simmons. “What are you going to live on?”

Mrs Albert Forrester flung him a glance totally devoid of amiability.

“God will provide,” she answered in freezing tones.

“I think it very unlikely,” he returned.

Mrs Albert Forrester shrugged her shoulders. She wore an outraged expression. But Mr Simmons made himself as comfortable as he could on his chair and lit a cigarette.

“You know you have no warmer admirer of your art than me,” he said.

“Than I,” corrected Clifford Boyleston.

“Or than you,” went on Mr Simmonds blandly. “We all agree that there is no one writing now whom you need fear comparison with. Both in prose and verse you are absolutely first class. And your style-well, everyone knows your style.”

“The opulence of Sir Thomas Browne with the limpidity of Cardinal Newman,” said Clifford Boyleston. “The raciness of John Dryden with the precision of Jonathan Swift.”

The only sign that Mrs Albert Forrester heard was the smile that hesitated for a brief moment at the corners of her tragic mouth.

“And you have humour.”

“Is there anyone in the world,” cried Miss Waterford, “who can put such a wealth of wit and satire and comic observation into a semi-colon?”

“But the fact remains that you don’t sell,” pursued Mr Simmons imperturbably. “I’ve handled your work for twenty years and I tell you frankly that I shouldn’t have grown fat on my commission, but I’ve handled it because now and again I like to do what I can for good work. I’ve always believed in you and I’ve hoped that sooner or later we might get the public to swallow you. But if you think you can make your living by writing the sort of stuff you do I’m bound to tell you that you haven’t a chance.”

“I have come into the world too late,” said Mrs Albert Forrester. “I should have lived in the eighteenth century when the wealthy patron rewarded a dedication with a hundred guineas.”

“What do you suppose the currant business brings in?”

Mrs Albert Forrester gave a little sigh.

“A pittance. Albert always told me he made about twelve hundred a year.”

“He must be a very good manager. But you couldn’t expect him on that income to allow you very much. Take my word for it, there’s only one thing for you to do and that’s to get him back.”

“I would rather live in a garret. Do you think I’m going to submit to the affront he has put upon me? Would you have me battle for his affections with my cook? Do not forget that there is one thing which is more valuable to a woman like me than her ease and that is her dignity.”

“I was just coming to that,” said Mr Simmons coldly.

He glanced at the others and those strange, lopsided eyes of his looked more than ever monstrous and fish-like.

“There is no doubt in my mind,” he went on, “that you have a very distinguished and almost unique position in the world of letters. You stand for something quite apart. You never prostituted your genius for filthy lucre and you have held high the banner of pure art. You’re thinking of going into Parliament. I don’t think much of politics myself, but there’s no denying that it would be a good advertisement and if you get in I daresay we could get you a lecture tour in America on the strength of it. You have ideals and this I can say, that even the people who’ve never read a word you’ve written respect you. But in your position there’s one thing you can’t afford to be and that’s a joke.”

Mrs Albert Forrester gave a distinct start.

“What on earth do you mean by that?”

“I know nothing about Mrs Bulfinch and for all I know she’s a very respectable woman, but the fact remains that a man doesn’t run away with his cook without making his wife ridiculous. If it had been a dancer or a lady of title I daresay it wouldn’t have done you any harm, but a cook would finish you. In a week you’d have all London laughing at you, and if there’s one thing that kills an author or a politician it is ridicule. You must get your husband back and you must get him back pretty damned quick.”

A dark flush settled on Mrs Albert Forrester’s face, but she did not immediately reply. In her ears there rang on a sudden the outrageous and unaccountable laughter that had sent Miss Warren flying from the room.

“We’re all friends here and you can count on our discretion.”

Mrs Forrester looked at her friends and she thought that in Rose Waterford’s eyes there was already a malicious gleam. On the wizened face of Oscar Charles was a whimsical look. She wished that in a moment of abandon she had not betrayed her secret. Mr Simmons, however, knew the literary world and allowed his eyes to rest on the company.

“After all you are the centre and head of their set. Your husband has not only run away from you but also from them. It’s not too good for them either. The fact is that Albert Forrester has made you all look a lot of damned fools.”

“All,” said Clifford Boyleston. “We’re all in the same boat. He’s quite right, Mrs Forrester. The Philatelist must come back.”

“Et tu, Brute.”

Mr Simmons did not understand Latin and if he had would probably not have been moved by Mrs Albert Forrester’s exclamation. He cleared his throat.

“My suggestion is that Mrs Albert Forrester should go and see him tomorrow, fortunately we have his address, and beg him to reconsider his decision. I don’t know what sort of things a woman says on these occasions, but Mrs Forrester has tact and imagination and she must say them. If Mr Forrester makes any conditions she must accept them. She must leave no stone unturned.”

“If you play your cards well there is no reason why you shouldn’t bring him back here with you tomorrow evening,” said Rose Waterford lightly.

“Will you do it, Mrs Forrester?”

For two minutes, at least, turned away from them, she stared at the empty fireplace; then, drawing herself to her full height, she faced them.

“For my art’s sake, not for mine. I will not allow the ribald laughter of the Philistine to besmirch all that I hold good and true and beautiful.”

“Capital,” said Mr Simmons, rising to his feet. “I’ll look in on my way home tomorrow and I hope to find you and Mr Forrester billing and cooing side by side like a pair of turtle-doves.”

He took his leave, and the others, anxious not to be left alone with Mrs Albert Forrester and her agitation, in a body followed his example.

It was latish in the afternoon next day when Mrs Albert Forrester, imposing in black silk and a velvet toque, set out from her flat in order to get a bus from the Marble Arch that would take her to Victoria Station. Mr Simmons had explained to her by telephone how to reach the Kennington Road with expedition and economy. She neither felt nor looked like Delilah. At Victoria she took the tram that runs down the Vauxhall Bridge Road. When she crossed the river she found herself in a part of London more noisy, sordid, and bustling than that to which she was accustomed, but she was too much occupied with her thoughts to notice the varied scene. She was relieved to find that the tram went along the Kennington Road and asked the conductor to put her down a few doors from the house she sought. When it did and rumbled on leaving her alone in the busy street, she felt strangely lost, like a traveller in an Eastern tale set down by a djinn in an unknown city. She walked slowly, looking to right and left, and notwithstanding the emotions of indignation and embarrassment that fought for the possession of her somewhat opulent bosom, she could not but reflect that here was the material for a very pretty piece of prose. The little houses held about them the feeling of a bygone age when here it was still almost country, and Mrs Albert Forrester registered in her retentive memory a note that she must look into the literary associations of the Kennington Road. Number four hundred and eleven was one of a row of shabby houses that stood some way back from the street; in front of it was a narrow strip of shabby grass, and a paved way led up to a latticed wooden porch that badly needed a coat of paint. This and the straggling, stunted creeper that grew over the front of the house gave it a falsely rural air which was strange and even sinister in that road down which thundered a tumultuous traffic. There was something equivocal about the house that suggested that here lived women to whom a life of pleasure had brought an inadequate reward.

The door was opened by a scraggy girl of fifteen with long legs and a tousled head.

“Does Mrs Bulfinch live here, do you know?”

“You’ve rung the wrong bell. Second floor.” The girl pointed to the stairs and at the same time screamed shrilly: “Mrs Bulfinch, a party to see you. Mrs Bulfinch.”

Mrs Albert Forrester walked up the dingy stairs. They were covered with torn carpet. She walked slowly, for she did not wish to get out of breath. A door opened as she reached the second floor and she recognized her cook.

“Good afternoon, Bulfinch,” said Mrs Albert Forrester, with dignity. “I wish to see your master.”

Mrs Bulfinch hesitated for the shadow of a second, then held the door wide open.

“Come in, ma’am.” She turned her head. “Albert, here’s Mrs Forrester to see you.”

Mrs Forrester stepped by quickly and there was Albert sitting by the fire in a leather-covered, but rather shabby, arm-chair, with his feet in slippers, and in shirtsleeves. He was reading the evening paper and smoking a cigar. He rose to his feet as Mrs Albert Forrester came in. Mrs Bulfinch followed her visitor into the room and closed the door.

“How are you, my dear?” said Albert cheerfully. “Keeping well, I hope.”

“You’d better put on your coat, Albert,” said Mrs Bulfinch. “What will Mrs Forrester think of you, finding you like that? I never.”

She took the coat, which was hanging on a peg, and helped him into it; and like a woman familiar with the peculiarities of masculine dress pulled down his waistcoat so that it should not ride over his collar.

“I received your letter, Albert,” said Mrs Forrester.

“I supposed you had, or you wouldn’t have known my address, would you?”

“Won’t you sit down, ma’am?” said Mrs Bulfinch, deftly dusting a chair, part of a suite covered in plum-covered velvet, and pushing it forwards.

Mrs Albert Forrester with a slight bow seated herself.

“I should have preferred to see you alone, Albert,” she said.

His eyes twinkled.

“Since anything you have to say concerns Mrs Bulfinch as much as it concerns me I think it much better that she should be present.”

“As you wish.”

Mrs Bulfinch drew up a chair and sat down. Mrs Albert Forrester had never seen her but with a large apron over a print dress. She was wearing now an open-work blouse of white silk, a black skirt, and high-heeled, patent-leather shoes with silver buckles. She was a woman of about five-and-forty, with reddish hair and a reddish face, not pretty, but with a good-natured look, and buxom. She reminded Mrs Albert Forrester of a serving-wench, somewhat overblown, in a jolly picture by an old Dutch master.

“Well, my dear, what have you to say to me?” asked Albert.

Mrs Albert Forrester gave him her brightest and most affable smile. Her great black eyes shone with tolerant good-humour.

“Of course you know that this is perfectly absurd, Albert. I think you must be out of your mind.”

“Do you, my dear? Fancy that.”

“I’m not angry with you, I’m only amused, but a joke’s a joke and should not be carried too far. I’ve come to take you home.”

“Was my letter not quite clear?”

“Perfectly. I ask no questions and I will make no reproaches. We will look upon this as a momentary aberration and say no more about it.”

“Nothing will induce me ever to live with you again, my dear,” said Albert in, however, a perfectly friendly fashion.

“You’re not serious?”

“Quite.”

“Do you love this woman?”

Mrs Albert Forrester still smiled with an eager and somewhat metallic brightness. She was determined to take the matter lightly. With her intimate sense of values she realized that the scene was comic. Albert looked at Mrs Bulfinch and a smile broke out on his withered face.

“We get on very well together, don’t we, old girl?”

“Not so bad,” said Mrs Bulfinch.

Mrs Albert Forrester raised her eyebrows; her husband had never in all their married life called her “old girl’: nor indeed would she have wished it.

“If Bulfinch has any regard or respect for you she must know that the thing is impossible. After the life you’ve led and the society you’ve moved in she can hardly expect to make you permanently happy in miserable furnished lodgings.”

“They’re not furnished lodgings, ma’am,” said Mrs Bulfinch. “It’s all me own furniture. You see, I’m very independent-like and I’ve always liked to have a home of me own. So I keep these rooms on whether I’m in a situation or whether I’m not, and so I always have some place to go back to.”

“And a very nice cosy little place it is,” said Albert.

Mrs Albert Forrester looked about her. There was a kitchen range in the fireplace on which a kettle was simmering and on the mantelshelf was a black marble clock flanked by black marble candelabra. There was a large table covered with a red cloth, a dresser, and a sewing-machine. On the walls were photographs and framed pictures from Christmas supplements. A door at the back, covered with a red plush portiere, led into what, considering the size of the house, Mrs Albert Forrester (who in her leisure moments had made a somewhat extensive study of architecture) could not but conclude was the only bedroom. Mrs Bulfinch and Albert lived in a contiguity that allowed no doubt about their relations.

“Have you not been happy with me, Albert?” asked Mrs Forrester in a deeper tone.

“We’ve been married for thirty-five years, my dear. It’s too long. It’s a great deal too long. You’re a good woman in your way, but you don’t suit me. You’re literary and I’m not. You’re artistic and I’m not.”

“I’ve always taken care to make you share in all my interests. I’ve taken great pains that you shouldn’t be overshadowed by my success. You can’t say that I’ve ever left you out of things.”

“You’re a wonderful writer, I don’t deny it for a moment, but the truth is I don’t like the books you write.”

“That, if I may be permitted to say so, merely shows that you have very bad taste. All the best critics admit their power and their charm.”

“And I don’t like your friends. Let me tell you a secret, my dear. Often at your parties I’ve had an almost irresistible impulse to take off all my clothes just to see what would happen.”

“Nothing would have happened,” said Mrs Albert Forrester with a slight frown. “I should merely have sent for the doctor.”

“Besides you haven’t the figure for that, Albert,” said Mrs Bulfinch.

Mr Simmons had hinted to Mrs Albert Forrester that if the need arose she must not hesitate to use the allurements of her sex in order to bring back her erring husband to the conjugal roof, but she did not in the least know how to do this. It would have been easier, she could not but reflect, had she been in evening dress.

“Does the fidelity of five-and-thirty years count for nothing? I have never looked at another man, Albert. I’m used to you. I shall be lost without you.”

“I’ve left all my menus with the new cook, ma’am. You’ve only got to tell her how many to luncheon and she’ll manage,” said Mrs Bulfinch. “She’s very reliable and she has as light a hand with pastry as anyone I ever knew.”

Mrs Albert Forrester began to be discouraged. Mrs Bulfinch’s remark, well meant no doubt, made it difficult to bring the conversation on to the plane on which emotion could be natural.

“I’m afraid you’re only wasting your time, my dear,” said Albert. “My decision is irrevocable. I’m not very young any more and I want someone to take care of me. I shall of course make you as good an allowance as I can. Corinne wants me to retire.”

“Who is Corinne?” asked Mrs Forrester with the utmost surprise.

“It’s my name,” said Mrs Bulfinch. “My mother was half French.”

“That explains a great deal,” replied Mrs Forrester, pursing her lips, for though she admired the literature of our neighbours she knew that their morals left much to be desired.

“What I say is, Albert’s worked long enough, and it’s about time he started enjoying himself. I’ve got a little bit of property at Clacton-on-Sea. It’s a very healthy neighbourhood and the air is wonderful. We could live there very comfortable. And what with the beach and the pier there’s always something to do. They’re a very nice lot of people down there. If you don’t interfere with nobody, nobody’ll interfere with you.”

“I discussed the matter with my partners today and they’re willing to buy me out. It means a certain sacrifice. When everything is settled I shall have an income of nine hundred pounds a year. There are three of us, so it gives us just three hundred a year apiece.”

“How am I to live on that?” cried Mrs Albert Forrester. “I have my position to keep up.”

“You have a fluent, a fertile, and a distinguished pen, my dear.”

Mrs Albert Forrester impatiently shrugged her shoulders.

“You know very well that my books don’t bring me in anything but reputation. The publishers always say that they lose by them and in fact they only publish them because it gives them prestige.”

It was then that Mrs Bulfinch had the idea that was to have consequences of such magnitude.

“Why don’t you write a good thrilling detective story?” she asked.

“Me?” exclaimed Mrs Albert Forrester, for the first time in her life regardless of grammar.

“It’s not a bad idea,” said Albert. “It’s not a bad idea at all.”

“I should have the critics down on me like a thousand bricks.”

“I’m not so sure of that. Give the highbrow the chance of being lowbrow without demeaning himself and he’ll be so grateful to you, he won’t know what to do.”

“For this relief much thanks,” murmured Mrs Albert Forrester reflectively.

“My dear, the critics’ll eat it. And written in your beautiful English they won’t be afraid to call it a masterpiece.”

“The idea is preposterous. It’s absolutely foreign to my genius. I could never hope to please the masses.”

“Why not? The masses want to read good stuff, but they dislike being bored. They all know your name, but they don’t read you, because you bore them. The fact is, my dear, you’re dull.”

“I don’t know how you can say that, Albert,” replied Mrs Albert Forrester, with as little resentment as the equator might feel if someone called it chilly. “Everyone knows and acknowledges that I have an exquisite sense of humour and there is nobody who can extract so much good wholesome fun from a semicolon as I can.”

“If you can give the masses a good thrilling story and let them think at the same time that they are improving their minds you’ll make a fortune.”

“I’ve never read a detective story in my life,” said Mrs Albert Forrester. “I once heard of a Mr Barnes of New York and I was told that he had written a book called The Mystery of a Hansom Cab. But I never read it.”

“Of course you have to have the knack,” said Mrs Bulfinch. “The first thing to remember is that you don’t want any lovemaking, it’s out of place in a detective story, what you want is murder, and sleuth-hounds, and you don’t want to be able to guess who done it till the last page.”

“But you must play fair with your reader, my dear,” said Albert. “It always annoys me when suspicion has been thrown on the secretary or the lady of the title and it turns out to be the second footman who’s never done more than say, ‘The carriage is at the door.’ Puzzle your reader as much as you can, but don’t make a fool of him.”

“I love a good detective story,” said Mrs Bulfinch. “Give me a lady in evening dress, just streaming with diamonds, lying on the library floor with a dagger in her heart, and I know I’m going to have a treat.”

“There’s no accounting for tastes,” said Albert. “Personally, I prefer a respectable family solicitor, with side-whiskers, gold watch-chain, and a benign appearance, lying dead in Hyde Park.”

“With his throat cut?” asked Mrs Bulfinch eagerly.

“No, stabbed in the back. There’s something peculiarly attractive to the reader in the murder of a middle-aged gentleman of spotless reputation. It is pleasant to think that the most apparently blameless of us have a mystery in our lives.”

“I see what you mean, Albert,” said Mrs Bulfinch. “He was the repository of a fatal secret.”

“We can give you all the tips, my dear,” said Albert, smiling mildly at Mrs Albert Forrester. “I’ve read hundreds of detective stories.”

“You!”

“That’s what first brought Corinne and me together. I used to pass them on to her when I’d finished them.”

“Many’s the time I’ve heard him switch off the electric light as the dawn was creeping through the window and I couldn’t help smiling to myself as I said: ‘There, he’s finished it at last, now he can have a good sleep.’”

Mrs Albert Forrester rose to her feet. She drew herself up.

“Now I see what a gulf separates us,” she said, and her fine contralto shook a little. “You have been surrounded for thirty years with all that was best in English literature and you read hundreds of detective novels.”

“Hundreds and hundreds,” interrupted Albert with a smile of satisfaction.

“I came here willing to make any reasonable concession so that you should come back to your home, but now I wish it no longer. You have shown me that we have nothing in common and never had. There is an abyss between us.”

“Very well, my dear,” said Albert gently, “I will submit to your decision. But you think over the detective story.”

“I will arise and go now,” she murmured, “and go to Innisfree.”

“I’ll just show you downstairs,” said Mrs Bulfinch. “One has to be careful of the carpet if one doesn’t exactly know where the holes are.”

With dignity, but not without circumspection, Mrs Albert Forrester walked downstairs and when Mrs Bulfinch opened the door and asked her if she would like a taxi she shook her head.

“I shall take the tram.”

“You need not be afraid that I won’t take good care of Mr Forrester, ma’am,” said Mrs Bulfinch pleasantly. “He shall have every comfort. I nursed Mr Bulfinch for three years during his last illness and there’s very little I don’t know about invalids. Not that Mr Forrester isn’t very strong and active for his years. And of course he’ll have a hobby. I always think a man should have a hobby. He’s going to collect postage-stamps.”

Mrs Albert Forrester gave a little start of surprise. But just then a tram came in sight and, as a woman (even the greatest of them) will, she hurried at the risk of her life into the middle of the road and waved frantically. It stopped and she climbed in. She did not know how she was going to face Mr Simmons. He would be waiting for her when she got home. Clifford Boyleston would probably be there too. They would all be there and she would have to tell them that she had miserably failed. At that moment she had no warm feeling of friendship for her little group of devoted admirers. Wondering what the time was, she looked up at the man sitting opposite her to see whether he was the kind of person she could modestly ask, and suddenly started; for sitting there was a middle-aged gentleman of the most respectable appearance, with side-whiskers, a benign expression, and a gold watch-chain. It was the very man whom Albert had described lying dead in Hyde Park and she could not but jump to the conclusion that he was a family solicitor. The coincidence was extraordinary and really it looked as though the hand of fate were beckoning to her. He wore a silk hat, a black coat, and pepper-and-salt trousers, he was somewhat corpulent, of a powerful build, and by his side was a despatch-case. When the tram was half-way down the Vauxhall Bridge Road he asked the conductor to stop and she saw him go down a small, mean street. Why? Ah, why? When it reached Victoria, so deeply immersed in thought was she, until the conductor somewhat roughly told her where she was, she did not move. Edgar Allan Poe had written detective stories. She took a bus. She sat inside, buried in reflection, but when it arrived at Hyde Park Corner she suddenly made up her mind to get out. She couldn’t sit still any longer. She felt she must walk. She entered the gates, walking slowly, and looked about her with an air that was at once intent and abstracted. Yes, there was Edgar Allan Poe; no one could deny that. After all he had invented the genre, and everyone knew how great his influence had been on the Parnassians. Or was it the Symbolists? Never mind. Baudelaire and all that. As she passed the Achilles Statue she stopped for a minute and looked at it with raised eyebrows.

At length she reached her flat and opening the door saw several hats in the hall. They were all there. She went into the drawing-room.

“Here she is at last,” cried Miss Waterford.

Mrs Albert Forrester advanced, smiling with animation, and shook the proffered hands. Mr Simmons and Clifford Boyleston were there, Harry Oakland and Oscar Charles.

“Oh, you poor things, have you had no tea?” she cried brightly. “I haven’t an idea what the time is, but I know I’m fearfully late.”

“Well?” they said. “Well?”

“My dears, I’ve got something quite wonderful to tell you. I’ve had an inspiration. Why should the devil have all the best tunes?”

“What do you mean?”

She paused in order to give full effect to the surprise she was going to spring upon them. Then she flung it at them without preamble.

“I’M GOING TO WRITE A DETECTIVE STORY.”

They stared at her with open mouths. She held up her hand to prevent them from interrupting her, but indeed no one had the smallest intention of doing so.

“I am going to raise the detective story to the dignity of Art. It came to me suddenly in Hyde Park. It’s a murder story and I shall give the solution on the very last page. I shall write it in an impeccable English, and since it’s occurred to me lately that perhaps I’ve exhausted the possibilities of the semi-colon, I am going to take up the colon. No one yet has explored its potentialities. Humour and mystery are what I aim at. I shall call it The Achilles Statue.”

“What a title!” cried Mr Simmons, recovering himself before any of the others. “I can sell the serial rights on the title and your name alone.”

“But what about Albert?” asked Clifford Boyleston.

“Albert?” echoed Mrs Forrester. “Albert?”

She looked at him as though for the life of her she could not think what he was talking about. Then she gave a little cry as if she had suddenly remembered.

“Albert! I knew I’d gone out on some errand and it absolutely slipped my memory. I was walking through Hyde Park and I had this inspiration. What a fool you’ll all think me!”

“Then you haven’t seen Albert?”

“My dear, I forgot all about him.” She gave an amused laugh. “Let Albert keep his cook. I can’t bother about Albert now. Albert belongs to the semicolon period. I am going to write a detective story.”

“My dear, you’re too, too wonderful,” said Harry Oakland.