

A close-up, low-angle portrait of a man's face and neck. He has a short, dark beard and mustache. He is wearing a dark, textured knit sweater. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on his neck and the texture of the sweater, and deep shadows on his face. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue-grey color.

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***PETER***

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**Peter**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER I](#)

[CHAPTER II](#)

[CHAPTER III](#)

[CHAPTER IV](#)

[CHAPTER V](#)

[CHAPTER VI](#)

[CHAPTER VII](#)

[CHAPTER VIII](#)

[CHAPTER IX](#)

[CHAPTER X](#)

[CHAPTER XI](#)

[CHAPTER XII](#)

[CHAPTER XIII](#)

[CHAPTER XIV](#)

# CHAPTER I

## Table of Contents

THE two who mattered were lounging on the cushioned seat in the low window, of which the lower panes had been pushed quite up in order to admit the utmost possible influx of air. Little came in, for the afternoon was sultry and windless, but every now and then some current moved outside, some trickle of comparative coolness from the grass and trees of the Green Park, sufficient to stir the girl's hair. On this high floor of the house of flats London seemed far remote; the isolation as of an aeroplane, as of a ship at sea, protected them from external intrusion.

Inside the room a party of four were assembled round the tea-table; the hostess, mother of the girl who sat in the window-seat, was wondering, without impatience, as was becoming to so chinned and contented a face, when Mrs. Alston would cease gesticulating with her sandwich and eat it, instead of using it as a conductor's baton to emphasize her points in the discourse to which nobody was listening. The sandwich had already a large semicircular bite out of it, which penetrated well past its centre, and one more application (if she would only make it) to that capacious mouth would render it reasonable to suppose that she had finished her tea. Mrs. Heaton herself had done so; so also had the stout grey-haired man with the varnished face, and as for Mrs. Underwood, she had long ago drunk her cup of hot water and refused any further nourishment. But while Mrs. Alston brandished her crescent of a sandwich, and continued talking as if somebody had contradicted her, it

was impossible to suggest a move to the bridge-table that stood ready with new packs and sharpened pencils a couple of yards away. To the boy and girl in the window that quartette of persons seemed of supreme unimportance both by reason of their age and of the earnest futility of their conversation. They talked eagerly about dull things like politics and prices instead of being flippant, in the modern style, about interesting things. Between them and the younger generation there was the great gulf dugged by the unrelenting years, and set on fire by the war. It was not flaring and exploding any longer, but lay there in smouldering impassable clinkers.

“High prices and high wages!” asserted Mrs. Alston. “That’s what is going to be the ruin of the country. I’ve said over and over again, ‘Why not have an Act of Parliament to halve the price of food and coal and that sort of thing, and another Act, unless you could get it into the same one, to reduce wages by a half also?’ High prices, so everybody allows, are the cause of high wages, and if miners and that sort of person could buy their food and their clothes at half the price they pay for them now, there would not be the slightest difficulty in reducing wages by a half, instead of multiplying them by two every time that they threaten to strike. Coal! The root of all the trouble is the price of coal. Reduce the price of coal by half, and instantly the price of transport and gas and electricity will go down in a corresponding manner. Steel, too, and linen; it all depends on coal. The English sovereign has to-day hardly more than half the buying power it used to have. Hardly more than half! Restore it, then, by reducing the price of everything

else, including wages. Including wages, mind! Otherwise you will find yourselves in a fine mess!”

She put the rest of her sandwich into her mouth, precisely as Mrs. Heaton had hoped and even foreseen. That made her mouth quite full, and for the moment she was as dumb as the adder. Her hostess, alert for this psychological occasion, gave a short, judicial and fulsome summing-up, addressed to the court in general.

“Well, dearest Mary,” she said. “You have made me understand it all now, a thing which I never did before. So well put, was it not, Mr. Steel, and I’m sure quite unanswerable. We must none of us attempt to argue with dearest Mary, because she would show us at once how stupid it was of us, and I, for one, hate to be made a fool of. What a good explanation! Quite brilliant! So now shall we get to our bridge? I expect we’re all going to the opera to-night, and so we shall all want to dress early. Dear me, it’s after half-past five already! Will nobody have any more tea? Quite sure? Shall we cut, then? Oh, there are Nellie and Peter in the window. Wouldn’t you like to cut in, too, dear?”

“No, mother, we shouldn’t!” said Nellie.

The four others swooped to the bridge-table, with the swift sure flight of homing pigeons, and hastily cut their cards in order to give no time for repentance on the part of the two others.

“You and I, Mr. Steel,” said Mrs. Heaton hastily. “Quite sure you wouldn’t like to play, Peter?”

“Quite,” said Peter gently. “I should hate it; thanks awfully.”

“Well, if you’re quite sure you won’t—my deal I think, partner. Shall it be pennies?”

Mr. Steel had a whimsical idea.

“Oughtn’t we to halve our points, too, Mary?” he said. “Like wages and coal?”

For a moment he was sorry he had been so rashly humorous, for Mrs. Alston opened her mouth and drew in her breath as if to speak on a public platform to the largest imaginable audience. Then, luckily, she found something so remarkable in her hand that her fury for political elucidation was quenched, and she devoted the muscles of her athletic mind to considering what she would do if the dealer was so rash as to call no trumps. Thereafter the great deeps, dimly peopled with enemies ready to pounce out of the subaqueous shadows and double you, completely submerged the four of them. They lit cigarettes as in a dream, and smoked them in alternate hells and heavens.

Nellie looked at them once or twice, as an anæsthetist might look at his patient to see whether he was quite unconscious. The third glance was convincing.

“It must be rather sweet to be middle-aged, Peter,” she said. “For the next two hours they’ll think about nothing but aces and trumps!”

“Sign of youth,” said Peter.

“Why?”

“Because they’re absorbed, like children. When you were little, you could only think about one thing at a time. It might be dentist or it might be hoops. But you and I can’t think about anything for more than five minutes together, or

care about anything for more than two. I suppose that when you're old you recapture that sort of youthfulness."

He paused a moment.

"Go on: tell me about it all," he said.

Nellie did not reply at once, but began plaiting her fingers together with the little finger on the top. They were slender and small like her face, which narrowed very rapidly from the ears downwards to a pointed chin. Loose yellow hair, the colour of honey, grew low over her forehead, and just below it, her eyebrows, noticeably darker than her hair, made high arches, giving her face an expression of irony and surprise. Her forehead ran straight into the line of her nose, and a short upper lip held her mouth in imperfect control, for it hinted and wondered, and was amused and contemptuous as its mood took it. Now it half-smiled; now it was half serious, but always it only hinted.

Peter apparently grew impatient of her silence and her finger plaiting.

"You're making them look like bananas on a street-barrow," he observed.

Nellie smoothed them out and gave an appreciative sigh.

"Oh, I bought two to-day," she said, "and ate them in the street. I had to throw the skins away, and then I was afraid that somebody would slip on them and break his leg."

"So you picked them up again," suggested Peter.

"No, I didn't. I was only sorry for anybody who might slip on them. I couldn't tell who it was going to be, and probably I shouldn't know him——"

"Get on," he said.

“Oh, about Philip. Well, there it was. He asked me, you see, and—of course, he’s rather old, but he’s tremendously attractive. And it’s so safe and pleasant, and I like being adored. After all, you and I have talked it over often enough, and you knew just as well as I did that I was going to accept him if he wanted me.”

Nellie suddenly felt that she was justifying what she had done, and she did not mean to do that. What she had done justified itself by its own inherent good sense. She changed her tone, and began counting on those slim fingers which just now had introduced the extraneous subject of bananas.

“Peter, darling,” she said. “If his grandfather and an uncle and two children of the uncle die, there is no doubt whatever that I shall be a peeress. Won’t that be fun? I feel that Uncle Robert and the two children may easily die; they’re the sort of people who do die, but I doubt whether grandpapa ever will. He’s like the man with the white beard; do I mean the Ancient Mariner or the Ancient of Days, who comes in Ezekiel?”

Peter Mainwaring rocked backwards in the window-seat with a sudden little explosion of laughter that made all the bridge players look up as if their heads were tied to the same tweaked string. Then they submerged again.

“Not Ezekiel, anyhow,” he said. “It’s either Daniel or Coleridge. I expect Coleridge.”

“Yes, I mean Coleridge,” she said. “The man who stops the wedding guest; wedding guest was what suggested it. Grandpapa always wanted Philip to marry one of those cousins of his, who look like tables with drawers in them.

Long legs and bumps on their faces like the handles of the drawers. But Philip wouldn't."

Peter ran his fingers along the line of his jaw as if to be sure that he had shaved that morning. His face for a man of twenty-two was ridiculously smooth and hairless; it did not much matter whether he had shaved or not.

"Naturally Philip wouldn't," he said, "but that's got nothing to do with it. I don't want to know why Philip didn't do something, but why you did. I want to see your point, to do you justice. At present I feel upset about it. You know quite well that there's only one person you ought to marry."

"You?" asked Nellie, feeling that the question was quite unnecessary.

"How clever of you to guess. You are clever sometimes. Oh, I know we've talked it over enough and seen how impossible it was, but when it comes to your marrying someone else——"

He lit a match and blew it out again.

"I know," he said. "You've got threepence a year, and I've got twopence, so that in the good old times we should have been able to buy one pound of sugar every Christmas. Even then we should have had nothing to eat with it. But what you haven't sufficiently reckoned with is the fact that by the time I am a hundred and fifty years old, I shall get a pension of a hundred and fifty pounds from the Foreign Office. But it's rather a long time to wait."

Nellie's eyes suddenly grew fixed and rapt.

"Oh, Peter, one moment!" she whispered. "Look quickly at mamma's face. When that holy expression comes on it, it always means that she is intending to declare no trumps. So

when I'm playing against her, if it's my turn first I always declare one no trumps, and then she has to declare two. Wait one second, Peter."

"No trumps," said Mrs. Heaton.

"There, I told you so!" said Nellie. "Yes; it is rather long to wait, though I don't mean to say that a hundred and fifty isn't a very pleasant age, dear. The people in Genesis usually lived five hundred years before they married, and begat sons and daughters. Anyhow, I shall be a widow before you're a hundred and fifty, and then we shall be engaged for three hundred and fifty years more, and then we shall totter to the altar. I can't help talking drivel; it's all too serious to take seriously. By the way, I shall be richer than you eventually, for when mamma dies I shall have two thousand a year, but that won't be for two thousand years. We have been born too soon, Peter!"

Peter thought this not worth answering, but lifting one of his knees, nursed it between his clasped hands in silence. For her loose honey-coloured hair, he had a crisp coal-blackness; he was tall for her small slim stature, and his lips were set to definite purposes, whereas hers were malleable to adapt themselves to any emotion that might waywardly blow on her. But both, in compensation for differences that were complementary, were triumphantly alike in the complete soullessness of their magnificent youth; without violation of any internal principle they might, either of them, shoot up singing with the lark, or pad and prowl with the ruthless hunger of the tiger, or burrow with the mole. They were Satyr and Hamadryad, some ancient and eternally young embodiment of life, with whim to take the place of

conscience, and the irresponsible desire of wild things to do duty for duty, and impulse to take the place of reason. Each, too, had developed to an almost alarming degree that modern passion for introspection, which is an end in itself, and like a barren tree, yields no fruit in the ways of action or renunciation.

Peter hugged his knee, and his eye grew hazy and unfocused in meditation.

“Am I in love with you, do you think?” he asked at length.

She laughed, quite disregarding the ears of the bridge players. With Peter she was more herself than with anyone else, or even than when alone.

“Oh, that’s so like you,” she said, “and so wonderfully like me. Certainly you’re not in love with me; you’re not in love with anybody. You never have been; you never will be. You’re fonder of me than of anybody else, but that’s a very different thing.”

“But how do you know I’m not in love with you?” he asked. “I may be. You’re not so unattractive. Why shouldn’t I be in love with you?”

“It’s obvious you aren’t. To begin with, you don’t feel the smallest jealousy of Philip. Besides, though you so kindly say that I’m not so unattractive, you’re the one person who really sees and notes and mentions my imperfections. You wouldn’t be so critical of me if you were in love. And then, as I said, you’re not jealous of Philip.”

“Good Lord, how could I be jealous of Philip?” asked he. “I should have to want to be Philip before I could be jealous of him, and I wouldn’t be Philip, even as things stand, for anything in the world. Besides, you don’t really think him so

tremendously attractive though you said so just now. You said that out of pure conventionality, not out of conviction.”

Some momentary perplexity, like a cloud on a sunny windy day of spring bowled its shadow over her face, and creased a soft perpendicular furrow between her eyebrows.

“Peter, I think I want to become conventional,” she said, “and, if you wish, I will confess I was practising for it when I said that. Oh, my dear, we’re all human, cast in a mould and put in a cage, if you don’t mind mixed metaphors. I’m going to marry in the ordinary way, just because girls do marry. Mamma married, so did my two grandmamas, and four great-grandmamas, and eight great-great-grandmamas. In fact the further you go back, the commoner marriage seems to have been. Some awful human hereditary spell has been cast on me.”

Peter leaned forward, bright-eyed and faun-like.

“Break it!” he said. “Exorcise it! Spells don’t exist except for those who allow themselves to be bound by them. The fact is we all weave our own spells.”

“But if I did refuse now, what then?” said she. “If you don’t obey conventions, you must have conviction to take their place, and I haven’t got any. Besides, if I don’t marry I shall become an old maid, unless I die young. Oh, we are all in a trap, we girls. There are three awful alternatives to choose from, and I dislike them all. I don’t want to die young, but if I live to be sixty I’ve got to be a grandmother or a stringy old maid.”

“You’ve got to be stringy, anyhow, at sixty,” said Peter.

“Not at all. Grandmothers are usually plump and comfortable: it is great aunts who are stringy. And

grandmothers remain young, I notice, whereas elderly maiden ladies are only sprightly. I think that it's because they cling to youth, and there's nothing so ageing as to cling to anything. If you want to retain anything, the best plan is to drop it, and then it clings to you instead."

"That's rather ingenious," said Peter. "You may go on about it for a minute."

"I was going to. It's perfectly true. All the people who don't eat potatoes and sweets for fear of getting fat become elephants, like mamma, who lives on cracknel biscuits."

"Does she?" said Peter with deep interest. "How wonderful of her."

"And all the people who take immense care of themselves die at the age of forty, because they are clinging to life, while those who break every ordinance of health never die at all. And all the people who lay themselves out to be brilliant are crashing bores——"

"Oh yes; proved," said Peter. "Let's go on to something else. What's to happen to me when you marry?"

"Nothing," said Nellie. "Why should it? You'll go on being quite different from anybody else. That's a career in itself. You aren't human, anyhow, however many great-grandmamas you may have had. You're a wild thing, partly domesticated, and when you're tired of us all, you go waving your tail, and walking in the wet woods, and telling nobody. Kipling, you know. Then you come back rather sleepy and pleased, and allow us to put a blue riband round your neck and tickle you under the chin, and then you lie down on a cushion in front of the fire and purr. You don't purr at us, though, you purr at yourself."

“Lor!” said Peter. “All that about me!”

Nellie pushed back her hair from her forehead, and again plaited her fingers together. But this time it was no deliberative, meditative process, but a swift unconscious action.

“Yes, my dear, and there’s more, too,” she said. “It’s my swan-song, remember, for soon I am going to become ordinary and conventional. I used to go in the wet woods, too, you know, though we never met each other there. But that has been the bond between us, up till now we have been completely independent. You’re going to remain so, but not I. Oh, Peter, there was a bond! My dear, do you think that I’m rather mad? I have serious doubts about it myself.”

“You always were rather mad,” said he. “But go on; sing your swan-song.”

“Then don’t look as if you had taken a guinea stall to hear me,” she said. “Where had I got to? Oh, yes. There was a bond; you know it yourself. I’ve never been conscious of anybody else as I’ve been conscious of you, nor have you ever been conscious of anyone else as you’ve been conscious of me. You’ve never been in the least in love with me, nor have I with you. But we’re the same kind of person, and one doesn’t often see the same kind of person as oneself. Do you understand at all, or am I simply reading out of my own book?”

He was silent a moment.

“Nellie, would you marry me if I were rich?” he asked.

She made a gesture of impatience.

“How on earth can I tell?” she said. “If you were rich you would be quite a different person.”

“No, I shouldn’t——”

“Oh, Peter, how stupid you are,” she said. “And how frightfully Victorian. That is so shallow. Wealth is just as much part of a man or a woman as brains or beauty. I don’t say that a girl loves a man for his brains, or his money, or his beauty, but they all make a part of him. Wealth isn’t an accident; it’s an attribute. A poor man—I’m not talking about you and me, but only speaking in the abstract—may be the same in character and charm as a rich man, but what a gulf money makes between them! Let one man be poor, and another, his absolute double in every way, be rich. They cease to be doubles at once.”

“But if you happened to love the costermonger——” began Peter.

“We can leave that out, because neither of us has the slightest idea what love means.”

“How about the bond you spoke of, then?” asked he. “Hasn’t that got anything to do with it?”

She considered this, and then laid her hand on his arm.

“If I could choose now, this minute,” she said, “in what relationship we should stand to each other, I would choose you as my brother. I haven’t got one; I should like to have one tremendously. And yet, if I might have it all just the way I liked, I think I should have you for my sister. I don’t so much want you to take care of me as I want to take care of you. I want——”

“Oh, come now,” said Peter.

“It’s true, though.”

They had turned themselves about in the window-seat, so as to secure for this surprising conversation a greater

privacy from the party at the bridge-table, and were leaning out of the window. A hundred feet below Piccadilly roared and rattled, but here the clatter of it was shorn of its sharp edges; it was as if a stir of bees was swarming in some hive down there. Seen like this from above, passengers and vehicles alike were but crawling dots and blots; everything, from the swiftest motor down to the laziest loiterer, seemed to be drowsily and soundlessly sauntering. Often had Peter and Nellie leaned out here looking on the traffic at the base of the cliff, capturing for themselves a certain sense of isolation. Even leaning out they could see nothing of the precipitous cliff side of the house, for a couple of feet below the window a stone cornice jutted out some ten or twelve inches, and beyond the edge of that the nearest visible objects below were the tops of motor buses and the hats of the foot passengers along the pavements. So still was the air that now, when Peter flicked the ash off his cigarette, it floated down, still cohering, till it dwindled into invisibility. He followed its fall with that detached intentness which the surface mind gives to the ticking of a clock or the oscillation of some flower-head, when the whole psychic attention is focused elsewhere; and it seemed that Nellie, as far as her surface mind went, was trotting in harness with him, for though he had not hinted at what occupied his eyes, scarcely knowing it himself, she was equally intent.

“I’ve lost sight of it, Peter,” she said, breaking the silence of a whole minute.

“Of what?” he asked.

“Of your cigarette end. You were watching it too. Don’t pretend that you weren’t.”

“Well, if I was, what then?” he asked.

“Nothing particular. I only felt you were watching it—just the bond.”

He shifted himself again. Hitherto, as they leaned out, his left shoulder touched hers. Now he broke the contact.

“I think that’s about the extent of the bond,” he said. “And your marrying Philip shows precisely what sort of value you put on it. You’ve made it clearer than you know, for you’ve defined your feelings for me as being a desire to have a brother, or rather a sister to take care of. I don’t think that’s worth much. You defined it further by saying that you couldn’t tell whether you would marry me or not if I were rich, because if I were, I should be a quite different person. If the quality of the bond would be affected by that, it must be of remarkably poor quality, and you’re quite right to break it. When you began talking about the bond I thought you might be going to say something interesting, something I didn’t know, something that, when you stated it, I should recognize to be true. If that’s all your swan has got to sing it might as well have been a goose.”

Nellie’s eyebrows elevated themselves up under the loose yellow of her hair.

“Peter dear, are you quarrelling with me?” she asked.

“Yes. No. No, I’m not quarrelling. But the whole thing is such a bore. Where’s my tail, and where are the wet woods?”

She leaned her chin on her hands, that lay along the window sill.

“I wish you were in love with me,” she said.

“I’m extremely glad that I’m not,” said he. “Otherwise I suppose I should want to be Philip, or, as the madrigal says, some other ‘favoured swain.’ But for you to talk about a bond between us is the absolute limit. You want everything your own way, and expect everybody else to immolate himself, thankfully and ecstatically, on your beastly altar.”

“So do you,” murmured Nellie. “We all do.”

“I? How do you make that out?” demanded Peter.

“Because you object to my marrying Philip when you haven’t the smallest desire to have me yourself. If you knew that I should say ‘Yes,’ supposing you asked me to jilt Philip and marry you, you wouldn’t ask me to. You want me to marry nobody and not to marry me yourself. That’s not good enough, you know.”

Peter’s mouth lengthened itself into a smile, and broadened into a laugh.

“It’s a putrid business,” he said. “Why shouldn’t I take a neat header from the window and have done with it? I’m twenty-two, and already I think the whole affair is rot. And if it doesn’t amuse me now, when is it going to amuse me? It was even more amusing during the war, when one came back for a fortnight’s leave before going out to that hell again. One did grab at pleasure then, because in all probability one would be blown to bits very soon afterwards. But now that one is not going to be blown to bits very soon afterwards the whole seasoning has gone out of it. No, not quite. I want to be admired. What is love? Good Lord, what is love? As I haven’t the slightest idea, the best thing I can do is to grab at pleasures.”

“Or the worst,” suggested Nellie, rather sententiously.

“Now get off the high horse,” said Peter. “Or, rather, don’t attempt to get on it. You can’t, any more than I. Let’s be comfortable. Marry your silly Philip, and I’ll—I’ll—— Shall I take to drink? No, that wouldn’t do, for people would say I was trying to drown my despair at your marriage. I haven’t got feelings of that sort, and I should hate anybody to think that I had. I loathe being pitied, anyhow, and to be pitied for something you don’t suffer from would be intolerable. And though you will remain just the same to me after you’re married, and I shall certainly remain the same, our relations will be altered.”

Nellie let her eyes flit over him, never quite alighting. They skimmed over his crisp hair, over the handsome, smooth, soulless profile, over his shoulders, over the knee he was nursing, over the hiatus where white skin showed between his rucked-up trouser and a drooping sock. At this moment she, with the knowledge of the definite step that she had taken in life by engaging herself to Philip Beaumont, felt far older and more experienced than he. She, anyhow, could look ahead and see a placid, prosperous life in front of her, whereas Peter, a year older than she, was still as experimental as a boy. All the same, if he wanted anything, he had remarkable assiduity in the pursuit of it until he caught it, but nothing beyond the desire of the moment was to him worth bothering about. Her own prudence, her own commitment of herself she knew to be a development of to-day and yesterday, and now it seemed suddenly to have aged and consolidated her. But she had no answer for that voice crying in the wilderness “What is

love?" Or was there some sort of signpost by the wayside enveloped in mist? She passed over that point.

"If it really all seems to you so putrid," she said, "I can't imagine why you don't, as you say, take a header into the street. But you've no intention of doing anything of the sort. You would firmly resist any attempt of mine to tip you out. You like life quite passably as it is, you know, and also you do expect something more from it. In fact, I never saw anyone so thoroughly unlikely to give up living or to run any risk that could reasonably be avoided. You say it's a putrid business, but really you find it a pleasant one."

Peter sighed.

"Oh, yes, it will have to do," he said. "Don't tip me out, Nellie. But don't, on the other hand, think that I cling so desperately to life."

"Not desperately, but instinctively. It would be silly of anybody to throw up a hand that may contain some glorious ace without looking very carefully through it. Everyone goes on playing and clutching at the new deals until he is sure that there isn't an ace in the pack for him. Indeed, it's when you've found the ace that you don't value the rest of the hand so much."

"I don't follow. Explain," said Peter.

"Well, this kind of thing. For instance, if you found the ace, that is to say, if you fell tremendously in love, you might not care about the rest of the hand. If the adorable was in my bedroom, two windows off, and if she was locked in there, and if the house was on fire——"

"Any more 'ifs'?" asked Peter.

“Not one. But supposing all these things, you would instantly get out on to that cornice, at peril of your life, and shuffle your way along it. You would *have* to be with her. You wouldn’t give two thoughts as to what might happen to you.”

Peter thought this over.

“I should be a consummate ass, then,” he remarked. “A fellow with a grain of sense would go down the passage and bash the door in.”

“But let’s pretend that for some reason you couldn’t. If the only way of reaching the room was along the cornice you would go.”

Peter looked at the ledge.

“And if I got there in safety, what then?” he asked. “I couldn’t carry her back along the ledge.”

“But that wouldn’t prevent your going,” said she. “Whatever the risk to yourself was, and however useless your going was, you would go.”

Peter was silent a moment, frowning.

“I feel as if all this has happened before,” he said. “Do you know that feeling? Did we ever sit here before and talk about just this?”

“Not that I remember. No, I’m sure we never have. Isn’t it odd, that sensation? Does it seem to you like remembrance of a previous occasion, or a presentiment of a future one?”

“Or a slightly faulty action of the two lobes of the brain?” said Peter. “What were we talking about? Aces?”

“Yes. That’s what I mean about throwing the rest of your hand away for the sake of an ace.”

Peter looked at his watch.

"I must go," he said. "I've got to get home to dress, and rush back to the Ritz to dine early before the opera."

"Oh, not just yet," said she. "But I wish you wouldn't live in South Kensington. Why do you?"

Peter had a direct glance and a direct answer for this.

"Because it's cheaper living with my father and mother than being on my own," he said. "Also——"

"Well?" she asked.

"I was going to say because they like having me with them," said he. "But I don't think that's true, so I didn't say it. I mean, if I had plenty of money I should take a flat of my own, quite regardless of whether they liked to have me with them."

Nellie gave a little sigh, with a click of impatience at the end of it.

"There's an odd kind of honesty about you," she said. "You state that sort of thing quite baldly, whereas I should conceal it. If I had been you I should have said that I lived at home because my mother liked having me with her. It wouldn't have been true, but I should have said it. Very likely by saying it often I should have got to believe it."

"Nobody else would have," remarked Peter.

"You're rather a brute, my dear," said she. "Go away to South Kensington."

"I'm going. But about aces for one second more. Have you found your ace, Nellie? Don't bother to answer."

"That is spoken like a rather spiteful woman," was Nellie's perfectly justifiable rejoinder.

"Maybe. I'm your spiteful sister," said Peter.

He walked gracefully and gently over to the card-table.

“Good-bye, Mrs. Heaton,” he said. “Nellie and I have had a lovely talk. I hope you’ve won every rubber.”

“And three aces, thirty,” said Mrs. Heaton. “Good-bye, dear Peter. I suppose you’ll be at the Opera to-night. *Parsifal*. My deal? So it is.”

# CHAPTER II

## Table of Contents

PETER descended from these heights into the hot dusty well of the streets, and soon was on his way home to dress and return to the Ritz, where an early dinner preceded the opera and any other diversions that might present themselves. On this sweltering June evening the top of a bus was a cooler progression than a taxi, besides advancing the sacred cause of economy, which he had just confessed was more real to him than that of filial piety, and at Hyde Park Corner he could catch a conveyance that would deposit him not fifty yards from his father's house. Coolness and economy were sufficiently strong of themselves to make him board it with alacrity, and the detachment of a front seat just suited the meditative mood which his talk with Nellie had induced.

Peter knew himself and her pretty well, and with the admirable contributions she had made to their discussion there was little to puzzle out, but much to appraise and estimate. The notion that the news of her engagement had been a blow of any sharp or stunning quality could be at once dismissed, for never had he known so well, as when she, earlier in the day, had communicated the news of her engagement to him over the telephone (that was like her), how whole-heartedly he was not in love with her, and how unintelligibly alien to him, as she had pointed out, was that emotion. During the last year which had witnessed a very decent flowering of intimacy between him and her, there had never been, on either side, the least attempt at love-

making; their relations had been wholly free from sentiment, and not once had either of them tripped or stuttered over the foreign use of love-language. But in ways wholly un sentimental they had certainly arrived at some extremely close relation of intimacy; there had emphatically been a bond between them, which to his mind her engagement, if it did not actually loosen it, would shift, so to speak, on to a new place; the harness must be worn elsewhere. If it was to be maintained, he, at any rate, must accustom himself to its new adjustment. She had defined that comradeship this afternoon in a way that was rather surprising, for the ideal relation of him to her, apparently, was that of a brother, or, with greater precision, that of a sister. That had not struck him before, but even when first presented, it did not in the least puzzle him. Indeed, it satisfactorily accounted for that elimination of sex which had always marked their intimacy. She had not sought the male element in him, nor he in her the female. So far he was in complete agreement with the casual conclusion they had jointly arrived at, but at that point Peter detected the presence of something that seemed to show a lurking fallacy somewhere. For he had no doubt that if he had been rich, he would before now have proposed to her, and in spite of her provision that, since riches were an attribute of a man and not an external accident, they turned him into a different person, and that thus she could not tell whether she would have accepted him or not, he did not, for himself, believe that she would have hesitated in doing so. Finally, as material to meditate upon, came her firm statement that though Peter did not want or intend to marry her, he objected to anybody else

doing so. With the extreme frankness with which he habitually judged any criticism on himself, he instantly admitted that there was a great deal to be said for Nellie's assertion. When it was stated brutally like that, he recognized the justice of her outline. She might have made a caricature of him, but her sketch contained salient features, the identity of which, as he contemplated this scribble of her inspired pencil, he could not disclaim. Without doubt she had caught a likeness; more tersely she had "got him." Even as he acknowledged that, he felt a resentment that she had so unerringly comprehended him, and shown him to himself. He enjoyed, rather than otherwise, his own dissection of himself, without bias or malice, but he felt less sure that when Nellie was the dissector he welcomed so deft an exposure.

The retrospect had been sufficiently absorbing to make him unaware that, somewhere in Knightsbridge, the top of the bus had become a strenuous goal for travellers. Every seat was occupied, and beside him a young man had planted himself in the vacant place and was talking to a girl who had plumped herself into a seat two tiers behind his. Peter instantly jumped up.

"Let me change places with your young lady," he said, "and then you'll be together and talk more conveniently."

The change was made with a tribute of simpering gratitude on the part of the "young lady," and Peter, with laurels of popularity round his straw hat, took the single place. He knew perfectly well that he had disturbed himself from no motive of kindness; he did not in the least want to please either the man or the girl. His motive had been only

to appear pleasant, to obtain cheaply and fraudulently the certificate of being a "kind gentleman." For himself, he did not care two straws if the pair of sundered lovers bawled at each other from sundered seats....

And then as he took his new place it struck him that the quality which had prompted the transference of himself from one seat on the top of a bus to another, was precisely the same as had led him to resent Nellie's dissection of him. In the one case his vanity was gratified, in the other his vanity was hurt.

"That's it," he said to himself, and mentally he prinked, like a girl, in the glass that had so unerringly shown him to himself. Yet it did not show him an aspect of himself that was in any way surprising, either for pleasure or distaste, for he knew well how prolific a spring of native vanity was in him. He would always take an infinity of trouble in order to appear admirable, or, on the other hand, to conceal what was not so admirable. He would always inconvenience himself in order to appear kind, exert himself to appear amusing, bore himself, while preserving the brightness of an attentive and interested eye, in order to confirm his reputation for being sympathetic. But though vanity was the root of such efforts, there was, at any rate, no trace of it in his acknowledgment of it. He never deluded himself into thinking that he suffered fools gladly, because he liked them, or desired to secure for them a pleasant half-hour in which they could tediously inflict themselves on him; he suffered them with the show of gladness in order to be thought kind and agreeable in the abstract, and in the concrete to pick up the gleanings of welcome and

entertainment which, for such as him, lie so thick on the fields of human intercourse, when the great machines have gone by. He had no reason to complain of these gleanings; there was no one among the youth of London who was more consistently in request, or who more merited his mild harvestings. In a rather fatigued and casual generation, tired with the strain of the last five years, and now suddenly brought to book after the irresponsibility of wartime, when for all young men each leave snatched from the scythe of the French front might easily be their last, there was a certain license given, Peter had always been a shining exception to such slack social conduct of life. He did not, as he had told Nellie, expect much from it, but as long as you were "on tap," it was undeniably foolish not to present yourself presentably. Your quality was certainly enhanced by a little foam, a little effervescence. "That nice Mr. Peter, always so polite and pleasant," was his reward; and at this moment Nellie's divination of his true attitude towards her engagement was his punishment.

The bus hummed and droned along the Brompton Road; there was still a solid stretch before it halted just opposite the side street which was his goal, and there was time to consider her further criticism that he went off, waving his tail, into the wet woods and saying nothing to anybody. What had she meant exactly by that? He had, at any rate, his own consciousness that she had hit on something extremely real and vitally characteristic of him. Surely she meant his aloofness from any intimate surrender of himself, the self-sufficiency that neither gave nor sought strong affection. He had acknowledged the vanity as of a be-

ribanded cat, and now he added to that his desire for material comfort, a quiet, determined selfishness, and the reservation to himself of solitary expeditions in the wet woods with a waving tail. Probably she meant no more than that, and though Peter quite acknowledged the justice of these definitions, he again felt a certain resentment against her clear-sightedness. She had a touch of these defects and qualities herself; it was that which made the bond between them.

Peter let himself into his father's house in the grilling, dusty street nearly opposite the Oratory with the anticipation of finding a speedy opportunity for a domestic exhibition of vanity, for he felt sure that something ludicrous or tiresome and uncomfortable would await him; something he would certainly tolerate with bland serenity and agreeableness. The house, the front of which had been baking in the sun all the afternoon, was intolerably hot and stuffy; the door at the head of the kitchen stairs had, as generally happened, been left open, and the nature of the dinner which would presently ascend could be confidently predicted. Beyond, at the back of the hall, the door into his father's studio was also open, and a languid, odorous tide of oil-paint and Virginian tobacco made a peculiarly deadly combination with kitchen-smells, and indicated that Mr. Mainwaring had been occupied with his audacious labours. Just now he was engaged on the perpetration of a series of cartoons (suitable or not for mural decoration). The practical difficulty, if these ever attained completion, would be the discovery of the wall that should be large enough to hold them; indeed, the great wall of China seemed the only