

# **The Story of a Modern Woman**

Ella Hepworth Dixon



## Table of Contents

<u>The Story of a Modern Woman</u> .....	1
<u>Ella Hepworth Dixon</u> .....	2
<u>CHAPTER I. AN END AND A BEGINNING</u> .....	3
<u>CHAPTER II. A CHILD</u> .....	7
<u>CHAPTER III. A YOUNG GIRL</u> .....	11
<u>CHAPTER IV. ALISON</u> .....	14
<u>CHAPTER V. MARY'S LOVER</u> .....	18
<u>CHAPTER VI. THE CENTRAL LONDON SCHOOL OF ART</u> .....	22
<u>CHAPTER VII. A KETTLEDRUM AT LADY JANE'S</u> .....	25
<u>CHAPTER VIII. MARY TRIES TO LIVE HER LIFE</u> .....	28
<u>CHAPTER IX. PERRY CONSOLES</u> .....	31
<u>CHAPTER X. IN GRUB STREET</u> .....	34
<u>CHAPTER XI. THE WOMAN WAITS</u> .....	38
<u>CHAPTER XII. THE MAN RETURNS</u> .....	42
<u>CHAPTER XIII. THE APOTHEOSIS OF PERRY JACKSON</u> .....	46
<u>CHAPTER XIV. MARY GOES OUT ON A WET DAY</u> .....	49
<u>CHAPTER XV. A COMEDY IN REAL LIFE</u> .....	52
<u>CHAPTER XVI. TWO ULTIMATUMS</u> .....	56
<u>CHAPTER XVII. NUMBER TWENTY-SEVEN</u> .....	59
<u>CHAPTER XVIII. DUNLOP STRANGE MAKES A MISTAKE</u> .....	62
<u>CHAPTER XIX. ALISON ARRANGES A MATCH</u> .....	66
<u>CHAPTER XX. THE GATE OF SILENCE</u> .....	70
<u>CHAPTER XXI. THE WORLD WAGS ON</u> .....	74
<u>CHAPTER XXII. THE TEMPTATION</u> .....	78
<u>CHAPTER XXIII. THE WOMAN IN THE GLASS</u> .....	81
<u>CHAPTER XXIV. IN WHICH CIVILISATION TRIUMPHS</u> .....	84

# The Story of a Modern Woman

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- CHAPTER I. AN END AND A BEGINNING
- CHAPTER II. A CHILD
- CHAPTER III. A YOUNG GIRL
- CHAPTER IV. ALISON
- CHAPTER V. MARY'S LOVER
- CHAPTER VI. THE CENTRAL LONDON SCHOOL OF ART
- CHAPTER VII. A KETTLEDRUM AT LADY JANE'S
- CHAPTER VIII. MARY TRIES TO LIVE HER LIFE
- CHAPTER IX. PERRY CONSOLES
- CHAPTER X. IN GRUB STREET
- CHAPTER XI. THE WOMAN WAITS
- CHAPTER XII. THE MAN RETURNS
- CHAPTER XIII. THE APOTHEOSIS OF PERRY JACKSON
- CHAPTER XIV. MARY GOES OUT ON A WET DAY
- CHAPTER XV. A COMEDY IN REAL LIFE
- CHAPTER XVI. TWO ULTIMATUMS
- CHAPTER XVII. NUMBER TWENTY-SEVEN
- CHAPTER XVIII. DUNLOP STRANGE MAKES A MISTAKE
- CHAPTER XIX. ALISON ARRANGES A MATCH
- CHAPTER XX. THE GATE OF SILENCE
- CHAPTER XXI. THE WORLD WAGS ON
- CHAPTER XXII. THE TEMPTATION
- CHAPTER XXIII. THE WOMAN IN THE GLASS
- CHAPTER XXIV. IN WHICH CIVILISATION TRIUMPHS

## CHAPTER I. AN END AND A BEGINNING

**GLARING** spring sunshine and a piercing east wind rioted out of doors, and here and there overflowing flower-baskets made startling patches of colour against the vague blue-grey of the streets, but indoors, in the tall London house, there was only a sickly, yellow twilight, for the orange-toned blinds were scrupulously drawn down. There was awe in the passages, and hushed tones even in the kitchen, as if the dead could hear! Some wreaths and crosses of wax-like, exotic flowers lay on the hall-table, filling the passage with their sensuous odour. Friends calling to inquire had left them there, but they had not yet been taken up to that darkened room where a marble figure—a figure which was strangely unlike Professor Erle—lay stretched, in an enduring silence, on the bed.

Downstairs, in the little study giving on a meagre London yard, a girl was bending over a desk. 'You will, I know, be grieved to hear that my dear father passed suddenly away the night before last,' she wrote, while a great nerve in her forehead went tick, tick, tick. The visitors who came all day long, leaving bits of paste-board, spoke in low, inquisitive tones. When the bell rang, there were veiled whispers at the hall-door. 'So terrible—so sudden!' Mary could hear them inquire how she was keeping up? And Elizabeth's answer: 'Miss Erle is as well as could be expected.' The trite, worn-out, foolish sentence almost made her laugh. All the stock phrases of condolence, all the mental trappings of woe, seemed to be ready-made for the 'sad occasion,' like the crape skirts and cloaks which had been forwarded immediately from the mourning establishment in Regent Street. 'Yes, I am as well as could be expected,' she thought, 'and father is dead. Father is dead.'

And all the long afternoon she went on mechanically writing: 'I am sure you will be sorry when I tell you that my dear father—' on paper bordered with black an inch deep. How he would have disliked that foolish ostentation of mourning; it was contrary to the spirit of his life. 'To-morrow,' she said to herself, 'I must send for some note paper with a narrower edge.' These letters were to be sent abroad. The English newspapers had sufficiently announced the death, for Professor Erle was perhaps the best-known man of science of the day.

In the little back room they had to light the lamp early, there was so much to do, so many details to arrange. The ceremony was to be as simple as might be; above all, no paid priest would stand at the grave to give 'hearty thanks' that the great thinker had been 'delivered out of the miseries of this sinful world.' The sinful world would have as its spokesman another famous professor, who had asked to be allowed to say a few words. Then there were the newspapers. There was the brisk, smartly-dressed young gentleman who came to do a leader for a daily paper, and who proceeded to make a number of notes in shorthand, asking innumerable questions as his omnivorous glance travelled rapidly round the study. Another press-man—a small, apologetic man with greyish hair and a timid cough—asked to see the house for the *Weekly Planet*. He begged of Elizabeth on the hall steps, to tell him if the Professor had said anything—anything particular, which would work up as a leader, just at the last? 'Oh! sir,' said Elizabeth, 'didn't you know? Master didn't say anything. He just died in his sleep.'

The daughter went about her tasks with a sense of detachment, of intense aloofness. 'I wonder if I really feel it?' she thought, 'and why I have never cried? I should like to, but it is impossible; I shall never, never cry again.' It was as if Death, with his cruel, searing wings had cauterised her very soul. Sometimes she pictured herself in her long crepe veil at the funeral, and heard in imagination her friends murmuring pitying words, as they all followed the coffin up the Highgate slope. Alison Ives, of course, would be with her; she would stay by her, perhaps, and hold her hand. And probably Vincent Hemming would be near. Yes, he too would be there.

At dinner-time she had to sit down to table alone. She was hungry, and she ate, hardly knowing what was on her plate. Nothing happened as it does in tales and romances. In innumerable novels she had read how the heroine, in a house of mourning, lies on the bed for days and steadily refuses to eat. As for Mary, a demon of unrest possessed her during that horrible week, and it was as if she could not eat nourishing food enough. She never stopped arranging, writing, adding up accounts. It was useless to try and read. Did she but take up a book, that dominant image in her mind—the image of a dear face turned to marble, with the cold, triumphant smile of eternity on its lips—shut out the sense of the words as her eyes travelled down the page.

And the strange, unmistakable odour of death, mixed with the voluptuous scent of waxen hot-house flowers, hung, night and day, about the staircase.

Towards the end of the week, there was more noise and bustle, and at last had come the morning when the

## The Story of a Modern Woman

house swarmed with undertakers' men, and Mary and her young brother Jimmie, who had arrived from Winchester, sat with a few old friends in the dining-room, waiting for the signal to go. There was the shuffling of men's feet, as they staggered down the narrow London staircase with their heavy burden, and then someone had made the girl swallow some sal volatile, and she was pushed gently into the first mourning carriage, along with her brother. They had made the boy drink some of the sal volatile too, and they both felt strangely elated and highly strung. There were only those two now, and Mary felt warmly drawn to Jimmie, as they sat side by side in their new black clothes, the two chief personages in the ceremony of to-day. She even pretended not to hear when, some gutter urchins making complicated cartwheels as their contribution to the imposing procession, Jimmie, boy-like, gave way to a furtive giggle.

The drive to Highgate seemed interminable, but at last, when the long procession crept slowly up the hill, it was in a kind of stupor that the girl saw and heard what happened. There was, she remembered afterwards, a long line of people, habited in black, awaiting them in silence inside the cemetery gate; a tolling bell, neighing horses, and a penetrating scent of early lilac. Sunlight on the paths, on the shining marble tombs, on the humble little mounds covered in plush-like grass; then a moving mass of black, a yawning hole, the creaking of ropes, and the mellifluous voice of the eminent professor, speaking his oration over some upturned clay.

'England—I may say the world—is mourning to day for her illustrious son'—how the people pressed round the yawning gap, and pushed against the guelder rose-tree overhead, so that the flowers fell in a minute white shower on to the oaken coffin below—'the world is mourning for her illustrious son. Not that those tears will flow in vain, for they will moisten and fructify the precious tree of Truth, a tree which is evermore putting forth fresh branches and new fruits which are indispensable to the physical and moral evolution of humanity.'

In a neighbouring laburnum-bush, a thrush was swelling its brown throat with a joyous morning song. Athwart the pale sky dappled with fleecy clouds, the lilac bushes were burgeoning with waxen, pinkish blossoms. The very air throbbed with coming life.

'Nature,' continued the orator, in his measured, lecture-room tones, 'Nature, who works in inexorable ways, has taken to herself a life full of arduous toil, of epoch-making achievement, of immeasurable possibilities, but to what end, and for what purpose, is not given to us, who stand to-day with full hearts and yearning eye around his last resting-place, to know.'

The sun was warm overhead, the scent of the pink may was strong in the nostrils; a joyous twittering in an adjacent bush told of mating birds, of new life in the nests, of Nature rioting in an insolent triumph.

The orator paused for an instant, coughed, and felt in his breast pocket for his notes. He was anxious, above all things, that the reporters should not print a garbled version of his speech. Round the open grave pressed the devotees of science, the followers of the religion of humanity; grey-skinned, anxious-looking men and women, with lined foreheads and hair prematurely tinged with grey; large heads with bulging foreheads, thin throats and sloping shoulders; the women with nervous, over-worked faces, the men with the pathetic, unrestful features of those who are sustained in a life of self-denial by their ethical sense alone. The ceremony of to-day was a great moral demonstration. All classes who think were represented. Side by side stood a white-haired Radical Countess in simple half-mourning and the spare form of a Socialist working woman, with red, ungloved wrists and an inspired look on her worn face. There, with her mother, Lady Jane, was Alison Ives. Lady Jane, who was impressionable, was already exhibiting a pocket-handkerchief, and not far off, Mary caught for one instant the brown, wistful eyes of Vincent Hemming.

The sun grew hotter and hotter overhead. One or two of the mourners began putting up umbrellas. The perfume of pink hawthorn became almost oppressive; an early butterfly hovered over a baby's grave planted with sweet-smelling flowers. A light breeze fluttered a laburnum-bush which hung over a neighbouring marble tomb, a large, opulent, marble tomb, on which was cut in glittering gilt letters: 'Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.' And everywhere there was the whiteness of graves. In ridges, in waves, in mounds, they stuck, tooth-like, from the fecund earth. They shone, in gleaming, distant lines, up to the ridge of the hill; they crowded in serried battalions, down to the cemetery gates.

The speaker was concluding his speech. 'For though to isolated men,' he said, raising his voice so that all who were on the edge of the crowd should hear, 'it may be given here and there to scale the loftiest heights—ay, and ever new height rising upon height in the great undiscovered country which we call the realm of Science; there,

## The Story of a Modern Woman

too, the Finite touches the Infinite, and must recognise what of tentativeness, what of inconclusiveness belongs to mere human effort. Here, on a sudden, the dark, impenetrable curtain, which none may draw aside, envelops us; here we know not whether all ends with this our last prison house, or if to us may be opened out yet further cycles of aspiring activity.'

In the silence which followed there was heard one long, sweet, penetrating bird-call.

One of the chief mourners, the boy Jimmie, was sobbing loudly when the professor's voice stopped, and with something gripping at her throat, the sister led him away. She reproached herself with having brought him; the young, she thought, should not know what sorrow is. The two spare, black-clad figures stepped aside up the hill.

Out yonder, at their feet, the dun-colour of the buildings lost in the murkiness of the horizon line, London was spread out. Here and there a dome, a spire loomed out of the dim bluish-grey panorama. A warm haze hung over the great city; here and there a faint fringe of tree-tops told of a placid park; now and again the shrill whistle of an engine, blown northward by the wind, spoke of the bustle of journeys, of the turmoil of railway-stations, of partings, of arrivals, of the change and travail of human life, of the strangers who come, of the failures who must go.

'Jim,' said the girl suddenly, taking the boy by the arm, 'there's London! We're going to make it listen to us, you and I. We're not going to be afraid of it—just because it's big, and brutal, and strong.'

'N—no, dearest,' said the boy, turning up a pretty, sensitive face, and a pink nose all smeared with tears. 'Of course not.'

The black crowd yonder was swaying, separating, and disintegrating itself into separate sable dots which were now seen descending the paths to the cemetery-gate. And slowly, they too stepped down the gravel path.

They came home to a house that was empty and orderly again; a house in which **his** door stood open, the pale light of a spring afternoon filling the desolate room. The blinds were pulled up, and downstairs, in the kitchen, the servants had begun to talk and laugh.

Towards dusk, Jimmie got engrossed in a new book of adventures, but the girl, restless still, wandered about the house in her black gown looking at everything with strange eyes. Something terrible, unforeseen had happened which altered her whole life. Towards the boy poring over the picture-book she felt much of a mother's feelings; it behoved her to look after him now that his father was gone. How long the time seemed—would the interminable day never end? There must be lots for her to do. And casting about in her mind, she remembered that this was the day on which she always gave out the groceries from her store cupboard; there was the seamstress to pay, too, who was altering a black dress for her up-stairs. So Mary dragged herself down to the kitchens and presently to the top of the house. It would be nice of her, she thought, to go in and speak to the woman who was sewing alone. It was sad for a young woman to be alone.

The pale, pinkish light of a spring evening fell on a drab-complexioned girl, whose fat hand moved, as she sewed, with the regularity of a machine. Now the needle was thrust in the fold of black stuff, and the light fell on her ill-cut nails; now the hand was aloft, in the semi-obscurity; it was all tame, monotonous and regular as a clock. She was a docile, humble, uncomplaining creature, who suggested inevitably some patient domestic animal. Her features, rubbed out and effaced with generations of servility, spoke of the small mendacities of the women of the lower classes, of the women who live on ministering to the caprices of the well-to-do. To-day it would seem she had assumed an appropriately dolorous expression.

It sometimes soothed Mary to stitch. Taking up a strip of black merino, she began to hem.

The seamstress's hand continued to move with docile regularity, and, as Mary looked at her, she was curiously reminded of many women she had seen: ladies, mothers of large families, who sat and sewed with just such an expression of unquestioning resignation. The clicking sound of the needle, the swish of the drawn-out thread, the heavy breathing of the work-woman, all added to the impression. Yes, they too were content to exist subserviently, depending always on someone else, using the old feminine stratagems, the well-worn feminine subterfuges, to gain their end. The woman who sews is eternally the same.

The light began to fail now; very soon it would be dark. Mary threw down her work with an impatient gesture, and, in the grey twilight, an immense pity seized her for the patient figure bending, near the window, over her foolish strips of flounces, the figure of the woman at her monotonous toil.

# The Story of a Modern Woman

## CHAPTER II. A CHILD

**THE** life of Mary Erle, like that of many another woman in the end of the nineteenth century, had been more or less in the nature of an experiment. Born too late for the simple days of the fifties, when all it behoved a young girl to do was to mind her account-book, read her Tennyson, show a proper enthusiasm for fancy-work stitches, and finally, with many blushes, accept the hand of the first young man who desired to pay taxes and to fulfil the duties of a loyal British subject (and the young man, it must be remembered, in the middle of this century, actually did both), Mary was yet too soon for the time when parents begin to take their responsibilities seriously, and when the girl is sometimes as carefully prepared, as thoroughly equipped, as her brother for the fight of life. A garden full of flowers, a house full of books, scraps of travel: these things were her education. Out of the years she could pick scenes and figures which typified her bringing-up.

There was the plain, self-contained, and not too clean baby. A child who was always grubbing in a garden, for it lived then in a house in St. John's Wood; a child who was devoted to animals and insects, who was on intimate terms with the many-legged wood-lice, which curled themselves up with all haste into complete balls when she touched them; a child for whom snails and black-beetles had no terrors, and who had much to say to the green, hairy caterpillars which hung about the pear tree.

There was a huge, fluffy, black cat, too, which represented, perhaps, the child's primitive idea of a deity; for, though she adored it, the adoration was leavened with a wholesome awe, a feeling which was not unconnected with certain unmerited chastisements in the shape of scratches on her fat, bare legs. More often, to be sure, the black cat was amiable, and even allowed itself to be carried up to bed, with its hind legs straying out helplessly from under the child's arm, to be presently concealed with all haste and caution under the white sheets and blankets, from whence its sharp-pointed ears and wide black cheeks arose with the most exquisitely mirth-provoking effect. With what inscrutable amber eyes did the black cat gaze for hours into hers! how it imposed on her babyish imagination with its self-contained, majestic manners, its air of detachment from the vain shows of the world! The man with the kind smile, whom the child called 'father,' used to laugh at her adoration, tell her she was a little Egyptian, and called the cat 'Pasht.' She thought it a funny name, and not being altogether sure the black cat would approve of it, generally addressed it as 'you.' And the cat would sit on long summer afternoons on the grass under the pear tree, or on foggy autumn days on a stool by the fireside, with paws neatly tucked away, its neck-ruff fluffed out, purring benignly in response to her confidences. Indeed, in looking back, the first tragedy of the child's life was the death of the black cat. It lay, one sultry July day, under a laurel bush in the garden, with glazed eyes which gave no signs of life. All morning and all afternoon the child sat there and fanned the flies away, until her idol was stiff, and then a hole was hastily dug, and the black cat was thrust out of sight. And never any more, in the warm summer afternoons, did a soft, furry thing go sailing, tail in air, over the close-cropped lawn; nor, on winter evenings, was a rhythmical purring to be heard hard by the tall fender which guarded the nursery fire. It was the first great void; the first headache had come.

A strange, indolent child, whose little hands were usually thrust beneath her pinafore when anyone spoke to her; for surely she could not be always washing herself, and to be on really intimate terms with insects and things, one cannot, like grown-up people, be always thinking of one's nails. She usually, too, concealed a small piece of putty about her person—an unpardonable sin, this, in the eyes of mother and nurse—for putty is useful in a thousand ways, and is, besides, so thrillingly delicious to feel surreptitiously in the recesses of one's pocket. At this time the child held the whole race of dolls in high scorn. They were a foolish, over-dressed, uninteresting tribe, with manifestly absurd cheeks and eye-lashes, and with a simper which was as artificial as that of the ladies in chignons and flounces who came to call at the house of an afternoon. She, on her part, was all for the violent delights of miniature guns and real gunpowder, the toilsome construction of fleets of wooden boats with the aid of a blunt knife and a plank of wood; fleets which were set a-sail, with flying pennants, on the cistern hard by the kitchen. There were boy neighbours who aided and abetted her in these delights, and great naval battles would come off between the Dutch and English fleets in the kitchen cistern, in which sometimes Van Tromp, and sometimes Blake, emerged victorious. The child, perhaps, did not take her patriotism seriously, as the boys did; she was content to be Van Tromp, since they insisted on being Blake and Monk. All that was of vital importance was that a fight of some sort should come off.

## The Story of a Modern Woman

The mother sank early out of ken. First they said that she was poorly, and had gone to Italy, and then they said that she was very ill, and afterwards that she was in heaven; so that for a long time the child used to think vaguely, as she sat in the summer-house with pursed-up lips and knitted brows, notching and slicing at her ships, that Italy and heaven were perhaps the same place. Nurse said that her mummy was an angel now; but, in all the picture-books, angels had long, smooth hair, wore a kind of night-gown, and had enormous, folding wings. The child could not picture her mother looking like that; she always remembered her in many flounces, with a headache; and certainly, no, certainly, mummy never had any wings out of her back.

The child could recollect that, some little time before her mother went to Italy, they took her upstairs one day and showed her a baby, with a red, crinkled face, lying in an over-trimmed cradle. She did not care for babies, she would rather have had a nice, new, fluffy kitten to replace the old black cat; but when they told her it was a little brother, of course that altered matters. She was sorry her brother should be so small, so fretful, and so red in the face; she would rather have had him the same size as herself, so that he could have been Van Tromp for once, and she the victorious Blake; but still, any sort or size of brother was better than none. Although, in a year or so, the baby developed into something suspiciously like a doll, with his fat, pink cheeks, his round, china-blue eyes, his dump of a nose, and his entire absence of chin, still, he was far more entertaining than that simpering and foolish tribe. Baby Jim's pink toes could kick; his little fist, with the creases of fat at the wrist, could hit out; there were warlike possibilities in him. In a word, Baby Jim was alive.

At ten years old the girl began to have strange fits of vanity. There were little shoes and frocks which she held in high favour, and others which nothing would induce her to put on. To wear a pinafore, now, was a bitter humiliation, and about this period she had the most definite theories about the dressing of hair. The discussion on coiffures usually took place in her bath, when a small, slippery person covered in soap-suds was to be heard arguing with her nurse—an argument which was not unusually enforced by physical violence—on the superior attractions of crimped to curled locks. At ten years old—she was of opinion—a person was grown up, or at least as old as any one need be. Why, big, tall men, with long beards and spectacles, who came to see her father, would bend down and ask her gravely if she would be their little wife? The child had been to more than one wedding, and she was aware that a wife was a person who began by wearing a beautiful white satin train, with white flowers and a veil; a person who was as imposing as that angel which nurse said her mother had become, although she had not, of course, any wings. The child was not sure whether she would best like to be a bride or an angel. The latter, it was true, had the additional attraction of a golden halo; but she thought, probably, that matters might be compromised, and that she could be a wife and have a halo, too.

The scene shifts now, for they had moved to another quarter of London, and the change made a vast difference in the child's tastes and habits. There was no cropped lawn now, where the pear tree made long shadows on summer afternoons, where she had a personal interest in a plot of ground of her own, and at least a bowing acquaintance with a whole host of fussy bumble-bees, gay yellow butterflies, furry caterpillars, and lazy snails. There was no summer-house in which ship-building could be carried on, and no convenient cistern in which to sail one's fleet. The firing off of toy guns was erased from the list of possible amusements. The house was a tall one, in a street in town, and rural delights were represented by a square yard at the back, which was haunted by stray, attenuated cats, and in which grew a solitary, stunted sycamore.

But, on the other hand, there was the new fascination of book-shelves, which ran all over the new house, so that the child had but to mount a chair and reach out a small hand, and, lo! romance and battles, laughter and tears, were all to be enjoyed at her will. She had only to pick out her volume. It was a revelation in the possibilities of life.

Looking back now, it must be owned that she led an odd life. The man with the kind smile was fond of his little daughter, but he was always at work, either at experiments in his laboratory or bending over his desk in the study. Nothing happened in the way of experience as it does to other children. One night her father took her to the theatre for the first time. A famous actress, an old friend, was giving *Antony and Cleopatra*, and they went first behind the scenes. They walked across a bare, lofty, cavern-like place, with dusty wooden boards, which sloped upwards, and the child was lifted up to peep through a little hole in a red velvet curtain, and through it she saw a large horse-shoe with quantities of people chattering as they waited. There was a great deal of tawdry gilt, and many gas chandeliers, and the people, especially at the top of the horseshoe, stamped with their feet and whistled. She did not care much for the play, when they presently took their places in a box close to the stage. There was a

## The Story of a Modern Woman

stout lady in long amber draperies, who kept throwing her arms round a tired-looking man with a brown face and a suit of gilt armour. The child was more amused when, between the acts, they went behind the scenes again to see the famous actress in her dressing-room. Unfortunately, the stout lady looked fatter than ever when seen close, but there were so many amusing things about—a wig with long plaits, several serpent bracelets, a diadem, and a beautiful golden girdle set with emeralds as big as pheasants' eggs. There was a middle-aged gentleman, too, who sat at his ease in a shabby armchair, and drank some pinkish, sparkling wine out of a low, round glass. Some one said that he was the editor of a great paper. The child had never seen an editor; she was glad to see one, because she had always thought they were quite different from other people. She liked to see him laugh, and whisper in a familiar, condescending way to the stout lady, and yet keep on drinking the pink wine out of the round glass.

The child was incorrigibly idle. A mild, non-descript, unimaginative governess and a fat, bald Frenchman who came once a week to instruct her in the Gallic tongue did nothing to take away the inherent unattractiveness of 'lessons.' She could read, and that was enough. The child read all day long. She lay concealed among the footstools under the long dining-room table, poring over *The Ancient Mariner*—her favourite poem—or thrilled with the lurid emotion of *Wuthering Heights*. A little later *Villette* became her cherished book; a well-thumbed copy, long ago bereft of its cover, stands on the girl's shelf to-day. Poor drab, patient, self-contained Miss Snow! How the child's heart ached for you in your bare, dismal, Belgian schoolroom, when Dr. John grew fickle; how she rejoiced when you found your ugly, be-spectacled Fate; how choky she felt at the throat when she read those last pessimistic, despairing words—words full of the sound and fury of angry seas and moaning winds. Why, poor patient hypochondriacal soul, were you destined never to be happy? And all these people were real to the child, much more real than the people she saw when she went out to tea-parties in her best frock and sash. They were as real as the little Tin Soldier and the little Sea-maiden of Hans Christian Andersen, types of humanity which will last as long as there are tender little human hearts to be touched.

And, later on, there is the rather plain girl of fourteen, with somewhat inscrutable eyes, and a seriousness which would have been portentous were it not laughable. Gone, for the time being, were her fits of high spirits and her wild gaiety; lost, the love of battle, and even the love of books about battles. The girl had much to occupy her mind. She began to understand something of life now. It was no longer a kind of coloured picture-book, made to catch the eye and amuse an idle half-hour. The pictures meant a great deal more than that. There were dreadful things, sad things, horrible things behind. Things that the girl could only guess at, but which were there, she was sure, all the same. The world, she could see from her books and newspapers, was full of injustice.

There was the great wrong which had been done some eighteen hundred years ago, when the most beautiful life that was ever lived had come to a shameful end. The girl was always reading that moving story; the Old Testament, with its revengeful, Jewish Deity, did not appeal to her at all. The poignant tragedy enacted at Jerusalem ate into her heart, and this child of fourteen felt herself burdened with the reproach which that senseless crime has left on humanity for well-nigh two thousand years.

Yes, those were serious days. Once in her teens, she had to make up her mind on many subjects. There were the questions of marriage, of maternity, of education. The girl had learned French by now, and the chance fingering of a small, last-century volume made her approach those supremely feminine subjects under the somewhat insecure guidance of Jean Jacques Rousseau. She imbibed, indeed, the Swiss philosopher's diatribes on virtue before she had comprehended what civilised mankind stigmatises as vice. *Emile: ou, de l'Education* was wearily, conscientiously toiled through for the sake of posterity. *Le Contrat Social* was a work which it behoved a person of fourteen—a person who wished to understand the scheme of civilisation—to know.

Strange, anxious days, passed in the twilight of ignorance, groping among the vain shadows with which man in his wisdom has elected to surround the future mothers of the race. It was not, of course, till years afterwards, that Mary became conscious of the fine irony of the fact that man—the superior intelligence—should take his future companion, shut her within four walls, fill that dimly-lighted interior with images of facts and emotions which do not exist, and then, pushing her suddenly into the blinding glare of real life, should be amazed when he finds that his exquisite care of her ethical sense has stultified her brain.

The girl was reading *David Copperfield* when she descended one day, with knitted brows, to the room where her governess was laboriously copying in water-colours a lithographed bunch of roses.

'What is a lost woman really, Miss Brown?' demanded the girl, with her tense look. 'Dickens says that little

## The Story of a Modern Woman

Em'ly is a lost woman, because she goes to Italy with that Mr. Steerforth. Was Mr. Steerforth a lost man, too?'

### CHAPTER III. A YOUNG GIRL

**LOOKING** back, across the vague, misty years, the egotism, the ferocious egotism, of the young girl appears well-nigh incredible. At eighteen, she, with her fluffy hair and her white shoulders, is the most important thing in her little world. There is the day she first discovers she has a throat with fine lines; the secret delight with which she hears an artist tell her that the movements of her body are graceful. Does black, or blue, or white become her best? It is never too late, and she is never too tired, when she comes back from a ball, to light all the candles again in her bedroom and examine herself critically, anxiously, in the glass. There is a little pink spot of excitement on each cheek; her hair is ruffled. She looks pretty, she has been happy to-night. Some one—no matter who—has told her she looks charming.

There is the desire of the young girl to coquet, to play with, to torture, when she first learns the all-powerful influence which she possesses by the primitive fact of her sex. With all the arrogance which belongs to personal purity, she stands on her little pedestal and looks down on mankind with a somewhat condescending smile. She is—and she feels it instinctively—a thing apart, a kind of forced plant, a product of civilisation. At present the ball-room, with its artificial atmosphere, its fleeting devotions, its graceful mockery of real life, is the scene of her little triumphs. The eyes of all men—young and old alike—follow the girl approvingly, wistfully, as she ascends the staircase, her full heart beating against her slim satin bodice, the clear, peachlike cheeks pink with excitement, her swimming eyes raised invitingly to some favourite partner, or dropped as she passes a man she wishes to avoid. At the door her slender white arms and shoulders disappear in a circle of black coats; the programme is scrawled all over; she notes exultantly that one or two men are scowling at each other, and that she has no dance to give some one who has joined the group too late. It is the woman's first taste of power.

There is, too, the *joie de vivre*, the delight of the young animal at play, the imperious will-to-live of a being in perfect health. The girl must dance till her feet ache horribly, the room swings round, and the pink dawn comes creeping in behind the drawn blinds; but still she must go on till that music stops, the swaying, voluptuous heartrending music which draws her feet round and round. The violins, with their *navrant* tones, the human, dolorous strains of the cornets, the brilliant, metallic, artificial sounds of the piano, all act powerfully on the young girl's nervous system. Then come the stifling crowded supper-room, with its indigestible food and sweet champagne; the young men who move nearer and look at her with strange eyes, after they have eaten and drunk. It is all new and intoxicating, and a little frightening; but it is life, or the nearest approach to it that a young girl, gently nurtured and carefully looked after, can possibly know.

Admiration, at this period, is the very breath of her nostrils. No matter from whom, no matter when or where. A smile, seen like a flash, on a face in a passing hansom; the ill-bred pertinacity of a raised lorgnette at a theatre; the dubious gaze of men about town, leaning against ball-room doors—nothing offends her. It is simply incense burnt at the feet of her youth.

But at last, out of the vague crowd of black coats and wistful eyes, the first lover emerges. It is a little difficult to recall his face, after all these years. Looking back dispassionately, he seems to have been very like all the others, only that he made her suffer, while the others, perhaps, suffered a little for her sake. There were the horrible half-hours of torture when she waited, in some crowded party, for his sleek head and his somewhat foolish smile to appear in the door-way; the blank, empty days when there was no letter; the shamefully sweet, the incredible surrender to the first tentative embrace, a surrender which tortured her night and day, and then the joy, the supreme joy, of knowing, for certain, that he cared.

It is all a little remote, now, but the beautiful secret was hugged like a very treasure. He was young, he was poor, there were difficulties of every sort to contend with, and finally there was a parting, one warm, windy night in November. It was a Sunday, about seven o'clock, and through the window, which was ajar in the drawing-room where they stood, came the sound of a tolling bell. It was only a neighbouring church summoning pious folk to evening service, but it sounded like a knell. It was a well-nigh hopeless affair, and all that they could do was to promise to write to each other. For some weeks the girl watched, in the column of the shipping intelligence, the eastward progress of a Peninsular and Oriental steamer on its way to Australia, and after that, on the mornings when the mail came in, she would stand with her heart in her mouth, and her hand on the knob of the dining-room door, afraid to go in and find that no foreign envelope lay beside her plate. For some months, to

## The Story of a Modern Woman

be sure, the letters nearly always lay there, but gradually they got rarer and rarer, and one day she told herself finally that she need not expect any more. Torture is not made more bearable by being slowly applied. During the months in which those letters from Australia grew rarer, the girl understood for the first time the helplessness, the intolerable burden which society has laid on her sex. All things must be endured with a polite smile. Had she been a boy, she was aware that she might have made an effort to break the maddening silence; have stifled her sorrow with dissipation, with travel or hard work. As it was, the trivial round of civilised feminine existence made her, in those days, almost an automaton. One looks back, with wonder, at the courage of the girl. To find a smile with which to face her father at the dinner table; to take a sisterly interest in Jim's exploits at school; to show due surprise each time her brother announced the arrival of a new batch of rabbits; and a partisan's joy in the licking which Smith minor had administered to Jones major—these were the immediate duties which lay before her.

Not feeling strong just now, the girl gave up going to balls; they reminded her too much of that episode which she wished to forget; and now the prospect that opened out before her was a vista of years full of scientific *soirées* where one walked down long sparsely-peopled rooms and looked through microscopes at things which wriggled and squirmed. Sometimes the girl felt strangely like one of those much-observed bacilli; the daughter of a scientist, she knew well enough that her little troubles had about as much importance as theirs in relation to the vast universe. Yet there she was, fixed down under her little glass case, while the world kept a coldly observant eye upon her. Ah, the torture of the young—the young who are always unhappy, and whose little lives are continually coming to a full stop, with chapters that cease bluntly, brutally, without reason and without explanation.

That she was thrown aside, dropped overboard, as it were, in the terrific battle for existence mattered nothing to the young girl. Having no self-pity, she never questioned the justice of the blow that had been dealt her. Afterwards, in the years to come, she might wonder why she should have been made to suffer so? But not then. One's first sorrow is a very precious thing. In those far-off days, she would gladly have sacrificed everything—even life itself—for the young man who forgot to write, and whose face, with its rather foolish smile, it is so difficult to recall exactly as it was.

About this time, when she began to work at the Central London School of Art, father and daughter became great friends. On the days when he went to lecture at the London University, she would either walk with him, or go to fetch him on those afternoons when he was coming straight home to tea instead of making his way to the Athenæum Club. With her chin in the air, looking straight before her, she stepped along, in the half-dark, with a royal scorn for the well-dressed loafers who find their pleasure in accosting ladies in the street. She was twenty-one, and a woman now; it behoved her to be able to take care of herself. And after all, they were perhaps more easily disposed of than some of the men who took her in to dinner, men who had tired eyes and a dubious smile, and who were fond of starting doubtful topics with a side-long, tentative glance.

She works now regularly with her father, acting as his amanuensis when his eyes are tired, or verifying facts in the library. Jimmie, the little brother, has grown into a boy with charming, insinuating manners, who is curiously un-British in his demonstrativeness. His sister, he says, is the most charming of girls. He announces that he is always going to live with her. Nothing shall separate them. His whole life, he declares, with his arms round her neck, is to be devoted to his dearest Mary.

How well she remembered the last time she and her father had gone out together. She could recollect driving in a hansom, and their talk on the way to the Foreign Office. His last book but one had but lately appeared, and was now being scratched and bespluttered assiduously by clerical pens, while it was received with rapture by the large class which like their advanced thinking done for them, and turned out in fat print with ample margins once in every third year. All the way up the crowded staircase there is a great display of teeth, of tiaras, of stars and orders, of shining bald heads. The wife of the Foreign Secretary is delighted to see the professor, though no one in that eminently aristocratic gathering 'insists' on anything, and most people are content to exchange two fingers, two words, and two smiles, one at greeting and one at passing on. His Excellency the German Ambassador detains the father and daughter, for he has just heard that the Emperor intends to bestow on the English professor the Order of the Crown, for his distinguished services to the progress of modern thought. The two move on, and are caught up in other small circles, where they hear agreeable commonplaces, in an atmosphere where everything is taken for granted, and in which smooth phrases and smooth faces abound, faces which have inherited, for hundreds of years, the art of expressing nothing in a polite way. It is all suave and artificial and decorous. No

## The Story of a Modern Woman

epigrams make themselves conspicuous in the well-bred chatter, and one great lady, exhibiting a superfluity of bare flesh, raises a tortoise-shell lorgnette when some one—who can it be?—is heard to laugh outright. A famous guardsman has several charming things to say, and the girl finds her chatter received with flattering attention by the handsome man with the Garter, who is at once a Viceroy and the most suave of diplomats. Surely, when one looks back, the girl's eyes are bright again that night; her blond hair is full of electricity; she has regained, though with a curious little composed manner, something of the roundness, the joyousness, of nineteen. Life is a compromise, and must not be taken too seriously. It is absurd to be much in earnest, and it bores people. So much the girl has learned.

For the next two or three days, the two hardly left the study, except for a short walk after dinner, for the professor's book absorbed him. Not feeling himself, he was anxious—terribly anxious—to get it done. After this they would go abroad, and get a long holiday. He wanted to go to Zermatt. At the Riffel Alp he would get the air and exercise he craved. No, he was not quite himself; he felt over-strained, nervous, he had a continual headache. It was, perhaps, he said, a touch of bile.

But one evening, just before dinner, the book was actually done. Bending over the girl at the desk, he kissed her crisp hair, and wrote at the bottom of the page, in his own cramped hand, these words—"The End."

And so it was, indeed.

The next morning, when the servant went up to call him, the professor had been dead some hours. The doctors spoke of a clot of blood in the brain, of over-work, and over-strain.

And in the tall, darkened house in Harley Street, the child who had played, the girl who had danced, died too.

## CHAPTER IV. ALISON

AS sometimes happens with busy people in London, the Erles had hundreds of acquaintances and but few intimate friends. A friendship is costly, in point of time, and Mary found, when one chapter of her life was done that spring morning, that there were two people only that she must imperatively see: a man and a woman—Vincent Hemming and Alison Ives. How their features stood out among the crowd of vague faces, which belonged to that other life! Alison Ives especially, who always looked like a Reynolds, with her handsome, clever face, her superb air, and her huge hats tied under the chin. With that grave sweetness which endears to us the Siddons in the National Gallery, she yet had the look of a thinker, modernised by a slightly bored expression, and a little distinguished way which at once made other women in her vicinity look dowdy or vulgar. Her clothes always seemed to suit her, as its feathers do a bird. There are women who look like an *édition de luxe* of a poor book; Alison Ives suggested that of a classic.

It had been her habit for a couple of years past to sit at the feet of Professor Erle; she constantly announced, indeed, that he was the only man she wanted to marry, only that he was firm, and would not permit it. Besides, it was no good trying to compete with her mother, Lady Jane, who was sixty-five—and irresistible. Women of sixty-five, she said, were nowadays the only people who inspired a great passion. She supposed her turn would come—a quarter of a century hence. But, all the same, the daughter was much admired in the world; but the world, as understood by her mother, Lady Jane, by no means entirely satisfied this eminently modern young woman. It was whispered that she had serious views, though it was certain that she was pretty enough to please a Prime Minister, and clever enough to entertain a guardsman, if she found herself next to either at dinner. Alison did not mind which, she said; in fact, after a long day in the East-end, when she was tired, she rather preferred the guardsman, who would be content to talk of polo ponies, whereas, when a young woman is put next to a Premier, it behoves her to look, at any rate, very brilliant indeed. Though she never smoked, was ignorant of billiard cues and guns, and hated playing the man, Alison had been heard to murmur something like an oath. It was a habit which she had picked up in Paris, when she was working in a sculptor's studio; and she always declared that *dame* and *sapristi*, being in a foreign tongue, were notoriously less efficacious, and by inference more pardonable, than swearing in the vernacular. For the rest, with the best heart in the world, she had a somewhat caustic tongue, could interpret Chopin like an artist, and always had her hair exquisitely dressed.

What attracted people at once was her womanliness, her lack of snobbishness, her real desire to be in sympathy with her own sex. Like all exceptional people, she had her moods, and sometimes for months together she was heard of only as forming one of a party in this or that great country house, while at other times she would come to town and study fitfully, or devote herself to the task of helping young girls. Once, in the middle of the season, she took a lodging in a by-street in the Mile End Road, but she only stayed seven weeks, and, when she appeared again, the expression on her face was sadder than before. 'Of course, one ought to **know** what it is like,' she said, when Mary asked her why she had left so soon. 'It's an experience—but a terrible one. It's not only the drunkenness, the down-at-heel vice, the astounding absence of any thrift or forethought, and the incredible repetition of one solitary adjective; but it seems to me that, when one or two of us go and live down there, we absolutely do no permanent good at all. The thing will be to bring the East-end here—one by one, of course, just as we go there.'

Alison kept her word. This spring had found her ensconced in a workman's flat in the Mayfair district, with one small servant, whom she had befriended in Whitechapel.

'But it's as much for myself as her,' explained Alison, laughing. She hated to be thought philanthropic. 'All we women are so incredibly dependent on other people. It's absurd that we don't know how to do anything useful. I shall keep my flat, and go to it now and again, when I am tired of shooting-parties. It will be a little home for my East-end girls, whom I intend to train. I daresay I shall be disappointed in them, but that's inevitable with all experiments. Anyway, it will probably do me more good than it will them. The only real slavery nowadays is the slavery of luxury. We are all getting so pampered that we can't exist without it. People do the most incredible things. I have known a woman stay with a husband whom she loathed, and whom it was an outrage to live with, simply because she couldn't do her own hair. I'm going to get our cook at Ives Court to teach me how to broil a mutton-chop, though, I daresay, she's too grand for that; and I shall go and watch the laundry-maid at her work.'

## The Story of a Modern Woman

'And your hands, you lunatic?' Mary had exclaimed. 'I think I see you with red knuckles.'

'Oh,' said Alison, laughing, 'I shall tell that little manicure just out of Bond Street to come twice a week. There's that new stuff, "Eau des Orchidées"; it's wonderful. Don't imagine I'm going to give up the only old-fashioned quality we modern women have got—our vanity. It's the only thing that makes us still bearable.'

This was the young woman who was shown into the study by Elizabeth one morning a few days after the funeral at Highgate. Mary was bending over a desk, busy with her father's proofs, when she came in. The elder girl's beautiful brown eyes were suspiciously shiny; it had evidently cost her an effort to come into the study which she knew so well. The two girls wrung each other's hands silently. But after the first kiss, in which she said everything that she dared not put in words, Alison, with her ready tact, began talking business at once.

The younger girl announced her plans frankly. There was just enough money for her to live meagrely, quietly on for the next few years, while she tried her luck at art. Mary had always meant to paint some day, when her time should be at her own disposal. To paint was a long-cherished ambition, mused over on drowsy afternoons in the reading-room of the British Museum, nursed during the days when she had remained bending over a desk in her father's study, patiently inscribing what the professor dictated as he walked up and down the little room. As for Jimmie, he was to remain at Winchester, and, if he could succeed in winning a scholarship, was to go to Oxford, as the father had wished. By living carefully this could be managed.

'No woman ever made a great artist yet,' said Alison, after a pause, 'but, if you don't mind being third-rate, of course go in and try. I suppose it'll mean South Kensington, the Royal Academy, and then—portraits of babies in pastel or cottage gardens for the rest of your life.'

'Oh, don't.'

'Never mind, my dear girl. You must work at something. Try the British Art School. Has Vincent Hemming been?' she added, rather inconsequently.

'Oh, yes, he has called. Two or three times, Elizabeth says, but I haven't seen any one,' said Mary, remembering, with a little shudder, the inquisitive voices at the door.

'I don't see why,' said Alison, thoughtfully, 'you shouldn't take a flat in the same building with me. Of course, there are little drawbacks. The ladies use a limited, if somewhat virulent vocabulary, and now and again one has to step over an elderly gentleman who lives just below, and who comes home tired, and sometimes goes to sleep on the stairs. But one gets accustomed to that.'

'I think on the whole,' said Mary, smiling, 'I'll take some rooms near. There are some furnished rooms in Bulstrode Street, kept by an old servant of ours. I've got to think of Jimmie and his holidays, you see.'

'Where is the boy, by the by?'

'Oh, poor Jimmie, I let him go—the day—the day after. He was very good; he said that nothing would induce him to leave me, and sat, poor boy, for at least an hour with his arms round my neck, crying. Then another note came from Smith minor—the boy who keeps so many lop-eared rabbits, you remember—asking him to go and spend a week with them in the country.'

'And then?' said Alison quickly. 'Ah! I can see Jimmie saying he shouldn't dream of going, and then wandering round the room, asking if you were not perhaps going out of town yourself. And about seven o'clock an epistle was indited to say that he would be very pleased to go, and the next morning Jimmie went off in a four-wheel cab, looking quite cheerful.'

Mary smiled in spite of herself.

'Poor boy,' she said softly, in an extenuating voice, 'he can't bear anything sad!'

'So much,' said Alison after a pause, 'for brothers.'

'We've got,' answered the other, 'fortunately or unfortunately, to depend upon ourselves in all the crises of life. I've got lots to do; lawyers to see, these proofs to correct, and to make arrangements for my own future.'

'Only that? She refuses herself nothing,' said Alison. 'I am modestly contented with arranging for Evelina's future. Evelina is my last girl. As for my own, I leave it to Providence.'

'You can afford to,' replied Mary, 'but we have it on the authority of a proverb that Heaven is not above taking assistance from mortals in this respect.'

'My dear, you should never say cynical things; you'll find you will so often be obliged to do them! But I want to tell you about Evelina,' she went on nervously, afraid every minute that one or other of them might break down. 'Evelina is my new girl,' she continued, settling down on the fender-stool. 'Her name is actually Evelina—isn't it

## The Story of a Modern Woman

preposterous? I should like to call her Polly, only I don't believe in changing poor people's names to suit your own fancy, as if they were cats or canaries. Well, Evelina's baby—'

'Oh, there is a baby?'

'Why, of course. A poor waxen little thing that screams all day long. I've put it out to nurse in a *crèche* that a friend of mine has started in Kentish Town. And now I'm trying to cultivate a sense of humour in Evelina.'

'It will be difficult, won't it?' said Mary, trying hard to take an interest.

'Never mind. It's what women ought to cultivate above all other things, especially the poorer classes. With a keen sense of the ridiculous, they would never fall in love at all; and as to improvident marriages, they simply wouldn't exist. If you could see the baby's father!—a pudding-faced boy, who helps in a tiny cheesemonger's shop down there. She "walked out" with him for two years. He is now nearly nineteen. It is all very well to smile, but it is terrible—for the woman. In the evening, when she has done her work, she lights the lamp in my little sitting-room (every-thing is quite simple, you know; only I've got a few books, and the tiny Corot from my den at Ives Court, and the Rossetti drawings), and then I read aloud while she knits. I read comic things—Dickens, Mark Twain, and so on; and when the poor girl laughs, I feel that I have scored. She isn't much more than a child, you know, and she has such a good heart. I think she likes to talk to me: she tells me her little story.'

'A story,' repeated Mary; 'she **has** a story, then?'

'Oh! a common one enough down there,' answered Alison. 'She drifted into the East-end from Essex, about three years ago, and became a drudge-of-all-work in a family of ten, in the Mile End Road. Her master was pleased to make love to her when his wife and the eight children had gone for the day to South-end; Evelina ran out of the house, leaving her box behind, and never dared to go back. Mary, these London idylls are not pretty. She is, however, beginning to show a faint sense of the ridiculous. I believe I shall make a sensible person of Evelina.'

Mary raised her head, for she had been listening mechanically, with her eyes fixed on the ink-spots on her father's desk, the desk on which his hand had so often rested. But it was impossible not to feel cheered by Alison's whimsical yet energetic personality. She looked so bright, so alert, so capable, as she stood there, in her pretty black gown and her rakish hat, a little askew with the wind.

'By the by, did I tell you the adventure I had on my visit to the Blaythewaites? My dear, it was only by the intervention of Providence that I didn't have to dine the first night in my tailor-gown. Of course, I went down third-class—'

'That's because you are saving for Evelina's baby, I suppose,' interrupted Mary.

'And so,' went on Alison, taking no notice of the interruption, 'the footman never thought of looking for me there. They all drove off without me, and my basket trunk, with my favourite white gown in it, got taken off with some other people to another place about five miles off. However, it was got back in time, and when I told my little story at dinner to Sir Horace, he was immensely amused, though I'm sure Lady Blaythewaite thought I was graduating for a lunatic asylum. People who don't know me well always do.'

'Did you tell Sir Horace Blaythewaite about the workman's flat—and Evelina?' said Mary, laughing. Alison was already at the door, tying on her hat firmly.

'You know I never talk about that,' she said, flushing up. 'Why it would look like a pose—as if I thought myself better than other people. And I couldn't bear any one to say that I had 'taken up slumming.' You know how I detest the whole attitude of the upper and middle classes towards the poor. Lifting the lids of people's saucepans and routing under their beds for fluff is simply impertinence. Why, district visiting is nothing less than a gross breach of manners—a little worse than electioneering, if that's possible. I'm just going up,' she said, giving a rakish twist to her velvet hat-strings, 'to the *crèche* in Kentish Town to see Evelina's baby. I'm going on the top of one of those charming trams. I told Worth when I was in Paris that I always went on the tops of omnibuses, and he designed me this little frock on purpose. It's pretty, isn't it, but a little too *ingénue* for me? It smacks of the Comédie Française. I think I see Reichenberg in it,' said Alison doubtfully, smoothing down the folds of her loose bodice. 'Now, you've got to promise to come and dine with me and mother in Portman Square; we shall have the house to ourselves. Good-bye. Eight o'clock.'

'Nonsense! It's very sweet of you, but I can't possibly go,' cried Mary down the passage.

In another instant she was gone, and the house seemed blank and empty again. But trying not to think of her sorrow, Mary went steadily on with the proofs.

## The Story of a Modern Woman

## CHAPTER V. MARY'S LOVER

**MR. VINCENT HEMMING** was looked upon by the professor, by Jimmie, by the servants, and indeed by everyone except Mary herself, as her especial property. He was, in fact, one of the few intimate visitors who came when he liked to the Harley Street house. He had become part of her grown-up life, having first appeared about a year after that Sunday night parting, when the world had seemed very empty indeed. His little air of deference was eminently attractive to a young girl, who fancied that she had done for ever with emotion. As for Jimmie, he adored Vincent, though Jimmie generally adored new acquaintances—for the space of about six weeks.

Hemming's father had been a politician of some note, who had twice held office, and Vincent had pre-eminently the manners of one burdened with state secrets. His little reserves, a certain air of caution, of discretion, all belonged to those early experiences when his father was alive. To be sure, he had charming, rather old-fashioned manners, affected the speech of the mid-century, and was carried away by few of the modern crazes or fads. A well-shaped forehead—of the showily intellectual type—wavy hair, already threaded with grey, a short, pointed beard, and eyes of an innocent, penetrating brown, made up a personality which appealed at once to dowagers and young girls. At table he looked very well, although his shoulders were inclined to slope slightly, but when he stood up you saw that he had not the eminently British habit of planting himself firmly, squarely, and self-assertively on his feet. For the rest, he had a small property which brought him in about three hundred a year, and though already grey, was still spoken of by his elders as a 'promising young man.'

Though a Conservative, he believed in the higher education, even the enfranchisement of women. It was a subject on which he was persuasively eloquent. It was quite pretty, ladies always thought, to hear him talk of his dreams, his sacrifices, and an occasional article which he succeeded in getting inserted on his favourite subject in the *Fortnightly* or the *Contemporary* was laboriously written in studied English, and with a persuasive pen. He had a great deal to say on the future of the race, and on the necessity of maintaining a high ethical standard, and he always waxed exceedingly wroth over the literary excesses of MM. Zola and de Goncourt, and thanked heaven, so to speak, that those eminent pioneers of Realism did not belong to the Anglo-Saxon family. 'We are passing,' he announced one day, when he was calling on Lady Jane Ives, 'through one of the reconstructive periods of the world's history. Art, under such conditions, is necessarily tentative, rarely complete.'

'Yes,' said Alison, dryly, 'and building, you see, always makes a mess. The smoking lime, the dirty puddles, the unpleasant odour of baking bricks are inevitable.' But Lady Jane, who had knocked about the most depraved society in Europe for half a century, and who clung with amiable tenacity to her illusions, always agreed with Mr. Hemming. Lady Jane, who was a judge of such things, said that he was one of the few modern young men whom she could endure in her drawing-room for more than twenty minutes.

A day or two after Alison's visit, Mr. Vincent Hemming appeared, looking charmingly correct and sympathetic, in a black-and-white spotted tie and a band round his hat. He had gauged to a nicety his degree of intimacy with the great man who was gone.

It was a day when outlines were clearly cut, and colours glaring; everything looked crisp, hard, decided, inevitable. The rooms wore the unsettled, desolate look of a house that is soon to be empty. One or two favourite pictures had already been lifted down from off the wall, leaving a patch of clean paper visible; one bookcase was already a dark void, the volumes were piled on the floor ready to be packed. Most of the library was to be sold, and Mary now stood on a ladder, running a regretful eye along the next case of beloved volumes, when Vincent Hemming came in.

'My poor child,' he said, in his sympathetic voice, 'why wouldn't you let me see you before?'

'I've been very busy,' said Mary, getting down from the ladder, and putting out a dusty hand. 'There was so much to do. Father's lawyer has been here constantly, and everybody has been very kind. I had to think of everything, you see—of Jimmie, and all that.'

'What are you going to do?' he asked, after a little pause, during which his eye had travelled round the dismantled walls, and the cavernous shelves of the once cosy drawing-room.

'Of course, we can't stay in this big house,' she explained; 'I've taken some lodgings in Bulstrode Street, near the Central London School of Art.'

'By yourself, my dear child?'

## The Story of a Modern Woman

'I suppose so, for the present,' she answered, knocking two volumes together in a determined manner to get the dust from the edges. Her mouth had got those little obstinate tucks at the corners now, which he knew so well. 'Aunt Julia—mother's sister, you know—has written offering me a home. She is very High Church, and lives at Bournemouth in one of those dreadful little gabled villas.'

'And, of course, you prefer an artistic life in London,' he was relieved, distinctly relieved, when Mary announced her intention of adopting art as a profession. Painting, especially in watercolours, he considered an eminently lady-like occupation; it was, indeed, associated in his imagination with certain drawings of Welsh mountains and torrents, executed by his mother with the prim *technique* of the forties, which now adorned his chambers in the Temple.

'That's so brave—and so like you,' said Vincent, as his eye wandered round the room again. The tone of his voice was vague: he was evidently considering something which took up all his attention.

'It isn't brave at all,' she said, simply. 'It's an absolute physical necessity. I should go mad if I sat down to think. It all seems so cruel, so terrible, so unjust. He was only fifty-three, and there was so much work for him still to do. He used to say that an ordinary long life could not suffice—'

'The death of Professor Erle is a national disaster,' replied Vincent, 'and is not to be gauged all at once.'

There was a long silence, during which all that this loss meant to each of these two passed through their minds. They had moved to the window now, through which a light breeze fluttered in. The tall, brownish-grey houses were spruced up for the season with clean blinds and boxes of daisies and spiraea. A couple of blonde girls in pink cotton made a gay splash of colour against the grey-toned street as they walked buoyantly along. A hansom was drawing up at the pale-green door yonder, and out of it sprang a young man in a glossy hat, a gardenia, and patent-leather boots. Just opposite some workmen were stretching a red-and-white awning for an evening party. The outward aspect of affairs was unchanged.

'I feel,' said Mary, gazing at the striped awning, which the men had now succeeded in propping, 'as if I had done with **that** world for always. And now I want to do something, to live. Oh, Mr. Hemming,' she added, with one of her comic little frowns, 'I don't want to be a "young lady"! Do you really think that, because I am a woman, I must sit by, and fold my hands, and wait?'

'You are very modern in one thing, dear child; you have the modern craze for work.'

'It probably saves some of us from the mad-house.'

'Ah, but you will marry one of these days, and then where will your work be?' replied Vincent, smiling a little fatuously.

Mary turned from the window abruptly.

'Let us go carefully over the books,' she said, with a brusqueness which she sometimes affected. 'Help me to choose,' she continued, mounting the steps, and beginning to hand down the volumes. 'I want that Lamb and the Heine, the Goethe and the Jean Paul Richter. Here, catch the *Phædo*, and put it with the Marcus Aurelius and that little Epictetus over there on the cabinet.'

'My poor child, you will no doubt require such consolation as the philosophers can afford,' said Vincent Hemming, in his old-fashioned way.

'Here's *Pippa Passes*, and Musset's *Proverbes*, and my special Shelley, and the *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Yes, yes, all those.'

Some colour had come into the girl's cheeks as she sat on the top of the ladder and dropped the books into his arms, covering him, as she did so, with a light cloud of dust; but she looked pathetically delicate in her close-fitting, sombre gown, which threw up the pallor of her throat, the mauvish tinge of her lips, the dark rings round her eyes. Vincent Hemming, whatever he had meant to do when he entered the dismantled drawing-room, was fairly carried away by the spectacle of Mary's childish face and busy, nervous little hands re-arranging her destiny in her own decided fashion. It touched him, and, at the same time, irritated him, producing the feeling that, as a man, he was bound to interfere.

One step nearer now, and the course of a lifetime would be changed.

'Mary, dear child,' he said suddenly, in an imploring tone, while they were both startled by the emotion in his voice, 'do you think you could—care for me a little?'

The girl turned to look at him. His penetrating brown eyes were actually suffused with tears; a nerve was ticking visibly in his forehead. It all seemed far-off, improbable, impossible. Vincent Hemming, her old friend,

## The Story of a Modern Woman

had turned into this imploring, visibly-suffering man. Mary burst into an hysterical little laugh.

'But you—you don't care for me, do you? You're only saying that because you think I'm lonely—that I want some one to take care of me—aren't you?' she asked hurriedly. 'Why, we've known each other so long,' she added, seeing that he was still silent. He had flipped the dust from his face and coat with easy tact, and stood, smiling up at her, close by her side.

'I don't know,' continued the girl, doubtfully, slowly twisting one of the buttons of his frock coat. She had come down several steps of the ladder, so that her eyes were on a level with his. The nerve no longer ticked in his forehead; the muscles of his mouth relaxed; there was already something of triumph in his look.

'Don't smile, dear,' she said, very gravely. 'I can't bear you to look at me like that. Do you—really—want me?'

'Dear heart, I have always wanted you,' said a changed, thick voice in her ear, and in the next instant two arms encircled her, and two lips were crushed against hers. For the first minute a consciousness of sorrow overwhelmed her. For good, for evil, the girl knew that she was giving herself up to this man, whom a minute ago she had looked upon with the cool eye and discriminating judgment of mere friendship. All the tragic potentialities of a woman's life, the uncertainties and sorrows of her who gives her happiness into another's keeping, flashed before her... Why, why must it be? Only a minute ago, and she had been ready to face the world alone, to be herself, to express herself, to work out her own destiny. And now it was all changed. Something held her against her will. This man—a minute ago her friend, and now, in this infinitesimal atom of time, her lover, who stood before her with red, flushed face, and looked with longing eyes into hers: this man had already communicated his trouble to her. His hands, which held her two wrists as they stood there gazing at each other, felt like links of iron.

In that one supreme moment, Mary Erle tasted for the first time, in all its intensity, the helplessness of woman, the inborn feeling of subjection to a stronger will, inherited through generations of submissive feminine intelligences.

'I can't, oh, I can't,' she said. 'Don't ask me now. You don't—you can't understand how I feel. And I don't know you like that. I've always thought of you as a friend,' she protested, drawing herself away, with her fine smile. 'Besides, it's dreadful to be—love—making—when father—'

'I don't ask you to think of it just now, my darling,' said Vincent. 'I—I—the fact is, I have much to do, and many plans ahead myself. I—I haven't the right to tie you definitely, Mary. I am thinking seriously of taking that trip to India and Australia, of which I told you.'

'You're—going—away?' she asked, blankly. Already the inexorable chain which nature forges bound her to this man.

'Yes, to collect materials for my book on the Woman Question. I might come home by way of Canada, and if so, the thing would take me the best part of a year. Then, when I come home, I shall have my book to do; and I hope, if the present Government keeps in, to get a legal appointment. So you see, little one, you will have ample time to think about it, as well as to perfect your artistic studies,' he added, with a touch of his old-fashioned manner. He was sitting down on the sofa now, and looked already his quiet, well-bred, rather deferential self again.

An hour later Vincent got up, reluctantly, to go. 'I have to dine with a member of the Government at a quarter to eight,' he explained, 'My new article must be finished before I start, and I'm thinking of starting quite soon.'

'Are you?' said Mary, sorrowfully, turning to the window and gazing down the street. It was all so different now. She belonged to this man who was going away. Why had he spoken? Could it not be as it was? ... A few yards off a piano-organ was rattling out a cheap German valse. The sun was off the houses now, and the street wore its familiar, dingy look.

Vincent searched among the disarranged furniture and the piles of books for his hat. Mary followed him to the door. She wanted to say something nice, but she could think of nothing. Just at parting, he took her in his arms again, and brushed her downcast lids with his lips. During that embrace, she thought of nothing, except that she was sure that she had always cared for him. 'Dear,' he muttered, 'I'm afraid that if I go away I shall leave the best part of myself with you.'

When he had gone, she stooped about again among the rows of books, sorting them mechanically, without thinking much what she was doing. Little clouds of dust rose in the twilight room. The tall, grim houses shut out all that remained of a daffodil-tinted sky. Tired and unstrung, the girl threw herself on to the sofa where she and Vincent Hemming had sat, and presently, to her surprise, she was conscious that two large, salt tears were

## The Story of a Modern Woman

coursing their way down her dusty cheeks.

## CHAPTER VI. THE CENTRAL LONDON SCHOOL OF ART

**THE** Central London School of Art, though backed by all the majesty of State support, was, at the first blush, a somewhat disillusionising place to the youthful aspirant for fame. To the over-nice, to be sure, it lacked an art 'atmosphere,' except such a material one as is generated by ancient paint-tubes, oily rags, furtively-munched sandwiches, and the presence of a preponderance of people to whom the daily tub is possibly not of vital importance. Outwardly, the Art School was only No. 55, in a dreary by-street near Portland Road; a small thoroughfare of sinister aspect, in which the houses seemed to be frowning at each other's dubious appearance. The white blinds—now grey with age and dirt—seemed always drawn; no one ever seemed to emerge from those faded, bespattered front doors. It was a dreary, mysterious street, of which, when Mary thought of it, she invariably saw the two ends swallowed up in a blurred, yellowish fog.

Inside, this temple of the fine arts consisted of one long room with a glass roof, divided, towards one end, by a serge curtain of bronze green. The walls were tinted a dingy-olive colour, throwing up the plaster Laocoon, the torso of the Theseus, the Apollo Belvedere, with its slightly supercilious air, the frowning Moses of Michael Angelo, and the simpering Clytie, with startling distinctness. A small *écorché* stood on a shelf, and all around, looking like the frozen remains of some monster operating-theatre, were eerie-looking arms, legs, feet, and hands cut off above the wrist.

Here, too, were the candidates for the Royal Academy, all laboriously stippling their drawings of the Laocoon with twists of bread and stumps; a process in which they had been engaged for some six months past; while in the other division of the room was posed a child dressed like an Italian contadina, surrounded by easels on every side. It was the afternoon on which the model sat. Painting from the life was carried on at the Central London School of Art on but two afternoons a week, being looked upon as a kind of frivolous extra which should not be allowed to occupy the mind of the serious student to the detriment of the stippled Laocoon.

It was a raw December day, but inside the fumes of a charcoal stove made the students' heads feel queer. They were an odd-looking collection of people, who were gathered there that winter afternoon in the falling light. The young women were of the lower middle class; daughters of retail shopkeepers, who dressed in gowns of orange or green serge, cut rather low about the throat, and beautified by strings of amber or Venetian glass beads, while some, on gala days, had been known to appear adorned with iridescent beetles' wings, a trimming understood to be dear to the female artist the wide world over. And though perhaps their hair left, like their speech, something to be desired, on the whole the girls were less objectionable than the boy-students, whose linen was not irreproachable, and who used to disappear in groups of five or six during the sitting, to return to their places presently, bringing with them a suspicious odour of bitter beer and inexpensive tobacco. An English art school has none of the boisterous, contagious hilarity of a French *atelier*. Decent silence reigned, broken only by the hoarse, repressed chuckles of a couple of boys as they exchanged a whispered witticism, or the rare, high-pitched, but almost inaudible titter of a student with ringlets as she bent over her easel.

Mary Erle, with her neat hair and her well made black dress, looked like a little princess as she sat, with a slight frown and tight-shut lips, among the outer ring of easels. She wore the same expression as of old, in the summerhouse in St. John's Wood, when she sat alone notching and slicing at her wooden fleet. And indeed, the girl was as much alone now, in this studio full of human beings, as in the silence of the leafy garden. Vincent had gone on his travels—had been gone, indeed, for nearly six months, and all that she had to remind her of that unexpected demonstration of affection in the Harley Street drawing-room was a crumpled letter with an Indian post-mark which she carried about in her pocket. Yes, she was alone, for had she spoken to the boys, she was sure they would have tried to be jocose; and she dreaded the confidences of the young ladies, some of whom had prosperous flirtations, carried on in neighbouring pastry-cooks' shops, or in the rooms of Burlington House with the 'advanced' male students. Indeed, the only person she ever spoke to was an old student who had been through the Academy schools, and who came to the Central London to work from the draped model, his studio on Haverstock Hill being just now in the hands of workmen.

Mr. Perry Jackson was an under-sized, drab-faced young man of about thirty, who gave the casual spectator the impression that he was a grown-up London gutter-boy. But in truth he had had no such dramatic beginnings. His parents, the well-to-do proprietors of a small upholsterer's shop in the Hampstead Road, had given him a fair

## The Story of a Modern Woman

education, and were now proud of having turned their only child into an 'artist and a gentleman.' To Mary, Mr. Jackson was so frankly, so completely himself, representing such an unknown, unguessed-at type, that he ended by amusing her. Perry Jackson, to be sure, was already a rising man; he had an extraordinary facility for drawing pretty faces. His black and white work in *Illustrations* was much admired at the railway stations, while already he had had one or two flashy pictures on the line at the Royal Academy.

How well Mary remembered the day she had begun her Laocoon, for the next competition. It would take, with its infinitely minute stippling, six months to complete.

'I'd advise you to look sharp and begin, Miss Erle,' Mr. Jackson had said, who, though rather abashed by his neighbour's manners, was inclined to be friendly. 'That serpent'll take you every day of six weeks, let alone the figure. They're awfully down on a fellow, I can tell you, at the Academy, if the shading ain't quite up to the mark. Anybody can correct the drawing for you, don't you see, but you've got to do that blessed stippling yerself.'

'Thanks. I think I will begin at once.'

'Right you are. Take this place, Miss Erle, there's a better light,' suggested Mr. Jackson, who was good-nature itself. 'Let me fix your easel. There. You may use the plumb-line as much as you like,' continued the young man, his small, pale eyes twinkling with vivacity; 'and I'll correct your outline for you. I ought to know something about it,' he added with sudden candour. 'Why, I went up for the R.A. Schools three times myself.'

There were two or three girls, besides herself, who were competing for the Academy, and several men, one of whom was verging on fifty years of age, and whose hair and unkempt beard were already turned grey. A legend current in the school related that this person had been competing for the Royal Academy Schools ever since he was eighteen years old. There was Miss Simpkins, a strapping young woman with a large, vague face, which somehow suggested a muffin, and who carried a small edition of *Modern Painters* about in a leather hand-bag, together with a pocket-comb, a hand-mirror, some ham sandwiches, and a selection of different kinds of chalk, and who had many confidences to impart to a pale girl with red ringlets, whom Mary remembered as the daughter of a confectioner in St. John's Wood, a girl who affected peacock-blue velveteen, and was understood to be intermittently in love with Mr. Jackson.

On the December day in question the glass door opened, and a small, pale man, wearing a frock coat and a narrow black necktie, and having the appearance and manner of an attorney's head clerk, stood bending over the first easel. Mr. Sanderson, the headmaster, was a person who rarely committed himself to a definite opinion, and especially to an adverse one. He wished, above all things, to be well with the students, so that his usual criticism took the form of:—

'Going on ve-r-y nicely, Miss Simpkins. Perhaps, on the whole, you might look to the movement of that head. Yes, just so. The arms, now, should you say they were just a little out of drawing? And the right leg, eh? perhaps, too, it might be as well to reconsider the position of the torso. Coming on nicely, Miss Simpkins.'

And Miss Simpkins, a lady whose devotion to the doctrines of Mr. Ruskin was perhaps more remarkable than her artistic skill, settled her amber necklace and continued to paint.

At the next easel was heard, 'Ah, a very ambitious view of the model, Miss Erle. It might be perhaps as well to reconsider the position of the figure. Just as well, on the whole, for the artist not to hamper himself with unnecessary difficulties. Very good, very good. In quite a promising condition, Miss Erle.' At the Central London, it will be seen, everything worked smoothly. The advent of the headmaster was the signal for general amenities. Every daub, every ill-drawn head, and every smeared, smooth drapery received its meed of praise. There were no tears, such as water the upward path of the student in a Parisian *atelier*; there were no ambitions, no heart-burnings, no rivalries. No one at the Central London had ever been known to have a theory to express, or if he had, it remained locked in his own breast.

It had already begun to dawn upon Mary that the whole thing was a foolish pretence at work. Slipping from her seat, she dropped back to the easel on which still stood her drawing of the Laocoon, a drawing which was beginning to assume, as it was destined to do, the appearance of a dotted engraving. She was standing, somewhat desponding and disheartened, before this thing which had cost her so much toil, and on the success of which so much depended, when the door burst open, and there appeared a radiant vision of velvet and sables, and of an audacious hat which only Alison Ives in one of her 'worldly' fits could have invented.

'*Nom d'un chien!*' cried that young lady, descending on Mary, and forcibly removing her drawing-board; 'am I to stand by and see you become a British female artist? You've got to come to a tea—a tea at home in Portman

## The Story of a Modern Woman

Square. We're driving straight back. Mother's out there in the carriage. Come on.'

'I can't,' said Mary: 'I told you I couldn't. I'm not going out; and I ought to work for another hour. The thing goes in in a day or two.'

'Pooh!' said Alison, as she found the girl's hat and cloak, and bundled her unceremoniously into the carriage; 'the whole thing is a farce.'

'But I believe these schools are excellent things for—for the kind of persons whom dear Mary describes so amusingly,' put in Lady Jane.

'Nonsense, mother,' said Alison. 'You've never been inside one. The whole thing is impossible. Schools of cooking, and not schools of art, are what we want,' shouted Alison as they rattled over the stones. 'You may leave your painter genius to find his way to the front, whereas boiled potatoes are a daily necessity. Go and talk,' continued the girl, with a smile, 'about your stippled gladiators and Laocoons in a serious French studio, where they **work**. Why, they would laugh in your face.'

'How nice it must be in Paris,' said Mary with a sigh. A place where they disapproved of the Laocoon as an exercise in art seemed to her to open out a vista of delightful possibilities.

## CHAPTER VII. A KETTLEDRUM AT LADY JANE'S

**LADY JANE IVES** was always to be found in Portman Square at five, but to-day she had sent out cards, so that an hour later the lofty, gaunt rooms, with their faded crimson carpets, their flowery chintzes and their many mirrors, were dotted with little groups. Lady Jane disliked new fashions in her house, and the general effect, in an over-luxurious age, was somewhat cheerless. The stiff, hard Guardis on the walls, in which tin gondoliers were propelling iron gondolas on a leaden lagoon, with a background of grey zinc palaces, were but faintly visible by the tentative light of the circle of candles in the quivering lustre chandelier. Between the starched lace curtains stood monster Chinese vases, swollen like vases seen in an uneasy dream. The buhl cabinets had chilly marble tops; the rosewood tables held vast photograph albums. Lady Jane had arranged the rooms on her marriage some forty years ago, and it had not occurred to her to change them.

Parliament had just opened; so that people were back in town. Here and there a man's black coat was visible. There was a subdued murmur of talk. People were slipping out quietly under cover of someone else's arrival, dropping the perfunctory smile which they had exhibited for ten minutes under the lustre chandelier, as they made their way quickly out into the portico, where a small army of grooms, with faces as drab and unemotional as their overcoats, hung about the steps.

'I've just come from the Ambassador of all the Russias,' drawled a pretty woman to Lady Jane, as she stood, in the swaggering attitude which she affected on entering a drawing-room, just at the door.

'My dear, you shouldn't encourage those barbarians,' declared her hostess; 'it's so shockingly radical to approve of foreign tyrannies.'

Alison, assisted by Mary, was pouring out tea in the gaunt back drawing-room. It was noticeable that most of the men had collected round the table. 'I won't have my friends fed at a sort of sublimated coffee-stall in the dining-room,' announced Lady Jane. 'It's a young woman's mission to make tea for her friends. Alison, remember Lady Blaythewaite doesn't like sugar.' 'Vous versez le thé avec une grâce parfaite,' sighed a sentimental *attaché* of vague Slav nationality, who was famous for turning compliments out of the most unlikely materials.

And Mary Erle, in her black clothes, sat on one side and looked at the little comedy with impartial eyes. It seemed so long since she had been in society; she supposed she was out of touch with the world. Vanity Fair, since she had left it for so many months, seemed curiously foolish.

Close to her, the pretty woman, who stood sipping her tea amid an admiring circle of black coats, had already got on one of her favourite topics.

'I don't mean to be done out of Monte Carlo, this year,' she announced in a penetrating voice, and with the air of one who is accustomed to have her least brilliant observations received with attention; 'so I've told Sir Horace he can have as many shooting parties as he likes, but I'm off on the 31st.'

The eyes of the complimentary Slav waxed brilliant as he gazed admiringly at Lady Blaythewaite.

'All very well,' objected a perfectly-dressed and perfectly self-satisfied young man, who gave the casual spectator the impression, from the parting of his beautifully cared-for hair to the pointed toes of his shiny boots, he was elaborately, exquisitely new and clean: 'all very well for ladies,' he said deliberately, 'but how on earth is a feller to go away in December if he wants to get any huntin'—what? Why, the Duchess said the other night when I told her I wasn't goin'—'

But to make room for two new arrivals, the exquisitely clean young man was obliged to step into the background, and the rest of his story was lost to every one but the pretty woman. After these two had thrashed out the engrossing subject of Monte Carlo, the word 'Plumpton' was bandied about, and afterwards the name of the latest three-act farce. The exquisitely clean young man, it appeared, was a great theatre-goer; in fact, he admitted that he went so often that it was impossible to recollect the names of the house, the play, or the actors.

'I don't remember the name of the piece, don't you know,' he confided, 'but we saw it the night before last at the Criterion—I think it must have been the Criterion, because we dined in the restaurant first—and the feller I liked awfully, don't you know, was the one who played the feller who kicks out the Johnnie in the third act. Awfully good, what?'

'Oh, yes. Awfully good—wasn't he? We all thought him a dear,' said the pretty woman in a bored tone. She had had enough of what she called 'intellectual conversation.'

## The Story of a Modern Woman

'What have you done with that charming Mr. Hemming, my dear?' demanded Lady Jane in a stage whisper, descending on Mary and leading her out of her corner by the arm. And, not waiting for an answer, she went on, 'You've sent him off to India, you naughty child, and he may die of the cholera or heat-apoplexy, and then you'll be sorry. Poor fellow, he looked so terribly cut-up. He came to see me just before he went. His father was an old flame of mine. But the men were more enterprising when I was young. They didn't take "no" for an answer.'

'But, dear Lady Jane,' whispered Mary, 'I didn't give "no" for an answer.' All this was said while a lady with sloping shoulders and dyed black hair was performing a rather deliberate solo on the harp.

But her hostess, whose eyes were turned towards the door, did not apparently grasp the import of Mary's words. Lady Jane was very fond of Professor Erle's daughter—the professor had always been one of the familiar faces at her Sunday dinners—but she was a somewhat indifferent listener, and just now she had not only to thank the fair harpist—but a new arrival was claiming her attention.

'Ah! there is my dear doctor,' exclaimed Lady Jane with much vivacity. 'How good of you,' she said, with more enthusiasm than she had yet exhibited, 'to find time to come and see an old woman.'

The man addressed was a striking figure enough; he had, moreover, that imposing air which endears itself to the feminine imagination. Dr. Dunlop Strange was a favourite with women in society. His speciality was nervous disease. He had done a great deal of useful work, had made one important discovery which had brought him prominently before the public, and was understood to be about to receive a baronetcy. Mary remembered his face. She had met him out often in the old days: at *soirées* at learned societies, at the dinner-tables of the celebrated or the merely smart. He was a man of forty-five, a little under the medium size, with a perpetual upright pucker just between his eyes. Those eyes, the girl noticed, spoil his face; they were small and somewhat shifty; but as he usually wore a pince-nez this peculiarity was not noticeable. He looked tired, but not at all bored.

The doctor was understood to be devoted to Alison, and, for once, Alison seemed pleased. Though she was good-looking and moved in a somewhat go-ahead set, she had never been known to have an ordinary flirtation. She used to say that she supposed she should have to marry some day—the later the better—because it was absurd to suppose that old maids had any influence on people's lives; and Power, to put it plainly, was what the modern woman craved. She supposed, in that respect, that she wasn't any better than the rest of her sex. Lady Jane was delighted; asked the doctor constantly to dinner, and insisted on his assisting at one of her Happy Afternoons for Pauper Lunatics. And Dr. Strange went; as indeed he would have gone anywhere just now to meet Alison.

'By the by,' she said, giving him a cup of tea, and pretending not to notice that his eyes were devouring every detail of her handsome personality, 'I want you particularly to know Mary Erle—Professor Erle's daughter. Of course you've met her, but I want you to know her. She's one of my few friends.'

Alison seemed in high spirits since Dr. Dunlop Strange's arrival.

'Here's Mr. Bosanquet-Barry,' she whispered, as a beautiful young man with Parma violets in his coat appeared in the doorway; 'one of mother's young friends. He's the new editor of the *Comet*.'

'The editor,' repeated Mary incredulously, emerging from a conversation with Dr. Strange, which she had carried on with difficulty, seeing that his eyes were fixed on Alison all the time. 'The editor of the *Comet*? Why, he looks a mere boy.'

'?My dear, he's seven-and-twenty. Besides, that's the new idea in journalism. You pluck your editor nice and hot from Oxford—someone who has none of the old hackneyed Fleet Street ideas.'

'This one,' observed Mary thoughtfully, 'doesn't look as if he had any ideas at all.'

'Oh I but then he's devoted to the Primrose League—and mother. He goes to her Happy Afternoons. I hear that all the smart set are in love with him—if that's any recommendation. Mary, you must be introduced. You'll have to know these people if you're going to be an artist.'

On closer inspection Mr. Bosanquet-Barry turned out to have a somewhat spurious air of youth. The effect of extreme juvenility was produced by his fair skin, his dazzlingly white teeth, and his piercingly blue eyes. He entertained Mary, as he got her a cup of tea, with a spirited account of a visit to a minor music-hall, which he and a pale-faced boy with tired eyelids and an exaggerated button-hole had arranged the night before for Lady Blaythewaite.

'It all went all right,' said Mr. Bosanquet-Barry confidentially, 'until the last. Lady Blaythewaite swore she'd never enjoyed anything so much in her life. Can't say I did, as I had to talk to the girl she brought with her, who was ugly as sin. However, I had to leave 'em a minute at the door, to see after the carriage, and then some beastly

## The Story of a Modern Woman

cad spoke to her.'

'How very unpleasant,' said Mary, who felt she was expected to sympathise with this lady's adventures in a London music-hall.

'Oh,' chuckled Mr. Bosanquet-Barry, with a laugh which was not quite pretty. 'I don't believe she minded—I shouldn't wonder if she rather liked it. At any rate, she shouldn't wear such outrageous clothes. I wonder Sir Horace——'

'Oh, Sir Horace doesn't care,' interrupted the pale-faced boy, whose name, it appeared, was Beaufort Flower, though he was usually briefly addressed as 'Beaufy'; 'Sir Horace doesn't care, he don't pay for them, you know.'

And with a display of all his white teeth at once, the editor of the *Comet*, who with all his boyishness had picked up the editor's air of not meaning to allow anyone to detain him, bowed abruptly and was now seen pressing the hands of several ladies of quality as he steered his way towards the door.

'He is an odious youth,' said Alison calmly. 'I'm not responsible, you know, for all mother's "boys." Sometimes he comes and stops for hours. They talk scandal all the time, and, Heaven preserve us! the scandal of the fifties—about women who are grandmothers, or in their graves. Don't you think it a depraved taste, Dr. Strange?' continued the girl.

'Perhaps,' he answered with a smile, 'he's going to write a book of reminiscences. You begin collecting at about twenty, and you keep your scandal, well-corked and in a dry place, till you are about eighty. Then you publish with additions.'

'I dare say,' laughed Alison, 'that scandal doesn't "keep" any better than other things. A little venom has to be added.'

'Scandal,' put in the pretty woman, emerging suddenly from a flirtation with the sentimental Slav, 'is only interesting about one's contemporaries.'

'Dear me, what an interesting woman Lady Blaythewaite must be,' whispered Mr. Beaufort Flower into the ear of a solemn man with a heavy jaw, who was well-connected, and who was understood to write essays in Addisonian English.

'Ah!' ejaculated the solemn man, with a thoughtful glance at the pretty woman.

'My only objection to immoral people,' chattered the other, gazing at her with weary, half-closed eyes, 'is that they're generally so shockingly censorious.'

'No one else's conduct, I suppose,' rejoined the solemn man deliberately, 'comes up to their high ethical standard.'

'My heavens!' exclaimed the pretty woman, who had heard part of the answer, 'they've begun to talk of ethical standards! I mustn't keep the roans any longer. Good-bye, all you people, good-bye.'

And sweeping away among her rustling silk petticoats the complimentary Slav, Lady Blaythewaite's tiny head and wide shoulders were seen descending the staircase.

There was a pause. Most of the people were leaving. From the open hall door came the click of closing carriage-doors, the word 'Home' pronounced in the official voice of the unemotional grooms, and the sound of departing wheels. Dr. Dunlop Strange was bending towards Alison, talking earnestly.

'Charmin' rooms,' said Mr. Beaufy Flower vaguely, terrified at finding himself alone with Mary, whom he took for his especial aversion, a *débutante*. His eye ran round the rather bare walls, the fluted steel fenders, the marble mantelpieces topped by their huge mirrors. 'So nice and old-fashioned, aren't they? Should you say early Victorian now, or late William the Fourth?'

But the favourite modern amusement of whispering malicious things of one's host or hostess behind their backs had never appealed to her, and much to his surprise the fair girl in mourning evinced no further desire for his society, but with one of those little manoeuvres which only women of the world know how to execute without offence, she had joined Alison and the doctor.

'Good gracious!' he said to himself as he tripped downstairs to his brougham. 'How pert! I don't believe she's a *débutante* after all.'

## CHAPTER VIII. MARY TRIES TO LIVE HER LIFE

ONE night, about a fortnight later, Mary walked home to her lodgings in Bulstrode Street more than usually weary and anxious. Somehow she felt hipped; she would have liked to creep back, just for once, to the book-lined drawing-room in Harley Street, with its indefinable air of perfect taste and perfect comfort; to the little tea-table near the fire, with its silver kettle, its dainty china, and the hot cakes which cook used to make so well. In those days, Mary remembered with a pang, a well-known step would be heard ascending the stair, and the professor would come in, with his keen eyes, and his dear, thin face, and stand with his back to the fire while he sipped his tea and teased his 'little girl.'

But instead, she entered the narrow passage of a house in Bulstrode Street, of which the varnished marble paper, as well as the grained staircase and stiff patterned oil-cloth were worn and stained with age, and ascended to her own domain, which consisted of two rooms. In the little bed-room, giving on a grimy back-yard, there was a small iron bed with starved-looking pillows, a washing apparatus of which every article, by a strange chance, was of a different pattern, two chairs, and a chest of drawers in imitation grained wood, with white china handles. On the walls, covered with a paper on which apples of a dingy yellow sprawled, in endless repetition, on a dull green ground, were several framed texts. A yacht in full sail, on the bluest of lithograph seas, was accompanied by the words, 'Search the Scriptures;' while opposite, encased in an Oxford oak frame, a stout, highly-coloured kingfisher emerging from a colony of bulrushes, faced another familiar phrase. These pictorial aids to piety were the only ornaments of the bedroom, and Mary often smiled when she thought of the delicate silver point drawings that hung on the pink walls at home. She thought, too, of the things that used to strike her as she read, and which she would write out and pin up in her pretty luxurious bed-room; the scraps of poetry in various tongues which she would scribble hastily on the back of some young man's visiting card, and then pin up, with a slender gilt tack, on to her door; especially those lines of James Thomson's, which, about a year after her first heart-ache, when all had ended in disappointment, it had given her such ironical pleasure to nail up in her bed-room, to the bewilderment of the new housemaid:

'The old three hundred sixty-five  
Dull days to every year alive  
Old toil, old care, old worthless treasures,  
Old gnawing sorrows, swindling pleasures,  
The cards were shuffled to and fro,  
The hands may vary somewhat so,  
The dirty pack's the same we know  
Played with long thousand years ago;  
Played with and lost with still by Man—

Fate marked them 'ere the game began.' Ah, she could afford to be pessimistic in those days! As Mary took off her hat and threw her cloak on the narrow bed, hastening her toilet for the evening because of the bitter cold of the room, she repeated these lines softly to herself; oddly enough, they evoked an image of that pretty bygone bedroom, of a tent-bed with gay draperies, a fire blazing against a background of Dutch tiles, on which blue ships in full sail were scudding over stiff curly waves, of soft mats of white fur on which it was a joy to tread with bare feet. 'No, I can't afford to be pessimistic, now,' thought the girl, as she went into the other room. The fire was nearly out, but two gas-burners, which had been lighted by the maid-of-all-work, and left on at full tap, had already loaded the air with the fumes of gas. It was now a quarter past six; she could not ask for tea, although her throat burned and her head ached. No, she must wait for dinner, her modest little dinner, which was served, with variations as to punctuality, about seven o'clock.

Mary threw herself on to the hard sofa, and her eyes travelled round the room. The furniture was old, shabby, and pretentious. She had an idea that there were cheap Landseer engravings on the wall, but Mary had made up her mind never to look at the pictures; otherwise, she said, she would have had to change her lodgings at once, and that she did not wish to do, as the landlady was an old servant of theirs, and would look after her better than a stranger. After all, the place would do well enough as a makeshift. It was best, she thought, not to accept invitations from friends, but to begin to live her own life. On days like to-day, when she was weary and

## The Story of a Modern Woman

disheartened, Mary found it necessary to repeat this phrase in her mind: 'To live her own life.' For it was all dispiriting enough. Art and artists, as exemplified in the Central London, were but doubtfully alluring; Mary wondered if anywhere else she might find the 'art' atmosphere of which she had read so much. But anyhow her Academy drawing was done; it had gone in with a dozen others, and to-morrow she would know if she had succeeded.

She lay like a log on the hard sofa, while the gilt clock with the hovering cupid slowly ticked out three-quarters of an hour. On the mantel-piece a long photograph of Alison, in an evening gown, exhibiting a good deal of a fine arm and shoulder, was supported by a large one of Vincent Hemming, with his grave expression, and wearing an orchid in his button-hole.

At last came dinner, heralded by an odour of boiled potatoes and frizzling meat. But the girl was too tired to eat the badly-cooked food; she pushed away the steak, which was tough and hard, and tried to drink some of the small bottle of stout, which was flat, with a strange flavour. Mary rebuked herself for these fantasies of the appetite; it behoved a young woman who wished to make her way in the world and compete with men to indulge in no such over-niceties. But a very feminine backache overcame her, and presently the maid-of-all-work, in creaking boots, removed with much clattering the dishes, and Mary was left alone with the firelight for a companion.

The photographs of her two friends looked down on her from the mantelpiece; Alison, with her capable expression and her distinguished air; Vincent Hemming, with his showily intellectual forehead, his weak mouth, and the slight frown which he sometimes affected. What a long time it seemed since they had said good-bye, first on that long summer day which they had spent at Haslemere, and finally at Tilbury, when the great P. and O. steamer had been swallowed up in the greyness of the wide river and tearful sky. Yes, a long time; but he had grown more to her in his absence than he had ever been, even at the last, for Mary was of the order of women who idealise the absent. Oddly enough, Vincent, pacing the deck of the *Sutlej* in his flapping ulster and his soft felt hat (he was not one of those people who look their best in travelling costume), had seemed more of a stranger than the man whose letters, arriving by the Indian mail, lay beside her plate every Monday morning. She remembered with a smile how fussy he had been about his luggage, and how humiliated she had felt when, man-like, Vincent Hemming had insisted on a last embrace, and, drawing her into his cabin, had shut the door in the face of the steward. She had dwelt a great deal on those last moments. He had seemed so passionately attached to her; the whole affair, though it had been obliged to remain vague, had become a solemn fact in her existence.

A letter from Vincent had arrived that morning; Mary felt in her pocket for the thin, crackling envelope bearing the post-mark 'Calcutta.' It was a peculiarity of Hemming's that one, and sometimes two, pages of his letters were indited in a flowing hand, while the rest of the paper was covered with uncertain upright hieroglyphics, which took all the reader's patience and good-will to decipher.

'My dear Mary' (it began)—'My delightful roamings have been brought to a standstill in this ancient and historic spot, one so eminently suited to the special studies which I desire, in furtherance of my scheme, to make. You will, I am sure, be delighted to hear that on all hands I have had every civility and courtesy extended to me from officials of every class, and that my father's name alone has been a sufficient introduction for me, in those circles in which it is most desirable for the purpose I have in hand to move. You will also, my dear Mary, be rejoiced to hear that my health has vastly improved since my departure from England; the fact alone that I anticipate with pleasure the advent of breakfast will give you a fair idea of my improved state of health, and I think I may say that, considering the somewhat trying nature of the climatic conditions, my appearance has wonderfully improved. But enough of my-self. I need not say that I am delighted to hear that you are bravely and earnestly attacking those art studies which, with due application, will ensure you fame, and possibly wealth, and which will, my dearest girl, be no mean factor in our (possible) future happiness.'

Mary sighed as she let the letter drop, and gazed thoughtfully into the fire. It was here that the flowing persuasive handwriting terminated abruptly, and that the upright uncertain characters began.

'Had I' (it went on) 'no dreams, no aspirations for the amelioration of the English race—were I, in short, a man to whom personal happiness is paramount—I might have spoken more decisively in relation to a possible future together before I left England. But I am paying you no mean compliment, my dear Mary, when I tell you that I have every confidence that in you, as in myself, questions of vast importance rise superior to mere selfish considerations, and that in you, above all women, I have a sympathetic sharer alike of my ambitions, dreams, and

## The Story of a Modern Woman

hopes. It is above all in studying the marvellous system of government of a vast aggregation of human beings of divers nationalities, of such widely-differing ethical standards as this great Indian Empire—' and here the handwriting changed again to the slanting style and meandered on over three crisp pages which the girl let fall on her lap. Somehow she would not reconcile this lover, with his old-fashioned phrases and copybook platitudes, with the Vincent Hemming who had held her in his arms in the cabin of the *Sutlej*, crushing the breath out of her body in the supreme moment of farewell. . . . Of the fine irony which results from the clash of human passion and human ambition she had not, as yet, a conception. It is to be feared that Mary, with all her somewhat worldly training, was, as far as her affections were concerned, astonishingly naïve. She was only a girl after all.

And so, in the dim light of the dreary apartments, Mary sat and dreamed her little dream. Lonely, tired, discouraged, she clung to the thought of their marriage with curious tenacity. She was haunted incessantly by a vision of tender brown eyes, of a caressing hand, of a sympathetic voice; of a pretty interior with books, and pictures, and soft lamp-light; of a man's head uplifted from a desk, while she held her latest picture up for her husband to see. He was not a judge of pictures, she remembered with a smile; he would probably think her modest attempts masterpieces. Why, he had even liked the sketch she had made at Haslemere, on that last day they had spent in the country together. After all, Vincent and she together would have enough to live quietly on; if she succeeded in her art, he might even yet realise his ambition and enter on a political career. What, indeed, might not the years bring forth? However dismal things seemed now, there was Hope—that Will-o'-the-wisp of the young—beckoning her from the dim valleys of the future. To-morrow, to-morrow she would know.

Mary took up the letter again, and bending down to the fire, re-read one or two affectionate phrases at the last. Then she put it carefully into a locked case which contained some twenty epistles in thin envelopes, turned out the gas, and went into her chilly bedroom, where, in the process of brushing out her fluffy blond hair for the night, she told herself valiantly that she was a lucky little person.

## CHAPTER IX. PERRY CONSOLES

**THE** next day—the day which was to decide her fate with the Academy schools—revealed itself shrouded with fog. By the light of one gas-burner Mary tried to eat some breakfast, but the doubtful allurements of the boiled egg which usually awaited her appealed to her to-day in vain. She had slept badly and risen late; it was now half-past ten. Already, at the art school, in the grimy little office, the names of the successful candidates would be nailed up. No, she could not eat; she must know. It meant so much to her, so much more, she thought, than to any of the others. It meant independence, a profession, a happy union. How many hoped—for marriages she had seen fail among professional people just for the want of a mere hundred or so a year. If she were good enough for the Academy schools, she felt that there was a future before her. She saw herself, in imagination, working, earning, helping.

Putting on her coat and hat she was soon outside in the fog, and threading her way along the streets to the School of Art. Underfoot was a layer of greasy mud. In the little shops a bleared gas-light made an orange patch in the all-pervading greyness. At the fruiterers' the mounds of golden oranges, crimson apples, and scarlet tomatoes flamed with startling assurance against the blurred, brownish-grey of the houses, the pavement, the very atmosphere. She was curiously alive, now, to effects of colour, to 'values'; everywhere the girl saw a possible picture. If she had passed, Mary made up her mind she would telegraph to Vincent. It would be an extravagance, but it would make him so happy. Mary pictured her lover reading that charming message from over the seas, as he sat in an Indian verandah in a white flannel suit, with a hazy background of punkahs and date palms.

Afterwards, when she thought of that day, she remembered that the hall of the art school was full of students, all talking at once. At the sight of the girl's expectant face someone called out goodnaturedly, 'I say, you're in, Miss Erle. I'm sure I saw your name on the list. It's in the office, pinned up over the mantel-piece.'

Mary slid into the little room without a word. Yes, there was the list of successful probationers, written in Mr. Sanderson's careful hand on a slip of notepaper, and pinned up with a brass drawing pin over the mantelpiece. Her eye ran hastily along the list—'Simpkins, Dorothy Muriel; Smith, Mary Gwendolen; Walsh, Joseph Frederick; Billington, George Francis; Thomson, Pamela Evelyn; Beadle, Reginald Forsyth.' That was all. She read it again to make sure, repeating to herself, mechanically, the Dorothys, Pamelas, and Gwendolens of the back-shop. No, there was no possible mistake. The name of Mary Erle was not there. And so it was all over... Never, she felt, should she have the courage to spend another six months labouring and stippling over another Laocoon. The girl slipped into a chair in a corner. Her disappointment had affected her physically, her feet were icy cold; she felt, without being hungry, as if she had nothing inside her, while the voices of people talking round sounded strange and far away.

But presently she roused herself and went through the big room to collect some things she had left. Only Mr. Perry Jackson met her behind the olive-green curtain :—Mr. Jackson, who, although the workmen were now out of his studio, was curiously often to be seen at the school.

He glanced at Mary and instantly read the disappointment in her face. Though young, he was, after all, a Londoner, and had the Cockney's intuitive knowledge of the world. He even went so far as to congratulate Miss Erle in having failed to attain the desired standard of academical excellence. He had, as he admitted with pleasing candour, only got his own drawing admitted, in the years gone by, 'by the skin of its teeth.' As for himself, he had mainly attended the classes (and this was said with something very like a wink) to make friends with the Royal Academicians. 'They're all right when you know 'em, but you've got to know 'em first,' quoted the rising artist. 'There's old Jack Madder, who always does Wardour Street pictures; he's not half a bad old chap, and thinks no end of me. He's on the Hanging Committee next year. I go and ask his advice. I'm going to do a big thing for next year's Academy, and I'll eat my hat if it isn't on the line!'

'I hope so, I'm sure,' replied Mary, smiling. 'When are you going to begin?'

'Oh, at once. I've got an idea that's bound to fetch the public.' 'Indeed?' replied Mary, amused at his naïve optimism.

'I shall call it "The Time of Roses." What do you think of that? Neat, eh? Nothing but girls, and nothing but roses. Lord, you can't give the public enough of either of them. It likes 'em, because they both "go off" so soon,' added Mr. Jackson, charmed with his own perspicacity. 'It'll be an eight-footer, if it's an inch, and if it isn't on the

## The Story of a Modern Woman

line next May——'

'I dare say it will be an immense success,' said Mary quietly, as she thought of bygone Private Views, and of the canvases which had become 'the picture of the year.'

'Now, for the Grosvenor,' continued Mr. Jackson—'after my last Academy picture they're spry enough with their invitations to exhibit there—I shall do a girl in a graveyard. Bless you, people are "death" on cemeteries. Black dress—limp—black hat, hangin' on her arm—black circles round the eyes. And there you are, don't you know.'

Mary laughed. There was not much doubt about the fact that Mr. Perry Jackson was destined to get on. He had an astonishing facility in painting; in the summer time he worked at vast canvases, out of doors, in the country, painting with large square brushes, in the approved modern manner.

'Oh! I say, Miss Erle,' said Perry, detaining the girl with a look as she stood putting her painting things together. There was something of despair in the way in which Mary was folding up her easel, and arranging her chinks and paint-brushes in the long tin box, and with his quick sympathy the young man wished to assuage her sickening disappointment.

'Just look here,' he continued, pulling from a cardboard portfolio an Indian-ink drawing of a beautiful young woman in a ball-dress reading a love-letter. 'Old "Stick-in-the-mud," he says he'd like this drawing for *Illustrations*, only he must have a short story or some verses to go with it. Now, you're so clever, and literary, and read so many books, can't you knock me off something to print with it?'

Mary, who had never heard of this primitive method of producing imaginative literature, stared in blank astonishment at Mr. Perry Jackson. Her eye caught his knobby hands, his stubbly hair, his knowing, anaemic, town-bred face, and then the picture of the exquisite woman robed in tulle, which he held in his hand.

'Oh, yes. Why not?' she found herself saying eagerly. 'I will try, if you like. I think I could do quite a short story. And I can only —fail,' she added, a little bitterly, as her mind ran back over the months she had spent in that odious room, herding with hulking boys, who smelt of stale tobacco, with young ladies who tossed their heads archly, and whispered anecdotes of 'fellows' whom they met in pastry-cooks' shops, or in the sculpture galleries of the British Museum.

'That's right. Knew you could,' rejoined Perry, repacking the drawing. 'It'll be time enough if I have it in a week. I'm doing a story for *Illustrations* now. Blessed,' he added, with a comic twinkle, pushing back his shock head of hair, 'if I didn't make an ass of myself yesterday. Last week old "Stick-in-the-Mud," he asked me if I'd do some pictures for a story. "Oh!" I said, "I'm game," I said; "who's it by?" And he says, "By Somervail." Well, I never heard of him—did you, Miss Erle?'

'I know the name,' said Mary.

'Well, presently comes the MSS., and I read it through, and it was pretty tough work, I can tell you, what with not being type-written, and I not feeling quite fit that day, havin' taken the chair at our smoking concert the night before. However, a few days later comes a stiff kind of a letter from this Somervail, saying I must call at once, that evening, at his house, out Notting Hill way. So off I go in my carriage and pair (the red-and-gold one, don't you know), and presently I find the house. Well, the servant girl, she showed me up a passage covered all over with autotypes, framed alike in white. Crikey! thought I, here's "High Art." There's nothing good enough for this chap but Rossetti, and Burne-Jones, and Watts. And in the drawing-room it was just the same——'

'But didn't you know then whom it was?' asked Mary, smiling.

'No, blessed if I did!' rejoined Mr. Jackson. 'And so this Mr. Somervail comes in. "Oh, good evening," says he, without any more ceremony than that. "Have you brought the rough sketches for my story?" "No," I said, "I haven't," I said, just imitating his off-hand manner, "because you wouldn't have understood 'em if I had.'"

'But didn't you know,' said Mary, 'that Mr. Somervail is the art critic of two or three London papers?'

'Nary a bit. Well, he laughed—a sort of thin, superior laugh it was—but he didn't say anything; and so I got out all right. But I felt a precious fool when I heard who he was.'

'Let us hope,' said Mary, who remembered the great art critic at dinner-parties, exhibiting his culture, with a modest air, 'let us hope Mr. Somervail isn't vindictive.'

Perry looked uneasy.

'I say,' he suggested, genially, 'why shouldn't you turn art critic, Miss Erle, and slate us all round? Old Somervail, he's made a good thing out of it!'

## The Story of a Modern Woman

At that instant a tumult of voices behind the curtain made further conversation impossible. A girl's shrill scream was suddenly audible, and then, the next second, the heavy crash of a falling plaster cast rent the momentary silence. Shouts, exclamations, and inextinguishable laughter, mingled with the sound of scurrying feet, followed. An untoward gaiety was evidently illumining the usual routine of the school. As Mary, gathering up her things, passed through into the large studio, a boy's raucous voice raised the joyous, but somewhat incongruous refrain :—

'The pore girl didn't know, yer know,

The pore girl didn't know'— a quotation which may or may not have had reference to the now triumphant probationer, Miss Simpkins, who, with heightened colour and agitated mien, was bending over the many fragments of the shattered Laocoon, which lay strewn about the floor.

The rest of the day, it would seem, was to be devoted to celebrating the admittance of Messrs. Walsh, Billington, and Beadle to the Royal Academy Schools, for, scared at Miss Simpkins' misadventure, the girls incontinently fled. A drawing—a laboriously stippled drawing—was triumphantly wrenched from an overturned board, and torn in many pieces; the easels were as unceremoniously hurled against the wall. Some bottles of beer made a mysterious appearance, and, from some one's bag, two pairs of boxing-gloves were surreptitiously produced. The moment was justly held to be a supreme one, for, dancing on the shattered fragments of the fallen Laocoon, a truculent, if disappointed, young gentleman was heard shouting to the three successful students that, 'successful or not,' he would fight them all in turn.

It may have been the bottled ale, or simply British perseverance, which emboldened the aggressor, for, as he threw off his coat and slipped on the gloves, he was heard fulminating the hazy, if withal glorious, challenge—

'I don't care a rap for your blooming Academy. Come on, you fellows. I'll show you who's the best man!'

## CHAPTER X. IN GRUB STREET

IT was a bright morning in January, with scudding, woolly clouds, showing patches of vivid blue. Sunshine brightened the huge gilt letters over the newspaper offices, the crowded, garishly coloured omnibuses, the hansoms laden with portmanteaux on their way to Waterloo Station, the flaxen hair and beflowered hats of the little actresses hurrying along to rehearsal. An ever-moving procession of people poured like a torrent up and down the street; journalists, country folk, office-boys, actors, betting-men, loafers—all the curious, shifting world of the Strand was jogging elbows on the pavement.

Mary stepped along with a certain sense of adventure. She had to see the editor of *Illustrations*, but she had no idea of the whereabouts of that popular weekly journal. She had in her pocket, too, a letter of introduction to *The Fan*. For her first attempt at fiction had actually appeared in print, and she was curiously anxious to go on. For the first few hours, when she had sat staring helplessly at the sheets of white paper which she had torn into loose pages, neatly folding down an inch border for corrections, she had imagined that the thing was impossible. Then, pacing up and down the room, Mary tried hard to concentrate her mind on a plot—a plot in which was to figure a young lady in a tulle ball-dress, reading a three-cornered note. . . . But she could think of nothing. It was all a blank. What had girls in ball dresses got to do with life—with life as it swirled and rushed by her, with its remorseless laws, its unceasing activities? . . . But yet she must think of something. The scene of her story must be laid at a ball; that, as Mr. Perry Jackson would have said, was sure to 'fetch the public.' Surely, surely she could invent a love-story? Yet nothing came. There seemed no reason, in the eternal fitness of things, why the hero should be dark and faithful, or blonde and fickle, or if the scene should be laid in the country, in town, or abroad. And there was the illustration, too, for which the story was to be written, and Mary, before she began, had grown to loathe the simpering young lady in tulle, eternally reading her love-letter. . . . But at last, after hours of torment, an idea came, and then the girl wrote steadily on, with the easy facility of the amateur. She had not an idea that her story was like everybody else's story—her way of telling it like that of hundreds of third-rate authors of fiction whom she had read.

After the clatter and roar of the street, the staircase which led to the editor's room at the office of *Illustrations* seemed dark and silent. The bare wooden treads were black with age and dirt, and were lighted only by a wan light, which flickered through a frosted-glass door, on which was printed, in gilt letters, the word *Illustrations*, the first letter having become effaced in the course of years. Underneath was to be read, in black italics: '**Editor's Room—Private.**'

It was some little time before Mary was able to overcome the scruples of the office-boy—a young gentleman whom she found dallying in an ante-room, pensively whistling a sprightly air which was just then much in favour, while he leisurely perused sundry inexpensive comic journals; but at length she succeeded in persuading him to take in her card. And presently a door was flung open, and Mary found herself in a small room, giving on Fleet Street, fronting a tall man with a large, melancholy face, who was bending over a desk. With some trepidation she remembered that the tall, melancholy man, according to Mr. Perry Jackson, had the reputation of being able to get people out of his office quicker than any other editor in London.

'Professor Erle's daughter, I believe?' said the editor severely, without looking up from the proofs he was correcting.

'Yes.'

'Ah! We were able to make use of your story, though it was not quite up to the mark.'

'I'm sorry—' began Mary.

'The name, of course,' went on the editor, without noticing the interruption, 'the name counts for something. Your late father's name carries weight with a certain section of the public. And then, with practice, you may do somewhat better. With practice, you may be able to write stories which other young ladies like to read.'

And with not a suspicion of the ambiguity of his compliment, the editor rummaged in his desk for some missing object.

Mary's heart fell. Was her story as bad as all that, she wondered? She was aware that, from a literary point of view, such praise was worse than blame. In the pause which followed she had leisure to look round furtively. And so this was the office of a big weekly newspaper? The walls, once painted a kind of pea-green, were dim with

## The Story of a Modern Woman

soot, and adorned only with a map of London on a roller; on the floor was stretched a grimy, threadbare carpet. A bluish gas–fire hissed in a narrow, black mantelpiece, and through the encrusted grime of the window–panes appeared the tall brick houses of the opposite side of the Strand. A long procession of omnibuses rattled by continually, and she could see the tops of the hats of those who sat on the outside. The sole furniture of the room consisted of a bureau with pigeon–holes, and three chairs, covered in cracked maroon–coloured leather, whose legs partook of that especial curliness which was in high fashion in 1860.

Meanwhile the editor had found his cheque–book, and, tearing out a leaf, wrote: 'Pay to Miss Erle two pounds two shillings for contributions during the month of January.'

Mary took the cheque with a heightened colour and a beating heart. It was the first money she had ever earned. This was the beginning.

A tinkling of the electric bell was heard, and the office–boy put in his head.

'A gentleman to see you, sir.'

'What for?'

'Drorings, sir.'

'Show him in.'

Mary rose.

'Wait a minute, Miss Erle.'

A long, shambling youth, whose face seemed swollen with the toothache, shuffled in, carrying a portfolio of sketches.

Not a word passed. It was a strange little scene. The shambling youth stood nervously twisting his shabby pot–hat in his fingers as the editor rapidly ran his eye over the drawings.

'Thanks,' he said, re–tying the strings and handing back the portfolio over the desk. 'No use to us. Good morning. Top handle,' and he waved his pen towards the door. In another instant the aspiring artist was gone.

'Terrible waste of time,' muttered the large, melancholy man. 'Hundreds of them a week.'

'Poor boy,' said Mary, who had seen his disappointed face.

'Pooh,' rejoined the editor, frowning; 'what we want are well–known names; the public likes a name,' and apparently with an eye to that section of it which had sat at the feet of Professor Erle, he added abruptly, 'We will consider anything else you may care to submit to us, Miss Erle.'

'Oh, thank you,' said Mary, 'I should like to try again,' and, treading on air, she made her way out, followed by the now admiring glance of the office–boy, who was not accustomed to see people detained in the editorial sanctum so long.

The girl was inordinately proud of her cheque for two guineas. How much better, after all, than stippling eternally at the Discobolus—for it was the Discobolus this time, with which she was to try her fate at the Academy schools—in the dubious atmosphere of the art school. The story had taken four days to write. There were three hundred and sixty–five days in a year, so that by writing a story or an article every four days she could earn something like two hundred a year! And what lots of papers there were! Fleet Street was full of them. They lurked up alleys and in quaint little squares at the back. Here they were: *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Observer*, *The Graphic*, *The Illustrated London News*. Why should she not walk in and demand some work to do? The idea was fearfully alluring. She passed a poster of *Illustrations*, with the name of her story in bright blue print, and Mary stood still and read it over and over again with a quickened pulse, until she was pushed aside by the tide of human beings eddying along the street. But at present, she recollected, she had to find *The Fan*.

After many inquiries, Mary found that the office was located in a huge building in one of the queer little squares out of Fleet Street, and that it was only one of many magazines and newspapers published by the same firm.

It proved to be a little world in itself, this vast bee–hive, for the printing, publishing, and editing of some dozen magazines and journals were all conducted on the premises. There was a deafening whirr of machinery which reminded the girl vaguely of international exhibitions, and at every turn she saw an editor's room, with the name of the journal printed in fat, assertive black type. She was wafted down long corridors of frosted glass—frosted glass, it seemed to Mary, was inseparably connected with journalism—until she was shown into a small room containing a bare, mahogany table, three chairs, and a framed lithograph of a young person in pink muslin, ogling

## The Story of a Modern Woman

the spectator over a diaphanous fan.

'The editor,' said the man in a kind of commissionaire's uniform, who accompanied her, 'the editor is engaged on business, but will you kindly wait?'

And Mary waited. In the next room she could hear, in a muffled way, the voices of that functionary and his visitor. The business, it would seem, on which they were engaged was of a somewhat hilarious nature, for frequent guffaws of laughter reached her, and there was an unmistakable odour of cigarettes. Ten minutes, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes went slowly by. The murmur of voices, the baritone laughter in the next room, continued to be audible. At last, when Mary had finally made up her mind to go, the door was flung open, and a young man with a high colour stumbled out.

'Ta-ta, old chap. Thanks, awfully. See you at the club to night,' and, bestowing on Mary a prolonged stare, he disappeared down the long glass corridor.

'Will you please come in?' said a rather affected voice, and Mary, walking into the editorial sanctum, found herself opposite a well-dressed, supercilious-looking young man of thirty, a man who curiously resembled all the young men whom she used to see in the Park on fine mornings.

Something like a blush darkened his smooth cheeks as Mary entered, and the editor of *The Fan* raised a pious prayer to the gods that this apparently inexperienced girl had not heard the conversation which had been going on for the last twenty minutes.

'I am sorry to have kept you,' he said lamely, glancing for the first time at the card and letter, which had been waiting at his elbow on the table, 'but you've no idea what a fool that man is. He never told me that a lady was waiting to see me.'

'I dare say,' replied Mary a little stiffly, 'that you are dreadfully busy.'

'Oh, as to that, of course, we're frightfully "rushed"—especially just now, at the middle of the month. We come out, you see, on the 23d. I'm most anxious, you see, to make *The Fan* a success. I want it to be quite the smartest thing out, and a real authority on dress and fashion. As to the dress part, I'm not afraid of that. I do it all myself.'

'Indeed?' said Mary, to whom the young man who spends his life describing petticoats was as yet an unknown entity. She felt vaguely uncomfortable as the supercilious editor's eye dwelt upon her, not feeling sure that he would approve of the shape of her sleeves, and being morally certain that he was by this time aware that her gown was not lined with silk.

'I came,' said Mary, 'to ask—to ask if you thought there was anything I could do for *The Fan*.'

The supercilious editor pursed up his lips and looked at Mary's sleeves. Her name, it was obvious, carried no sort of weight in the office of *The Fan* magazine.

'The fact is, we are inundated with stuff which isn't any good to us. We are refusing stuff every day. What we **want** wouldn't be in your line, I'm afraid. The only thing I really think of starting,' he announced, standing on the hearthrug and twisting a neat moustache, 'is a really good society article. Only about smart people, don't you know? We don't want what the other ladies' papers have got: "Mrs. Townley Tompkins gave a most successful ball at her beautiful house in Lancaster Gate, or any of those God-forsaken places. Lady Jane Ives, Lady Blaythewaite—those are the sort of people. Really smart, don't you know, and the *vieille souche* as well. Now, I should have liked a smartly written account of Lady Jane Ives's party the other night. Of course, I knew lots of people there, but they haven't got the *cacoëthes scribendi*, don't you know?'

'I think I could do you that, if you thought it interesting enough,' said Mary, 'as I happened to be there.'

'Oh, you were there?' said the editor, with rising respect in his tone; and for the first time looking at the girl with any interest, he added: 'It's possible we might arrange something; in fact, we might begin something this month. We might manage an article for the next number—something smart, you know, and just a wee bit malicious. We'll call the thing 'Behind my Fan,' and that'll give plenty of scope. Don't be afraid, Miss Erle. Any gossip that hasn't got into the papers, you know.' 'Lady Jane Ives, now, must be a very interesting acquaintance,' went on the editor, in deferential tones, 'quite one of the women of the day. I wonder if you could get her to be interviewed for *The Fan*?' he added, visibly brightening.

'I'll ask her,' said Mary, smiling. 'But I ought to tell you that I am not going out much this season.'

'Oh! that don't matter,' said the editor hopefully. 'What we want is somebody who really knows **the set**. Little bits of gossip, don't you know, that the 'lady journalist' can't possibly get hold of. Do you care to try?'

'I think I will.'

## The Story of a Modern Woman

'We can do with three columns a month. The firm pays a guinea a column. When may I have the pleasure of seeing your first article? It would appear next month if you let us have it by the 20th. Thanks awfully. Good-day.'

And the stuffy, jolting omnibus conveyed back to Bulstrode Street a young woman who was conscious neither of hunger, fatigue, nor rattling stones. This was a beginning! Her pocket, in which lay the cheque for two pounds two shillings, had suddenly acquired a special importance. She had earned that money herself; it was the output of her brain. Secretly she would like to telegraph to Vincent, who was now in New Zealand, but she felt the impulse was a silly one. She would write by the next mail.

## CHAPTER XI. THE WOMAN WAITS

'**SAPRISTI!**' cried Alison, 'he's come back, you say? I think I shall insist on the marriage coming off at once.'

'No, you won't,' answered Mary, reddening, 'because we've got to earn enough between us to set up house.'

'What a pity!' rejoined the other girl. 'I'm in the vein for weddings. I had an interview yesterday with Evelina's baby's papa. Don't stare, you idiot. I've been arranging a match.'

It was a sultry day at the end of July, and the two girls sat in the dingy lodgings in Bulstrode Street. Vincent Hemming had telegraphed from Liverpool; he was to be in London that afternoon.

'Alison! you don't mean to say you——?'

'Certainly. I found the young man open to reason, especially when he comprehended that I might be likely to give Evelina a small **dot**, though it took some time to overcome his moral scruples——'

'His moral scruples!' ejaculated Mary.

'My dear, you must know that the average man is, in theory, enamoured of virtue, but in practice his devotion usually takes the form of insisting on that of his female belongings——'

'A vicarious offering to the gods,' said Mary, 'which it is to be hoped is sometimes efficacious!'

'It's astonishing,' said the elder girl thoughtfully, 'what a lot of human nature one sees down there in Whitechapel.'

'More, I dare say, than in Mayfair.'

'The wedding,' observed Alison, 'will come off in the autumn—I shall give the bride away. You may come and look on if you like.'

'Poor little Evelina,' said Mary abstractedly.

'Poor!' laughed Alison. 'What do you think she asked for when I told her she might choose a wedding present? A white silk dress! She knew, she said, where she could get one, second-hand, for twelve and sixpence, but what she held out for most was a white tulle veil and a wreath of orange blossoms.'

'The veil and the orange blossoms are quite pathetic,' murmured Mary, getting up and pushing the window wide open. There was a long silence, during which a large bumble-bee swayed in and buzzed ponderously round the little room.

'You ought now,' said Alison, jumping up, 'to be getting into your most becoming dress, and a proper frame of mind in which to receive so estimable a young man——'

'Oh, don't go. It's so dreadful to wait, all alone. He can't be in London till four o'clock, so I don't imagine I shall see him till six or seven, or perhaps not till after dinner.'

'Ah,' said Alison Ives thoughtfully, 'then you had better come with me. I'm going to take a lot of poor girls over the National Gallery at three o'clock.'

'Oh, I can't. It's too far. And he might come while I was out.'

'And considering,' laughed Alison, 'that you intend spending the rest of your natural existence with Mr. Hemming, that would be nothing short of a calamity.'

'You are an unsympathetic demon, and you can be off to your East-end young women,' said Mary sternly.

'Pooh,' said Alison calmly, 'I shall stay till the last moment, and give you the benefit of my mature advice. It's wonderful,' she added, snatching up her big Gainsborough hat and putting it on at an extraordinary angle, 'how kind I am to young people. I believe I've been making a mistake all this time. I ought to have been the mother of six boys—for Heaven forbid that I should bring another woman into the world.'

'You would have been bored to death with them,' said Mary.

'Nonsense, depend upon it, I should have been a pattern parent. All we people make the mistake of doing everything more or less badly. Here are you,' she continued, taking up with an impatient gesture a small book bound in red calico, which was lying on the table, 'reading a ninepenny translation of Epictetus, when I'll be bound you can't make a pudding properly without it "catching"—or whatever the cook calls it.'

'I know I can't; but it's eccentric—to say the least of it,' rejoined Mary, 'for a young woman like you to want to make puddings at all.'

'I suppose it is an affectation,' said Alison candidly, fastening her velvet strings firmly with a diamond scorpion, 'but it's so much more amusing than going to balls. Oh, those old club hacks who go out to exercise their

## The Story of a Modern Woman

livers, and the boys who dance till they stream with perspiration, because they want to make acquaintances—in society.'

'It's doubtfully alluring—the London ball of to-day,' assented Mary, 'but why go?'

'I don't,' said Alison, 'it's what I remember out of the dim past. Well, good-bye, I'm off to explain Mantegna to my girls. I only hope they won't **all** come in ostrich feathers. Your most becoming gown, remember, and your most angelic manners, please. This is the supreme moment, remember.'

After she had gone, she put her head in at the door to say—

'That baby of Evelina's makes my joy. You never saw such a dumpling, and it doesn't cry now. I have it to spend the day at the flat, and it crawls all over me, and sticks its fat little fists in my eye.'

When the street door had finally closed, Mary felt horribly restless. After much inward debate, she put on her hat and went out. Secretly, she would have liked to go to Euston to meet her lover, but he had said nothing about it, and she thought it best to wait. So she walked to the Regent's Park, and there, in the trim flower-garden, where the avenue of chestnuts was making long shadows on the neatly-swept paths, Mary sat down and waited. It was high midsummer now; there was a velvety smoothness on the trim lawns, the green light filtered through a canopy of broad chestnut leaves, and the beds were odorous with heliotrope, purple with pansies, and aglow with geraniums. Half past four! Now perhaps the train was thundering into Euston Station. Vincent Hemming was getting out of his compartment, collecting his manifold baggage, hailing a cab. London was the richer for one important person; London contained her lover!

The people who haunt the parks on fine afternoons were there as usual, but to-day they seized her imagination. There was a young woman with restless eyes and a hard mouth, keeping a rendezvous with a lover who had not yet appeared; a nurse or two with a swarm of children from the surrounding Georgian terraces, racing and squealing and looking like white rabbits with their pink noses and creamy boots, while, erect and military, the figure of a park-keeper in his gilt buttons and his peaked cap gave an official air to the trim paths.

Yes, he was driving now to his chambers in the Temple; passing, actually rolling on London streets, in a London cab, not so very far from where she sat. It seemed incredible, and yet it was true. The only drawback to her happiness was Jimmie, for her brother was back for the holidays, and being as yet unaware of the understanding between them, he would be sure to insist on being there when Vincent came. Mary could not picture the scene with a third person.

Over yonder was the girl with the hard mouth, still pacing up and down alone. Mary felt drawn towards her; she would like to have gone up and said something kind.

'If that tawdry-looking girl could write down her story,' thought Mary, as she passed her, 'we should have another masterpiece! It is because they suffer so that women have written supremely good fiction.'

Everything, to-day, seemed imprinted on her brain; the delicate arrangement of mauves and lilacs in the distant flower-beds; the foolish faces of the nurses bent over a penny novelette as they pushed forward their perambulators; but above all, the figure of the girl with the hard mouth, who was still looking from right to left, for some one who did not appear. She had sat down on a green bench opposite, her shabby boots stuck hopelessly out. Her hair was untidy; in her hat was a dirty pink-bow; her dark stuff gown was frayed at the edge. The woman in her was dead; she was past the stage of caring about her appearance. 'Poor girl,' thought Mary, 'she is waiting, too, for **her** lover. But he will not come to-day; she didn't expect it, really, when she came out.' No, he had not come, and there was something in her blank eyes—eyes which seemed to look into an abyss, which suggested the thought that in all human probability he never would.

By-and-by the nurses began to put by their tatting and gather their chattering, swooping broods together. Perambulators were pushed forward on the creaking gravel, and little white boots and gaiters were seen trotting in the direction of the shining, columned terraces. A clock on a neighbouring church struck five.

And now, suddenly, Mary began to hurry. It was five o'clock! If the express had been punctual, Vincent might be at his chambers by this. Supposing he came, and she were out? Her heart thumping at the thought, she walked rapidly through the gates. She wanted to buy some flowers, too; lots of flowers, to disguise the terrible ugliness of those lodgings. At a florist's she bought an armful of roses, peonies, and tiger-lilies; and then she almost ran home to Bulstrode Street. There were the flowers to arrange, and she would like to change her gown. Vincent didn't like black, she remembered; she would wear the little grey dress she had just had made, and fasten some roses in her belt. At home, in the drawing-room, the interior in which she was so soon to receive her lover was

## The Story of a Modern Woman

not enticing. The tea-cups—common thick-lipped earthenware—were laid out on a battered tin tray; a small glass jug contained a bluish white fluid, and a moulded glass basin was half filled with dubious looking lumps of sugar. And to complete the picture, Jimmie had apparently taken a seat for the afternoon at the table, and only raised his head from a novel to clamour for his tea.

'Presently, dear, presently,' said Mary, hastily filling all the available bowls and vases with flowers. What could she do with the boy? she wondered, as she ran into her bedroom, put on the grey gown, and pinned some roses at her waist.

'I say, dearest,' said Jimmie, banging at the door, 'aren't we ever going to have tea? Or are you waiting for old Hemming?'

'Oh, no,' said Mary faintly, still pondering what she could do with her young brother. 'Tell them to bring up the tea.'

It was past six now; he probably would come after dinner. That would be very nice—they would have a beautiful long evening. The rooms, too, did not look quite so dreadful at night. She had brought a small copper lamp, with a rose-coloured shade, in expectation of Vincent's arrival, so that those dreadful milky glass gas-globes would not have to be lighted. And then she had an idea. It was an extravagance which she would not have permitted herself, but then——

'Jimmie!' she called out, as she stood at the looking-glass, her hands trembling as she tried to fasten the over-blown roses at her waist, while one by one the petals fell away and left a bare stalk.

'Yes, dearest.'

'Would you like, for a treat, to go to the theatre to-night? There's that piece still at Drury Lane with the real railway-engine in it, and you might go with Smith major, you know.' She opened a drawer and took out her purse. There were ten shillings left out of her last cheque. Four shillings had been spent on flowers, but there was enough still to send the two boys to the theatre.

'Here's six shillings, and mind you're back at half-past eleven.'

And Jimmie was nothing loth. He insisted, however, on having fried eggs and bacon with his tea, and Mary resolved, when the sitting-room was finally saturated with the odour of fried fat, that she would say she was not at home if Vincent called. But at last the room was aired, and the house quiet again. Jimmie had finally disappeared.

The twilight of a summer evening settled on the dingy room. Mary paced the floor, after crowding all her flowers on to the centre table, and opening the two windows wide to let in the sultry evening air. When she neared the window she listened intently for the sound of cab-wheels, or for that of on-coming footsteps. Yes, there were footsteps—footsteps coming to the door. There was an agitated ring of the bell, and some one hurrying up the stairs. Mary got up from her chair, and stood with tightly-clasped hands, looking vaguely down at the faded true-lovers' knots which meandered with foolish reiteration over the carpet. The door opened. It was Jimmie.

'Oh, I say, dearest, I quite forgot the six shillings you gave me! Where can I have left them?' And then a hunt began for the missing money. Presently it was found, and Jimmie had gone for the evening.

It was very hot; stuffy with the damp, vitiated air of a London night verging on August. Few people passed. Bulstrode Street is a quiet thoroughfare. Once, about eight o'clock, cab-wheels were audible, and then Mary shrank into the farthest corner of the room, clasping her little hands tight, and listening for the sound of the door-bell and that well-known step on the stair. But neither came. The cab drove on, having emptied its fare two doors off. It was nine o'clock now.

'I am so lonely, so tired,' thought the girl. 'I wish he would come. I want to talk to some one who cares for me, to get my little share of happiness. I am so tired of drawing the Discobolus, of writing for *The Fan*. I wonder if any man alive really knows how dreadful it is to be a woman, and to have to sit down, and fold your hands, and wait?'

Half-past nine now. Still he might come. He would have dined at his club, in all probability, and he would come on, after exchanging gossip with the men he would meet. Mary lighted the copper lamp now, and placed the pink shade over it. How pretty the flowers looked! Only the roses at her belt were faded. Going into the next room, she pinned in a fresh bunch. A quarter to ten? He would hardly come now; he always had a nice eye to the proprieties. But his cab might have broken down; he might have been detained at the club. The march up and down the room continued. Mary never knew how much she walked that night. The long, empty hours seemed

## The Story of a Modern Woman

interminable. But at last, in the still, sultry air, she could hear Big Ben strike eleven. Oh, eleven! Then it was all over; she might as well take off the pretty grey dress, unpin the bunch of roses.

At half-past eleven Jimmie returned, full of the delights of the play.

'Oh, I say, dearest, are you sitting up? I'm so jolly hungry, darling! Can't you get me something to eat? It was sweet and dear of you to send me to the theatre. But, I say, where's old Hemming? Hasn't he been?'

'I haven't seen anything of him,' said Mary. 'I suppose he was too tired to come to-night.'

And though she went to bed soon after, she lay with her eyes wide open, until the grey dawn began to creep in behind the dingy white blind. Oddly enough, the face of the girl she had seen in the Regent's Park rose up again and again. And yet what had they in common?

## CHAPTER XII. THE MAN RETURNS

**HEMMING** was there now, sitting on the hard sofa opposite, very bronzed since she had last seen him, but studiously correct in his town clothes and his frothy white tie.

At the first instant, when she had gone into the drawing-room to meet him, they had stared at each other as if they were strangers. Then Vincent Hemming had advanced to meet her with his unemotional smile, holding in his hand a new, shiny hat, and a minute later it seemed natural enough to both of them that her blonde head should be resting on the young man's shoulder, and that he should be murmuring vague phrases which for once had nothing to do with the enfranchisement of the women of the Anglo-Saxon race.

Like all people who have been separated for a long time, they found little or nothing to say.

'And did you have a good passage across the Atlantic?' asked Mary, when she had made him sit on the hard little sofa, and she had taken a stiff, high chair some little way off, and was looking at him with all her eyes. Was this neatly turned-out young man, in his tightly-buttoned dog-skin gloves, the lover with whom she had corresponded all these months and months? She felt strangely shy in the midst of her happiness.

'Fairly good. Yes. I may say it was a tolerably agreeable experience. There were some pleasant people on board. And I was not troubled with sea-sickness.'

'I'm glad you came back by way of the Canadian Pacific. And you went to Ottawa—and Niagara—' added Mary vaguely, as people always talk of places and countries they have never seen. 'And what is Niagara like?'

'Niagara,' said Hemming, with a certain solemnity, 'Niagara is something like London. The great falls, you know, are not beautiful; neither is London. But they are, like London, a unique, a terrifying spectacle. The roar, the immensity, the sense of a great power for ever driving forward; all these things are identical. Some day, Niagara will have dried up, retreated, become a mere dribble among waterfalls. Some day, London will be a handful of ruins.'

'What an unpleasant idea!' said Mary, laughing; 'what dreadful things you always think of!' And then, with a childish, frank outburst, she crossed to the sofa, knelt down on the floor, and, putting her two hands on his shoulders, she shook him gently.

'Why didn't you come yesterday,' she whispered. 'You old silly, you stopped and talked to somebody at the club, I suppose?'

But Vincent did not hear. He had gathered her up in his arms, the little, pale face, on which overwork had already told, the charming, childish mouth, with its curved upper lip, the ruffled fair hair. There was a long silence.

Presently Hemming sighed. Mary had almost forgotten her disappointment of yesterday in the emotion of to-day. Men were like that, she thought. The horror of waiting, waiting, and waiting did not occur to them. They never had to do it; how could they know?

'Dear, aren't you glad you're back?' she asked, raising her head a little so that the brown eyes and the gray eyes met.

'Of course, of course,' he muttered, glancing vaguely round the room; 'but there are so many things to be thought of'

'Is that,' said Mary, gently disengaging herself from his arms, 'is that—why you didn't come yesterday?'

'My dear child, I had a thousand things to think of. I was obliged to see the Colonial Secretary on my arrival in London. I had a confidential message of the highest importance from the Governor-General of Canada.' Vincent Hemming had assumed his most official manner—a manner that Mary had always instinctively disliked.

'Ah!' she said, looking down at her belt, where the roses had dropped off one by one yesterday, 'I see.'

'And afterwards some friends—some rather important people with whom I crossed over—insisted on my joining them at the theatre. And for reasons which I need not go into now, I thought it better to go.'

'And did you amuse yourself? Was it a good piece?' said the girl frigidly. 'I should not like to think you had been bored—the first night of your home-coming.'

He looked at her in slight surprise. It was so rarely she said anything sarcastic.

'What's the matter with you, little one? You look fatigued. I am afraid this sultry weather is too much for you; you must go away. We must get the roses back to those pale cheeks,' he said in his old-fashioned way.

## The Story of a Modern Woman

'Oh, I can't go away. I'm hard at work. You don't know how hard I've worked. I didn't mind, you know. It was all for you, so that we—we—' She almost broke down, covering her face with her bloodless, nervous hands.

'You are unstrung, overwrought,' said Hemming, in his kind voice—a voice which always meant twice as much as he intended to say. He touched her wrist tentatively. 'Don't, little woman, don't.'

'Oh, it's nothing. I'm—I'm a little over-tired. I didn't sleep last night. Please don't bother about me; perhaps it's the weather. You see I don't remember,' she added, 'ever being in London so late in the summer. Yes, I daresay it's that.'

'No doubt the sultriness of the weather may have a good deal to do with your indisposition. Poor little Mary! You must try change of air.'

'I don't know where,' said Mary, with a little shrug. 'If I went to Aunt Julia's at Bournemouth, I should have to sleep in a bedroom hung with framed photographs of tombs, and talk to ritualistic curates——'

'But Lady Jane Ives? She will be sure to want you at Ives Court.'

'They're going to Aix on Monday, and later on the house will be full. It would mean many more frocks and much higher spirits than I've got just now. But we'll go down and have long days in the country together, won't we?' she asked wistfully, twisting with two white fingers one of the buttons on his coat. 'There's the river—the river at Goring or Marlowe, Vincent, so cool, and green, and quiet on a week-day! Or the Surrey Hills, places that are mauve with heather; and pine-woods, beautiful, solemn pine-woods—don't you remember—like the place where we went the day before you sailed? We'll go there again, won't we?'

'Y—es, I hope so, if possible,' said Hemming; 'but for the next week or two I am afraid I shall be a good deal engaged.'

There was a silence which Mary, as hostess, did her best to break. She did not look at him in the eyes any more during his visit. It was almost as if he had struck her. There was a sort of ball in her throat. Her cheeks had got hot; there was colour enough in them now, and her hands shook as she poured out the tea which the maid-of-all-work had brought in. But she must not look as if she cared. A woman—especially in her own house—should always smile. It was on that acquiescent feminine smile that the whole fabric of civilisation rested. And for the next half-hour, as Vincent Hemming discoursed of the unusual opportunities he had enjoyed in Calcutta, in Sydney, and in Ottawa of studying the different systems of government which obtained in various parts of the British Empire, Mary was a model hostess.

And soon, too, he was gone. Afterwards, she remembered, he had spoken of seeing her again very soon, as he kissed her cheek at the door—of taking her and Jimmie to the theatre. And then his close-cropped greyish hair, the back of his shining collar, and his well-cut frock coat, were seen descending the dingy staircase.

And that was all. The meeting for which she had longed with all the ardour of a frank, loyal, and direct nature, had come and was over. She went into the little dreary bedroom and threw herself on the narrow bed. No tears came. She lay blankly staring at the blue and green kingfisher, with the text in large German letters, 'Come unto Me all ye that are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' She wondered, vaguely, what connection there was between a kingfisher and that exquisitely touching phrase. And then she remembered how her Aunt Julia, from the seclusion of her gabled Bournemouth villa, had once written her a long letter foreshadowing, with the perverse joy of the righteous, the day when her niece Mary would infallibly need the consolations of religion. Her Aunt Julia had spoken of her as 'hardened.' Well, that exactly described her state of mind. Mary felt not only hardened, but petrified. What did it all mean? He was hers, was he not, the man who had just left her? All her thoughts turned naturally to him; she was incapable now of comprehending a life which they were not to share together. She was perfectly aware of his little poses, his not altogether amiable peculiarities, but she had got to the stage when they made no difference. A French wit has it that '*C'est le ridicule qui tue*,' an aphorism which may be true of politics, fashions, or art, but which, alack! does not apply to the vagaries of human passion.

Vincent Hemming, once outside the door, felt in his breast-pocket for his cigar case, carefully chose a promising cigar, and thrust it firmly between his teeth while he stopped in a door-way to strike a match. His sensations that afternoon were mixed. It had been, he reminded himself, delightful to see little Mary again. If only he had not been so imprudent as to speak before he went away. And yet what could he do? Curiously enough, the girl appealed to the sensuous side of his nature. Her slight, thin shoulders, her long, delicate throat, the rather pathetic curve of her jaw, belonged to the type of beauty he preferred. The nervous energy, which was her special characteristic, touched, while it troubled him. As on the day that he asked her to wait for him, he always, whatever

## The Story of a Modern Woman

she announced her intention of doing, felt constrained to interfere. He admired her pluck, her perseverance, her dogged determination to get on, her fine appreciation of all that was best in literature and art. 'She's a little girl in a thousand,' he said to himself, 'and not at all likely to make unpleasantness if things become impossible. Not that one would dream of doing anything but what was best for her; but she's young—she may see some one she likes better. By Jove! she ought to make a really good match.' And in his modesty Mr. Hemming allowed himself to caress this idea. He pictured her, in many diamonds, at the head of a long dinner-table—a table scintillating with silver and crimson with roses, with a vague, undefined husband at the other end. And he, Vincent, sat by her side, and she—his little Mary—looked at him, as he talked, with her emotional eyes, and murmured pretty, sympathetic phrases with her deliciously curved lips. 'Who knows?' he muttered, throwing away the end of his cigar, 'odder things have happened.'

And then he went over his year of travel as he strolled down Regent Street on his way to call at the Métropole. Everything, from the very beginning, had gone off smoothly. He had enjoyed it from first to last. His letters of introduction—he had had excellent letters, he reminded himself—had brought him in touch with all the important men in India and the colonies. He had ample material for a book. The thing, it was true, had been somewhat overdone, but then he was sure of his style; the book would not be written after the manner of the globe-trotting M.P. And yet, by the time the volumes were out, he, too, would be among England's legislators. (It was typical of Hemming that he always thought of the hedge-row member of parliament as a 'legislator.')

He had quite made up his mind about that. Marriage might well be postponed a year or two, but for a man to have any real influence on politics, he must be in the House. As luck would have it, the member for Northborough was known to be seriously ill, a lingering illness which must terminate fatally, and the party were already making arrangements for contesting the seat. He had reason to know that his candidature would be highly appreciated by the Conservatives. All that was wanted were funds.

And it was then that his mind ran back to his meeting with his new friends. He had found them first, Mr., Mrs., and Miss Violet Higgins, of Northborough, Lancashire, engaged in a protracted quarrel with the black porter in a train bound New York—wards from Niagara. The Higgins family had wished to have the windows of the long compartment opened, but the black porter, having no personal objection to tropical heat, had insisted on shutting every aperture. Finally, Vincent had effected a compromise, and the perspiring mayor and mayoress of Northborough had been, he thought, somewhat unduly thankful. The daughter, a young lady with beady eyes, a high colour and a complete absence of chin, had watched him all the rest of the journey with extreme interest. He had not liked her appearance or her manners; her clothes were trimmed all over with gold braid, and she looked unnecessarily conscious on being addressed; but this first aversion had worn off during the seven days on the steamer, for they met again on the wharf at New York, in the rush and bustle of embarkation. The father, a manufacturer of the staunchest Tory principles, took a curious fancy to the young man. Vincent remembered how impressed the Mayor of Northborough had been when he found out that this was 'young Hemming,' the son of the late cabinet minister. How confidential he had got, exercising with him on the summer nights; how easily the parents had surrendered Miss Violet to his care did that young lady evince a desire to pace the hurricane deck. Their wealth was abundant, but not ostentatious, like that of the Chicago pork-packers' wives and daughters who graced the steamer with their presence. Violet was their only child, and Elijah Higgins took occasion, one night when the smoking-room was empty, save for a select party of San Franciscans who were playing poker and emitting fantastic oaths in the midst of a cloud of smoke in a distant corner, to mention that he was prepared to settle a considerable fortune on his daughter if she chose a husband of whom he approved. Yes, old Higgins was inclined to be friendly. He had offered to be president of his committee should he think of standing for Northborough; he had talked of heading a subscription to defray Vincent's election expenses. He thought, on the whole, he should accept their invitation to run up north and look around him at his future constituents. One couldn't put things in motion too soon, he told himself, as he crossed Trafalgar Square, and stepped down Northumberland Avenue to the Métropole. Miss Violet had had a headache, the night before, at the theatre; it would only be civil to go and ask how she was. He had an idea they expected him, and so, it appeared, they did. They not only expected him, but they expected him to stop to dinner.

The next day Mary received a note from Vincent, to the effect that he was running up north on parliamentary business, but that he hoped to see her very soon. The postscript was typical of the man: 'I rejoice to think that you are continuing your literary and artistic studies with your usual courage and energy. Only I implore you to

## The Story of a Modern Woman

consider your health, mental and physical. You tell me you are writing stories now—love stories, I presume. Remember that work which entails a drain on both the imagination and the feelings is more exhausting than you perhaps imagine.'

A month later, Vincent was still at Northborough, and Mary, whose drawing for the Academy had again been refused, was working, all through the dog-days, at her new profession of journalist.

## CHAPTER XIII. THE APOTHEOSIS OF PERRY JACKSON

IT was a bright October morning, and the light of mid-day fell searchingly on the pictures in their garish new frames. Scotch mountain streams, eastern bazaars, young ladies reading love-letters, fishermen mending nets, ran promiscuously up the walls to the very cornice, or modestly hung on a level with the boots of the spectator. Everywhere was the obvious, the threadbare, the **banal**; everywhere there was a frank appeal to the Philistinism of the picture-buying public. It was press day at the galleries of the Society of United Artists—the Benighted Artists, as they were called at a certain club consecrated to the fine arts—so that, for once, there was a sprinkling of people moving about the polished parquet floor. Indeed, in a distant room there was even a small crowd; but that, it appeared, was due to the fact that a buffet, spread with a York ham, a magnificent display of bath buns, and several decanters of fiery-looking sherry, presided over by a young lady with arch manners and pendant ear-rings, had been provided to seduce the austere journalist. Sounds of hilarity, as well as whiffs of tobacco smoke, frequently penetrated to the large room where Mary Erle was taking notes. Shaggy-looking men, with wide-awake hats and Inverness capes of dubious freshness, strolled in twos out of the luncheon room, lit a cigar, took a seat on the red velvet divan in the middle of the room, making incongruous figures enough as they rested under the fronds of a giant palm, and fell to talking Fleet Street, until one or the other, producing a watch, hastily rose and shuffled downstairs. These curious proceedings on the part of a certain portion of the press aroused some astonishment in Mary. The scene was as new to her as the work; for she had only taken the art critic's place on the *Comet* during the temporary illness of that functionary.

So she walked slowly, conscientiously round the room, stopping at every picture that she could possibly mention in her article, and stopping, too, before pictures which an editorial hint had advised her she would have to mention whether she liked them or no. Yonder was a yellow and blue 'Rome from the Pincian Hill,' by a man with whom, she remembered, her editor constantly dined; while close beside it was a portrait of Mr. Bosanquet—Barry himself, by a lady more celebrated for her charms than her talent. She must find, of course, some phrase which might encourage the fair artist to go on painting editors' portraits. Marking with a pencil the titles of these works of art, she absolved her conscience by making some elaborate notes about a clever little picture by an unknown man, which was hanging near the floor, an effect of the Strand on a rainy day. Mary had to kneel on the floor to see it, and as she rose, her eyes were on a level with a tolerably large canvas, hung in the place of honour. The scene represented Trafalgar Square by moonlight, with a young woman of superhuman beauty wrapped in a threadbare shawl, huddled in the shadow of one of the lions. In a passing brougham was seen the profile of another girl, painted, bedizened, supercilious.

'*Two Sisters*, by Perry Jackson, A.R.A.,' said Mary, consulting the catalogue. 'I thought so.'

'How do you do, Miss Erle?' said a voice—a voice which she had not heard for many months, and, turning, she saw that the painter of the picture was taking off his hat, and blushing a bright pink as he advanced to meet her. She noticed, with amused surprise, that he was dressed in the height of the fashion, and wore a pink carnation in his button-hole. His shock head, too, was closely cropped now, but as there was still no trace of hair on his face, he had, as of old, the look of a grown-up London street-boy.

'If this isn't a sight for sore eyes!' declared Perry gallantly. 'Why I haven't seen you to speak to for ages—not since the old days at the Central London.'

'No,' said Mary, 'and you have become famous since then! I must congratulate you on your election to the Royal Academy.'

'Oh, it don't mean much—except in the £s.d. line, you know,' said Perry, modestly. 'But I told you I'd do it, didn't I? You remember *The Time of Roses*? That was what did the trick, the girls and the roses. Agnew bought it, sold thousands of engravings—especially in Australia. Australia, you know, is like England—only more so. And in America, too. I'm told that in America they give away an autogravure of that picture with every pound of Scourer's Soap and every bottle of Parkins' Pain-killer.'

'America is a wonderful country,' said Mary gravely.

'Of course,' continued Perry, 'you saw the picture in the Academy. Sold for two thousand pounds at the private view. What fetches the public is a long price. I hope,' he added wistfully, 'that you'll come and see my studio. I'm down Kensington way now—all among the Royal Academicians.'

## The Story of a Modern Woman

'I shall certainly come,' said Mary.

'Oh, when?' demanded Mr. Jackson with an unmistakable show of eagerness. 'I'm in old Madder's house, the big red one with the white balconies. He couldn't keep it up, poor old chap. Would go on doing historical pictures: 'After Naseby,' 'Charles II. hiding in the oak' and all that sort of thing, and the public won't have him at any price.'

'Those things were in fashion,' replied Mary, 'when he was young. There is something pathetic in his clinging to them, like one or two old ladies in society, who still wear the ringlets and berthas of 1850.'

'Well, it may be pathetic,' said Perry, staring in a somewhat bewildered way, 'but, anyhow, it don't pay. Poor old Madder was glad to get rid of the house as it stands; so I took it just as it was: tapestries, Venetian mantelpieces, suits of armour, and all the rest of it.'

'And do your—your people live with you?' said Mary vaguely, remembering the old couple in the Hampstead Road upholsterer's shop.

'Oh! no. They wouldn't care about it, you know. The old people like to come and walk round the house. There's the Venetian drawing-room now, that rather takes their fancy.'

'It's rather a responsibility, isn't it, setting up such a big establishment?'

'Bless you,' whispered the new Associate confidentially, 'its all for show! I live in a little room at the back; couldn't be bothered to sit down and eat my mutton-chop in that great big gold and amber dining-room. Oh! no. Not for this infant. But it fetches the public, no end. Why, I've had any amount of tip-top swells there already. They come in and say, 'What a **perfectly** beautiful house, Mr. Jackson. What **exquisite** taste! Where **did** you get that cabinet? I wonder now, if I were to ask **very** prettily, if you could find time to paint my portrait?'

'I see,' said Mary thoughtfully, 'that you thoroughly understand your public.'

A loud gaffaw of laughter burst from the inner room. One of the United Artists, emboldened by several glasses of the dubious-looking sherry, was playfully disengaging the arch young lady's ear-ring from a stray lock of hair. A female journalist, who wore a waterproof and a pince-nez, emerged hastily, with a superior expression, through the doorway, and in the general hilarity which followed this little scene several more glasses of sherry were hastily poured out and a quantity of fresh cigars were lit. Artists and critics were seen exchanging cards, and an atmosphere of extreme sociability hung about the galleries. An old man with a white beard, who had painted the interior of Cologne cathedral for forty years, was leading affectionately by the arm the young gentleman who did the galleries for *The Easel*, towards the room where his latest contribution to the fine arts hung. A little group of critics had collected round Perry Jackson's canvas. It was easy to see that they considered it the picture of the exhibition. A vague official crossed the room and bending down, whispered confidentially:

'May I suggest your taking some slight refreshment? It is all in the next room.'

'Thank you,' said Mary, in her stiffest manner. 'I lunched before I came out.'

There was an awkward pause, which Perry Jackson hastened to break.

'And you—what are you doing now, Miss Erle? I've seen your stories in *Illustrations*—though I haven't much time for reading myself. Why, you must be making "a pile."'

'My income varies,' said Mary, smiling a little pathetically. 'It sometimes exceeds thirty-six pounds a year.'

'Great Scott!' ejaculated Perry, 'I'm glad I don't write.'

'One writes for the fun of it, I suppose,' said Mary. 'Why—I've even thought of writing a realistic novel!'

'Oh! When will it be published?' asked the young man.

'It won't ever be published,' answered the girl. 'It would be a bit of real life; it would have twenty-seven years of actual experience in it.'

'And so you haven't written it?' he asked quickly.

'No. My idea was too sad—too painful, all the publishers said. It wouldn't have pleased the British public. But I have been given a commission to do a three-volume novel on the old lines—a ball in the first volume; a picnic and a parting in the second; and an elopement, which must, of course, be prevented at the last moment by the opportune death (in a hospital) of the wife, or the husband—I forget which it is to be—in the last.'

'I dare say it will be ripping good,' said Perry, optimistically.

'I am quite sure it will be dreadful,' said Mary; 'but then I can't afford to say no. I've got a big boy at Winchester, you know. Brothers are so expensive—they want such a lot of neckties. And I dare say it doesn't matter much what one writes. It will all be forgotten soon enough. I used to have my little ideas about what was artistic and so on; but then, as you say, one **must** think of the public,' she added, rather dismally, as her eye ran

## The Story of a Modern Woman

along the walls covered with smooth views of Rome, of the Thames at Wargrave, impossible fisher-girls, and treacly sunsets. She was surprised at herself for talking so openly to this young man whom she had not seen for so long; but there was a fund of frankness and kindness under Mr. Perry Jackson's somewhat unattractive manners which was difficult to resist. He was so perfectly candid himself that few people were ever anything but frank in return.

'Why, of course you must,' replied the new Associate, resting a complacent eye on his own canvas, which stood out in all its meretricious cleverness from the ruck of commonplaces around. After all, Mary thought, there was merit in the picture—the moonlight was broadly painted, there was real movement in the passing *coupé*, and the girl's face inside, lit up by the carriage lamps, was cleverly indicated.

'By the by,' said Mary, as she put up her note-book, 'I suppose you've heard from *Illustrations*? They're going to have an article on you and your work, on your election to the Academy, you know. And I think they rather want me to do it.'

'I wish you would, Miss Erle,' said Perry, blushing. 'You know pretty well all about me, don't you? And I'll show you all the work I've got now at my place, and—and will——'

'In that case,' said Mary, 'I shall pay a state visit to your studio, and I shall be highly critical, so don't attempt to disarm me with sherry and bath buns.'

'You looked then,' cried Perry, 'just like you used to when you first came to the Central London, with a funny little twinkle in the tail of your eye.'

'Did I?' laughed Mary. 'I don't feel like it. I believe I am about a hundred,' she added, gathering up her note-book and parasol.

'May I—I should like to see you home?' said Perry gallantly, as they descended the stairs together. 'Where did you say you lived?'

'In the same place, in Bulstrode Street. But I hope I shall not have to stay there long. What I should like would be a little house somewhere in a suburb. A little house with a garden,' she added, as they passed out into the street, and her thoughts flew back to Vincent Hemming,—to Vincent, whose letters during the last few weeks had somehow grown rarer and rarer.

And in the empty galleries the rays of an autumn sunset touched the threadbare 'Romes' and 'Wargraves' and 'Cornish Fisher-scenes' with its delicate golden fingers. One by one the pressmen and the lady journalists had slipped away. The odour of tobacco was evaporating. Even the buffet was deserted, save for one elderly gentleman, who, as he stood talking to the presiding nymph as she washed up the glasses, leaned heavily with one elbow on the table and regarded the empty decanters with a fixed smile.

## CHAPTER XIV. MARY GOES OUT ON A WET DAY

'IT'S the deuce of a wet day, dearest,' murmured Jimmie, strolling into the sitting-room where Mary was writing. 'Must you really go out?'

'Yes, dear. Don't bother. I must go directly I have done this article on Perry Jackson,' answered the girl, with the irritated look of a person who is interrupted in the middle of a train of thought—thought which was to be paid for at the rate of threepence a line.

'But you really don't look the thing, darling. By the by, does Sarah know I'm down? or is there any breakfast about?' added Jimmie, with his newly-acquired drawl. He had shot up into a curiously pretty and precocious boy. It was characteristic of him that he addressed his sister with as much politeness as any of his numerous loves. Everybody agreed that Jimmie Erle was a delightful boy. Laudatory adjectives abounded when his name was mentioned. Just now, lounging in his cricketing blazer against the mantelpiece, he looked the picture of airy and irresponsible youth.

'As it's half-past-eleven,' said Mary, laughing, blotting her MSS., and thrusting it in an envelope, 'Sarah may have some vague idea that you might be putting in an appearance soon.'

'Dear, you're not cross with me?'

'No, boy. Sleep as long as you can. I daresay you have to get up very early at school.'

'Oh, yes, sometimes,' said Jimmie vaguely. But Mary had gone into her bedroom now, and was rapidly doing up her hair, and putting on a waterproof. As she left the room there was a brief vision of her brother helping himself to a third serve of marmalade. The morning paper was at his elbow, and there was even a surreptitious box of cigarettes on the chimney-piece.

'I think,' said Mary to herself as she clattered down the staircase in her flapping waterproof, 'that Jimmie will always be comfortable and happy. He will never have to go out on a wet day.'

In the underground railway it was at any rate dry, and Mary could rest her back, tired with bending over a desk since nine o'clock. For a long time she had felt wretchedly weak. The strain of writing was intense; there were whole mornings which she spent staring at a sheet of white paper on her desk. The only ideas she had, came at night, when she ought to have been asleep, and after hours of insomnia she would get up and go to her desk with every nerve in her body quivering. Mary told herself severely as the train rattled on its way to Kensington that she could not afford to break down now. She wanted so much to retain her position on the *Fan*; if she gave it up for a month there would be a dozen women ready to snatch it from her. Then, too, she was getting on with her three-volume novel, which was to appear in *Illustrations*, and there was the Perry Jackson article for the same paper, over which she had taken a deal of trouble, and to finish which she was on her way to the new Associate's house. And she smiled as she thought how amused Vincent would be to hear that she had met Perry Jackson again, and to learn that she had been chosen to write an article on *The Time of Roses*, and the beautiful house and studio in which the artist was now installed. And with the clarity of mental vision which is one of the first signs of ripened powers, Mary contrasted the two men: Perry with his ridiculous manners, his good heart, his stubborn determination to get on, and his curiously keen knowledge of the public; Vincent with his smooth, charming phrases, his good looks, his vacillating nature.

It was pouring rain as Mary stepped out of Kensington High Street Station. A heavy, pinkish sky lowered overhead, and the trees of Holland House took on a strange metallic hue in the changing stormy light. The end of the road was swallowed up in mist and rain, and on the streaming pavement, which reflected everything like a mirror, she could see a vision of her own umbrella hurrying along through the storm. By the time she rang the bell of Mr. Perry Jackson's imposing house her feet were soaked through.

The door was opened by an elderly person in a bonnet profusely trimmed with lilies of the valley, a lady whose dark stuff gown and bibulous eye contrasted strangely enough with the spacious white hall, with its Persian tiles, its soft, flame-coloured carpets, and its delicate, turquoise-tinted embroideries. Mr. Jackson was at home, and the lilies of the valley, with a confidential, if somewhat mysterious, air, shuffled along the discreet, silent passages, and after a tentative knock at the door, ushered Mary into the studio.

The subject of her article was at work on a large canvas when she was shown in.

In the vast studio, with its vista of polished boards, its golden ceiling, and its tapestry-hung walls, the artist

## The Story of a Modern Woman

made a somewhat insignificant figure, as he stood on a step-ladder and reached up to put in a piece of background. The gorgeous colouring of the great silent room accentuated the paleness of his features. With his profile outlined against an alcove of golden mosaics, he looked more than ever like a grown-up London street-boy, who had found his way, by mistake, into some oriental palace fashioned by superhuman hands. The wan, veiled light of a rainy day crept through the great north window, and on a small outer studio of glass—destined for out-of-door effects—the rain pattered monotonously. Palms and azaleas in giant pots repeated the enchanting note of green which was visible through the glass walls of the outer studio.

The huge canvas at which he was at work represented a convent garden in the grey crepuscule of a summer evening. The pale, pensive faces of young nuns, faces of unnatural loveliness, with haunting eyes and flower-like mouths, shadowed by wide blue headdresses, were seen bending over beds of white lilies, while here and there a transparent hand was stretched to gather the passionless, immaculate flowers. This picture, destined for next year's Academy, was to be called 'The Hour of Lilies.' Mary was startled when she looked at it. Only a short time ago she had suggested the subject to him. He must have set to work at once, leaving everything else. The picture was already blocked in.

'Oh, I say, this is good of you,' cried Perry, blushing crimson.

Mary observed, with some annoyance, that he had lately taken to blushing at her advent. It was ridiculous, for they had to see each other so often about the article that they had become like old friends. And she always thought of him, moreover, as the Perry Jackson of the Central London School of Art—a little man with a shock head, and whose parents, moreover, sold cheap dining-room suites in the Hampstead Road.

'That thing must be at the office not later than to-morrow morning,' said Mary, sinking into the nearest chair and surveying her damp boots with solicitude.

'And a fine mess they've made with that process-block of *The Time of Roses*,' said Perry, indignantly. 'I'm blessed if you'd know they were roses. Why, they might be—artichokes—or anything else.'

'Well, we can't help that now,' said Mary doggedly. 'What I want to-day are just the last touches for my article—something to make the thing literary, with a meaning, you see. I should be glad to know, for instance,' continued Mary, glancing round the walls with a slight smile, 'if you have a Message?'

'What's that?' asked Perry, putting a flat high light on the golden hair of a novice.

'I have never,' said Mary, abstractedly, 'been quite able to ascertain. But nowadays most people—writers, painters, and so on—are supposed to have a Message to deliver to their contemporaries. And I thought,' she continued, encouragingly, glancing at the canvasses around, at the feminine faces with haunting eyes and flower-like mouths, 'I thought perhaps you meant to insist, in your art, on the cult of beauty, the pagan love of form, the delight, so to speak, in a physically perfect existence?'

Perry whistled thoughtfully.

'Well,' he said, after a pause, 'I never thought about it like that. But you can put it in that way if you like. I don't mind what you say about me;' and then with engaging candour he added: 'All I want to do is to make the thing pay.'

'But, dear Mr. Jackson, it evidently does pay,' urged Mary, laughing; 'here you are, "arrived," with poor Mr. Madder's beautiful house and studio all to yourself.'

'Yes,' said Perry, looking at her curiously, with a side-ways glance, 'all to myself. There was a lady here yesterday,' he continued with a short laugh, 'who came to interview me for an evening paper, and what do you think she asked me? If I was married—or going to get married.'

'And are you?' asked Mary, in a politely interested tone; but something in his look made her drop her eyes, and she turned away, asking two or three embarrassed questions about a distant canvas on the wall.

There was an awkward pause. Outside, the rain poured with a sibilant sound on the roof of the glass studio, and the great trees drooped, soaked and soddened with wet. It had grown dark in the big room. Perry had thrown down his palette, and was standing gazing at her with a nervous, agitated look. Mary began to walk round the studio, the drips from her umbrella making tiny pools of wet on the polished parquet floor and on the eastern rugs.

'I really ought to go,' she said nervously, looking down; 'your room is much too gorgeous for a damp journalist.'

He hurried forward imploringly, his sharp face whiter than ever with emotion, and for years after she could not forget the painful scene which followed. She remembered how she had been intensely conscious of her damp

## The Story of a Modern Woman

boots and of the little spots of water which her dripping waterproof made on the polished floor, while Mr. Perry Jackson, who, in moments of intense excitement, had an occasional difficulty with his aspirates, proffered her his name and fortune, and the undisturbed possession of the Venetian drawing-room, the amber and gold dining-room, and a Japanese boudoir on the first floor.

In the pause that followed there was no sound but that of the pitiless rain hissing on the outer studio roof. Mary stood with her eyes fixed on the polished boards. How could he have misunderstood her so—what could she say to soften it? Didn't he know? Didn't he understand that it was impossible? Well, she must say something. A strange misgiving forbade her to mention the name of Hemming, so she spoke of vague things, of Jimmie, and of her profession.

'Is—is—there any one else that you care for?' stammered Perry forlornly, just as she was going.

'Yes,' she said, but she did not meet his eyes, and as the word left her lips a sharp foreboding seized her.

In silence Perry Jackson clasped her hand at the door. Each felt that the parting, the estrangement, was final.

'Then you'll speak about that process-block to the editor?' said Perry awkwardly, just at the last, as she was crossing his threshold.

'Oh, yes, of course. No doubt it can be touched up as you suggest. And that about your ideal in art will make the article much stronger,' she said in a loud, would-be cheerful voice.

Both these two young people were already thinking of their work. He saw her out, and watched the slim figure, in its grey waterproof, disappear down the street in the rain and mist.

He would like to have saved her from the struggle of the woman who works, the fret and fever, the dreary fight for existence. As he turned back down the clear white passages, with their soft, glowing carpets, and his eye caught the masses of transparent flowers within, the sumptuousness of his home struck him for the first time as ludicrously incongruous.

He strode back into his studio, and began searching among his portfolios for the sketch of a girl's head which he wanted for the new picture. As evening fell, he was still working.

## CHAPTER XV. A COMEDY IN REAL LIFE

**THE** first act was over, the curtain was down again. A buzzing sound was heard all over the theatre. Men were standing up in the stalls, raking the house with their opera-glasses; the critics were seen exchanging significant looks and portentous monosyllables; while here and there was visible the profile of a pretty woman craning her neck to be seen speaking to some distant celebrity. The house, viewed from above, was one compact mass of human beings, the clear, pale dresses of the women making gay patches among the rows of black coats, white shirt fronts, and slightly bald heads of the men.

It was the first night of a new comedy at a modish theatre. In the private boxes the little canvas doors opened continually, revealing a glimpse of the begilded corridor darkened by the figure of a man in evening dress. In some of the boxes, notably that of Lady Jane Ives, the door opened almost with the regularity of a machine, while a small procession of young gentlemen sidled in and out.

'All mother's "boys" will be here before the evening's over,' whispered Alison to Mary. 'I don't know whether our brains will hold out.' But Alison, for once, made no effort to entertain them, for hardly had the curtain fallen when Dr. Dunlop Strange, who was in the stalls, had taken the chair behind her, and had begun telling her of a new medical discovery in which she was interested.

For the moment, Mr. Bosanquet-Barry and Mr. Beaufort Flower were the other occupants of the back chairs.

'Dr. Strange, you've got to personally conduct us over the Whitechapel Hospital,' said Alison, turning her beautiful, intelligent eyes upon him. 'Miss Erle wants to write something about a hospital, and you can explain the medical details to her.'

'When will you come?' said the doctor eagerly.

'Oh, arrange it with Mary,' said Alison, laughing, 'these young women who write are always so busy. At present I'm one of the unemployed.'

'Dear Lady Jane,' objected Mr. Flower, patting the tuberoses in his coat, 'you're not going to allow them to go over one of those nasty hospitals? Why, you don't know what they will catch, and I'm told the language of the patients is quite ornamental.'

'Allow them!' ejaculated Lady Jane. 'My dear Beaufy, if you had a grown-up daughter, you'd find that you were "allowed" to do things or not as **she** chose. That's why I'm so young,' said the old woman with a fat laugh. 'It's because I go with the times. And as for that child Mary, I can't refuse her anything. You see Alison and I both wanted to marry her poor dear father. He was the most delightful creature that ever lived.'

Mary, in her little white frock, was looking radiant. The morning papers had announced the results of the by-election, and Vincent Hemming's name headed the poll with a majority of forty-seven votes. In a day or two—perhaps even now—he would be in town; he would have time for her. They would have leisure, perhaps, to see a great deal of each other once more. She had become accustomed by now to a certain vagueness about the future. But just to know that he was happy and successful was enough for the moment.

'Why are you looking so pretty to-night?' whispered Beaufy to Mary, to whom he had taken a perverse fancy because she generally snubbed him.

'I never look pretty,' said Mary calmly.

'No? That's true. I've seen you,' he added with engaging candour, 'look positively ugly. And other times, you know, you become radiantly lovely.'

Meanwhile Lady Jane, showing a good deal of plump shoulder and bland bosom, in a gown of excruciating red, was gently tapping Mr. Bosanquet-Barry with a carved ivory fan, as he leaned over her chair.

'Tell me who's here, you shocking creature. You know I can't see. And what are you young men there for except to tell us the news?'

'Oh, yes. Everybody's here. Lots of people have come up to town on purpose. No end of smart people in the stalls. And who do you think is down there in the omnibus box? Lady Blaythewaite, of all people. *C'est crâne, hein?* Three days before she has to appear in the divorce court. They say,' he added, dropping his voice so that only Lady Jane could hear, 'they say it will be a *cause célèbre*. She brings the case, of course, but she won't get it. They're betting on it at the clubs.'

'I see she's got that old woman, what's-her-name, who's so very proper, in the box,' said Lady Jane, as she

## The Story of a Modern Woman

surveyed the coming heroine of the divorce court exhaustively with her tortoise-shell lorgnette. 'How **clever**,' she continued in an approving tone: 'white muslin, and not a jewel. I was so fond of her poor mother. She was one of the first women who smoked—I mean before people. She was a sort of Mrs. Norton. Lord Houghton used to say she was one of the few women in society that he could ask to his literary breakfasts. Her daughter hasn't inherited her wits.'

'No, or she wouldn't have committed the fatal error of being found out,' murmured Mr. Bosanquet-Barry, and then he added, showing all his dazzling teeth in a fatuous smile:

'Lady Blay's a charming woman when she lets you know her. I assure you, she's quite irresistible.'

'I see all you young men are quite *épris*,' replied Lady Jane, in her well-bred, indifferent tone. 'Do you see much of her?'

'One's supposed to be able to find her at five. But very often she's out.'

'Yes,' put in Mr. Flower, in his waspish voice, 'she says it's so effective to be out occasionally. Isn't it malicious of her?'

'My dear Beauify, Lady Blaythewaite is quite good-looking enough to do these things. Who are those curious-looking persons in the next box?'

'Aren't they quite too delicious for words?' cried that young gentleman, with some animation. 'They're my discovery. There's a man—a political man—in the stalls who knows. It's the mayor of Northborough, the mayoress of Northborough, and the heiress-apparent. They're as rich—well, as rich as Americans. Their name is Higgins. Aren't they nice? I never saw a provincial mayor before. I wonder if he is red all over, like his face? I'm sure he wears his chains of office under his clothes. Look at the mayoress' gown, dear Lady Jane. Do you see, it has a small V at the throat, and elbow sleeves, and you may swear it's high at the back! And the daughter—*qu'elle est fagotée, mon Dieu*, and with diamonds put in all the wrong places. It is a relief to look at Lady Blay, who's got hardly anything on at all.'

And so these were the Higginses; Vincent's friends, whom he had picked up in America, and who had got him returned to parliament. Mary gave one swift, comprehensive glance at the daughter, taking in her under-bred face, with its beady eyes and fretful mouth, her over-trimmed clothes and her uneasy attitude, and remembering Hemming's fastidious tastes, she decided, with a little throb of feminine exultation, that she had nothing to dread from Miss Violet Higgins.

'Does anybody know what the play is about?' asked the girl in a relieved voice, in which there was even a note of happiness. 'It seems to me to be rubbish.'

'Oh, I simply **love** these old-fashioned pieces, where all the poor young men turn out to be baronets, and all the women marry their first loves. They're so adorably untrue to life, don't you know?' opined Beauify. 'One **wants** that sort of thing in a pessimistic age. Of course Realism and that sort of thing amuses me, but I don't really care for it.'

'But that's very ungrateful of you,' said Alison, turning suddenly round. Dr. Dunlop Strange had caught sight of Lady Blaythewaite in the box opposite, and his eyes seemed riveted on her exquisite face. Somehow the fact annoyed her; Alison did not like Lady Blaythewaite.

The curtain drew up on the second act, revealing a rose-clambered cottage and a sundial. The play proceeded after the manner of love-stories which are enacted to lime-light. Two sets of lovers—one arch, one sentimental—wandered through a wicket-gate in rotation, though during the scene between the arch lovers—in which a watering-pot and some artificial geraniums played a prominent part—it was noticeable that some of the habitual theatre-goers began a mumbled conversation. It was unmistakable, however, that the interest of the dress-circle was aroused when a rising moon illuminated the embrace of the sentimental lovers, during which the ominous figure of an adventuress was seen hovering behind a hedge.

The critics, however, began to yawn, and several cheery conversations were started in private boxes, notably in that of Lady Blaythewaite, whose white shoulders were detached with startling distinctness against a phalanx of black coats.

The door of the Higgins's box down below opened, and there was visible the figure of a youngish man against the pale gold of the corridor. Mary could not see his face, which was black against the light; but in another instant the new-comer, after shaking hands all round, had slipped into the chair behind the younger lady, and his face was now illuminated by the glare of the footlights. Miss Higgins began to fan herself violently with a jerky

## The Story of a Modern Woman

movement, and fidgeted about in her chair. Mary's eyes were riveted on the face of the new arrival. Just where she sat he could not see her. It was Vincent Hemming.

Then she turned her eyes away—as if ashamed—and kept them fixed upon the stage. The sentimental lovers were now swearing eternal fidelity.... Were they the real puppets, Mary wondered, or she, and Vincent, and Miss Higgins, and the Blaythewaites, each pulled this way and that by their passions, their ambitions, their desires? Vincent was in town, and she had heard nothing from him! True, she had not had many letters of late, but then he had been, of course, immersed in his election business. She had not expected to hear. And yet, why should he spend his first night in town with these people? Vincent, too, must have got the box; it was evidently his party, for the mayor of a provincial town, however many times a millionaire, is not on the lists for first-nights at fashionable theatres in London.

On the stage Mary was conscious that the adventuress was advancing to the footlights murmuring the words 'My husband!' and that the curtain was falling on the second act.

She sat with her eyes fixed on her lap. Every nerve in her body was drawn at full tension. It was a relief when the canvas door opened, and one or two men came in. She leaned back in her chair, saying anything, so as not to have to think. Beaufy had slipped again into the chair behind her.

'What do you think I heard about the Higgins heiress?' he began. 'I take such an interest in them because, you see, I was the first to discover them. You see that man down there, sitting in her pocket? Well, that's Hemming, the man who's just got in for Northborough. They say he's going to marry her.'

'Is he?' said Mary, and she was astonished to find how natural her voice sounded. After all, she told herself, she knew how it would be on the day of his return from America.

'Yes; isn't it delicious? Why, one might as well be married to the housemaid. But they say he hasn't got a farthing, you know, and she'll have twelve thousand a year just to start housekeeping. But the best of it is, I hear the poor devil wants to get out of it, only his worship won't let him off. Stands over him in his chains of office and waves the municipal mace; says he only got him into the House as a prospective son-in-law. They say she's got a strong Lancashire accent,' he concluded in his most malicious and triumphant tone.

'Indeed,' said Mary, raising her eyelids, and letting them drop again with a tired gesture. Fortunately no one in the box had heard but herself. Both Lady Jane and Alison were talking to new arrivals. She made an effort—an effort which completely prostrated her next day—to look smiling, calm, imperturbable. Why, the very fabric of society was based on that acquiescent feminine smile. She, like other women before her, must learn her fate with the eyes of the world fixed curiously upon her.... If she could only creep away somewhere, hide her face, not see the hideous comedy going on in the box down there, not have to look at the yellow footlights, watch the foolish, inane, unreal comedy on the stage. But she could not leave the theatre without making a scene, having explanations. The curtain rose on the last act.

'Vincent is going to marry Miss Higgins,' she said to herself deliberately, as the arch pair of lovers entered, quarrelling, in a pretty drawing-room set. She tried to realise this new calamity; to understand what it meant to her, as the comic young gentleman on the stage essayed to appease the arch young lady's wrath by tying an errant shoe-lace. Vincent and Miss Higgins.... Vincent and Miss Higgins: living together, always together; husband and wife in all the long, long years to come.—'For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death did them part.' It was with the blurred vision which accompanies poignant mental anguish that Mary saw that the happiness of the sentimental lovers on the stage was not to be frustrated, for the adventuress, it would seem, was a bigamist, and was already married.... Married! Why, merciful God! Vincent and that girl in the box down below—they, too, were going to be married—

'Dear, you look dreadfully white,' said Alison, catching sight of Mary's face. With a fixed, mechanical smile, Mary was thanking Mr. Beaufort Flower, who was playfully throwing a boa round her shoulders. 'I'm afraid you're tired. The play bored one horribly, didn't it? And the theatre's so hot—'

'I'm all right,' said Mary heroically. 'It's nothing.'

People spoke to her as she went downstairs and along the corridor, and she answered them with pale, mauvish lips. Such a charming, pretty piece, wasn't it? Quite an idyll, and so wholesome, after this disgusting talk about heredity, and so on.... It was quite a relief, they said, to get a thoroughly English piece with a happy ending.

And in the pushing crowd at the door her lover almost brushed her elbow as he passed her unwittingly with the Lancashire heiress. The girl, Mary could see, wore the triumphant expression of the underbred young woman who

## The Story of a Modern Woman

has secured a desirable husband. Mary hardly dared look at Vincent, though every fibre in her body yearned towards him; but as he passed out, with Miss Higgins leaning heavily on his arm, she had a brief vision of a harassed, sheepish, and uneasy face.

'Why, he is unhappy!' she thought, with a pang.

## CHAPTER XVI. TWO ULTIMATUMS

IN the professional solemnity of the consulting-room, the large, bland face of Dr. Danby looked grave. Tapping his stethoscope, with which he had just made an examination of Mary, he looked her straight in the eyes.

'The fact is, my child, you ought to know the truth. You will not, believe me, be able to do the work you are doing. As a matter of fact, you are very, very far from strong. Nothing dangerous, I admit, but great delicacy,' he added thoughtfully, pronouncing the word 'delicacy' with a certain unction, as an attribute which applied mostly to charming young women. 'None of the vital organs are attacked as yet,' he went on, 'but there is a terrible want of tone. If I were asked to describe you, I should say you were a bundle of nerves. Slightly anæmic, too,' continued the doctor, frowning. 'You live too much in London. There is too much strain on the nervous system. You have, you see, an unfortunate previous history. Your father, you must remember, was not able to stand the strain; your poor mother died when she was a mere girl. A mere girl,' repeated the great man, shaking his head.

'Well, that, at any rate, I shall not be able to accomplish,' said Mary drily. 'You know, doctor, that I am nearly twenty-eight.'

'Dear me, dear me—you don't look it.' And then he added briskly, taking out a sheet of paper and beginning to write a prescription, 'I should like to have all you young ladies living a healthy out-of-door life, happily married, and with no mental worries. There is something wrong somewhere,' he muttered to himself, 'with our boasted civilisation. It's all unnatural. Not fit, not fit for girls.'

There was a silence. Mary said nothing, but observed, with much interest, a sparrow which was conveying to a nest in the drain-pipe a crust of bread which the servants had thrown out in the yard. Since Vincent's letter—a long, characteristic letter, speaking of new duties, and obligations, of personal sacrifices for the cause which he had so much at heart, and of his dread of dragging her down 'to a life of pecuniary restraints and restricted horizons'—she had almost felt as if she must give up the fight. Her nerves were completely unstrung, but she had never stopped working. In work there was at least forgetfulness.

'Arsenic, iron, and strychnine, with something for the nerves,' said the doctor, thoughtfully; 'and the Volnay I told you of before. There should be a complete change of scene and ideas.'

'I'll try the tonic and the burgundy, please,' said Mary, as she rose to go. 'I cannot leave London now; and I don't see any prospect of doing so. And—and—it isn't exactly serious, dear Dr. Danby?' she continued, looking him, in her turn, straight in the face with her charming eyes.

'My dear child,' he said kindly, 'life without health and happiness is not worth having. Let me beg you to stop, to take care of yourself, to think of others,' he added vaguely.

'I wonder whom I've got to think of?' thought Mary, as she went down the step of the Wimpole Street house. 'Jimmie, who will probably marry before he is one-and-twenty? Aunt Julia, at Bournemouth, who thinks I am given over to the evil one since I've become a journalist? Vincent?'—but here Mary pulled up her thoughts with a jerk. Yet the words 'life without health and happiness,' 'very delicate,' repeated themselves in her brain, as she made her way towards the Strand, where she had an appointment with the editor of *Illustrations*.

And with this new care pressing upon her, never had the Strand seemed so dreary, so cheaply vicious, as to-day under the hurrying clouds.

'Spesh—shul!—Globe piper—St. James's Gizzett— Pall Mall,' shouted a newsboy in her ear, at Charing-cross; and looking down she read, in blue or red letters, spattered and stained with London mud, the posters of the evening newspapers:—'The Great Divorce Case. Cross-examination of the Plaintiff, Unabridged Report. Ladies ordered out of Court. Sketches of the Co-respondents.' For the Blaythewaite scandal hung, like a pestilence, over England. Like some foul miasma, it poisoned everything. It met the eye, in columns of close print, at the breakfast table; it formed the one subject of conversation wherever people met. With hoarse laughs and brutal jests, it was discussed in public-houses and at street corners; with tepid, meaning smiles and shrugged shoulders in drawing-rooms and clubs.

And meanwhile the great tide of humanity swept on. A dray had got across the crowded street, and a procession of loaded omnibuses, whose drivers were bandying oaths and scathing cockney satire, drew up at the curb. Outside Charing Cross station two girls in tawdry capes were quarrelling and gesticulating, while a man in a round hat, who had just arrived by train, and who appeared to be the cause of the dispute, turned from them both,

## The Story of a Modern Woman

hailed a hansom, and drove off with a relieved air. A small gaping crowd at once gathered round the wranglers on the pavement. 'Run 'em both in,' said a raucous voice on the fringe of the crowd; and, indeed, a policeman's helmet was now seen bearing down towards the group. Mary hurried on. Further on there were sordid little eating-houses displaying a joint of raw meat, a cauliflower, and a plate of oysters; and dark narrow passages—the entrance to theatres—ornamented with coloured posters of the latest three-act farce. Inexpressibly dreary were the pictures which invited one within: representations of elderly ladies in black silk, falling backwards into hip-baths: monster heads of comedians, with flaxen wigs and brick-red complexions, displaying all their teeth in a frightful grin; full-length posters of girls with knowing smiles and abnormally developed limbs; while further on, outside a music-hall, was the picture of a raffish-looking dwarf, who was described with engaging optimism as 'screamingly funny.'

'Spesh—shul! Extry spesh—shul! The great divorce case! Ex—trorinary evidence! Cross—examination of Sir 'Orris Blaythewaite!' shouted a small newsvendor in Mary's ear, as she waited at Wellington Street to cross.

And all the while, as she hurried along to the office, with this new terror of broken health knocking at her brain, she wondered what the abrupt summons could mean which she had received from the editor. Half of the MSS. of her novel was in his hands. Could it be possible that he was going to refuse it?

With some trepidation, Mary gave her name to her old admirer, the small office boy, whom she found casting a supercilious eye over the current number of the paper, while he furtively sucked an acid drop. And in due time she found herself ushered into the editor's private room. Six months of proof-reading, of interviewing incapable artists, of the thousand worries of a newspaper, had not made the manners of the editor of *Illustrations* more gracious.

'Good day, Miss Erle. Take a chair. I want to talk to you.'

'Is it anything,' asked Mary, 'about the novel?'

'The fact is,' said the melancholy man, tapping with an irritable hand on a pile of manuscript near his desk, which Mary recognised with some anxiety as her own, 'it won't do at all. It won't do at all.'

'It—won't do?' faltered Mary. 'Why, I've written it just as you told me. There's a ball in the first volume, a parting in the second—'

'Oh, that's all right,' interrupted the editor. 'But, my dear young lady,' he added, 'you've put the most extraordinary things in this last chapter. Why, there's a young man making love to his friend's wife. I can't print that sort of thing in my paper. The public won't stand it. They want thoroughly healthy reading.'

'Do they?' said Mary, who could not help remembering the columns of unedifying matter which had lain on the breakfast-table that morning, nor the newsboys vending the latest detail of the great scandal, served red-hot at the street corners. 'I thought,' she continued quietly, 'that the public would take anything—in a newspaper.'

For a minute the editor looked perplexed. Then, frowning slightly, he went on: 'Not in fiction—not in fiction. Must be fit to go into every parsonage in England. Remember that you write chiefly for healthy English homes.'

'But even the people in the country parsonage must occasionally see life as it is—or do they go about with their eyes shut?' ventured Mary quietly.

'Well, we're not going to encourage that sort of thing,' he said conclusively, getting up and putting his mouth to the telephone.

'Hullo! Richards! No. Yes, of course. Not got the portrait of Lady Blaythewaite? What? Spoiled? Take another kodak into court, then. Eh? Yes. See that it's a good likeness. All the co-respondents for this week's issue. And see that they're touched up. What? Yes, yes. A couple of pages of drawings.'

The editor sat down again. Their eyes met.

'The fact is,' he said, looking rather foolish, 'novels are—er—well—novels. The British public doesn't expect them to be like life. And if you take my advice, Miss Erle, and cultivate your talents in the right way, you will be able to make a—a—comfortable income. Only there must be a thoroughly breezy, healthy tone.'

'Oh, as to breezy,' said Mary, in a tired voice, 'I never somehow feel like that. I don't know how it is, but I can't help seeing things as they are, and the truth is so supremely attractive.'

'But it is just what the public won't stand,' repeated the editor. 'Now take this chapter back and reconsider it. This young man, now—he isn't a principal character in the story—couldn't you make him her cousin—or her brother?'

'Oh, anything you like,' said Mary, taking the manuscript; 'but I did like that chapter. I took so much trouble

## The Story of a Modern Woman

over it. It was a little bit of real observation.'

'That's right. And if you don't mind my saying so, there aren't quite enough love scenes between the hero and the heroine. The public like love-scenes, and besides, they illustrate so well.'

'Is there anything more?' asked Mary, trying to force the manuscript into her pocket.

'I should suggest a thoroughly happy ending. The public like happy endings. The novelists are getting so morbid. It's all these French and Russian writers that have done it. It's really difficult now to get a thoroughly breezy book with a wedding at the end. Take my advice and stick to pretty stories. They're bound to pay best.'

'That's what Perry Jackson thinks,' said Mary to herself, as she stepped out into the windy Strand. 'And he certainly understands—he always did understand—the public.' The *banal*, the pretty-pretty, the obvious! This was what she was to write—if she wanted to make any money, to keep her head above water. And the kindly words of the doctor reiterated themselves in her brain: 'All you young ladies ought to be living a healthy, out-door life, happily married, and with no mental worries!' And then, with a kind of obstinate courage, she thought of what she should do to get better. She would try and eat more meat; she would order some burgundy at the stores; she would try and get more out in the open air; and there was the tonic—the arsenic and strychnine—which sometimes, for a week or two, seemed to give her a fresh lease of life. She must take some of that prescription to-night, for to-morrow she had to go all the way to the Whitechapel Hospital to do a scene for her book. It would be tiring, very tiring, but it had all been arranged with Alison and Dr. Strange. The outlines of the long narrow street were growing vague in the twilight. The omnibuses, loaded inside and out, loomed in dark masses against the pink western sky. The aspect of the crowd had changed. Hardly any women were to be seen, and the newsboys, bawling their loudest, were thrusting their wares in the faces of busy lawyers hurrying from the Courts. With the passing hours, events, it would seem, had waxed more exciting.

'Spesh-shul! Extry Spesh-hul! Fifth Edition! Sir 'Orris Blaythewaite in the box! Revoltin' details! The great divorce case!' shouted the newsboys.

And beneath the cold, unheeding, scudding clouds, the world which writes, and buys, and sells the news of the evening was pushing, hurrying, and jostling elbows up and down the wind-swept Strand.

## CHAPTER XVII. NUMBER TWENTY-SEVEN

**THE** vast, mud-coloured building loomed out of the fog as the doctor's coachman drew up, with a jerk, under the portico. Against the dark lining of the carriage the fine drawing of a man's profile was visible by the light of a portable lamp. There were irritable folds at the corners of the mouth, a restless look in the keen eyes, as they travelled over the page he was reading. Dr. Dunlop Strange only folded up the medical paper he had been studying as he went up the steps of the Whitechapel Hospital. It was his habit to allow himself no time for vagrant thoughts, so that even to-day, when he was to meet Alison and take her over the hospital along with Mary Erle, even to-day his mind ran on professional matters.

Inside the large bare hall, where a marble statue of the Queen loomed chillily out of the vague half-light, Alison and Mary, the latter carrying a leather note-book, were already awaiting him. Dunlop Strange looked at Alison, taking in every detail of her radiant personality with his swift professional glance. In the after years he always preferred to think of her as he saw her that instant, standing by the white marble statue of the Queen, for never again did she look at him with the same clear, cordial eyes.

The doctor and Alison met as people meet who are more than interested in each other. For some time past she had known that he was devoted to her, and the girl had almost made up her mind, if he asked her, she would accept him. It was a busy, sensible life, that of a doctor's wife, she told herself; and, after all, in her world, one had to marry some day or other. One couldn't permit one's self the luxury of being an old maid, unless one had an income of over £5,000 a year. But there was no particular hurry, she said, when well-meaning friends bothered her about it. They were both of a certain age. They both had their own occupations, their own hobbies.

The doctor never took his eyes from her face. To have this woman for his wife would be the crowning act of a brilliantly successful career. He only hesitated to speak until he had received the baronetcy which was in store for him. Not that Alison herself would care; she had none of the usual small feminine ambitions; but the doctor was quite aware that it would influence Lady Jane, who had made up her mind that Alison, when she married, should only make, if she could help it, what she called a 'sensible match.'

They went up a stone staircase, to which a somewhat false air of cheerfulness was imparted by a grass-green painted dado, surmounted by a bright lavender-toned wall, passing a large window giving out on a grimy back garden, a garden whose sodden grass plot was closed in by high, brown brick walls, and over which hung a heavy, fog-laden sky, etched with sooty branches. On the first landing there was a closed door, and outside, an empty stretcher, beside which two hospital porters were waiting. Suddenly the door was pushed ajar, and for an instant there was a vision of anxious, inquisitive faces, lit up by a glare of gas; of a nurse's back, bending forward, and of a surgeon's face, blowing spray on to something that was invisible. Over all an intense silence, broken only by the hoarse whispers of the porters with the stretcher, wondering how long they would have to wait.

'There don't seem to be many students in there,' said Alison in her practical voice.

'No, they don't crowd in here like they do in the other hospitals. We've so many operations, you see. Two or three every afternoon all the year round.'

Upstairs, in the 'Charlotte Ward,' the fifty red-quilted beds effaced themselves in the gloom of the winter afternoon. There was a vague odour of medicine, overpowered by that of patent disinfectants. All the beds were alike; there were blue-and-white checked curtains and vallance, a rope by which the patient could pull herself into a sitting posture, a cupboard with food and medicines inside, and a cardboard overhead, on which the number, age, disease, and diet of the patient were all duly inscribed. Yes, the little beds, thought Mary, were curiously alike, and yet on every mattress a different form of pain was being endured.

'Congestion of the lungs, peritonitis,' said the doctor in a brief undertone, as the two girls passed down the room. A screen was placed round one of the narrow bedsteads.

'What is that for?' whispered Mary.

'Hopeless case,' answered the doctor gravely. 'It is probably all over by now. We do that to spare the other patients. Death scenes have a bad moral effect.'

'And—and how long do they stay there after it's all over?'

'Oh, they are removed to the mortuary at once.'

At intervals down the long room, with its shining white boards, blazed large fires, lighting up, here and there,

## The Story of a Modern Woman

the bland, unemotional features of a nurse, under her smooth hair and white cap—the sexless features of a woman who has learnt to witness suffering without a sign. Yet they brightened the room, these girls, in their lilac cotton gowns and ample aprons, with their practical faces, and their strong, helpful hands, suggesting an out-of-doors where people were healthy and happy, a place where no one was agonising.

On hearing that Dr. Strange was taking visitors round, Sister Charlotte, the superintendent of the ward, emerged from her private room and hurried forward. The Sister was a long-nosed woman of thirty-five, with small, bright eyes and a cordial manner. The doctor introduced the three ladies to each other, and Sister Charlotte talked, moving forward all the time, with a professional look on her bright face. They stopped, now, at every bed. Mary asked questions in an undertone, and Dunlop Strange, whose hospital manner was proverbial, addressed each sick woman in the same tone he would have employed to a duchess. His way with women was one of the things for which he was justly famous. And in this manner the little procession moved somewhat slowly along.

They had come to the end of one line of beds, and were now about to turn up the other side of the room. Sister Charlotte stopped.

'We have a new patient there, doctor,' she said briskly. 'Number twenty-seven. A hopeless case of rapid consumption. Poor creature,' she whispered to Alison, 'she was in a terrible state when she came. I can't tell you. They brought her in from one of the common lodging-houses. It seems she tried to commit suicide last summer, but the police fished her out of the canal, and managed to pump back the life into her. That was the beginning of her lung-trouble. Since then she must have sunk very low.'

All four stepped up to the foot of the narrow bed. The patient's back was turned to them. She was only a shapeless lump, breathing heavily under the red coverlet.

'Don't let's disturb her,' said Alison, in a faintly disgusted tone. 'Why hadn't they let the wretched woman drown in that muddy canal water, before she could be sucked down in the awful whirlpool of vice?'

But the irony of actualities has little to do with any mere human volition. There are things written by the great penman we call destiny, which no man's remorse can erase and no woman's tears wash out. Number Twenty-seven tossed over and lay on her back, and the course of two lives was altered.

Number Twenty-seven lay on her back, her vicious face, with its hard mouth and the brownish-pink flush on each cheek-bone, looking sharply emaciated against the whiteness of the pillow. Her fringe, reaching nearly to her eye-brows, was faded and lank; the mouth, with its singularly hard lines, was swollen and livid.

'Oh! Alison,' whispered Mary, 'I remember her, although she's terribly changed. I once saw her, waiting, poor soul, in the Regent's Park, for someone—'

Dr. Dunlop Strange bent forward with his searching, professional glance, for he was famous at diagnosis. He put his hand on her wrist, and their eyes met. Good God! Could it be? His heart absolutely stood still. Was this horrible wreck the girl he had taken such a fancy to only half a dozen years ago—the girl who had been so fond of him, but who had grown so bad-tempered and suspicious, that he had been obliged to break off all relations with her? And, merciful God! could it be that this woman—the unsightly corpse, as it were, of his dead pleasure—was going to speak; was about to spoil the happiness of his whole future life? In all his forty-five years Dr. Dunlop Strange had never known such an odious moment.

But Number Twenty-seven only laughed—an unmirthful, coarse, and empty laugh.

'Lord, **are you here?**' she muttered, staring the doctor straight in the eyes. Then she tossed over.

It was a curious scene. The doctor drew a long breath; he had grown visibly paler before he spoke. The nurse stared. Alison's eyes were fixed on the bed-quilt. Mary looked perplexed.

'Poor creature! She mistakes me for some one else,' he said at last, in a voice which he tried hard to make natural. 'They often do just at the last,' he added in a lower tone. And then, taking down the card hung over the bed, on which the patient's age, disease, and diet, as well as the physician's name in charge of the case were written, he continued in his sympathetic voice—

'Quite right; perfectly right. Dr. Brown, I see, has ordered everything that could possibly be of use. Sister, look after this case specially.'

Alison roused herself, bent over the patient, saying something kind, and passed on in a kind of dream. Not an incident of the strange scene had escaped her. She felt a curious kind of nausea; perhaps it was the air of the ward. It sounded far off, the chat and the talk round the other beds, as they passed up the ward, and she was conscious only of an irresistible desire to go back and speak to that poor outcast on the hospital mattress. They passed to

## The Story of a Modern Woman

another girl—the battered leavings of the vice of a great city—and further on a sallow, bright-eyed young woman sitting up in bed, whom, Sister Charlotte whispered, they must make haste to cure and discharge, as in a month or two she would become a mother.

'She will become a mother,' thought Alison, 'the mother, perhaps, of a baby-girl, destined, before she is born, to become like one of these!'

The face of Number Twenty-seven became an obtrusion. She must go back and hear her story; perhaps she could help her, save her, send her out to a farm she knew of at the Cape, where even such as she might begin a new life. People often got well at the Cape when they were far gone in consumption.

The doctor and Mary were a little way in front as Alison detained the Sister for a moment.

'I should like, Sister Charlotte,' she said, trying to make her voice sound indifferent, 'to come and see that poor woman—Number Twenty-seven—to-morrow. I have taken an interest in her case. Tell me, where does she come from—what sort of a girl **was** she before—?'

'Oh, she's not a Londoner. Came from Sussex five or six years ago.'

'I might,' said Alison, 'be able to do something for her. I will talk it all over with you if you will let me come to-morrow.'

'You must allow me to drive you both home,' said Dr. Dunlop Strange, in his decided way, as they stepped out into the grey mud, the orange gas-lights, and the shuffling crowd of the Whitechapel Road. But there was not much conversation as the carriage rolled westward through the deepening gloom. Mary and the doctor talked spasmodically. Alison hardly spoke.

## CHAPTER XVIII. DUNLOP STRANGE MAKES A MISTAKE

IT was three minutes to eight. Round the marble mantelpiece in the great empty-looking drawing-room in Portman Square, a small circle of guests were gathered. Lady Jane was talking. She had been a wit and a beauty in her youth, and, with the garrulity of old age, she liked to talk of her triumphs; of her flirtation with Bulwer Lytton, whose waistcoats and whose romances were just then turning the heads of all the women; of the occasion when she snatched a celebrity from Lady Palmerston, and above all, of d'Orsay, who, up to the last, had continued to scintillate at her dinner-parties. To-night she was discussing a famous statesman's cautious affairs of the heart with a little old man, whose parchment face had wrinkled and whose hair had whitened in the service of his country at various minor European courts.

'I always heard, you know, that she was formally engaged to him when her husband was still alive. He went there every day. The thing was accepted.'

The wrinkled old man had a senile chuckle, which not infrequently turned into a cough.

'He, he, my dear lady. I know it for a fact. And then there was the other woman. The old lady that used to make appointments with him, by the great fountain at the Crystal Palace—'

'And who left him all her money.'

'How quite too delicious. Early Victorian scandal,' whispered Beauty Flower to Lady Blaythewaite, who, in her *rôle* of pretty woman, was standing in her favourite swaggering attitude on the hearth-rug, a radiant vision of pink and white flesh. 'Don't you want to hear it?'

'I don't know whom they're talking about,' she said in her deliberate drawl. 'Does one ever meet these people anywhere—at dinner, or at Sandown?'

'Oh, they're all dead,' he sniggered, patting the Parma violets in his coat.

'Then why didn't you say so before, you little idiot?' announced her ladyship in her rather high voice. She was vaguely afraid of the boy's malicious tongue, but she tolerated him about her because she was more afraid of the spiteful things he would say if she didn't.

'But it's deliciously amusing, Lady Jane's scandal, isn't it?' he continued with a little wriggle which disposed of the pretty woman's snub. 'Can you picture an intrigue in side-spring boots, the *coup de foudre* from a spoon-bonnet and a burnous, and white, blue-white stockings?'

'No, I can't. They must have looked frumps,' replied the lady, with a complacent survey of her Paris frock and her somewhat obvious charms in the huge gilt mirror. It was two months now since the great divorce case; it was considered dull to talk about it any more. The whole affair had remained nebulous. Neither side had been able to obtain a verdict, but most people took the lady's part. Sir Horace was old, ugly, and vicious; she was young, pretty, and in a notably tolerant set. The husband had gone away in his steam yacht to investigate the South Sea Islands, and meanwhile Lady Blaythewaite made a point of being seen everywhere, especially at houses which she would have voted 'frumpish' a year ago.

The guests were arriving quickly now. Mr. Bosanquet-Barry, very boyish-looking and important, with something to tell Lady Jane which had to be told in a distant corner, while his hostess tapped him several times playfully with a small carved ivory fan; the Irish Viceroy, over on important business; a well-known beauty without her husband, who was annoyed when she found she was not the last, as she had wished to make an effective entry; Mary, looking somewhat pale and worn; a young A.D.C. from India, with a crooked line of sunburn across his forehead, and a naïve enthusiasm for the two London beauties; and the Attorney-General, famous for his good stories.

'It is my own child,' complained Lady Jane to the Viceroy, who had more than once advanced to offer his arm, under the impression that dinner had been announced, 'who keeps me waiting for my dinner. Would you believe that that girl of mine spends half her time in a workman's flat, or poking about in those horrible smelling streets in Whitechapel?'

'Young ladies,' said the Viceroy, frowning, for he was very hungry, 'have curious ideas of amusing themselves nowadays.'

'In our time balls and parties were supposed to suffice. But I can't get my child to take a proper interest in society,' complained Lady Jane. 'I tell her it's absurd. Why, it's such a refuge for a woman in her old age. But it's

## The Story of a Modern Woman

always the same story. When she is young and pretty society cares for the woman, but when she is old and—well—repaired, it is, of course, the woman who cares for society.'

Just then Alison slipped in quietly. 'Please forgive me, mother, for being late,' she said, in a tired little voice, as she kissed Lady Jane on each plump cheek. 'I'm dead tired. I only got home from the hospital at seven.'

'Well, you're not the last,' said her mother. 'Our dear Dunlop Strange hasn't come yet, and he's to take you down.'

'Dr. Strange?' said Alison, her face growing white. 'I thought he was in Brussels? It was in the papers that he had been sent for from Brussels.'

'So he was; but he'll be back for my dinner to-night. I know, too, he's got an important consultation to-morrow. But we can't wait,' said Lady Jane, ringing the bell.

The long procession began to move slowly to the dining-room. Alison went down alone. She ate her soup in silence, thankful for the empty chair beside her. Oh, if only something would keep him away to-night. She could not bear it. She was tired, her head ached, her throat felt dry; she must have caught a chill. A fine drizzle had been falling when she left the Whitechapel Hospital, and nowhere was there a cab to be seen. The long journey home in an omnibus, an omnibus for which she had waited a long time at a corner, had thoroughly tired and chilled her. The conventional voices of the men, the foolish, fixed smiles of the women all around, struck her to-night as more than usually puerile. How endless seemed the long procession of fishes and meats, of hocks and clarets!—what a foolish superabundance of food! At one moment she made up her mind she would get up and slip out of the room. The commonplace voice of Lady Blaythewaite, making the somewhat bald statement that she intended to start for Monte Carlo on the 28th of the following month, bored and irritated her. On her right hand two people were passionately discussing the way in which red mullet should be cooked. The lady, it would seem, was all for *papilottes*, whereas the gentleman could not endure them without being stuffed and served with port-wine sauce. It was the only moment of the dinner at which the conversation on her right hand had approached any sort of enthusiasm. The wrinkled diplomat, who sat on her mother's left hand, was resuscitating some details of Lola Montez in '48 for her special delectation. The Viceroy was solemnly consuming his dinner. Through the tall flower-stands Alison could hear Mr. Bosanquet-Barry, under the soothing influence of Lady Jane's excellent champagne, airily inciting Mary to write art criticisms for *The Comet*; a fact which Alison was certain he would forget the very next morning. The odour of hot-house flowers, the smell of the meats, the very bouquet of the wines, seemed to overpower her. She had made up her mind to go, when the chair next to her was pulled out, and Dunlop Strange sat down beside her.

It was too late now. She could not leave the room without all London knowing that—

'I'm so sorry; the boat was late getting into Dover, and I've only just got here,' said Strange.

'Then I'll let you eat your dinner, doctor,' said Alison, making a civil effort, 'you must be tired and hungry.'

'No, no fish or soup. I'll have what's going,' said the doctor to the obsequious butler, who regarded him already as the son-in-law of the house.

'You're a wicked man,' cried Lady Jane down the table. 'Why didn't you come before? My cook won't forgive you, even if I do.'

And Dunlop Strange, as he drank off a glass of champagne and looked round the table, felt tenderly disposed to all the world. He felt, rather than saw, the beautiful profile at his side. He was always intensely conscious of Alison's presence; he knew when she was in a room even before he had seen her. No woman that he had ever met had ever attracted him like this one. And in gracefully artificial moments like these Dunlop Strange was happy. The factitious and fleeting emotions which he experienced in society delighted him—emotions heightened by a rare vintage, made memorable by an elaborate dish, accentuated by a fine feminine smile. The half chaffing, half caressing tone in which his patients addressed him (for Dunlop Strange was popular with great ladies); the *rôle*, three-parts confessor and one-fourth adorer, which he played with these beautiful victims of the vapours and the megrims, appealed directly to his vanity. He had around him continually in his consulting-room of a morning, during his afternoons spent rapidly driving from one enervating boudoir to another, and at night in society, a voluptuous feminine atmosphere, an atmosphere which had become part of his life, and which he could no more dispense with now than the fine burgundy he was wont to drink at his dinner, the special havannah which assisted the process of digestion afterwards. And there, close beside him, his arm almost touching hers at the crowded dinner-table, sat the woman who was more to him than any other feminine personality—the woman who was to

## The Story of a Modern Woman

make him one of the most envied men in London.

Alison was speaking now to her neighbour on the right, but Strange was struck, when she turned round, with the hard look on her face. There was an expression in the girl's eyes to-night which he had never seen there, and which he could not quite understand, unless—

'You look tired,' he said, in his soft professional voice. 'What have you been doing to-day?'

'I? Oh, I have been at the Whitechapel Hospital. I have been there several times since that day we went with you,' she added quietly.

'I wish to Heaven you would not run any such risk! We doctors are hardened, you know, but there is always the fear of infection for delicate women.'

'I did not,' said Alison, 'go near the fever ward. I went to see—Sister Charlotte.'

Just then Lady Blaythewaite, who was on Strange's left, turned her rather prominent eyes upon him, and for a quarter of an hour Dr. Dunlop Strange was not suffered to waver in his dinner-table devotion, though he was tortured with doubts about Alison—about the girl in the hospital. It was absurd, it was melodramatic, that the girl should have turned up again.... But with this ugly fact knocking at his brain, he had to lend an attentive ear to his neighbour's confidences about the Cambridgeshire, and how much 'ready cash' she expected to 'land' by her somewhat elaborate transactions. Vaguely, as in a dream, the doctor heard about the favourite—a certain 'Miss Gwen—dolen'—who had just been 'scratched,' and some foreign admirer, who, it appeared, 'put' Lady Blaythewaite on to various 'good things.' On his other side an animated discussion on the subject of liqueurs was in hand, in which Miss Ives was politely pretending to take an interest. The merits of Kirsch, of Benedictine, of Elixir de Spa, were contended for with some spirit and success, while Lady Blaythewaite, joining in, declared herself entirely in favour of green Chartreuse. The subject was beginning to show signs of wear when the doctor turned to Alison—

'And so you went to see Sister Charlotte again? A capital woman. Plenty of common sense—no nonsense about her. The sort of person you can trust.'

'I am glad of that,' replied Alison quietly, 'for she gave me a great deal of information on a subject I am intensely interested in.'

'And what,' said Strange, with a somewhat uneasy smile, 'and what, may I ask, is that?'

'I am interested, doctor, in poor creatures like Number Twenty-seven—'

'Ah!' sighed Strange, frowning slightly, as he reached out his hand to the glass of Château Lafite which the butler had just poured carefully out, holding the bottle in its wicker cage like a very treasure, lest one drop of the dregs should reach the glass.

'Dear Miss Alison, those are terrible cases. They are cankerous evils, eating away the very life of our social system.'

Alison looked at him, and there was a royal scorn in her glance. What, he was going to brazen it out, then; to pretend that she was nothing to him?

'My dear doctor,' she said, very slowly and softly, 'you forget that Mr. Lecky maintains that, on the contrary, Number Twenty-seven is the martyr of civilisation.'

'It is a subject,' murmured Strange, with a slight movement of the shoulders, 'which I must admit I find painful to discuss with young ladies.'

'Ah!' said Alison, in her quiet, serious voice, 'but then I am not a "young lady." I am only a woman, taking a great deal of interest in others of my own sex. The girl, at any rate, seems to be what we are now agreed to call a 'morally deficient person'—one, in fact, who has urgent claims on all men's honour, on all women's pity. Properly trained and protected, she might have been well, happy, and a tolerably useful member of society. Think of it! That woman was younger than I am. If I had only known her earlier, who knows? I might have been her friend; I might have saved her from—'

'Possibly,' replied the doctor, coolly, 'but meanwhile—'

'Meanwhile the girl has succumbed. She died to-day.'

There was a burst of laughter from each side of the table. The Attorney-General had just told his newest story. Dr. Dunlop Strange was carefully peeling a fine pear as she spoke. In the pause that followed he continued to separate the fruit from its perfumed skin, bending a little, in his short-sighted way, over his Sèvres plate. All his future life, he knew, was involved in her next few words.

## The Story of a Modern Woman

'My dear Miss Ives,' he said, with something of his consulting-room manner, 'pray, don't judge hastily. You have probably only heard half her story. Do you, now, really **know** anything about her?'

'Yes,' said Alison, abruptly. And, as she looked him straight in the eyes, he knew that she was aware of the whole sordid story. 'I'm not particularly sentimental, as you know,' she added; 'but I've made up my mind that that poor creature shall be decently buried in the little country churchyard in Sussex, in the village where she used to live. I should like her to rest now—for good. Shall I make the necessary arrangements, or will you,' she added with a shade of irony, 'prefer, perhaps, to do so—?'

They were standing up now, for the ladies, gathering up their fans and gloves, were about to leave the room. He looked at her humbly, imploringly, but the beautiful candid eyes were quite hard.

'I—I—perhaps it would be better, on the whole, if you allowed me to see to it.'

Nothing more was said. He sat down again when she was gone, staring blankly at the fruit-strewn plates and half-drained glasses, at the tall flower-stands and flickering candles. Her crumpled napkin fell across his knee, and, as it fell, he saw, with a shudder, a vision of a stiff, silent figure in the hospital mortuary. He could hear the rustle of silk dresses, and the sound of feminine voices as the ladies trailed upstairs. And he knew as he heard them go that it was all over. Yes, it was all over, for she, at any rate, was not one of those girls who have infinite complaisances for a possible husband.

A man drew up his chair, asked for a light, and began to talk of a bit of scandal that was then enjoying high favour at the clubs. Strange stared at him with haggard eyes, got up, made some excuse, and left the house.

## CHAPTER XIX. ALISON ARRANGES A MATCH

**TWO** or three days after the dinner in Portman Square, as Mary was trying to impart an air of reality to her 'society' article in *The Fan*—a task at which she was busy on three mornings of every month—a pencil note was brought from Alison, dated, to her surprise, from Portman Square.

'Dear little girl,' it said, 'I'm down with an awful cold—bronchitis, I think. The doctor says I'm not to get up. It's such a nuisance my being seedy, because to-day is Evelina's wedding-day. She's to be married at 2.30. Will you, like a dear, go and see that she's dressed, and bring her here to me? And my presents—the tea-service, and the work-basket, and the new cot for the baby—see that she has them, won't you?—Yours, ALISON.'

'Tell the man,' said Mary to the stolid maid-of-all-work, who was waiting, with pendant red hands and slightly open mouth, at the door, 'that I shall be round in half an hour.' There were still another dozen lines to write. The thing must be neatly turned, made acidulous and sparkling. It took some fifteen minutes of writing and scratching out. Then mechanically she ran her eye once again over the lines, tied up the sheets of MSS., and directed it to the editor before she left the house.

Mary found the bride all dressed and ready when she reached the flat. Always a silent girl, who accepted things as they came, Evelina seemed to-day paralysed with the excitement of her position. In silence they drove in a four-wheel cab to Portman Square. Lady Jane, with an uneasy look on her plump, worldly face, was issuing from Alison's bedroom when they got upstairs.

'That's so kind of you, my dear Mary. Go in—go in. My poor Alison wishes to see you. And this, no doubt, is the young person she is so interested in. My dear child has such a good heart. You will stay, will you not, while darling Alison is poorly? I have to go to a meeting of the Primrose League—the dear Primrose League. And, Mary, my child,' she added, as she rustled down the stairs in her ample garments, 'kindly ask my maid, as you're near my room, to bring down my bottle of lavender-salts—the strong ones with the gold top.'

Alison was sitting up in bed, with her head slightly bent forward in a fit of coughing, as they stepped inside. It was in a large, gay-looking bedroom that she lay—a room furnished by Lady Jane in a style which she considered suitable to an unmarried daughter. There were many chintz draperies, patterned with sprawling pink roses; the pillows were trimmed with deep lace, and the ample silk eider-down quilt was of a piercing blue. Little pot-bellied Loves disported themselves on the round looking-glass, and a number of slim gold-and-white chairs were placed about the room. A bronchitis-kettle was steaming near the bed, and bright sunshine lay along the counterpane and in patches on the carpet.

'Here she is!' said Mary; and Evelina, with loudly-creaking boots, stepped, gawky and embarrassed in her finery, to the bedside, her red cheeks and wrists accentuated by the pallor of her soiled white-silk frock. A wreath of stiff kid orange-blossoms lay on her wiry, dark hair, from which hung backwards a veil of white tulle. One of the thumbs of her white silk gloves had already ripped up. On her ample bosom heaved and fell a gold locket, containing a curl of the baby's hair.

'Kiss me, my dear,' whispered Alison; 'I hope you are going to be very, very happy. I'm so sorry I can't be at the wedding.'

'Oh, Miss Alison,' cried the girl, 'I'm so sorry you're—you're not well. Joe and me, we'd both like to put the wedding off till you could come—'

'Don't wait for that, Evelina,' said Alison, an anxious look crossing her forehead; 'you mustn't wait for that. Mary, you'll go with her to the church, and see that the wedding breakfast—'

'Yes, yes, dear, Don't tire yourself thinking about it all. How did you catch this dreadful—cold?'

'Waiting for an omnibus in the Mile End Road. You know—that night of the dinner here. I had been to the hospital. I must have caught a chill.'

'Alison, I'm coming back.'

'Oh, yes. Good-bye, my dear Evelina. I wish I could have been with you to-day,' she said, wistfully. 'I hope you'll like the little house; and mind you look after Joe, and keep him steady. Good-bye, good luck!'

And a few minutes later the pink cheeks, the second-hand wedding-dress, and the creaking boots were being conveyed in a four-wheeled cab towards matrimonial respectability.

Alison wanted to hear all about it when Mary got back.

## The Story of a Modern Woman

'Well, and what did she say?' asked the sick woman.

'She didn't say anything. Brides never do,' said Mary.

'And how did Joe behave?'

'As far as I could make out, he was terrified at me, and as I saw that, in all probability, he would eat nothing as long as I was there, I made an excuse, and left the wedding—feast, no doubt to the intense relief of the guests.'

'And the baby—my dear fat thing?'

'Oh, the baby,' said Mary, 'apparently belongs to the new anti—marriage movement. He doesn't approve, it would seem, of any legalising of the bond which unites his father and mother. At any rate, he screamed till he was purple in the face, and had to be removed from the room by a first cousin of his mamma's, a young lady who wore more ostrich feathers than I have ever seen on one human head. And as for poor Evelina,' continued Mary, laughing, 'I'm afraid, after all the pains you've taken, you haven't developed in her a sense of humour. Otherwise she wouldn't have insisted on being married in a second—hand white silk dress.'

'You don't understand,' protested Alison. 'I think that it shows a certain vague hankering after the ideal—a sort of *élan* towards the unattainable.'

'Nonsense! she ought to have been married in a good stout waterproof.'

'Well, thank goodness, we're not all sensible. How dull it would be if we were!'

'I must say the kid orange—blossoms and the reach—me—down wedding—dress quite made my joy.'

'You're an unsympathetic beast,' said Alison, tossing on her rumpled pillows. 'I shouldn't have laughed. I know these people so much better than you do.'

Presently she fell into a doze, and Mary sat at the window, trying to read, but with her eyes and thoughts constantly on the bed, where Alison was tossing about in a curiously restless manner.

'Little Mary!' came a voice from the bed presently.

'Yes, dear?'

'Promise me that you will never, never do anything to hurt another woman,' said the sick girl, running her finger along the pattern on the counterpane. 'I don't suppose for an instant you ever would. But there come times in our lives when we can do a great deal of good, or an incalculable amount of harm. If women only used their power in the right way! If we were only united we could lead the world. But we're not—we're not,' she said, closing her eyes with a tired gesture.

'Ah!' said Mary slowly, 'but we shall be by and by. All we modern women are going to help each other, not to hinder. And there's a great deal to do—'

'Yes, and we've all so little time,' said Alison, regretfully. 'Do you remember the hospital, and that poor girl, Number Twenty—seven?'

'Yes, of course. What makes you think of her?' faltered Mary.

'She's dead, you know. It can't be nice to die in a hospital, can it? The ugly, long ward, those ghastly, twitching faces on the pillows, the students staring at you, then the mortuary, and a pauper's funeral.'

'Don't talk about it, Alison.'

'And yet that girl,' muttered the sick woman, 'was Dunlop Strange's mistress. He made her what she was.'

'Oh, Alison, are you **sure**?'

Alison nodded.

'I thought at first it might be a got—up story—one hears of such things, you know. But it was true, quite true. She had his photographs, his letters, little things that belonged to him. Mary, that wretched creature was a respectable girl—a shop assistant—when she first saw him. No, it isn't a pretty world!'

'And Dr. Strange? Does he know?'

'I told him that night at the dinner. I was furious. He tried to brave it out, to pretend he knew nothing about her. I hope,' she added, while the anxious look deepened on her forehead, 'that I shall never have to see him again. You won't,' she said excitedly, 'let them bring him up here, to me?'

'No, no, of course not.'

But the thing seemed to have taken possession of her mind.

'When did you see her, Mary?' she asked presently. 'You seemed to know her when we stopped at that bed.'

'I only saw her once in the Regent's Park, waiting about for some one. I remembered her face perfectly—it made an impression on me. It—it was that day at the end of July when—when I expected Vincent back—'

## The Story of a Modern Woman

'That was the day they pulled her out of the canal—the slimy green canal. She got fourteen days for that. The magistrate said it was a painful case, and that he would let her off easily.'

'They might have let her drown. It would have been better,' replied Mary, gazing into the firelight.

'She never said a word about **him**,' said Alison presently, 'she never mentioned his name. Lots of girls would have made a scandal, out of revenge. There must have been some good in her. It was only quite at the last that I knew for certain.'

The winter dusk fell early in the spacious bed-room. There was a terrible tension in the air. The very atmosphere seemed charged with feminine emotion, as the two girls, exaggerating, as over-refined women will, the importance of ethical standards of conduct in the great teeming universe, talked on and on in the gathering gloom.

It was dark when Lady Jane returned, bringing with her large, pink cheeks, her parted hair, her rustling silk clothes, an air at once motherly and mundane into the sick room.

'I shall insist, my darling, on your seeing some one else,' she announced in her rather loud but cheery voice. 'I can quite understand your not wishing to see our dear Dunlop, for we women,' she added with a sigh, 'all have our little coquetries. But what objection can you have to seeing Danby? I shall send round at once to Travers Danby.'

But the great man, when he finally arrived, preserved an impenetrable mask in the presence of Alison, of her mother, and of Mary. A prolonged consultation with the other doctor resulted in frequent doses of brandy or port wine being ordered, and an admission, just at the hall-door, that the case was serious.

Mary went down to the dining-room when the bell rang, leaving Alison's old nurse at the bed-side. Lady Jane's one idea was that Dunlop Strange should be called in.

'If she would only see him,' she reiterated for the fifth time, shaking her head tragically when the butler offered her a savoury, 'he is so clever with chest complaints, so marvellously, marvellously clever! Why, he cured Kempton—Lord Sandown's eldest son—when he was positively given up by every doctor in London. And they say the poor young man had led a perfectly shocking life.'

'Dear Lady Jane,' urged Mary, 'pray don't insist on it to her. It would be worse than useless—it really would do harm.' She had made up her mind to say nothing about 'Number Twenty-seven,' and her sordid little tragedy. Lady Jane was kind and charming, but she had retained the prejudices of ladies who were young in the fifties. In all probability she would only call the dead girl some old-fashioned hard names. Certainly she would never comprehend her daughter's extremely modern sympathy for this woman who had drawn her last breath in a hospital ward.

It was settled that Mary should remain all night at the bedside. There were a dozen things to think of: food, stimulants, medicines, blisters. She ran over carefully in her mind all that she would have to do during the night. Lady Jane said she would lie down in the next room but with the door open, to listen.

Towards ten o'clock, the sick girl sat up, saying she could breathe easier in that position.

'Oh, how I hate being ill,' she muttered, clenching her fingers as they lay on the counter-pane. 'Mary,' she continued, while the irritable anxious look deepened on her face for she had to stop—'I feel,' she gasped at last, 'as if I were choking.'

'Dear,' said the other girl, 'why don't you lie down?'

'I can't—I can't breathe if I do. Mary, do you think I shall be ill long? I've always hated being ill. There is the personal degradation—one looks odious, one **is** odious.'

'Dear, you will be all right again in a day or two,' urged Mary.

'Oh! I don't mean that,' she muttered, falling back. 'It doesn't matter; nothing matters, nothing matters,' she went on till she fell into an uneasy dose. She was lying tossing from one side to the other with her head lower than her shoulders, when Dr. Danby came again at eleven.

'How long has the patient been in that position?' whispered the great man. Something in the tone of his voice made her heart stand still.

'She's been lying like that all the time—when she isn't sitting up coughing,' faltered the girl.

'Ah! We must keep up the patient's strength in every way. It's very serious now, Miss Erle.'

Mary heard the words, but they sounded a long way off.

## The Story of a Modern Woman

## CHAPTER XX. THE GATE OF SILENCE

'I WILL not, while I have health and strength,' said Lady Jane severely at the breakfast table, when the question of a trained nurse was mooted, 'consent to have my child nursed by a hireling. It is a mother's duty,' she continued, with lofty decision, regarding Mary and her red, tired eyelids somewhat reproachfully. And Lady Jane, to be sure, was convinced that she herself had tended the sick girl through the night. Mary remembered, with something like a smile, that once or twice during that long vigil, her hostess, arrayed in a somewhat short night-dress, scantily covered by a pink dressing-gown, had stepped ponderously into the room, upset one or two medicine bottles, and poured some beef-tea into a glass which contained lemonade. Lady Jane had the best intentions, but nature had not cut her out for a sick nurse. She was short-sighted and easily perturbed, and her natural emotions overcame her so much that once she retreated in tears, carrying away in her distraction the bottle of medicine which was to be administered every hour.

'No,' reiterated the mother; 'not while I have health and strength. I shall go to her myself immediately.'

The hours passed mournfully enough. There was no improvement during the day. Alison sat up in bed, propped up with pillows, while her strength lasted. Her face, which had gradually turned livid, was covered with a clammy perspiration. Every now and again she pushed back the damp strands of hair from her forehead. The fits of choking became more frequent; she had no longer the strength to battle with them.

'Mary,' she whispered once during the morning, 'my feet look so odd. They are swelling—I wonder why?' She pushed one foot from under the bed-clothes; it was quite disfigured already.

'Funny it looks,' she muttered. 'What's his name? the French sculptor—you know—modelled my foot once. It would be horrid!'—she stared vacantly at the little swollen foot, while Mary bent down and rearranged the bed-clothes—to have great fat feet like that. Mary, do you think they will get slim again when I am well?'

'My darling, of course, of course.'

Again the sick woman fell into an uneasy doze. The doctors' visit brought small comfort. Both bent with anxious faces over the bed. Little could be done but to administer strong restoratives. The two physicians feared some cerebral complication.

'Had the patient,' they asked Lady Jane, 'recently had any mental shock?'

'Certainly not, certainly not. My poor darling,' replied the mother, 'was the picture of health and happiness. Impossible that she should have had any trouble of which I am not aware,' she announced, with all an old woman's fatuity.

The two doctors glanced at each other and said nothing. Mary detained the elder man downstairs.

'Tell me the truth,' she said.

'My dear young lady, I fear there is nothing—absolutely nothing—that can be done. The patient is sinking rapidly. In all probability she will not live through another day. It would be well if you could break it to her poor mother.'

Mary stood still for a minute, leaning against the passage wall, as the two doctors closed the door softly. She heard the two carriages roll away—rolling away to other sick rooms, to pronounce, perhaps, another sentence of death before they reached home. It was nothing to them, she remembered; nothing, nothing, nothing. People died every day. Every day people were born. Some had to go, these men of science would say, to make way for others.

'There seems to be no change—for the better,' whispered Lady Jane an hour later, as they both stood at the bedside. 'She is still asleep, and muttering, my poor darling. If we could only rouse her, now. I shall insist on Danby seeing her again,' she added feverishly, patting her eyes with a lace handkerchief.

Mary looked at the slight figure in the bed.

'Dear Lady Jane,' she said softly, 'I don't think we shall ever—be able to rouse her now.' It struck her as curiously odd that she should be saying this to the woman near her—this woman that she always pictured at dinner-parties and drums, tapping people with her fan, carrying her bare shoulders and her little stories from drawing-room to drawing-room in the eternal monotony of good society. With a thing so poignant, so human, so pitiful as death, it seemed impossible that this charming lady could ever be associated.

The mother broke down completely, and had to be led away.

Towards four o'clock someone knocked at the door, bringing up letters for Mary. They had been sent round

## The Story of a Modern Woman

from the lodgings in Bulstrode Street. There were several letters: one from Jimmie, one from her bootmaker, and one she saw, with a curious tight feeling at her heart, was from Vincent, and bore a Northborough post-mark. Going to the window, she bent forward in the failing light and broke the seal. Northborough, Dec. 3rd.

'MY DEAR MARY,—You are perhaps aware that to-morrow is fixed for my marriage, and it is no exaggeration to say that I shall not feel happy when I stand at the altar in the morning unless I have a word of blessing from you, my oldest and most valued friend, on this most auspicious occasion. Although I trust that changed circumstances will not to any great extent separate us, yet I cannot help expressing the hope that such uncommon virtues, intellectual powers and remarkable perseverance [the word 'virtues' had been added as an after-thought, and was squeezed in between 'uncommon' and 'intellectual'] as are happily yours, may be speedily and justly rewarded.'—Ever your devoted friend,

'VINCENT HEMMING.'

Then she deliberately opened the other letters. There was a small cheque from a newspaper; a little note—very affectionate—from Jimmie, requesting the loan of three pounds; and lastly, a bootmaker's bill. Jimmie wanted three pounds, to be forwarded immediately. It was annoying—he was always asking for money, in little notes full of the most endearing epithets. Well, there was the present cheque. It was for three guineas—the price of one of her articles—so she could send him a post-office order. As for the bootmaker, he would have to wait. There was something absurd, incongruous about that bootmaker's bill. And yet after all, one had to pay one's boot bill, even if one's lover was going to be married in the morning.

She felt a curious tightening in her chest, a horrible feeling in her head, as if the brain were pressing against the skull. Something had to be done—to be done at once, she kept saying to herself. Yes, Vincent must be congratulated. Her pride was up in arms. It would be undignified to look as if she were considering the matter. Women, she bethought her with a grim smile, should accept their fate with a graceful acquiescence.

And at once Mary made up her mind that she would not write, although there was just time to catch the country post. It would be better to telegraph. She would go herself to the nearest office. Gathering up her letters, she crept to the bedside. Alison was asleep. Bending down she kissed the white wrist that lay on the counterpane, and then, telling the maid not to move from the sick-room, she threw on her hat and cloak and left the house in the gathering dusk. It was not far to the nearest post-office, in Baker Street, and once inside she carefully wrote out a post-office order for Jimmie. Then she took a telegraph form and wrote two or three different phrases with the blunt pencil tied to a short piece of string. Finally, when she had scratched out two or three messages, she handed the paper across to the clerk. 'I wish you all possible happiness.—Mary,' read out the young man in his everyday, unemotional voice, and then the girl found herself outside, walking rapidly down Baker Street towards the Regent's Park. 'I must walk; I must breathe the open air,' she said to herself, 'or I shall never be able to sit up again all to-night.'

The gates of the Regent's Park were shut, but she walked on, round the outer circle, seeing nothing, for her brain was busy with two overpowering thoughts, the awful struggle with death, the protest against annihilation which was slowly being fought out in that bedroom in Portman Square, and the fact that henceforward she was to walk alone, to fight the battle of life unaided—a moral starveling, whose natural instincts were to be pinched, repressed, and neatly trimmed in conformity with the rules of the higher civilisation. And, in sooth, it was in accordance with the inexorable laws of the higher civilisation that so priceless a boon as a loyal love should weigh as nothing when balanced with a thing which had a nicely ascertained value in the money market.

Pausing on the North Gate bridge, she looked down into the dark canal water, on to which the last shivering autumnal leaves were slowly fluttering down. She thought of the girl—of Number Twenty-seven—who had tried to drown herself in those greenish, slimy waters. After all, it was but the Open Door of the Greek philosophers which she had tried to slip through with uncertain, unsuccessful feet...

The curve of the road outside was all a silvery grey. Road, sky, and pavement were clothed in the same neutral tint, but the street lamps made an orange sickle of fire, heightened on the other side by the indigo blueness of the park, etched with intricate lines of bare stems and branches. The scarlet of a mail-cart flashed past, and afterwards, in the solitude of the grey road, a shabby, belated mourning carriage. There was a flapping of dingy

## The Story of a Modern Woman

white scarves as the dyed horses, with lowered heads, moved dejectedly away into the growing dusk, leaving a vision of rusty black clothes and of vague, drab faces gazing from the carriage-window on to the sombre, naked trees.

Mary shuddered. 'I must get back,' she thought, and calling a hansom, she was, in ten minutes, mounting the stairs again to the sick room in Portman Square.

Mary hardly dared look when she reached the bedroom again. The sick girl, propped up on pillows, was battling for life with her breath. The distended jugular veins told of the fearful struggle; the lips were livid, the fingers clenched. The beautiful brown eyes were turned on her mother with the look of a tortured animal; then her head fell forward, and they laid her length-wise on the bed.

Alison lay long in a state of somnolence. In the silence of the large bedroom, in which the only other sound was that of the sprightly French clock on the mantelpiece, ticking away the hours, the sick woman's delirious mutterings seemed of fearful importance to the watchers round the bed. What was she saying—she who was never to speak any more? Long after, Mary remembered the last coherent words she had said: 'Will my feet get slim again when I am well?'

The long night began. Alison still lay prone, but the breathing was now stertorous, with a kind of rattle in the throat. Dr. Danby, summoned again by Lady Jane, implored her to be calm, for the end could not be long. But to Mary, during the endless hours of that December night, the end seemed long in coming. It tortured her to see the one human being for whom she cared now in the world, dying that terrible death of suffocation. Towards midnight, the strain on Mary became intense. Alison fell into a doze, and then Mary crept, for a few moments, into the next room and threw open a window. The injustice of life revolted her. Her misery was too poignant for tears. When she was a little child she used to stiffen herself with silent rage when any one accused or struck her unjustly. The girl felt something of that hardened feeling now. And so Alison, too, was to go. The last grim, speechless battle with annihilation was slowly being fought out in that gay, beflowered bedroom.

It was a still winter night, and a great round moon looked over the tops of the tall houses opposite, like a white, surprised face. The sounds of the ponderous, buzzing city entered in at the window with the whiff of fresh air; the rattle of cabs and omnibuses; voices of the passers-by. Carriages were driving round the square; somebody, two doors off, was giving a dinner-party. On the steps was a little cluster of footmen. Presently the hall door opened, there was a rush of light, and the figures of two ladies, in white cloaks and laces, passed from under the portico. The click of the carriage door was audible, the word 'Home!' and the sound of retreating wheels. Presently a couple of men left, lighting their cigars as they went down the steps, and striding off on foot to the sounds of amused laughter. But presently the square was silent. Not a branch stirred. Only the great white moon rose higher in the heavens with her cold, triumphant air.

Mary sank on her knees at the open window, her forehead pressed against the sill.

'Why could it not have been I?' she moaned. 'No one wants me, no one cares for me; while Alison—. O God! O God! and must I go on living—?'

And then she remembered that Death, the great destroyer, had an irony which is all his own. Beautiful, noble, helpful lives were crushed, destroyed, annihilated. Death made no more account of them than a schoolboy does of a beetle, on whom, in passing by, he tramps wantonly in a ditch. A minute ago they breathed, and hoped, and loved; another minute in the æons of time, and the insect was a mere blotch of slime, one's passionately loved idol lay rotting under the sod. And for a little while, if they were lucky, the idols were remembered, but more often their memories, too, passed away.

The burden of sex, the lust of life, the torture of the ideal, the unslaked thirst for immortality, had all been theirs; but always others came to take their places, to suffer the same agonies, to be thrilled, for a brief moment, with the same fears and pleasures. And always the long procession moved on, and on, and on; some fell out, but others jostled forward; the ranks were filled up; there was small time for tears. Yes, for ever the great army of humanity moved on, on its strange inexplicable march from a mother's womb to six feet of oozing clay.

The long hours of the night dragged slowly by. In the sick room the only sounds were the ticking of the French clock and the terrible, ominous rattle from the lace-trimmed pillows. It was nearing dawn. Restless and hysterical with grief, the mother had run out to write one more vain summons to the doctor. Outside, there were women's voices, sobbing on the stair-case. Mary sat by the bedside, waiting for the dawn, waiting for the dread inexorable moment. And then, just when there came creeping in behind the blind the wan, drabbish light of the December

## The Story of a Modern Woman

daybreak—of the morning which Mary remembered with a kind of stunned feeling was to be that of Vincent Hemming's marriage—a strange noise from the pillows made her heart stand still in her body. And suddenly she was aware that there was no sound at all in the sick room but the pert click of the little gilt clock on the mantelpiece, ticking, ticking, ticking, glibly away.

## CHAPTER XXI. THE WORLD WAGS ON

**FIVE** years had passed.

All day long the streets had been full of carriages going and coming from Buckingham Palace. The spring sunshine fell on the pink arms, the thin bare shoulders of young girls on the back seats of broughams and closed barouches, which passed swiftly by, leaving a vision of a foam of tulle, an excited young face, a cascade of flowers, or the large complacent bosom of a chaperon.

Some of these carriages stopped, towards five o'clock, at Lady Jane Ives' in Portman Square. The drawing-room was already spread with shining satin trains, and heavy with the odour of slightly faded hothouse flowers, before the hostess herself appeared, for Lady Jane was presenting a niece, and had been late in getting away from the palace. One or two men, vaguely bored, strayed about with uncertain feet among the yards of satin and brocade which covered the floor; and the women, in their nodding plumes and foolish trains, seemed conscious of their wrinkled throats and faded skins, as they stood, with a somewhat forced smile, receiving the usual compliments.

But very soon Lady Jane appeared, swimming into the room with her large smile, and her ruby velvet train, and having behind her a young girl in white, with puffy pink cheeks and an alarmed air.

'My niece, Victoria,' she announced to every one, in her rapid, genial manner. 'Presented today; my brother's girl, you know. Dear Victoria is so devoted to society; she is going to stay with me. It will be quite charming.'

And Mr. Beaufort Flower, with a huge white button-hole which accentuated the dingy yellow of his skin, and with several tell-tale wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, murmured to Mr. Bosanquet-Barry as he gazed with half-closed lids at the new candidate for society's favours;—

'I adore drawing-room teas. One sees **so much** of people, don't you know. And in the daylight, too, one gets such a good idea of what they are really like,' he tittered, turning to where Lady Blaythewaite's creamy white shoulders were illuminated by the full glare from the window, the sunlight sparkling on the diamond tiara round her forehead.

'She's got her best "fender" on,' said Mr. Bosanquet-Barry, with rising interest, 'by Jove! did you ever see such jewels? And what a skin! She looks like some superb animal.'

'Oh, no, she don't,' whispered Beaufy, in his acidulous voice, 'animals never look depraved. And for my part, I don't admire her so much as all that. Poor Lady Blay is so odiously, blatantly healthy.'

The room was nearly full when Mary came up the stairs. A stout lady in green, whose extremities looked extraordinarily large in their white coverings, thrust a bouquet of spiked flowers in her eye as she reached the landing, and then stared, with all the impertinence of a certain kind of British matron, when the girl stepped back, annoyed.

'Oh, **dear** Miss Erle,' said a shrill voice at the door, '**do** come in. It's such a nice party. I wonder,' continued Mr. Beaufort Flower, who entertained a good deal himself, 'why other people's parties are so much nicer than one's own? I suppose it is because one always knows so many more people at other people's houses?'

'Who is here?' said Mary, who never troubled herself to laugh at his small witticisms.

'All sorts of pretty people. There's Lady Blaythewaite, "looking magnificent in yellow.'" He always made a point of praising other women when he talked to ladies, in the pleasing hope that it would annoy them. 'She never misses going to Court once a year; but really, you know, she's got to! There's the Duchess of Birkenhead now,' he chattered on, 'she's only been once since her marriage, you know. But then she needn't, because she's so perfectly, so entirely respectable!' And he disappeared with a delighted little wriggle in the crowd, and a few minutes later Mary saw him pouring his sub-acid compliments into Lady Blaythewaite's ear.

There was some attempt at animation in the rooms now. There were crowds of ladies as well as those who had been to Court, and a hired pianist, making tinkling sounds on a somewhat worn piano, was endeavouring to impart a false air of gaiety to the affair. The words, 'the Queen,' 'the Princess,' 'heliotrope brocade,' 'exquisite diamonds,' and 'fearful crush,' were bandied about the room. Some one related a story that a Colonial lady of much wealth had been turned away because she had worn tan-coloured gloves, and an ancient legend even found listeners that a young girl had fallen over her train while backing from the Royal presence. A woman with pronounced Jewish features, who wore a smart bonnet and a French frock, explained at some length to an

## The Story of a Modern Woman

indifferent group what had happened when she had been presented last year. And, as she stood talking to Mr. Bosanquet-Barry, who had, as usual, his air of not wishing to be detained, the lady whom Mary remembered in the old days as a player on the harp, had placed a piece of music on the piano, and was singing in an elderly, threadbare voice, and an accent which left much to be desired, something which sounded like—'Allong cueillir lay roas—er.' lifting her eyebrows, standing on tip-toe, and slightly wriggling her shoulders as the song proceeded.

Mary looked round the room. It all seemed foolish enough; the women with their naked, yellow shoulders, their torn veils and faded flowers, the men slipping in and out in their neat frock coats, murmuring scandal of the very people whose hands they had just pressed. She could not bear the house since Alison's death. The rooms seemed noisy and yet empty without her. It was the same outwardly, for here were the usual crowd, chattering, smiling, whispering, as they passed in and out. And only she, Mary, seemed to remember. Lady Jane, to be sure, had been immersed in grief for some months after the death, but the next season she had reappeared in mauve and black, and had resumed her round of drums and dinners. All that had happened five years ago. This was the second niece that she had successfully launched in society; the first had made an excellent match, and Lady Jane only hoped, in confidence to all her intimate friends, that Victoria would not think of marrying quite so soon, for it was charming, she said—it made her feel quite young again—to have a girl to take out. She never, she complained, had been able to make her poor darling Alison take a proper interest in society; only an eccentric, intermittent one. And people naturally dislike that.

'Allons cueillir les ro—' urged the lady at the piano, but her voice, not being very strong, was inaudible at the end of the song, a termination which was received thankfully, with a decent little murmur of applause.

'Dear Sir Dunlop,' cried Lady Jane in her deep, genial tones at the door, 'how good of you to find time to drink a dish of tea. Let me introduce to you my niece Victoria. Presented to-day, and so devoted to society. Go in, go in, you will find all your pretty friends in there.'

And the face of the fashionable doctor, smooth, smug, successful, was seen here and there chatting in the crowd. If the mouth was still hard, the smile was more insinuating than ever. A voluptuous feminine atmosphere surrounded him as he moved about, as pretty women bent forward to whisper, meeting his eyes with an intimate look, or laying detaining, half-caressing fingers on his arm. All of these charming ladies had been, were now, or would be, his patients. His reputation had grown apace in the last five years; no one could have the megrims in Belgravia or Mayfair without consulting Sir Dunlop Strange. Reports of his approaching marriage were constantly circulated, but at present, it would seem, there was a barrier in the way; for he was understood to be devoted to Lady Blaythewaite. And indeed, as he neared the window where she was still standing, the circle of black coats which surrounded her dissolved, and they stood practically alone, looking out on the square. The lady slowly turned her handsome, prominent eyes upon him, and, with a long gaze which took in every detail of her radiant health and beauty, he slipped his nervous, sinewy fingers round her wrist in the shadow of the curtain.

Mary was standing near the door, trying to get a breath of air, when the pale, town-bred face of Perry Jackson was seen ascending the stair, but she instinctively stepped aside, not knowing whether he would care to speak to her. She heard Lady Jane overwhelm him with pretty phrases, for she was proud of the portrait he had painted of her that year, and adored a new celebrity; but Perry Jackson did not come near Mary, and it was with a somewhat forced smile that he returned her greeting. 'I have lost my kind little friend,' she said to herself with a certain bitterness. And then, as Vincent Hemming appeared in the crowd, she said to herself with the inconsistency of a woman, 'Here, at any rate, is some one who cares for me still—a little bit.'

The face of Vincent Hemming was that of an irritated, disappointed man. He was, however, as perfectly dressed, as elaborately suave as of old, as he stopped to speak to several dowagers on his way upstairs. It was always half a pleasure, half a pain to her to meet him, and there were times when she felt that the acquiescent feminine smile was a little forced as she talked to him at some crowded party, or called on his wife at Queen's Gate.

Hemming had made but a brief appearance in the House of Commons, for he had been unseated almost immediately—his agents, it would seem, not having been discreet in the matter of beer; and he had had no opportunity of entering the House since. Meanwhile, Mrs. Vincent Hemming had not made herself popular in London society, and her husband had always a somewhat uneasy air when she was in the same room. Lady Jane Ives, for one, openly snubbed her, and Vincent had arrived at that stage in an unsuccessful marriage when a

## The Story of a Modern Woman

husband is not offended at being asked out to dinner without his wife. To any other woman but Mary the thing would have been a personal triumph.

'Here is that poor Mr. Hemming that you threw over,' whispered Lady Jane to Mary; 'I did not ask his impossible wife. I don't know how a man with such delightful cultured tastes could marry such a person. If it had only been an American, now! An American or an Australian—then nobody would have minded what she said or did.'

And in a few minutes Mary found herself talking, in a conventional voice, of the rain and the fine weather, of politics and the park, with the man who had once been so much to her. Sometimes, indeed, as he took her down to supper, or handed her a cup of tea, with his little formal manner, she wondered how, in those past years, he had been able to make her suffer so. But Mary was beginning to understand that women love most of all the men who have done them an irreparable wrong.

His face looked grey and tired, and it was with a visible effort that he found phrases suitable to be overheard by the nodding plumes, the bare shoulders, and the limp nosegays around.

'You look tired; are you ill?' she said suddenly, in her old sweet manner. For a moment Mary had forgotten.

'No; it is nothing. I am a little out of sorts I think,' he said, avoiding her eyes. Then he added, after a pause, looking straight at the carpet, 'You don't know, you can't conceive, what worries I have!'

She said nothing; there was nothing she could say. But he looked miserable, and all her tender, womanly little heart rushed out to him.

'Mayn't I get you a cup of tea?' he said suddenly, offering her his arm, and turning with an abrupt movement towards the door. Downstairs, there was the usual struggle for a cup, a sugar-basin, a spoon.

'Why mayn't I come and see you sometimes, Mary?' he said, in his voice which meant so much more than the mere words.

'Oh, Vincent! You've put cream in my tea, and I can't bear it,' said Mary, with a comical little frown.

'I'm so sorry, and you don't like sugar either. How could I have forgotten it?' said Hemming, wafting it away in his grand manner. 'But Mary,' he continued, when he had battled successfully for another cup, 'why won't you read me some of your work? I used not to be a bad critic, though I do little enough myself now. Why can't we see each other, sometimes, like that?'

All the blood left her face. It was horrible, horrible of him to talk so; but he must not even guess that she cared.

'Of course,' she said, after a pause, during which they had been pushed apart by the stout lady with the spiky bouquet, who had come downstairs and was forcing her way with a business-like air to the buffet. 'I suppose you can come and be victimised by manuscripts—if you want to.'

'When, Mary?'

'Oh,' she said quickly, 'not to-morrow. I've got to go to the Strand. But the day after—?'

'Aren't you well? Let me look at you,' said Hemming, as they went up to the drawing-room again. 'Come into the light,' he continued in an authoritative tone. 'I can't have you getting ill.'

There was a movement of departure in the crowd. The monstrous trains were being caught up, bouquets were seen moving towards the door. Mr. Beaufort Flower, slipping in and out, was murmuring a last impertinence to a pretty woman on her way downstairs. Lady Jane was beginning to look tired, for at seventy, as she said, one wasn't in the first blush of youth; and Miss Victoria, whose puffy cheeks had assumed a purplish hue, announced to every one, as they made their farewells, that she and her aunt were going to a ball that night, which she expected would be 'splendid fun.' Mr. Bosanquet-Barry, who approved of Miss Erle as an occasional contributor because he met her in what he called 'smart' houses, bestowed on her a brief vision of all his gleaming teeth as he squeezed her hand and passed on without a word.

'The day after to-morrow, Mary?' demanded Vincent Hemming, as they stood irresolutely on the doorstep among the little crowd of drab-coated footmen. She hardly noticed Mr. Beaufoy Flower, as he skipped past her down the steps, tripping into his brougham and slamming the door with a vicious little click, nor the rather shrill voice, in which there was a triumphant sound, giving the direction: 'To the Bachelors' Club!'

Mary stood silent for a moment, gazing at the stone steps. After all, why should she not see Vincent—her old friend, her father's friend? She felt nervous and unstrung; it would be very sweet to have him there, to talk to him in a sensible way. She wanted to ask his advice about Jimmie, for her young brother, who had duly got his exhibition at Magdalen, had done little more during his stay at Oxford than entangle himself with, and finally

## The Story of a Modern Woman

marry, a scout's daughter. Living by herself in lodgings, she never saw any one; there seemed to be no one now whose advice she could ask.

'Yes, come,' she said suddenly, in a high, clear tone, and, as she went down the steps and hurried across the square, she was startled herself by the note of exultation in her voice.

## CHAPTER XXII. THE TEMPTATION

**ALTHOUGH** she had been thinking of Hemming for hours, the sharp, agitated pull of the bell startled Mary as she sat sorting papers at her desk in the little room, a third room, crowded with bookshelves, which she had been able to add to her domain during the last year.

'Mr. Vincent Hemming,' said the servant opening the door.

He shook hands, without a word. Mary knew instinctively that something was wrong, before he spoke.

'We'll have tea, please, Sarah,' she said, and, until the girl brought in the cups and saucers, they sat exchanging commonplaces a little awkwardly. There was a tight feeling in Mary's throat as she looked at Hemming's drawn face and averted eyes. And yet it was good to have him there, all to herself, sitting opposite to her, sipping his tea, on the deep sofa near the window, his brown eyes looking black against the light.

He got up presently, moving restlessly about the little room, examining with curious eyes the place which was Mary's home. He stopped in front of the old-fashioned writing-table, on which blotting-paper, foolscap, and worn-out pens were scattered. A great odorous bunch of waxen pinkish lilac stood in a jug on the table. On the shelf above the pigeon-holes there was a full-length, slightly-faded photograph of himself.

'And this is where you work?' he muttered, absently, sitting down in the swing chair, and leaning his elbow, with a tired gesture, on the ink-stained desk. 'Poor little Mary! Don't you ever paint, now? You used to like it so much.'

'I paint very little. I think this is almost the last open-air thing I ever did,' she added, taking a wooden panel from under a pile of papers and holding it a little way off. 'It was down there, you know, in that pine-y, heathery place, at Haslemere, where we went before you sailed—'

'I remember,' he said, gravely.

And then something tightened at her heart as she stood near him, holding out the sketch. It was the very scene she had so often pictured when she lived here waiting for him to come back. Here was the room, lined with book-shelves; the desk, with Vincent half-turned round, while she held her smudgy little painting up for him to see. Only the years had passed away, and he was another woman's husband, the father of another woman's child....

'I remember,' he repeated, softly, taking the little nervous hand that hung close to him, and looking at it intently as he held it in his.

'Why Mary, how thin and white you are!' he said, suddenly. 'You can't be well. Have you seen Danby?'

'Oh, it's nothing. I'm all right,' she answered quickly, pulling away her hand. 'I've been worried about Jimmie. And I've—I've been working rather hard—'

'You can't stand it, you never could,' he muttered. 'In the old days you used "to get away—you used to travel with your father." Good Lord!' continued Hemming, scrutinising her face with a swift glance which he turned instantly on the chimney stacks opposite, 'you'll be killing yourself, and for what?'

'One works,' said Mary, absently, 'because one must. I'm not a person of wealth and leisure like yourself.'

Hemming got up and strode up and down the room, his mouth working nervously at the corners as he answered—

'Heaven knows you needn't reproach me about that. If you knew what my life is, Mary,' he blurted out suddenly, his face turning a dark red, 'the dreariness, the vulgarity, the commonplace of it.'

'You have your—your—wife, your child,' she said slowly, her eyes fixed on the empty teacup in her hand, 'and I—I have nothing.'

'My wife!' he said derisively. 'Yes, I have a wife. Someone who sits opposite me at dinner, who pays the bills with her own cheques, who never misses an opportunity of reminding me that I am a failure. I know—I know I'm a failure. I haven't done what she married me for; she has spent her money for nothing. Mary, the egotism of a vulgar woman is something that you cannot even conceive of.'

'Don't talk like that, don't, don't,' implored Mary. 'Oh, Vincent, I—it doesn't matter about me,' she continued, 'but I can't bear to see you unhappy.'

She had risen and was standing in front of him, her eyes wet with tears. He took her hands, holding them fast, and bowed his head down, so that his face lay on their joined hands. And in that moment of his humiliation and despair Mary had never loved Vincent Hemming so well.

## The Story of a Modern Woman

'My poor, poor dear,' she muttered with a movement of exquisite maternal tenderness, 'it will come all right by and by. You will try, won't you, to be—nicer—to her?' she added with an effort. 'It must be so easy for husband and wife to make it up. And there is the child—'

'The child,' he repeated blankly. 'A thing three years old. And she is jealous if I even look at the baby. Mary, her jealousy is infernal. I can't live with her, I can't, I can't.'

And then for a moment, Mary Erle tasted the intoxication of a personal triumph. Vincent did not love his wife; he had come back to her, to her. The years seemed to roll away.... In the intimacy of that quiet room it seemed as if time were obliterated; as if nothing had happened. Just as before, in the empty, dusty drawing-room in Harley Street, where he had first asked her for her love, his passion communicated itself to her. He looked at her, and with a sudden fear she stepped backwards, away from him, but he had risen, and his troubled eyes were looking straight into hers.

And once again, just as on that bygone June afternoon, Mary was drawn, in spite of herself, by the mysterious, inexorable bond of the flesh. Youth, the will to live, the imperious demands of human passion for one moment were to have their way.

'Vin—cent,' she pleaded, as he held her two wrists like a vice, and then slowly, with a long shudder, she was conscious that his arms were enfolding her. It was good to rest there for a little, to forget, to run an erasing finger over the ugly past, the years of waiting, of disappointment, of unceasing work. To the starved woman it was sweet; so sweet that she stood there, her head bent down, his arms holding her fast.

'Mary, my own little girl! Why won't you look at me? Turn up your face. Let me see your eyes. You belonged to me once, Mary. Look at me, dearest, say you haven't forgotten me altogether? Dear heart, how good it is! No, don't move, don't move, for God's sake. Give me my little bit of happiness,' he muttered, as she moaned under his caresses, 'we're not hurting anyone, not anyone, Mary.'

'No,' she cried at last, breaking away from him. She was trembling from head to foot; all the blood in her body seemed to have rushed to her brain. 'You're not hurting anyone—but me! You're hurting me—me! You're doing your best to make me a miserable woman.'

Hemming flung himself on the sofa, with his head buried in the pillows. From the movement of his shoulders, Mary could see that he was sobbing, as she stood at the other end of the little room, supporting herself against the mantelpiece. It was so terrible to see that he, after all, was suffering, and through her. He was one of those men whose rather pompous manner surrounds them like a suit of armour; men whom it is difficult to picture breaking down, feeling acutely, bearing their share of the burden of human suffering.

'Vincent,' she said softly, crossing over to him, 'try and be brave, for—for both our sakes. We—we can't help it now. It's all done with long ago—for you and me. Don't forget that. Don't torture me, for God's sake, dear.'

'Understand me, Mary,' he said, uncovering his face, and speaking rapidly with his eyes fixed on the carpet, 'I'm not going back to her. I can't, I won't stand it. I'm going away—somewhere—anywhere, where I can be quiet and think. The mail train leaves at eight—I shall catch that, and go straight through to Paris. Mary, dear child,' he said, drawing her suddenly down beside him on the sofa, 'come with me. If you wish it, I'll give up everything; my position, my political career, my—my child. Won't you—can't you be to me what she has never been, my real wife?'

'Your real wife!' repeated Mary, wonderingly. For the first few seconds, she was not conscious of feeling shocked. For years now, this man had been so constantly in her thoughts, he had represented, in the time of his absence, the one poor joy, the starveling hope in her dreary existence, that she was no more horrified than if her own brain had worded the thought: 'His real wife!' But she knew, even as he spoke, that this was the end of everything; that never again, as long as she lived, could they ever be alone together. And all the time she was conscious of the fascination, the odious fascination which belongs to sin.

'Come with me,' he whispered, taking her thin fingers and entwining them with his. 'Trust me, little one. I want to be everything to you. We—we could live somewhere in France,' he went on, frowning slightly, 'in some little place where English people don't go—'

'Ah—some place where English people don't go!' she repeated softly, with a shade of irony in her voice. She had drawn herself apart now, and was looking at him steadily as he spoke.

'Mary,' he went on, 'my little girl! Dare to be yourself. Come to me, let us begin a new life, a **real** life, dear. You are above the prejudices of our false civilisation, you are capable of being a true woman, of giving up

## The Story of a Modern Woman

something for the man you love. In a little while I might be free, and then we could be married. Mary, Mary, don't you really care for me enough for that? Think of it, think of what we are missing? It would not be a selfish life we would lead, Mary. We would work together. You would inspire me to noble things,' he added, with a touch of his old manner. 'Other women—great women—have been strong enough, single-hearted enough, to do as much for the men they loved. Dear heart, think of the years we might spend together.'

There was a tense silence. Mary had risen and walked to the window, where she stood fidgeting with the tassel of the blind, and looking down into the dingy street. Those words that she was listening to were the last words of love which she was ever to hear. And she thought, as she stood there, of the irony of life. To her, love had been twice offered: the affection of Perry Jackson, and now the selfish passion of a man who was another woman's husband. After to-day it would all be a blank. And the impotence, the helplessness of woman's lot struck her with irresistible force. She was the plaything, the sport of destiny, and destiny always won the game.

She turned slowly round, and faced him, still swinging the tassel of the blind with one hand. Her face was quite white; she looked cold, almost indifferent.

'Vincent,' she said, in a grave voice, 'I can't do it. I can't, I can't—not even for you! It is not that I mind what people would say—that's nothing. It isn't that I don't love you. I—I—why, I have always loved you. But it's the other woman—your wife. I can't, I won't, deliberately injure another woman. Think how she would suffer! Oh, the torture of women's lives—the helplessness, the impotence, the emptiness! And, Vincent, she is the mother of your child. **Your child**, dear,' she went on, after a pause. 'I could not bear that she should grow up and hate me. All we modern women mean to help each other now. We have a bad enough time as it is,' she added, with a faint smile; 'surely we needn't make it worse by our own deliberate acts! We often talked it all over, Alison and I. You don't know the good she did in her life, the help, the sympathy she gave. You will go away a little, Vincent, and then you will go back. You will go back—to your little daughter?'

The next instant she was gone. He heard her shut and lock her bedroom door, but he sat on and on, hoping she would come back, that she would relent, that she would forgive him.... But no sound came from the little room. He did not know that she had silently left the house.

At last Hemming rang the bell, and the servant appeared.

'Tell Miss Erle,' he said, in a harsh, discordant voice, 'that I am waiting—to say good-bye.'

'Miss Mary went out nearly an hour ago, sir. Didn't you know?'

She was gone, then. It was all over; she had not trusted him. Eight o'clock struck. He felt wretched, sick, hungry. It was too late now to catch the evening mail, for he had no clothes, and he thought, with a grim smile, that a man couldn't cross the Channel, even if he had been defrauded of his dearest hopes, in a frock coat and a tall hat. Presently he left the house, and wandered along towards Regent Street. He thought he would go to a restaurant and have some dinner; he did not want to meet any of the men at the club.

And afterwards he had an indistinct impression of a meal at which, in his wretchedness, he went on ordering pints of champagne, of the corridor of a music-hall, of rustling gowns, of scarlet smiles, and of some one, very young and rather pretty, who leant upon his arm. It must have been a kind of dream, a sort of madness, he thought afterwards, when he had returned, a day or two later, to the decorous solemnity of his home in Queen's Gate.

## CHAPTER XXIII. THE WOMAN IN THE GLASS

MARY walked rapidly round the Regent's Park. Over yonder, where the sombre trees massed themselves against the pale evening sky, came the sounds and scents of the on-coming summer; children's shrill voices calling to each other near the ornamental water; the tread of sweethearts' feet on the gravel path; the delicate aroma of newly-cut grass. All around her were simple human joys. But they were not for her. She had left all that behind her in that little room in Bulstrode Street, where sat the one man in the world that she cared for—the one man now who cared for her. There was no one else; there never could be any one else.

But it behoved her henceforward to be sensible—to be strong for both of them. She must never see him again, must, above all, try and think of Vincent as she used to do, before that afternoon in Harley Street—how many years ago now?—when he had first made love to her, and asked her to wait for him. How it spoiled everything—this eternal question of sex! It was almost impossible for a woman to see a man as he really is. And, in pursuance of the plan of being sensible, she went deliberately over Hemming's faults. They were obvious enough. He was weak, vacillating; his phrases were absurd. His ambitions, after all, were but vulgar ones, and he had not the will-power to carry out even his most cherished plans. He was all that, and yet he was the only man in the world that she loved—the only man in the world now who desired her as a woman.

And yet she must walk on, get as far away from him as possible. Here, at the North Gate, the slim young poplars detached themselves tremblingly against the pinkish sky, while in front of her stretched the long, white Avenue Road, with its substantial, scrupulously-kept houses, holding themselves aloof in their leafy gardens. She would walk on until she came to Hampstead. Up there, there was space, distance; one's horizon opened out.

Over the garden walls swayed the waxen, pinkish lilac. The scent struck her like a blow; **that** room where they had been together had been filled with the same penetrating, sensuous odour. Pink lilac and foliage made artificial-looking by the yellow light of a gas-lamp—how they always reminded her of Paris: of Paris, where they might have been on their way by now. But she was walking alone, steeling her heart against him, in a road in a London suburb. On each side was the prosperous, orderly, contented life of the middle-class, with its placid domesticity, its unemotional joys. From the open window of a long drawing-room came the sound of a young girl's thread-like voice. Upstairs, in the nursery, the lights were already lowered. The white street was deserted. But suddenly, from one of the open gateways, appeared a pair of sleek chestnuts. The carriage passed out, and, as Mary stood waiting at the curb, a man and a woman's smiling faces were photographed on her brain. A prosperous, middle-aged couple, going out to a placid evening's amusement. Then silence again.

The girl pushed on, past endless rows of houses, trim, smug dwellings, every one of which represented the Family—that special product of civilisation for which she, as an individual, was to be sacrificed.... On and on, until at last, through a dark, leafy lane, she emerged on the open heath.

The after-glow of a crimson sunset still hung in the west. The Surrey Hills were faintly blue, and the heath, with its broken ridges topped with gorse and bracken, swept in superb lines at her feet. The air was very still. Over yonder a mysterious hand had hung a silver sickle in the pale twilight sky. Mary sank tired on to a seat. But presently two vague figures approached in the growing darkness—the figures of a girl and a young man, working people both, who sat awkwardly down at the other end of the bench, and talked in jerky, constrained whispers. The girl's eyes were bent demurely on her lap, but once, when Mary turned her head in their direction, she could see that the young man's eyes were devouring the face of his shabby little companion with a passionate glance. Something tightened at Mary's throat. Why to-night, of all nights, must she be reminded of what she was giving up? She got up, and began to walk rapidly homewards.

'I was not wanted there; I was spoiling their evening,' she thought. 'I must learn to be discreet.'

With some trepidation she rang the bell of her lodgings.

'When did Mr. Hemming go?' she asked.

'About eight o'clock, miss. Will you have some dinner?'

'No, thanks, Sarah. I can't eat anything to-night. I've got one of my headaches.'

Mary went straight into the little study and shut the door.

Outwardly nothing was changed. The air was full of his presence. There were the tea-cups out of which they had drunk; the chair at the writing-table was still half swung round, just as Vincent Hemming had left it. It was

## The Story of a Modern Woman

here, just at the mantelpiece, that he had taken her into his arms and said all those mad things. She went deliberately over the scene, repeating in her mind everything he had said. On the sofa the cushions were still tumbled where he had sat and sobbed. Ah, for once, she had made **him** suffer. She flung herself down, clenching her fists, with her face against the silken cushions. Her other self revolted against the injustice of human laws. The woman within her cried aloud in the darkness. What had she done that she was always to be sacrificed? Why was she to miss the best that life has to offer?

She lay there a long time, miserable, stricken, helpless. Then, going into her bedroom she began to take off her dress mechanically and to unloosen her hair. Half-dressed as she was, she flung herself on the bed; she was tired and footsore with her long walk. For an hour she fell into a fitful sleep.

The night was warm, but she could hear the flapping of the window-blind, swaying in a light breeze. Mary lay there a long time, every nerve in her body quivering. How long, how long the night was! Would it never end, never be daylight, when she could get up and work again? To work was to forget. If only she could keep strong and not worry too much.

She got up presently, weary with lying awake, and lit a couple of candles on the dressing-table. The flapping-blind got on her nerves. She had forgotten to wind up her watch, but, from the curious hush in the air, Mary thought it must be nearing dawn. Then she began to pace the room mechanically. Would the night never end?

In the mirror on the dressing-table she caught sight of herself as she passed. Her fair hair was floating in a kind of halo round her head; her bare arms and shoulders emerged from the whiteness of her bodice. How the eyes looked at her—hauntingly, appealingly—from out of a pathetic little face. She slipped into the chair at the table, and leaning her face on her hands, looked gravely at the mirror. For a long time now she had had a strange sense of dual individuality. When she looked in the glass a woman looked back at her with reproachful, haunting eyes. And to-night the woman looked at her appealingly. By the soft candle-light the face was curiously young. The cheeks were delicately thin, but the lips were those of a girl of eighteen; in the fluffy, fair head the few grey hairs were lost among the pale gold. There was the line of her throat, her beautiful white shoulders, the delicate modelling of her satiny arms. And, as she looked, the woman in the glass softened with a triumphant smile.

'You may torture me, starve me, but you cannot make me unlovable. He loves me!' smiled the woman. 'Why, he would ruin himself to-morrow for me. I have only to say one word, and his life is mine. What are we two, after all? Two atoms of matter, breathing, living, loving, suffering for one brief moment on a planet which was once without organic life, and which is slowly grinding on to irreparable decay. A few more drops in the ocean of eternity, and we and our little loves and little hates will be forgotten. A few more drops, and mankind itself will have disappeared, and once more a cold, uninhabited globe will continue its monotonous course round the sun. No one can stop the coming of the "Great Year." Nature—insolent, triumphant nature—cares nothing for the individual. Summer and winter, seedtime and harvest will come and go in the ages to come, but I—I **shall not be here**. Nestlings will crouch, chirruping, under the eaves; there will be dew on the meadow-sweet, sunshine in the orchard; there will be lovers' glances, and the laughter of little children. But for me, **for me it will all be dark**. Yet we do have the present moment; let us keep it and hold it. We are alive now. We love each other. Give him to me! Only a few short years am I here,' pleaded the haunting eyes: 'I, and such as I, tearing our little hands in the search for gold, shaking them at the heavens with impotent vengeance. Give him to me, give him to me! The inexorable years—the years which fade and blight—will pass over us, and then our "folly" will be forgotten. Why, people in the next generation will shrug their shoulders and say, "After all, they were only human." And I,' pleaded the woman in the glass, 'I shall have lived.'

Mary dropped her head on her arms. The night was mysteriously still. The breeze had dropped, and an uncanny silence hung about the house. The window was shut now, the blind drawn. The two candles on the dressing-table were burning low in their sockets. When she raised her head again, the eyes were no longer triumphant, they were reproachful. 'Who am I? Why am I here?' they asked: 'To live is to suffer; why do you let me live? Must I go on looking back at you until my eyes are faded, my lashes are grey, until I have run through the gamut of mental and physical pain? I am a living, suffering entity,' said the woman in the glass, 'in a world of artificial laws; of laws made for man's convenience and pleasure, not for mine. Have I one thing for which I have longed? Have I a human love, have I the hope of immortality, have I even tasted the intoxication of achievement? Human life is but a moment in the æons of time, and yet one little human lifetime contains an eternity of

## The Story of a Modern Woman

suffering. Why, since you take joy from me, why do you let me live?'

Here, indeed, was a greater temptation than the one from which she had just escaped. She sprang up, horrified, afraid of the haunting eyes.... Was that to be the end?

Pacing the room, Mary fell to thinking of her father; of the kind-eyed enthusiast who, in his younger years at least, had little enough joy, and much toil, who had been blamed and reviled and stoned by the public, and who had worked solely and single-heartedly for truth's sake.

'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield,' she suddenly said aloud. It was a line she had engraved on her father's tomb at Highgate, a favourite line of his, of that dear worker of whom, even to think, was morally bracing. Yes—

'It may be that the gulfs will wash us down,

It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles;

....but something ere I end—

Some work of noble note may yet be done,' repeated Mary deliberately, as she walked into the little study, pulled up the blind and raised the sash.

## CHAPTER XXIV. IN WHICH CIVILISATION TRIUMPHS

**OUTSIDE** was the wan light of a wet daybreak. A thin rain flipped her face, cooling her feverish cheeks. The gas-lamps already took on an orange hue, and in the east there flickered a streak of mysterious light. A faint chirruping of birds began, though London still lay mute, but soon the bird-chorus waxed louder, more shrill, more persistent. The terrible night was over. The dawn was at hand.

Mary lit her lamp and searched about among her papers for the chapter of her novel at which she had been at work yesterday before Vincent came. She had still to do another happy ending, the rapturous *finale* which the public demanded. She tried to fix her thoughts, but the great bunch of pinkish lilac irritated her with its dominant, sensuous odour. Taking the dripping stalks in her hand she went to the open window and let them drop gently on the pavement below. And then, there was some-thing else—the large, full-length, faded photograph of Vincent Hemming, which stood just above the pigeon-holes on her desk.

Raising the short silk curtain which hid the grate in the summer-time, Mary placed the photograph upright in the fireplace and lit it with a match. Then she sat down on the fur rug, in her dressing-gown, and, hunched up, with her chin on her knees, watched the holocaust. There was neither sorrow, love, nor anger in the grey eyes, nothing but a kind of curiosity. But the stiff cardboard would not burn. Mary lit it twice with matches, and it caught for a minute, and then went out with a sudden little puff.

'Paper—paper is what I want,' she muttered. 'I wonder if love-letters burn better than other kinds of paper?' And, going to the table, she unlocked a drawer and took out a thick bundle of letters in thin, foreign envelopes; all Vincent's letters during his journey round the world. 'It is poetic justice,' she thought grimly; 'and then—I must keep nothing that will remind me of him—nothing—nothing—nothing.'

So she gathered up all his letters, even the last one, which she had received the day before Alison's death, and laid them under the photograph. Ah! now he burned. First the boots, then the trousers to the knee, then to the trim waist of the frock-coat. But then it went out again, leaving Vincent's head and shoulders still there; Vincent's face, with its slightly superior air, the orchid in the button-hole. How chilly it had grown! A draught came under the chink of the door, and her bare feet, thrust into bedroom slippers, were deadly cold. Another match; this time it was for good. First the orchid was licked up by the little blue flames, then the chin, the mouth, the eyes. Soon there was only a handful of blackened paper. Well, real life was like that. The love of lovers was a blaze, a whiff, a vain, fleeting thing. She looked at the little heap of fluttering paper, and saw, with her sane vision, Vincent going back to his wife. Yes, he would go to Paris, and then he would go back to domesticity in Queen's Gate. Next year there would possibly be another child—a boy, perhaps, in whom he would take more interest. He had his wife's fortune, and for sure next time he would secure a safe seat in Parliament. That passionate interview would soon be a mere episode to him.

'A mere episode,' she repeated to herself deliberately, as the white daylight came creeping in at the window.

And now a draught, blowing down the chimney, rustled the handful of ashes and dispersed them with a sudden gust, while a ray of wan sunlight crept tentatively along the empty hearth.

Late that afternoon a slight figure was to be seen toiling up to Highgate Cemetery. Mary had to see the stonemason about the inscription on her father's grave. They had written to say that some of the letters wanted re-painting, perhaps re-cutting. She found the stonemason sitting straddle-legged on a high tomb near, carefully scraping a marble anchor which had become dingy in the course of years. The man clambered down and touched his cap. She remembered him well as a freethinker, and a great admirer of her father's books.

They both looked carefully at the professor's grave. And, to be sure, the line—'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield' was almost illegible. The urn on the top was slightly askew.

'It gets all the wind and the rain, you see, Miss Erle,' said the stonemason, gazing critically at his work. 'Yer father's tomb, it do stand so 'igh. Almost the 'ighest in the cem'try, I may say. And a sight of rain we do 'ave up here in winter time. Soaks the clay, it does, and shifts the graves. Look at that angel with the trumpet over there. A bit squiffy, he looks, don't 'e? Some of them tombs 'ave to be repaired constant.'

'I want this seen to at once,' said Mary.

'It'll be a matter of five pound to do it up properly, Miss,' he said, after some consideration, and then he added, in his apologetic workman's voice, 'and I shouldn't like, for 'is sake, to skimp the job. Ah! we ain't got many like

## The Story of a Modern Woman

'im up 'ere.'

When the man had gone, Mary stood for a long time there on the little mound at the top of the hill.

All around her was the joyous activity of spring-time. Nature, who never ceases, who never rests, was once again at her work of recreation. Once again the lilac-trees were burgeoning with waxen blossoms. Once again a thrush, somewhere among that great city of sleepers, was swelling its brown throat with an amorous song. The air was loaded with the perfume of may; a pair of swifts were circling and swooping against the tender evening sky. And in all this gaiety of a new-born world only she was to have no part. Henceforward she was to stand alone, to fight the dreary battle of life unaided. 'And women live long,' came the ironical thought: 'yes—we live long!'

The sunset touched her face, her hand, the flush of hawthorn above her head. At her feet, beyond the foreground of spreading trees, lay stretched out an ocean of houses, softened, made vague with a silvery veil of smoke, and pricked by endless spires. Here and there a blurred block, a monster hotel, a railway station, rose out of the great sea of dwellings. It was London that lay stretched out at her feet; majestic, awe-inspiring, inexorable, triumphant London.

Standing alone, there on the heights, she made a feint as if to grasp the city spread out before her, but the movement ended in a vain gesture, and the radiance of her face was blotted out as she began to plod homewards in the twilight of the suburban road.

THE END.