



# THE CREATORS: A COMEDY

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XLII

THE Brodricks—Hugh, Henry, all of them—stood justified. There was, indeed, rather more justice than mercy in their attitude. Jane could not say that they had let her off easily. She knew—and they had taken care that she should know—the full extent of her misdoing.

That was it. They regarded her genius (the thing which had been tacked on to her) more as a crime than as a misfortune. It was a power in the highest degree destructive and malign—a power utterly disintegrating to its possessor, and yet a power entirely within her own control. They refused to recognize in it any divine element of destiny, while they remained imperturbably unastonished at its course. They judged it as they would have judged any reprehensible tendency to excitement or excess: you gave way to it or you did not give way. In Jane the thing was monstrous. She had sinned through it the unforgivable sin—the sin against the family, the race. And she had been warned often enough. They had always told her that she would have to pay for it.

But now that the event had proved them so deplorably right, now that they were established as guardians of the obvious and masters of the expected, they said no more. They assumed no airs of successful prophecy. They were sorry for her. They gathered about her when the day of reckoning came; they could not bear to see her paying, to think that she should have to pay. She knew that as long as she paid they would stand by her.

More than ever the family closed in around her; it stood solid, a sheltering and protecting wall. She was almost unaware how close they were to her. It seemed to her that she stood alone there, in the center of the circle, with her sin. Her sin was always there, never out of her sight, in the little half-living body of the child. Her sin tore at her heart as night and day she nursed the strange, dark little thing, stamped with her stamp. She traced her sin in its shrunken face, its thread-like limbs, its sick nerves, and its bloodless veins.

There was an exaltation in her anguish. Her tenderness, shot with pain, was indistinguishable from a joy of sense. She went surrendered and subdued to suffering; she embraced passionately her pain. It appeased her desire for expiation.

They need not have rubbed it into her so hard that it was her sin. If she could have doubted it, there was the other child to prove it. John Henry Brodrick stood solid and sane, a Brodrick of the Brodricks, rosy and round with nourishment, not a nerve, Henry said, in his composition, and the stomach of a young ostrich. It was in little Hugh's little stomach and his nerves that the mischief lay. The screaming, Henry told her, was a nervous system. It was awful that a baby should have nerves.

Henry hardly thought that she would rear him. He did not rub that in; he was much too tender. He replied to her agonized questioning that, yes, it might be possible, with infinite precaution and incessant care. With incessant care and in-

*finite* precaution she tended him. She had him night and day. She washed and dressed him; she prepared his food and fed him with her own hands. It was with a pang, piercing her fatigue, that she gave him to the nurse to watch for the two hours in the afternoon when she slept; for she had bad nights with him because of the screaming.

Brodrick had had bad nights, too. Jane made him sleep in a room at the other end of the house where he could not hear the screaming. He went unwillingly, and with a sense of cowardice and shame. He could not think how Jinny could stand it with *her* nerves.

She stood it somehow, in her passion for the child. It was her heart, not her nerves, that his screams lacerated. Beyond her heavy-eyed fatigue she showed no sign of strain. Henry acknowledged in her that great quality of the nervous temperament—the power of rising high-strung to an emergency. He intimated that he rejoiced to see her on the right track, substituting for the unhealthy excesses of the brain the normal, wholesome life of motherhood. He was not sure now that he pitied her. He was sorrier, ten times sorrier, for his brother Hugh.

Gertrude Collett agreed with the doctor. She insisted that it was Brodrick and not Jane who suffered. Gertrude was in a position to know. She hinted that nobody but she really did know. She saw more of him than any of his family. She saw more of him than Jane. Brodrick's suffering was Gertrude's opportunity, the open, consecrated door where she entered soft-footed, angelic, with a barely perceptible motion of her ministrant wings. Circumstances restored the old intimate relation. Brodrick was worried about his digestion; he was afraid he was breaking up altogether, and Gertrude's solicitude confirmed him in his fear. Under its influence and Gertrude's the editor spent less and less of his time in Fleet Street. He found, as he had found before, that a great part of his work could be done more comfortably at home. He found, too, that he required more than ever the coöperation of a secretary. The increased efficiency of Addy Ranger made her permanent and invaluable in Fleet Street. Jane's preoccupation had removed her altogether from the affairs of the "Monthly Review." In-

evitably Gertrude slid into her former place.

She had more of Brodrick now than she had ever had; she had more of the best of him. She was associated with his ambition and his dream. Now that Jane's hand was not there to support it, Brodrick's dream had begun to sink a little; it was lowering itself almost to Gertrude's reach. She could touch it on tiptoe, straining. She commiserated Jane on her exclusion from the editor's adventures and excitements, his untiring pursuit of the young talents,—his scent for them was not quite so infallible as it had been,—his curious or glorious finds. Jane smiled at her under her tired eyes. She was glad that he was not alone in his dream; that he had some one, if it was only Gertrude.

For, by an irony that no Brodrick could possibly have foreseen, Jane's child separated her from her husband more than her genius had ever done. Her motherhood had the fierce ardor and concentration of the disastrous power. It was as if her genius had changed its channel and direction, and had its impulse bent on giving life to the half-living body. Nothing else mattered. She could not have traveled further from Brodrick in her widest, wildest wanderings. The very hours conspired against them. Jane had to sleep in the afternoon, to make up for bad nights. Brodrick was apt to sleep in the evenings, after dinner, when Jane revived a little and was free.

The year passed, and she triumphed. The little half-living body had quickened. The child, Henry said, would live; he might even be fairly strong. His food nourished him. He was gaining weight and substance. Jane was to be congratulated on her work, which was nothing short of a miracle. *Her* work, *her* miracle, Henry admitted it was that. He had had to stand by and do nothing. He could not work miracles. But if Jane had relaxed her care for a moment, there was no miracle that could have saved the child.

To Jane it *was* a miracle. It was as if her folding arms had been his antenatal hiding-place; as if she had brought him forth with anguish a second time.

She would not have admitted that she loved him more than his brother. Jacky was as good as gold; but he was good with Gertrude and happy with Gertrude. The

baby was neither good nor happy with anybody but Jane. Between her and the little twice-born son there was an unbreakable tie. He attached himself to his mother with a painful, pitiful passion. Out of her sight he languished. He had grown into her arms. Every time he was taken from them it was a rending of flesh from tender flesh.

His attachment grew with his strength, and she was more captured and more chained than ever. He "had" her, as Tanqueray would have said, at every turn. Frances and Sophy, the wise maternal women, shook their heads in their wisdom; and Jane smiled in hers. She was wiser than any of them. She had become pure womanhood, she said, like Gertrude. She defied Gertrude's womanhood to produce a superior purity.

Brodrick had accepted the fact without astonishment. The instinct of paternity was strong in him. Once married to Jane, her genius had become of secondary importance. The important thing was that she was his wife; and even that was not so important as it had been.

In the extremity of her anguish Jane had not observed this change in Brodrick's attitude. But now she had leisure to observe. What struck her first was the way Gertrude Collett had come out. It was in proportion as she herself had become sunk in her maternal functions that Gertrude had emerged. She was amazed at the extent to which a soft-feathered angel, innocent, Heaven knew, of the literary taint, could constitute herself a great editor's intellectual companion. But Gertrude's intellect retained the quality of Gertrude. In all its manifestations it was soothing and serene. And there was not too much of it—never any more than a tired and slightly deteriorated editor could stand.

Jane had observed pitifully the deterioration and the tiredness. A falling-off in the high fineness of the "Monthly Review" showed that Brodrick was losing his perfect, his infallible scent. The tiredness she judged to be the cause of the deterioration. Presently, when she was free to take some of his work off his shoulders, he would revive. Meanwhile she was glad that he could find refreshment in his increased communion with Gertrude. She knew that he would sleep well after it; and so long as he could sleep—

She said to herself that she had done Gertrude an injustice. She was wrong in supposing that if Hugh had been married to their angel he would have tired of her, or that he would ever have had too much of her. You could not have too much of Gertrude, for there was, after all, so very little to have. Or else she measured herself discreetly, never giving him any more than he could stand.

But Gertrude's discretion could not disguise from Jane the fact of her ascendancy. She owed it to her very self-restraint, her amazing moderation. And, after all, what was it but the power, developed with opportunity, of doing for Brodrick whatever it was that Jane at the moment could not do? When Jane shut her eyes and tried to imagine what it would be like if Gertrude were there, she found herself inquiring with dismay, Why, whatever would he do without her? What should she do herself? It was Gertrude who kept them all together. She ran the house noiselessly on greased wheels; she smoothed all Brodrick's rose-leaves as fast as Jane crumpled them. Without Gertrude there would be no peace.

Before long Jane had an opportunity of observing the fine height to which Gertrude *could* ascend. It was at a luncheon party that they gave by way of celebrating Jane's return to the social life. The Protheros were there, and Caro Bickersteth. Jane was not sure that she wanted them to come. She was afraid of any disturbance in the tranquil depths of her renunciation.

Laura said afterward that she hardly knew how they had sat through that luncheon. It was not that Jinny was not there, and Brodrick was. The awful thing was that both were so lamentably altered. Brodrick was no longer the enthusiastic editor, gathering about him the brilliant circle of the talents; he was the absorbed, depressed, and ponderous man of business. It was as if some spirit that had breathed on him, sustaining him, lightening his incipient heaviness, had been removed. Jinny sat opposite him, a pale Mater Dolorosa. Her face, even when she talked to you, had an intent, remote expression, as if through it all she were listening for her child's cry. She was silent for the most part, passive in Prothero's hands.

On the background of Jane's silence

and effacement nothing stood out except Gertrude Collett.

Prothero, who had his hostess on his right hand, had inquired as to the ultimate fate of the "Monthly Review." Jane referred him to Miss Collett on his left. Miss Collett knew more about the "Review" than she did.

Gertrude flushed through all her faded fairness at Prothero's appeal.

"Don't you know," said she, "that it's in Mr. Brodrick's hands entirely now?"

Prothero did know. That was why he asked. He turned to Jane again. He was afraid, he said, that the "Review," in Brodrick's hands, would be too good to live.

"Is it too good to live, Gertrude?" said she.

Gertrude looked at Brodrick as if she thought that *he* was.

"I don't think Mr. Brodrick will let it die," she said.

It was Caro who asked, in the drawing-room, afterward, if they might see the children.

Gertrude went up-stairs to fetch them. Eddy Heron watched her softly retreating figure, and smiled, and spoke.

"I say, Gee-Gee's coming out, is n't she?"

Everybody affected not to hear him, and the youth went on smiling to his unappreciated self.

Gertrude appeared again presently, bringing the children. On the very threshold little Hugh struggled in her arms and tried to hurl himself on his mother. His object attained, he turned his back on everybody and hung his head over Jane's shoulder.

But little John Henry was admirably behaved. He wandered from guest to guest, shaking hands, in his solemn urbanity, with every one. He looked already absurdly unastonished and important. He was not so much his father's son as the son of all the Brodricks. As for little Hugh, it was easy enough, Prothero said, to see whose son *he* was. And Winny Heron cried out in an ecstasy that he was going to be a genius; she was sure of it.

"Heaven forbid!" said Brodrick. Everybody heard him.

Little Hugh began to cry bitterly, as if he understood and resented that reflection on his mother. And from crying he

went on to screaming, and Gertrude carried him, struggling violently, from the room.

The screams continued in the nursery overhead. Jane sat for a moment in agony, listening, and then rushed up-stairs.

Gertrude appeared, serene and apologetic.

"Can't anything be done," Brodrick said irritably, "to stop that screaming?"

"It's stopped now," said Winny.

"You've only got to give him what he wants," said Gertrude.

"Yes; and he knows he's only got to scream for it."

Gertrude's eyebrows, raised helplessly, were a note on the folly and infatuation of the child's mother.

Caro Bickersteth and Laura left, hopeless of Jane's return to them. Prothero stayed on, conferring with the editor. Later, he found himself alone in the garden with Jane. He asked then—what they were all longing to know—when she was going to give them another book?

"Never again, Owen; never again."

He reproached her.

"Ah, you don't know what it's been, this last year!" she said. "George told me I should have to pay for it; and you see how I've paid."

His eyes questioned her.

"Through my child."

He turned to her. His eyes were pitiful, but incredulous.

"Owen, he said there'd be no end to my paying. But there shall be an end to it. For a year it's been one long fight for his little life, and I've won; but he'll never be strong; never, I'm afraid, like other children. He'll always remind me—"

"Remind you?"

"Yes. They say I'm responsible for him. It's the hard work I've done. It's my temperament—my nerves."

"Your nerves?"

"Yes. I'm supposed to be hopelessly neurotic."

"But you're not. Your nerves are very highly strung,—they're bound to be, or they would n't respond as perfectly as they do,—but they're the *soudest* nerves I know. I should say you were sound all over."

"Should you?"

"Certainly."

"Then"—she almost cried it—"why should he suffer?"

"Do you mean to say you don't know what 's the matter with him?"

"Owen—"

"He 's a Brodrick. He 's got their nerves."

"*Their* nerves? I did n't know they had any."

"They 've all got them except Mrs. Levine. It 's the family trouble—weak nerves and weak stomachs."

"But Henry—"

"*He* has to take no end of care of himself."

"How do you know?"

"It 's my business," he said, "to know."

"I keep on forgetting that you 're a doctor, too." She meditated. "But Sophy's children are all strong."

"No, they 're not. Levine told me the other day that they were very anxious about one of them."

"Is it—the same thing that my child has?"

"Precisely the same."

"And it comes," she said, "from them. And they never told me."

"They must have thought you knew."

"I did n't. They made me think it was my fault. They let me go through all that agony and terror. I can't forgive them."

"They could n't have known."

"There was Henry. He must have known. And yet he made me think it. He made me give up writing because of that."

"You need n't think it any more. Jacky gets his constitution from you, and it was you who saved the little one."

"He made me think I 'd killed him. It 's just as well," she said, "that I should have thought it. If I had n't, I might n't have fought so hard to make him live. I might have been tormented with another book. It was the only thing that could have stopped me."

She paused.

"Perhaps—they knew that."

"It 's all right," she said presently. "After all, if there is anything wrong with the child, I 'd rather Hugh did n't think it came from him."

She had now another fear. It made her very tender to Brodrick when, coming to him in the drawing-room after their guests had departed, she found him communing

earnestly with Gertrude. A look passed between them as she entered.

"Well, what are you two putting your heads together about?" she said.

Gertrude's head drew back as if a charge had been brought against it.

"Well," said Brodrick, "it was about the child. Something must be done. You can't go on like this."

She seated herself. Her very silence implied that she was all attention.

"It 's bad for him, and it 's bad for you."

"You think I 'm bad for him?"

He did not answer.

"Gertrude, do *you* think I 'm bad for him?"

Gertrude smiled. She did not answer any more than Brodrick.

"Miss Collett agrees with me," said Brodrick.

"She always does. What do I do to him?"

"You excite him."

"Do I, Gertrude?"

Gertrude's face seemed to be imploring Brodrick to be pitiful, and not to rub it in.

"Do I?"

"The child," said Gertrude, evasively, "is very sensitive."

"And you create," Brodrick said, "an atmosphere of perpetual agitation—of emotion."

"You mean my child is fond of me."

"Much too fond of you. It 's playing the devil with him."

"Poor mite—at *his* age! Well, what do you propose?"

"I propose that he should be with somebody who has n't that effect, who can keep him quiet. Miss Collett very kindly offered—"

"Dear Gertrude, you can't. You 've got your hands full."

"Not so full that they can't hold a little more." Gertrude said it with extreme sweetness.

"Can they hold Hughy?"

"They 've held Jacky," said Brodrick, "for the last year. *He* never gives any trouble."

"He never feels it. Poor Baby has got nerves—"

"Well, my dear girl, is n't it all the more reason why he should be with somebody who has n't got 'em?"

"Poor Gertrude! She 'll have more



nerves than any of us if she has to look after the house, and the accounts, and Jacky, and Hughy, and *you*—"

"She does n't look after me," said Brodrick, stiffly, and left the room.

Jane turned to Gertrude.

"Was that your idea or his?"

"How can any idea be mine," said Gertrude, "if I always agree with Mr. Brodrick? As a matter of fact, it was the Doctor's."

"Yes. It was very like him."

"He spoke to Mr. Brodrick yesterday. And I am glad he did."

"Why are you glad?"

"Because it was taken out of my hands. I don't want you to think that I interfere, that I put myself forward, that I suggested this arrangement about the children. If it's to be, you must understand distinctly that I and my ideas and my wishes have nothing to do with it. If I offered myself, it was because I was compelled. Mr. Brodrick was at his wits' end."

"Poor dear! I drove him there," said Jane.

"It's put me in a very difficult position. I have to appear to be taking everything on myself, to be thrusting myself in everywhere, whereas the truth is I can keep on only"—she closed her eyes, as one dizzied with the perilous path she trod—"by ignoring myself, putting myself altogether on one side."

"Do you hate it?" Jane said softly.

"No; it's the only way. But sometimes one is foolish—one looks for a little recognition and reward—"

Jane put her hands on the other woman's shoulders and gazed into her face.

"We do recognize you," she said, "even if we don't reward you. How can we, when you've done so much?"

"My reward would be—not to be misunderstood."

"Do I misunderstand you? Does *he*?"

"Mr. Brodrick? Never."

"I, then?"

"You? I think you thought I wanted to come between you and the children."

"I never thought you wanted to come between me and anything." Her hands that held her dropped. "But you're right, Gertrude. I'm a brute, and you're an angel."

She turned from her and left her there.

# XLIII

It seemed to have struck everybody all at once that Prothero was impossible. That conviction was growing more and more upon his publishers. His poems, they assured him, were no longer worth the paper they were written on. As for his job on the "Morning Telegraph," he was aware that he held it only on sufferance, drawing a momentary and precarious income.

His impossibility appeared more flagrant in the face of Laura's marvelous achievement. Laura's luck persisted, she declared, because she could not bear it, because it was a fantastic refinement of torture to be thrust forward this way in the full blaze, while Owen, withdrawn into the columns of the "Morning Telegraph," became increasingly obscure. It made her feel iniquitous, as if she had taken from him his high place and his praise. Of course she knew that it was not *his* place or *his* praise that she had taken; degradation at the hands of her appraisers set him high. Obscurity, since it meant secrecy, was what he had desired for himself, and what she ought to have desired for him. She knew the uses of unpopularity. It kept him perfect, sacred, in a way, and uncontaminated. It preserved perpetually the clearness of his vision. His genius was cut loose from everything extraneous. It swung in ether, solitary, and pure, a crystal world, not yet breathed upon.

She would not have had it otherwise. It was through Owen's obscurity that her happiness had become so secure and so complete. She was the unique guardian of a high and secret shrine. She had never been one who could be carried away by emotion in a crowd. The sight of her fellow-worshippers had always checked her impulse to adore. It was as much as she could do to admit two or three holy ones, Nina or Jane or Tanqueray, to a place beside her where she knelt.

As for the wretched money that he worried about, she would not have liked him to make it, if he could. An opulent poet was ridiculous, the perversion of the sublime. If one of them was to be made absurd by the possession of a large and comfortable income, she preferred that it should be she.

The size of Laura's income, contrasted, as Prothero persisted in contrasting it, with her own size, was excessively absurd. Large and comfortable as it appeared to Prothero, it was not yet so large nor was it so comfortable that Laura could lie back and rest on it. She was heartrending, irritating, maddening to Prothero in her refusals to lie back on it and rest. She toiled prodigiously, incessantly, indefatigably. She implored Prothero to admit that if she was prodigious and incessant, she *was* indefatigable, she never tired. There was nothing wonderful in what she did. She had caught the silly trick of it. It could be done, she assured him, standing on your head. She enjoyed doing it. The wonderful thing was that she should be paid for her enjoyment, instead of having to pay for it, like other people. He argued vainly that once you had achieved an income, it was no longer necessary to set your teeth and go at it like that.

And the more he argued, the more Laura laughed at him. "I can't help it," she said; "I've got the habit. You'll never break me of it, after all these years."

For the Kiddy, all in her affluence, was hounded and driven by the memory of her former poverty. She had no illusions. She had never had them, and there was nothing spectral about her fear. After all, looking at it sanely, it did not amount to so very much, what she had made. And it was not really an income; it was only a little miserable capital. It had no stability. It might at any moment cease. She might have an illness or Owen might have one; he very probably would, considering the pace *he* went at it. Or the "Morning Telegraph" might throw him over. All sorts of things might happen. In her experience they generally did.

Of course, in a way, Owen was right. They did not want all the money. But what he did not see was that you had to make ten times more than you wanted in order to secure ultimately an income. And then, in the first excitement of it, she had rather launched out. To begin with, she had bought the house, to keep out the other lodgers. They were always bringing coughs and colds about the place and giving them to Owen. And she had had two rooms thrown into one so as to give Owen's long legs space to ramp up and down in. The den he had chosen had been

too small for him. He was better, she thought, since he had had his great room. The house justified itself. It was reassuring to know that, whatever happened, they would have a roof over their heads. But it could not be denied that she had been extravagant.

And Owen had been the least shade extravagant, too. He had found a poet even more unpopular, more impecunious than himself, a youth with no balance, and no power to right himself when he toppled over; and he had given him a hundred pounds in one lump sum to set him on his legs again. And on the top of that he had routed out a tipsy medical student from a slum and "advanced him," as the medical student put it, twenty pounds to go to America with.

He had just come to her in her room, where she sat toiling, and had confessed with a childlike, contrite innocence the things that he had done.

"It was a sudden impulse," he said. "I yielded to it."

"Oh, Owen dear, don't have another soon! These impulses are ruinous."

He sat down, overburdened with his crime, a heartrending spectacle to Laura.

"Well," she said, "I suppose it was worth it. It must have given you an exquisite pleasure."

"It did. That's where the iniquity comes in. It gave me an exquisite pleasure at your expense."

"You give me an exquisite pleasure," she said, "in everything you do."

Her lips made a sign for him to come to her, and he came and knelt at her feet and took her hands in his. He bowed his head over them and kissed them.

"Do you know what you are?" she said. "You're a divine prodigal."

"Yes," he said, kissing her; "I'm a prodigal, a dissolute, good-for-nothing wastrel. I adore you and your little holy hands; but I'm not the least use to you. You ink your blessed little fingers to the bone for me, and I take your earnings and fling them away—in—in—" He grew incoherent with kissing.

"In one night's spiritual debauchery," said she. She was pleased with her way of putting it; she was pleased, immeasurably pleased, with him.

But Owen was not pleased in the very least.

"That," said he, "is precisely what I do."

He rose and stood before her, regarding her with troubled, darkening eyes. He was indeed a mark for the immortal ironies. He had struggled to support and protect her, this unspeakably dear and inconceivably small woman; he looked on her still as a sick child whom he had made well, and here he was living on her, living on Laura. The position was incredible, abominable, but it was his.

She looked at him with deep-blue, adoring eyes, and there was a pain in her heart as she saw how thin his hands were, and how his clothes hung away from his sunken waist.

"Oh," she cried, "what a little beast I am, to make you feel like that, when you're journalizing and agonizing day and night, and when it's your own savings that you flung! It *was*, dear," she insisted.

"Yes, and as I've flung them, I'll have to live on you for a year at least. It all comes back to that."

"I wish *you* would n't come back to it. Can't you see, can't you see," she implored, "how literally I'm living on you?"

"If you only did!"

"But I do, I do. In the real things—the things that matter. I cling and suck like a vampire. Why can't you have the courage of your opinions?"

"My opinions? I have n't any. Hence, no doubt, my lack of courage."

"Your convictions, then, whatever you call the things you *do* have. You think, and I think, that money does n't matter. You won't even allow that it exists, and for you it does n't exist, it can't. Well, then, why make such a fuss about it? And what does it matter which of us earns what, or who spends it?"

He seemed to be considering her point. Then he put it violently from him.

"That's the argument of all the humbugs, all the consecrated hypocrites, that have ever been. All the lazy, long-haired, rickety freaks and loafers who go nourishing their pretended spirituality at some woman's physical expense. The thing's indecent, it's unspeakable. Those Brodricks are perfectly right."

Laura raised her head. "They? What have they got to do with you and me?"

"A good deal. They supply me with

work which they don't want me to do in order to keep me from sponging on my wife. They are admirable men. They represent the sanity and decency of the world pronouncing judgment on the fact. No Brodrick ever blinked a fact. When people ask the Brodricks, 'What does that fellow Prothero do?' They shrug their shoulders and say, 'He has visions, and his wife pays for them.'"

"But I don't. It's the public that pays for them. And your wife has a savage joy in making it pay. If it was n't for that, I should loathe my celebrity more than Jinny ever loathed hers. It makes me feel such a silly ass."

"Poor little thing!" said Prothero.

"Well, it's hard that I should have to entertain imbeciles who would n't read *you* if they were paid."

He knew that that was the sting of it for her.

"They're all right," he said. "It's your funny little humor that they like. I like it, too."

But Laura snapped her teeth and said, "Damn! Damn my humor! Well—when they use it as a brickbat to hurl at your head."

She quoted furiously: "While her husband still sings to deaf ears, Mrs. Prothero has found the secret of capturing her public. She has made her way straight to its heart. And the heart of Mrs. Prothero's public is unmistakably in the right place." Oh, if Mrs. Prothero's public knew what Mrs. Prothero thinks of it! I give them what they want, do I? I don't give it to them because they want it. If they knew why I give it, and how I'm fooling them all the time! How I make them pay—for *you*! Just think, Owen, of the splendid, the diabolical irony of it!"

"So very small," he murmured, "and yet so fierce."

"Just think," she went on, "how I'm enjoying myself."

"Just think," said Prothero, "how I am not."

"Then," she returned it triumphantly, "you're paying for my enjoyment, which is what you want."

The clock struck six. She went out and returned, bringing an overcoat which she said had grown miles too big for him. She warmed it at the fire and helped him on with it, and disappeared for a moment



under its flapping wings, so large was that overcoat.

All the way to Fleet Street, Prothero, wrapped in his warm overcoat, meditated tenderly on his wife's humor.

## XLIV

NOTHING, Tanqueray said, could be more pathetic than the Kiddy spreading her diminutive skirts before Prothero, to shelter that colossal figure.

But the Kiddy, ever since Tanqueray had known her, had refused to be pathetic; she had clenched her small fists to repel the debilitating touch of sympathy. She was always breaking loose from the hands that tried to restrain her, always facing things in spite of her terror, always plunging, armored, indomitable, into the thick of the fight. And she had always come through, somehow, unconquered, with her wounds in front. The wounds he had divined, rather than seen, ever since, in their first deplorable encounter, he had stuck a knife into her. She had turned that defeat, he remembered, into a brilliant personal triumph; she had forced him to admire her; she had worn over that mask, as it were, a gay and pretty gown.

And now, again, Tanqueray was obliged to abandon his vision of her pathos. The spectacle she presented inspired awe, rather, and amazement, though all that she called on you to observe at the moment was merely an insolent exhibition of a clever imp. The Kiddy was minute, but her achievements were enormous; she was ridiculous, but she was sublime.

She sat tight, tighter than ever, and went on. She wrote one charming book after another, at astonishingly short intervals, with every appearance of immemorial ease. She flung them to her scrambling public with a side wink at her friends. "They don't know how I 'm fooling them," was her reiterated comment on her own performances.

Tanqueray exulted over them. They all went to Prothero's profit and his peace. It was not in him to make light of her popularity or to cast it in her hilarious face. Nor could he hope to equal her own incomparable levity. She would come to him, laughing, with the tale of her absurdly soaring royalties, and he would

shout with her when she cried: "The irony of it, Tanks—the delicious irony! It all goes down to his account."

"He 's got another ready for them," she announced one day.

She always spoke of her husband's poems as if they were so many bombs hurled in the face of the enemy, her public. There was nothing like the pugnacity of the Kiddy in these years of Prothero's disaster.

She came to Tanqueray one evening—the evening before publication; she came secretly, while Owen was in Fleet Street. Her eyes blazed in a premature beginning of hostilities. She had come forth, Tanqueray knew, to brave it out, to show her serenity, and the coolness of her courage on the dreadful eve.

It was impossible to blink the danger. Prothero could not possibly escape this time. He had gone, as Tanqueray said, one better than his recent best. And Laura had got a book out, too—an enchanting book. It looked as if they were doomed, in sheer perversity, to appear together. Financial necessity of course might have compelled them to this indiscretion: Laura was bound eventually to have a book, to pay for Prothero's; there was not a publisher in London now who would take the risk of him. But, as likely as not, these wedded ones flung themselves thus on the public in a superb disdain, just to prove how little they cared what was said about them.

Laura was inclined to be reticent, but Tanqueray drew her out by congratulating her on her popularity, on the way she kept it up.

"Oh," she cried, "as if I did n't know what you think of it! Me and my popularity!"

"You don't know, and you don't care, you disgraceful Kiddy."

She lifted her face—a face tender and a little tremulous, which yet held itself bravely to be smitten, as it told him that indeed she did not care.

"I think your popularity, *and* you, my child, the most beautiful sight I 've seen for many a long year."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You may laugh at me," she said.

"'E is n't laughin' at you," Rose interjected. She was generally admitted to Tanqueray's conferences with Laura. She

sat by the fire, with her knees very wide apart, nursing Minny.

"He is n't, indeed," said Tanqueray. "He thinks you a marvelous Kiddy, and he bows his knee before your popularity. How you contrive to turn anything so horrible into anything so adorable he does n't know, and never will know."

"Dear me! I'm only dumping down earth for Owen's roses."

"That's what I mean. That's the miracle. Every novel you write blossoms into a splendid poem."

It was what she meant. She had never meant anything so much. It was the miracle that her marriage perpetually renewed for her, this process of divine transmutation by which her work passed into Owen's and became perfect. It passed, if you like, through a sordid medium, through pounds and shillings and pence, but there again, the medium itself was transmuted, sanctified by its use, by the thing accomplished.

"I'm glad you see it as I do," she said. She had not thought that he would see.

"Of course I see it." He sat silent a moment, regarding his vision, smooth-browed, close-lipped, a purified and transmuted Tanqueray.

"What do you expect," he said presently, "to happen?"

"I expect what always has happened, and worse."

"So do I. I said in the beginning that he had n't a chance. There is n't a place for him anywhere in his own generation. He might just as well go on the stock-exchange and try to float a company by singing to the brokers. It's a generation of brokers."

"Beasts!"

"Aunt's lodger is a broker," said Rose. "Old furniture—real—and pictures is 'is line."

"Aunt's lodger, I assure you, will be thoroughly well damned if he takes any stock in Owen."

"E 'as n't seen Mr. Prothero," said Rose, "and you'll frighten Minny if you use such language."

Tanqueray ignored the interruption. "Owen, you see, is dangerous. He regards the entire stock-exchange as a bankrupt concern. The stock-exchange resents the imputation, and makes things dangerous for Owen. If a man will insist on belonging to all the centuries that have

been, and to the centuries that will be, he's bound to have a bad time in his own. You can't have it both ways."

"I know. He knows it. We'd rather have it this way. I ought n't to talk as if he minded, as if it could touch him where he is. It hurts *me*, not *him*."

"It hurts me, too, Kiddy. I can't stand it when I see the filthy curs rushing at him. They've got to be kicked into a corner. I'm prepared for them this time."

He rose, went to his desk, and returned with an article in proof, which he gave to her.

"Just look through that and see if it's any good."

It was his vindication of Owen Prothero.

"Oh,"—she drew in her breath,—*"how you have fought for him!"*

"I'm fighting for my own honor and glory, too."

He drew her attention to a passage where he called upon Heaven to forbid that he should appear to apologize for so great a man. He was concerned only with explaining why Prothero was, and would remain, unacceptable to a generation of brokers; which was not so much a defense of Prothero as an indictment of his generation. She would see how he had rubbed it in.

She followed, panting a little in her excitement, the admirable points he made. There, where he showed that there was no reason why this Celt should be an alien to the Saxon race, because—her heart leaped as she followed—his genius had all the robust and virile qualities. He was not the creature of a creed or a conviction or a theory; neither was he a fantastic dreamer. He was a man of realities, the very type—Tanqueray had rubbed that well in—that hard-headed Englishmen adore—a surgeon, a physician, a traveler, a fighter among fighting men. He had never blinked a fact,—Laura smiled as she remembered how Owen had said that that was what a Brodrick never did,—he had never shirked a danger. But—Tanqueray had plunged in a new paragraph into the heart of his subject—on the top of it all he was a seer; a man who saw *through* the things that other men see. And to say that he saw, that he saw through things, was the humblest and simplest statement of his case. To him

the visible world was a veil worn thin by the pressure of the reality behind it; it had the translucence that belongs to it in the form of its eternity. He was in a position to judge. He had lived face to face and hand to hand with all forms of corporeal horror, and there was no mass of disease or of corruption that he did not see in its resplendent and divine transparency. It was simple and self-evident to him that the world of bodies was made so and not otherwise. It was also as clear as daylight that the entire scheme of things existed solely to unfold and multiply and vary the everlasting-to-everlasting, world-without-end communion between God and the soul. To him this communion was a fact—a fact above all facts, the supreme and only interesting fact. It was so natural a thing that he sang about it as spontaneously as other poets sing about their love and their mistresses. So simple and so self-evident was it that he had called his last and greatest song a “Song of Transparences.”

“It sounds,” she said, “as if you saw what he sees.”

“I don’t,” said Tanqueray. “I only see *him*.”

At that, all of a sudden, the clever imp broke down.

“George,” she said, “I love you—I don’t care if Rose *does* hear—I love you for defending him.”

“Love me for something else. He does n’t need defending.”

“Not he! But all the same I love you.”

It was as if she had drawn aside a fold of her pretty garment and shown him, where the scar had been, a jewel, a pearl with fire in the white of it.

#### XLV

THEY were right. Worse things were reserved for Prothero than had happened to him yet. Even Caro Bickersteth had turned. Caro had done her best to appreciate competently this creator adored by creators. Caro, nourished on her “Critique of Pure Reason,” was trying hard to hold the balance of justice in the “Morning Telegraph,” and, according to Caro, there was a limit. She had edited Shelley, and she knew. She was frankly, as she said, unable to follow Mr. Prothero in his latest flight. There was a limit even to the imagination of the mystic, and to

the poet’s vision of the transcendent. There were, Caro said, regions of ether too subtle to sustain even so imponderable a poet as Mr. Prothero. So there was not much chance, Tanqueray remarked, of their sustaining Caro.

But the weight of Caro’s utterances increased, as they circulated, formidably, among the right people. All the little men on papers declared that there was a limit, and that Prothero had passed it.

He stood condemned in the interests of reality.

Laura knew it did not matter what they said about him, but that last touch kindled her to flame. It even drew fire from Owen.

“If I gave them the reality they want,” he cried; “if I brought them a dead body with the grave-clothes and worms about it, they’d call that poetry. I bring them a living body rejoicing in life, and they howl at me.”

They were alone in his big room. Nina and Tanqueray and Jane had come and praised him. Laura had been very entertaining over Prothero’s reviews. But, when they had gone, she came and crouched on the floor beside him, as her way was, and leaned her face against his hand. Prothero, with the hand that was not engaged with Laura, turned over the pages of his poem. He was counting them, to prove the slenderness of his offense.

“They can’t say it’s *not* a song,” he said. “Listen to this.”

He read, and she listened, while her hand clutched his, as if she held him against the onslaught of the world.

The music gathered and rose and broke over her in the last verse, in the song of consummation, of the soul’s passion, jubilant, transcendent, where, of the veils of earth and heaven, the veils of separation and illusion, she weaves the veil of the last bridal, the fine veil of immortality.

In the silence Laura stirred at his side. She had possessed herself of his hand again and held it firmly, as if she were afraid that he might be taken from her in his ecstasy.

She was thinking that he had used that theme before, in the first poem of his she ever heard. He was mistaken. There was more than one way of saying the same thing. She reminded him of this earlier

poem. Surely, she said, it was the same thing, the same vision, the same ecstasy, or, if he liked, the same experience?

He did not answer all at once; he seemed to be considering her objection, as if he owned that it might have weight.

No, he said presently, it was not the same thing. Each experience was solitary, unique; it had its own incommunicable quality. He rose and found the earlier poem, and brought it to her that she might see the difference.

She shook her head; but she had to own that the difference was immense. It was the difference, so she made it out, between a vision that you were sure of and a vision of which you were not so sure. And, yes, it was more than that: it was as if his genius had suffered incarnation, and its flame were intenser for having passed through flesh and blood. It was the incorruptible spirit that cried aloud; but there was no shrill tenuity in its cry. The thrill it gave her was unlike the shock that she remembered receiving from the poem of his youth, the shiver they had all felt, as at the passing by of the supersensual. Her husband's genius commanded all the splendors, all the tumultuous energies of sense. His verse rose, and its wings shed the colors of flame, blue, purple, red, and gold that kindled into white; it dropped and ran, striking earth with untiring, impetuous feet; it slackened, and still it throbbed with the beat of a heart driving vehement blood. But she insisted that it was the same vision. How could she forget it? Did he suppose that she had forgotten the moment, four years ago, when Tanqueray had read the poem to them, and it had flashed on her—

"Oh, yes," he said; "it flashed all right. It flashed on me. But it did no more. There was always the fear of losing it. The difference is that—now—there is n't any fear."

She said, "Ah, I remember how afraid you were."

"I was afraid," he said, "of you."

She rose and lifted her arms to him and laid her hand on his shoulders. He had to stoop to let her do it. So held, he could not hope to escape from her candid, searching eyes.

"You are n't afraid of me now? I have n't made it go? You have n't lost it through me?"

"You 've made it stay."

"Have I? Have I done that for you?"

He drew in his breath with a sob of passion. "Ah, the things you do!"

"None of them matter except that," she said.

She left him with that, turning on the threshold to add, "Why bother, then, about the other stupid things?"

It was as if she had said to him that since he owed that to her, a debt so unique, so enormous that he could never dream of paying it back in one lifetime, was it not rather absurd and rather mean of him to make a fuss about the rest? How could he think of anything but that? Did not the one stupendous obligation cover everything, and lay him everlastingly abject at her feet? The only graceful act left him was to kneel down and kiss her feet. And that was what, in spirit, he was always doing. As for her, she would consider herself paid if she saw the difference and knew that she had made it.

It was only now in the hour of achievement that, looking back and counting all his flashes and his failures, he realized the difference she had made. It had seemed to him once that he held his gift, his vision, on a fragile and uncertain tenure; that it could not be carried through the tumult and shock of the world without great danger and difficulty. The thing, as he had said, was tricky; it came and went; and the fear of losing it was the most overpowering of all fears.

He now perceived that, from the beginning, the thing that had been most hostile, most dangerous to his vision was this fear. Time after time it had escaped him when he had hung on to it too hard, and time after time it had returned when he had let it go, to follow the thundering batteries of the world. He had not really lost it when he had left off clutching at it or had flung himself with it into the heart of the danger. He could not say that he had seen it in the reeking wards, and fields bloody with battle, or that he had any memory of it as he bent over plague-stricken or wounded bodies. But it had the trick of coming back to him in moments when he least looked for it. He saw now that its brief vanishings had been followed by brief and faint appearances, and that when it had left him longest, it had returned to stay. The times of utter

destitution were succeeded by perfect and continuous possession. He saw that nothing had been fatal to it except his fear.

He had tested it because of his fear. He had chosen his profession as the extreme test because of his fear. He had given up his profession, again because of his fear—fear of success in it, fear of the world's way of rewarding heroism, the dreadful fear of promotion, of being caught and branded and tied down. He had thought that to be forced into a line, to be committed to medicine and surgery, was to burn the ships of God, to cut himself off forever from his vision.

Looking back, he saw that his fear of the world had been nothing to his fear of women, of the half-spiritual, half-sensual snare. He had put away this fear, and stood the ultimate test. He had tied himself to a woman and bowed his neck for her to cling to. He would have judged this attitude perilous in the extreme, incompatible with vision, with seeing anything but two diminutive feet and the inches of earth they stood in. And it was only since he had done this dangerous thing and done it thoroughly, only since he had staked his soul to redeem his body, that his vision had become secure. It really stayed. He could turn from it, but it was always with him; he could hold and command it at his will.

She was right. If he could take that from her, if he was in for it to that extent, why *did* he bother about the other stupid things?

And yet he bothered. All that autumn he worked harder than ever at his journalism. He seemed to gather to himself all the jobs that were going on the "Morning Telegraph." He went the round of the theaters on first nights, reporting for the "Morning Telegraph" on plays that were beneath the notice of its official dramatic critic. He reviewed poetry and belles-lettres for the "Morning Telegraph"; and he did a great deal of work for it down in Fleet Street with a paste-pot and a pair of scissors.

Prothero's genius had liberated itself for the time being in his last poem; it was detached from him; it wandered free like a blessed spirit invisible, while Prothero's brain agonized and journalized, as Laura said. There was no compromise, this time, no propitiation, no playing with the beau-

tiful prose of his occasional essays. He plunged from his heavenly height sheer into the worst blackness of the pit, he contorted himself there in his obscure creation of paragraphs and columns. His spirit writhed like a fine flame, trammelled and tortured by the grossness of the stuff it kindled, and the more it writhed the more he piled on the paragraphs and columns. He seemed, Laura said, to take a pleasure in seeing how much he could pile on without extinguishing it.

In December he caught cold coming out of a theater on a night of north wind and sleet, and he was laid up for three weeks with bronchitis.

And at night, that winter, when sounds of coughing came from the Consumption Hospital, they were answered through the open windows of the house with the iron gate. And Laura, at Owen's side, lay awake in her fear.

#### XLVI

THERE was one thing at which Prothero, in his journalism, drew the line. He would not, if they paid him more than they had ever paid him, more than they had ever dreamed of paying anybody—he would not review another poet's work. For some day, he said, Nicky will bring out a volume of his poems, and in that day he will infallibly turn to me. If, in that day, I can lay my hand upon my heart and swear that I never review poetry, that I never have reviewed it, and never shall, I can look Nicky in his innocent face with a clean soul.

But when Nicky actually did it (in the spring of nineteen hundred and nine) Prothero applied to Brodrick for a holiday. He wanted badly to get out of town. He could not, when it came to the agonizing point—he could not face Nicky.

At least that was the account of the matter that Tanqueray gave to Brodrick when the question of Prothero's impossibility came up again at Moor Grange. Brodrick was indignant at Prothero's wanting a holiday, and a month's holiday. It was preposterous. But Jane had implored him to let him have it.

Jinny would give a good deal, Tanqueray imagined, to get out of town, too. It was more terrible for her to face Nicky than for any of them. Tanqueray himself was hiding from him at that moment in



Brodrick's study. But Jinny, with that superb and incomprehensible courage that women have, was facing him down there in the drawing-room.

It was in the drawing-room, later on in the afternoon, that Brodrick found his wife, shrunk into a corner of the sofa and mopping her face with a handkerchief. Tanqueray had one knee on the sofa, and one arm flung tenderly about Jinny's shoulder. He met, smiling, the husband's standstill of imperturbable inquiry.

"It 's all right, Brodrick," he said. "I 've revived her. I 've been talking to her like a father."

He stood looking down at her, and commented:

"Nicky brought a book of poems out, and Jinny cried."

"It was th—th—the last straw," sobbed Jinny.

Brodrick left them together, just to show how imperturbable he was.

"George," she said, "it was horrible. Poor Nicky stood there where you are, waiting for me to say things. And I could n't, I could n't, and he saw it. He saw it, and he turned white—"

"He is white," said Tanqueray.

"He turned whiter. And he burst out into a dreadful perspiration. And then,—oh, don't laugh! It was so awful!—he took my hand and wrung it, and walked out of the room, very dignified and stiff."

"My dear child, he only thought you were speechless with emotion."

But Jane was putting on her hat and coat.

"Let 's get out somewhere," she said—"anywhere away from this intolerable scene. Let 's tear over the Heath."

She tore and he followed. Gertrude saw them go.

She turned midway between Putney and Wimbledon. "Oh, how my heart aches for that poor lamb!"

"It need n't. The poor lamb's heart does n't ache for itself."

"It does. I stabbed it."

"Not you!"

"But, George—they were dedicated to me! Could my cup of agony be fuller?"

"I admit it 's full."

"And how about Nicky's?"

"Look here, Jinny. If you or I or Prothero had written those poems, we should be drinking cups of agony. But there is

no cup of agony for Nicky. He believes that those poems are immortal, and that none of us can rob them of their immortality."

"But if he 's slaughtered,—and he will be,—if they fall on him and tear him limb from limb, poor, innocent lamb!"

"He is n't innocent, your lamb. He deserves it. So he won't get it. It 's only poets like Prothero who are torn limb from limb."

"I don't know. There are people who 'd stick a knife into him as soon as look at him."

"If there are, he 'll be happy. He 'll believe that there 's a plot against him to write him down. He 'll believe that he 's Keats. He 'll believe anything. You need n't be sorry for him. If you or I had only Nicky's hope of immortality! If we only had the joy he has even now in the horrible act of creation! Why, he 's never tired. He can go on forever without turning a hair, whereas, look at *our* hair after a morning's work! Think what it must be to feel that you never can be uninspired, never to have a doubt or a shadowy misgiving. Neither you nor I nor Prothero will ever know a hundredth part of the rapture Nicky knows. We get it for five minutes, an hour, perhaps, and all the rest is simply hard, heavy, heartbreaking, grinding labor."

Their wild pace slackened.

"It 's a dog's life, yours and mine, Jinny. Upon my soul, for mere sensation, if I could choose, I 'd rather be Nicky." He paused. "And then, when you think of his supreme illusion—"

"Has he another?"

"You know he has. If all of us could believe that when the woman we love refuses us she does it only because of her career—"

"If he *did* believe that—"

"Believe it? He believes now that she did n't even refuse him. He thinks he renounced her—for the sake of her career. It 's quite possible he thinks she loves him; and really, considering her absurd behavior—"

"Oh, I don't mind," she moaned; "he can believe anything he likes if it makes him happier."

"He is happy," said George, tempestuously. "If I were to be born again, I 'd pray to the high gods, the cruel gods,



Drawn by Arthur I. Keller. Half-tone plate engraved by R. Varley

"‘GEORGE,’ SHE SAID, . . . ‘I LOVE YOU FOR DEFENDING HIM’" (SEE PAGE 539)

Jinny, to make me mad like Nicky, to give me the gift of indestructible illusion. Then, perhaps, I might know what it was to live."

She had seen him once, and only once, in this mood—the night he had dined with her in Kensington Square, six weeks before he married Rose.

"But you and I have been faithful to reality—true, as they say, to life. If the idiots who fling that phrase about only knew what it meant! You've been more faithful than I, you've taken such awful risks. You fling your heart down, Jinny, every time."

"Do you never take risks? Do you never fling your heart down?"

He looked at her. "Not your way. Not unless I *know* that I'll get what I want."

"And have n't you got it?"

"I've got most of it, but not all—yet."

His tone might or might not imply that getting it was only a question of time.

"I say, where are you going?"

She was heading rapidly for Augustus Road. She wanted to get away from George.

"Not there," he protested, perceiving her intention.

"I must."

He followed her down the long road where the trees drooped darkly, and he stood with her by the gate.

"How long will you be?" he said.

"I can't say. Half an hour, three quarters, ever so long."

He waited for an hour, walking up and down, up and down the long road under

the trees. She reappeared as he was turning at the far end of it. He had to run to overtake her.

Her face had on it the agony of unborn tears.

"What is it, Jinny?" he said.

"Mabel Brodrick."

She hardly saw his gesture of exasperation.

"Oh, George, she suffers! It's terrible. There's to be an operation—tomorrow. I can think of nothing else."

"Oh, Jinny, is there no one to take care of you? Is there no one to keep you from that woman?"

"Oh, don't! If you had seen her—"

"I don't want to see her. I don't want *you* to see her. You should never have anything to do with suffering. It hurts you. It kills you. You ought to be taken care of. You ought to be kept from the sight and sound of it." He gazed wildly round the Heath. "If Brodrick was any good, he'd take you out of this place."

"I would n't go. Poor darling, she can't bear me out of her sight. I believe I've worn a path going and coming."

They had left the beaten track. Their way lay in a line drawn straight across the Heath from Brodrick's house. It was almost as if her feet had made it.

"Jinny's path," he said.

They were silent, and he gathered up as it were the burden of their silence when he stopped and faced her with his question:

"How are you going on?"

(To be continued)

## QUATRAINS

BY MRS. SCHUYLER VAN RENSSELAER

### IF GREAT LOVE DIES

**I**F great love dies, ask of thy years of earth  
No other. Keep from lesser bondage free.  
Let the great gift bequeath the next in worth—  
Unto thyself thine own sufficiency.

### A WARNING

**N**O chance can ravish from thy resolute grasp  
One greatest good, no power can break thy clasp;  
Only thyself, stooped to ignobler quest,  
May cheat thee of the will to seek the best.