

A MAN OF INACTION

G. E. MITTON

I

Pull, pull the oars
And leave the women at home.

THE words, chanted in a hoarse chorus, to an air that might have been that of "Rye Sally Walker," rang across the slate-gray smoothness of Ullswater Lake from a jovial crew who were pulling up to Pooley Bridge in anticipation of an evening's spree. No sooner had they ceased their inane chant than some one of them started a gramophone in a rollicking harsh tune.

Two men who had pulled in under the shadow of the sleeping hills were savagely annoyed.

"Howling devils," said one who was in charge of the oars. The other, who was sitting in the stern, stooped abruptly, and picking up a shot-gun which lay in the bottom of the boat, discharged it deliberately in the direction of the passing boat-load, invisible in the drooping darkness. The discharge had no more effect on the offenders than the opening of a soda-water bottle; they continued on their way, leaving behind them a trail of outrageous noise, like the noisome murk from a steamer funnel. The report of the gun re-echoed from the opposite hills, for the lake was fairly narrow just here, and mingled with it came a sharp cry in a treble voice.

"By the Lord," said the oarsman, dropping his hands in amazement. "You mad fool! You've shot someone."

"Pull over, Retford, and let's investigate," said the culprit calmly.

"A dozen times I've regretted I ever came with you, Leven," Retford went on as he pulled wrathfully across the oily water. "The only thing to say is that you are not capable of taking care of yourself."

"I wonder why I did that," commented Leven; "I shouldn't, if I had thought for a moment, I suppose. I just wanted to frighten them. I never dreamt the old blunderbuss would carry so far, and it seems to have carried right across. The shore must be nearer than it looks."

"If I hadn't come with you there'd have been murder done before this," grumbled Retford as the boat glided in to a stony beach, silent, and apparently deserted. Search revealed a rough stone boathouse and a landing-place, but there was no sign of a human being. Soberly they rowed on up the lake to their own landing-place, which was on the same side.

"I suppose you're going right up to the house," said Retford resignedly, as he made the boat fast. "I must, of course, try to trace the victim and offer adequate compensation."

Leven stood just a little above him, ruffling up his hair quizzically. "I suppose that *would* fall within your duties," he said, "But you didn't bargain for that. Is it worth it, Retford — is it worth it? That's what you must ask yourself."

With this extraordinary remark he went on alone.

II

"I've done all I can," said Retford an hour or so later, as he sank into a chair, still panting from the ascent of the steep hill on which the house stood. "The conduct of these matters needs tact and diplomacy. It's infernally unpleasant to be mixed up in them, I can tell you."

"Yes, my dear fellow, I know. I am burning to hear, of course, but just before you begin I'll ask — why do it?"

"Someone must," replied Retford, hitching his chair round and beginning an impressive narrative. "I went first to a man who does odd jobs on the road. I ascertained from him that the boat-house is sometimes used by the daughter of the landlord of the inn, — hotel they call it. Deductively I argued that she must have been your victim, for it was certainly a woman's voice we heard cry out. I went to the inn and asked for the young lady ——"

"Yes," interrupted Leven; "I appreciate your style immensely — none better; but just tell me, before we get any further, is she really hurt? I shall enjoy the rest of it all the more for knowing, beforehand. Don't doubt that."

Retford heeded him not; he went on: "She is — well, you know, for that class, — she is an uncommonly attractive girl. She spoke in an uncommonly attractive voice. I noticed at once that her hand was bandaged ——"

"Sleuth-hound," murmured Leven, looking at his pipe bowl.

"She protested it was nothing. One of the spent shot must have struck her as she was standing on the landing-stage securing her little boat. She was ashamed of having cried out, but it was the shock of it coming out of the dark, and the next instant she heard the thunder of the low rolling echoes of the gun. I assure you I felt quite uncomfortable in offering her the usual form of compensation, but I knew that if it had to be done it was better done by me, so I hinted very gently how nice a pretty trinket would look on her pretty wrist."

"She would appreciate that," came out of Leven's corner.

"Extraordinary to say, she didn't! You never know where you are with these people. She drew back, and grew rather stiff and cold. I fear it will have to be money."

"You didn't go on to that, did you?" asked Leven with interest.

"Yes, I did. It's got to be done. I said something about a cheque, — that sounded best, — and I knew you could well afford it. She laughed then, and said I might rest assured her very slight hurt needed no such plaster, and that, as unpleasant accidents were apt to stay in the mind longer than was agreeable, it seemed to her it would be a great pity to erect a tablet to the memory of this one. I don't know how it was, but I found I could say nothing else, and had to leave."

"I see. Well, you've done your best, and no one can do more."

Retford shuffled a bit in his chair. "I've wanted to say something to you, Leven, ever since we came here."

"Say on."

"It was obviously an arrangement that suited us both — our coming for a holiday here together, I mean. I'm glad you saw that directly I suggested it. You have the money, of course —"

"And you the tact, *savoir faire*, etc., etc. Yes?"

"I wouldn't have put it quite like that, but you certainly are the most casual fellow I ever met. With your opportunities of birth, education, money, you ought to be in a very different position from what you are. It comes to this, Leven, you've done nothing, — you never have done anything."

Leven was standing now with his back to the fireplace. His sad eyes and thinning hair were very plain to see. "You're perfectly right," he said indifferently.

"But don't you want to do things?"

"So many people 'do things.'"

"Yes, but the 'world is full of opportunities, strings of tension waiting to be struck.' I don't remember where that comes from, but it isn't original."

"That's the theory, I know; but supposing a man doesn't seem to get the opportunities?"

"Why don't you look around for them? Found a hospital or endow something, so that you can have your name associated with at least one deed for the good of your fellow-men. I should be wretched if I had had your chances and died feeling that not one soul was the better for my having had them."

He got up as he spoke and nodded good-night, leaving the other man standing by the chimney-piece.

III

The cottage where the two men were staying was set up against the green side of Swarth so snugly that the back upstairs windows were level with the earth. The sun was not up, and the dim gray light was still sharply cold, when Leven got out of the small wooden bed he occupied, and, slipping on a pair of canvas shoes, climbed, just as he was, in his pyjamas, out of the narrow case-ment and on to the grass. Though broad of shoulder he was anything but stout, and after the start the rest was easy. Then he began strolling upwards over the sheep-nibbled grass. Swarth is not very high, and though it rises sharply, its rounded slopes and grassy terraces afford a choice of ascent pleasant to a man who starts for a mere before-breakfast stroll.

Leven's mind was running on Retford. What a good fellow he was really, and how intolerable! He was personable in appearance, with his tall, well-built figure, his clean face, and black hair. Why was it that everything he said and did was as dust in the mouth, so that getting away from him to clear the system with a breath of fresh air was a necessity now and again? Yet Retford was right, quite right, in what he had said. It was the knowledge of his own futility that banked Leven in at every turn. He had meant to do something at first, of course, — not exactly in the line of putting up colossal mausoleums of brick and mortar to house unfortunate children as a lasting memorial to himself, —

but something. And he had never done anything but help those he met along the road, when he understood their needs. Retford, for instance. Retford was a proud beggar; he would not take anything as a gift. He could not have afforded a holiday like this, but he certainly would not have come unless Leven had accepted his suggestion of being business manager, so to speak, and carrying the purse, so that he could feel he was being useful. He was a man of probity; every item was docketed, — in fact, Leven wished he wouldn't docket so much; it was a nuisance, but it must be borne in order to reinforce Retford in the idea that he was earning his holiday. However, it would soon be over; three weeks wasn't much to give to a fellow like Retford who had to sweat in an office all his days.

Leven had reached the cairn before the sun actually rose, and he stood on the bald patch with its indications of the haunting of many rabbits. It was cold still on this morning in August, and Leven turned away to go down by the beck, which had cleft for itself a highly irregular gash down the hillside.

He knew it well; there was one pool as large as a decent-sized room, full of the brown water which poured in a cascade from above. He wished he had brought his towels; he might have had a dip. Retford would say that was just like his casualness. He neared the pool noiselessly, approaching it from above over the close grass. He was forestalled!

Already in the pool, swimming round and round, throwing brown arms gleefully over her thick brown-covered head, was a girl. As Leven dropped suddenly behind one of the great split stones, she stood up on the margin, and he saw that she had on some sort of a costume of stockinette, but it was almost flesh-color, — her undermost undergarment probably, — however, no worse than those worn by thousands of girls disporting themselves on the sandy coasts in full human view all round the south of England. Conscious of no ill intent, he watched the prettiest spectacle he had ever seen.

Directly he saw her out of the water he knew that this was the daughter of the inn; for a tight small bandage still held her left hand. Her discarded clothes were lying in a small heap beneath a rowan tree, which, with the perversity of its kind, had chosen to grow on the very lip of the rock and hang out across the brown

down-flowing stream. The berries in their rich profusion showed up among the feathery leaves and against the gray satin-smooth stem. As Leven watched, the girl dived in again, and swam over to the place where the cascade, greatly shrunken at this time of year, fell in a silver streak. It broke down over a niche like a chimney laid bare, and the sides of this were cushioned in dripping green moss. With a shiver of delight the girl reared herself into the chimney, laughing as the water burst into splinters around her, and she swayed her beautiful curved body backwards and forwards into the cushioned moss with eyes close shut.

A very unusual girl certainly!

IV

At breakfast Retford declared, with the profound simplicity of one who has never suffered from the ache of an error in judgment, "I thought it just as well to make further inquiries about the people at the inn, — hotel, as they persist in calling it. The old man married again, while this girl, his only child, was away at a boarding-school. He is very fond of her, but has made the common mistake of educating her above her station. It is a great pity, for now she is of no use to herself or any one else."

Leven arranged that Retford should go into Pooley Bridge to fetch necessities, including a particular sort of tobacco, after tea that evening, and when he was well on the road he himself strolled down to the landing-place below the inn.

Before he got there he found the girl he sought, though at the first glance he felt surprised at her appearance. She was dressed in hardly more clothes than when he had seen her in the earliest morning hours. Her arms, neck, and head were bare; her scanty skirt dropped scarcely to the knee, yet she carried herself so that the lines of her figure gave an air of the latest fashion to the drapery. Whatever quality it is that marks out the well-dressed from the ill-dressed, it was hers.

As he drew near, raising his hat, she smiled at him frankly, and it was he who felt embarrassed. He made the obvious move by looking at her hand, now free of its bandage, and she met him before he got out his apology. "It's nothing — all gone now." Then almost immediately, "Was it you who did it? The other gentleman who came here last night said *he* didn't. The use of the

word "gentleman" alone betrayed her origin; in tone and accent she spoke faultlessly.

"I am the guilty one; he only came to make the peace for me," said Leven, leaning on the rail over the green water, and looking at her. She certainly was pretty.

"You would have done better to come for yourself," she said quickly. Leven smiled.

"You would not have said what he did," she went on, glancing at him and away again.

"Now how on earth do you know that?"

She threw out her hands with a little gesture that struck him as rather pathetic: "How does one know anything?"

"You think that I would have offered you something less tangible and more valuable than a mere trinket?" he asked, regarding her curiously.

She looked at him with quick suspicion.

"The offer of willing service," he went on. "Is there anything I can do for you? If there is, I will do it."

She also leaned meditatively on the rail, half-turning her back on him. "A dangerous thing to say to a woman," she murmured softly, with an air and manner that might have belonged to a reigning society beauty. "But of all that a woman desires what does a man know? I shall not hold you to your very rash promise."

"I am sorry for it. I should at least be interested to hear what it is that I may not attempt," he answered, coming over beside her.

"That would be to lay bare so much," she said very low indeed. "Not yet — perhaps — who knows, it might come, — but now to prove you, I will ask you something. You are a rich man, Mr. Leven, are you not?"

It was spoken with a simplicity that carried no offense.

"Fairly well-to-do as these days go."

"Then — could you — do you think you could, help someone?"

Her eagerness now flooded up over her.

"Try me."

"If I tell you and you can't, you must promise to forget about it."

"Miss Sinclair — for answer I'll tell you something about myself. 'I'm a poor duffer of a fellow who started life with his hands

full of good things, which he was eager to share with others, but because of some quality of futility in him he has never been able to do anything satisfactorily. He has blundered, he has been tricked with his eyes open, he has audibly heard the laughter of the fools he thought to benefit — and now he drifts — he does nothing.’”

“I don’t believe it.” Her bright eyes were child-like, looking up at his with a mixture of tenderness and trust he found irresistible.

He cleared his throat; he found this sudden belief amazingly touching. “Tell me the name of the person you want me to help,” he asked.

“His name is Teddy.”

Then she had a lover! A stupid, good-hearted country lout, probably, who wanted a lift in life. A pity; she was of the few who had unspoiled perceptions and dared to trust in them.

Mr. Sinclair from the hotel came into view, bringing a couple of anglers to the boat. The girl Jessie did not run away, instead, in modern fashion, she thrust the boat out, threw in the cushions, and arranged the oars before the party came abreast.

The last Leven saw of her was as she glanced back from the stern before they rounded the point of Hallin. The boat was doubled in the glassy water.

V

There was but a scanty congregation in the little church of Martindale the following morning. A few visitors, very much in holiday garb, were sprinkled among the white-bloused, shiny-faced country girls and the rather awkward young shepherds who formed the normal few.

The service was so comically mingled with “sheep” that it seemed to Leven’s imaginative mind to be more of a dream than reality. The low-arched door was left open, and the plaintive bleat of the sheep formed a long undercurrent to all that went on; their poignant smell was strong near the door, and one innocently interested wanderer peeped in on his nibbling way past. But more than that: the psalm for the day happened to be that about “green pastures.” The hymn was, “There were ninety and nine that safely lay”; and when the old clergyman, fifty years pastured on these slopes, mounted the pulpit, he gave out in his quavering

voice, which was absurdly punctuated with little bleats each time he took breath, "All we like sheep have gone astray."

Now that he was sitting, Leven could see more of the congregation who had been cut off before by the pillar against which, true to his retiring instincts, he had planted himself. He tried to spot "Teddy," but there were so many possible Teddies that he gave it up. In the vicar's pew was pathos enough and to spare. A careworn mother, with renunciation of earth and hopes of heaven writ clear upon her face, had next to her one of two freckled, snub-nosed girls in cotton frocks and cotton gloves; and on the other side a boy of about fourteen, comically ugly. He had a head of stubbly sandy hair of that tint that seems to permeate the very skin. His head was large and lumpy, his lips protuberant, the eyes small and deep-set. The boy's jacket was too small, his trousers too large, but his collar was spotless and his conduct irreproachable.

The next morning when Leven went down to his own boat-place with the idea of fishing, he found this lad in possession, dressed in well-worn homespun. A few remarks about fishing-tackle proved him an expert, and soon he was drawn to answer a few questions about himself. Yes, he lived at home; his father taught him. That was about the sum of it.

Then Jessie Sinclair came floating down on them along the strand between the landing-stage of the inn and theirs.

Teddy's shy, ugly face radiated light and glory as he looked at her, but he gathered in his fishing-tackle, and departed without a word.

"So you have found him," Jessie said breathlessly. "What do you think of him?"

"*That* is Teddy?" asked the amazed Leven.

"Yes, yes. Teddy is a genius. Oh, I know it. I *do* know things about people. He can't speak even to me of the great thoughts he has, but he gets them down on paper sometimes. No one has seen them but me. He is cramped and buried here. Do you know that the vicar, his father, teaches him, though he knows nothing? Think of the agony of it. Day by day Teddy goes over the same old grind and pretends he knows no more, because, you see, it would be dreadful for his father to know he thinks it all baby-food. His father is stupid, — oh yes, it is a dreadful thing to say

of a clergyman, but it's true. He is jealous of Teddy. Long ago Teddy tried to tell him that he was far beyond what he is allowed to do, but he was dreadfully snubbed, and now he says nothing."

"But, my dear girl," Leven protested, when the torrents of words had run themselves out; "it's absurd. It's not human nature. If the boy is really clever, the father would be the first to be gratified. Why? If because of nothing else, he would see a future for his son."

"He doesn't. He's just the particular kind of fool who can't. He's been here too long; he's grown like a sheep. He's got that suspicious stare a sheep has at anything beyond the grass. No one knows but me. They think Teddy a dull good boy. He can't even talk to me as we would like; we can't go walks together, because they think it 'strange' and 'odd.'"

"What must I do!" asked Leven submissively.

"Read some of the things he has written. I will give them to you, but, of course, you mustn't let him know. By the way, Mr. Leven, you seemed so surprised when I said that it was Teddy I wanted you to help. Who did you think it was?"

"I imagined Teddy was some young man in whom you had an interest."

"A lover? I have no lovers! How could I have? I am like no one here, just a betwixt-and-between. The young shepherds would, of course, never dream of it. And what have I to find in them? The visitors treat me with a half-playful friendly familiarity."

"You seem almost as lonely as Teddy."

"I suppose I am. There is so little I can do. Have you seen my stepmother? She is very nice, pretty too, and a good manager. She is just 'it,' not, — oh, how can I say it? — not knowing that there is anything beyond. That's so curious, isn't it? When one gets to know a little bit, ever such a little bit more, one can always look back and see what is behind, but one can never look on above and see the beyond, — not to comprehend it, that is. Unless one knows there is more to know, I mean, how can one understand one's own ignorance? I *do* express it badly. No matter about me. The time will come when I shall escape quite easily."

"How will you manage that?"

"A woman's way. I shall marry. Yes, as I said, there are not many, but there are a few I could have, conceited ones, of course,

— a little wheedling, a little flattery, and they would nobly sacrifice themselves to their own inclinations by marrying the beggar girl, — my King Cophetuas. A conceited man need not be a bad husband, and he would always be easy to manage.”

VI

A week later and the lake was wildly tossing its wind-raised waves; the rain stalked the hills in gigantic spectral columns, and the air that had been so warm was icy-cold.

Lamp and fire burned brightly within the little house under the lee of the hill, and Leven, with a richly-colored pipe in his mouth, sat deeply absorbed in some odd scraps of paper. Their miscellaneous character, and their condition, written on both sides, spoke eloquently of the shifts of Teddy to get the simplest material on which to set down his bursting thought. What Leven had inspected so far showed brain certainly. The poems and ideas were mostly in Latin or in classical English; they would have been creditable as the work of a sixth-form boy in a public school, and were clever as the work of a mostly self-taught child of fourteen, but they displayed no genius.

Retford had been wandering up and down restlessly.

“I say, Leven,” he said, after four or five attempts to break into speech. “She’s an extremely clever girl, you know, and when all is said against her that can be said —”

“Umph?”

“I mean about her station in life and all that, you have to remember that brains tell, and a woman, clever and charming, easily reaches up to her husband’s station. These Westmoreland people have good blood in their veins, too. It isn’t her looks that attract me so much as her discrimination. She is so perceptive; she knows a fool when she sees one — and — er — a man who isn’t a fool too, you know. Some people are so dense, it would kill me to live with them.”

“Eh? Who is it you are talking of?”

“Jessie Sinclair. But I’m only rotting, I couldn’t really do it. My mother would have a word to say. No. I must see her again, of course, and soothe down any little feeling I may unintentionally have aroused.”

“I fancy it will depend on her,” said Leven half to himself.

"What? Well, you obviously don't want me, so I think I'll just go down to the hotel. What a night!"

When, with a good deal of fuss and stamping, he had got into his mackintosh and departed, Leven resumed his reading. The last thing he got hold of was the best. Most unpromising choice of material one would have thought. It was a poem in English blank verse, telling the story of Er the son of Armenius, taken from the tenth book of Plato's *Republic*. In some mysterious way the boy had caught the glow of Plato's high thought. With many a mark of the tool he had labored, but the inspiration shone through, and there was something that came and went that made Leven's breath come faster. He had found his mark of genius, the girl was right! How on earth had she known? The boy was crude and undeveloped, obviously limited by his disadvantages, but he was a boy with a mind which could fly to any height.

Leven let the paper fall on his knee, and sat on looking into the coal fire necessary on this cold northern August evening. Teddy should be his grand opportunity. In Teddy he would see developed all those dreams with which he had started life. He had meant to write poetry; he had meant to be a great classical scholar; and in the fine mind of the child he saw the creative power he had lacked.

And he, Leven, who sat there, began to feel that at last he should do some great thing for another. Blindly he sat, unconscious that his way through life was already marked by "great" things. Never a fellow-creature had appealed to him in vain; never one had been helped without the resources of a finely sensitive soul being taxed that the gift of help might be delivered without hurt to the self-respect of the recipient.

His pathway behind was radiant with light, but he knew it not. He looked onward, and saw only the light that he should kindle for himself by the discovery of Teddy.

Meantime, in an upstairs room at the hotel-inn, Retford was face to face with Jessie. It was a small room, overfilled with worn furniture. It was occasionally let as a "private sitting-room" to visitors in the summer, and was used by the family in the winter. Everything in it had a discolored look. The cheap piano piled with dog-eared torn music, the damp walls plastered with cheap pictures in cheaper frames, and china ornaments set upon plush

"plaques." It was a room where, if you moved at all, you had also to move some piece of furniture to make way.

At the table sat Jessie with a soiled account-book before her. She had been adding up the columns before Retford came in at the door, and, shutting it behind him, sat down on a chair close to her. He had asked for her, and when her father offered to fetch her, and he had suggested going up himself to find her, he had decided his fate in life.

"I wish you hadn't come," said Jessie, her face bent low over her figures, "but now you are here you might help me with these accounts; the total comes different every time."

Instead of that, he leaned nearer to her, across the creased red rep cloth. "Why do you say you wish I hadn't come, Jessie?"

"*You* know." The words were so low that he had to lean nearer yet.

"Perhaps I can guess. You think that I shall soon go away, eh?"

No answer.

"Tell me, Jessie, would you be very sad if I went away?"

"Of course not," with a defiant shake of the head. "I wouldn't. I should think then you were just like all the rest."

"And you don't think so now?"

For answer she looked up at him under her lashes for one glinting moment, but it was enough, — Retford was a doomed man.

"And what would you say if you knew I had come here to-night to ask you to be my wife?"

Never had he felt so deliciously magnanimous, so grand and noble as then!

"I should say ——"

"Yes?" He was holding her now in his arms.

"That you were different from any man I had ever known."

"My darling! You are fit to be the wife of a king."

"Then you are my king," she said, turning to him.

When he heard the news, Leven puzzled long whether this would be accounted to him for righteousness or not, and then gave it up in despair and fell back upon his undoubted "find" of Teddy.

YOUR HOUSE IS MY CASTLE

ARTHUR RUHL

HOMES, in ultra-modern Russia, have met the fate of a number of other "bourgeois notions," and palatial chambers in Moscow have been chopped up into tiny compartments to make room for the crowds of people who have been thronging into the city since 1917. Cobblers, professors, and quondam nobles are here pictured trying desperately to keep the home fires burning while using a common latchkey and stumbling over each others' umbrellas in quarters packed tight by vigilant housing committees.

IN a story which deeply moved the fiction readers of a generation ago, the hero, pausing on the doorstep of the lady to whom he had just offered his hand, gazed down the long line of gas-lamps which led to that far-off bourne where dwelt the "other woman." If he had but twenty-four hours longer to live, would he choose to spend them with her or with the Bishop's daughter? . . . With her, — if but that brief

time were left. A life-time was another matter. We were not led to believe that this other lady was in any wise reprehensible. It was scarcely in the rôle of Mr. Davis' heroes to know any such. She lived "at the other end of the gas-lamps," and that was enough.

The geography of New York, with wealth and fashion gathered about its central avenue and the cross streets leading down a descending social scale, invites such symbolism. Its sharp visualization of social differences strikes us all from time to time. On some wilting summer night, as we stroll past shuttered palaces whose owners are inviting their souls somewhere by the sea, an "L" train, blinking across the street to the eastward, suddenly recalls the sweating herds in the tenements over there trying to sleep. . . .

Why — but the speculation stops before we are ready to take any strange birds into *our* little five-room nest! In Moscow the Fifth Avenue pedestrian's midsummer fancy has been carried to the logical and bitter end. So many people, so many square feet of floor space. Divide the one by the other, at whichever end of the gas-lamps they live, and there you are.

One begins, naturally, with the palaces. They become hospitals or schools, or, if they are interesting enough, museums. In 1900, a casual visitor to Petrograd would not have been likely to see the inside of the Stroganov Palace on the Nevski. Last summer I