

Permutations Among the Nightingales, Aldous Huxley

Permutations Among the Nightingales

A PLAY

It is night on the terrace outside the Hotel Cimarosa. Part of the garden façade of the hotel is seen at the back of the stage—a bare white wall, with three French windows giving on to balconies about ten feet from the ground, and below them, leading from the terrace to the lounge, a double door of glass, open now, through which a yellow radiance streams out into the night. On the paved terrace stand two or three green iron tables and chairs. To the left a mass of dark foliage, ilex and cypress, in the shadow of which more tables and chairs are set.

At the back to the left a strip of sky is visible between the corner of the hotel and the dark trees, blue and starry, for it is a marvellous June evening. Behind the trees the ground slopes steeply down and down to an old city in the valley below, of whose invisible presence you are made aware by the sound of many bells wafted up from a score of slender towers in a sweet and melancholy discord that seems to mourn the passing of each successive hour.

When the curtain rises the terrace is almost deserted; the hotel dinner is not yet over. A single guest, COUNT ALBERTO TIRETTA, is discovered, sitting in a position of histrionic despair at one of the little green tables. A waiter stands respectfully sympathetic at his side, ALBERTO is a little man with large lustrous eyes and a black moustache, about twenty-five years of age. He has the pathetic charm of an Italian street-boy with an organ—almost as pretty and sentimental as Murillo's little beggars.

ALBERTO (making a florid gesture with his right hand and with his left covering his eyes). Whereupon, Waiter (he is reciting a tale of woes), she slammed the door in my face. (He brings down his gesticulating right hand with a crash on to the table.)

WAITER. In your face, Signore? Impossible!

ALBERTO. Impossible, but a fact. Some more brandy, please; I am a little weary. (The waiter uncorks the bottle he has been holding under his arm and fills Alberto's glass.)

WAITER. That will be one lira twenty-five, Signore.

ALBERTO (throwing down a note). Keep the change.

WAITER (bowing). Thank you, Signore. But if I were the Signore I should beat her. (He holds up the Cognac bottle and by way of illustration slaps its black polished flanks.)

ALBERTO. Beat her? But I tell you I am in love with her.

WAITER. All the more reason, then, Signore. It will be not only a stern disciplinary duty, but a pleasure as well; oh, I assure you, Signore, a pleasure.

ALBERTO. Enough, enough. You sully the melancholy beauty of my thoughts. My feelings at this moment are of an unheard-of delicacy and purity. Respect them, I beg you. Some more brandy, please.

WAITER (pouring out the brandy). Delicacy, purity.... Ah, believe me, Signore ... That will be one lira twenty-five.

ALBERTO (throwing down another note with the same superbly aristocratic gesture). Keep the change.

WAITER. Thank you, Signore. But as I was saying, Signore, delicacy, purity.... You think I do not understand such sentiments. Alas, Signore, beneath the humblest shirt-front there beats a heart. And if the Signore's sentiments are too much for him, I have a niece. Eighteen years old, and what eyes, what forms!

ALBERTO. Stop, stop. Respect my feelings, Waiter, as well as the ears of the young lady (he points towards the glass doors). Remember she is an American. (The Waiter, bows and goes into the hotel.)

SIDNEY DOLPHIN and MISS AMY TOOMIS

come out together on to the terrace. MISS AMY supports a well-shaped head on one of the most graceful necks that ever issued from Minneapolis. The eyes are dark, limpid, ingenuous; the mouth expresses sensibility. She is twenty-two and the heiress of those ill-gotten Toomis millions. SIDNEY DOLPHIN has a romantic aristocratic appearance. The tailoring of 1830 would suit him. Balzac would have described his face as *plein de poésie*. In effect he does happen to be a poet. His two volumes of verse, "Zeotrope and 'Trembling Ears," have been recognised by intelligent critics as remarkable. How far they are poetry nobody, least of all Dolphin himself, is certain. They may be merely the ingenious products of a very cultured and elaborate brain. Mere curiosities; who knows? His age is twenty-seven. They sit down at one of the little iron tables, ALBERTO they do not see; the shadow of the trees conceals him. For his part, he is too much absorbed in savouring his own despair to pay any attention to the newcomers. There is a long, uncomfortable silence. DOLPHIN assumes the Thinker's mask—the bent brow, the frown, the finger to the forehead, AMY regards this romantic gargoyle with some astonishment. Pleased with her interest in him, DOLPHIN racks his brains to think of some way of exploiting this curiosity to his own advantage; but he is too shy to play any of the gambits which his ingenuity suggests. AMY makes a social effort and speaks, in chanting Middle Western tones. AMY. It's been a wonderful day, hasn't it?

DOLPHIN (starting, as though roused from profoundest thought). Yes, yes, it has.

AMY. You don't often get it as fine as this in England, I guess.

DOLPHIN. Not often.

AMY. Nor do we over at home.

DOLPHIN. So I should suppose. (Silence. A spasm of anguish crosses DOLPHIN'S face; then he reassumes the old Thinker's mask. AMY looks at him for a little longer, then, unable to suppress her growing curiosity, she says with a sudden burst of childish confidence:)

AMY. It must be wonderful to be able to think as hard as you do, Mr. Dolphin. Or are you sad about something?

DOLPHIN (looks up, smiles, and blushes; a spell has been broken). The finger at the temple, Miss Toomis, is not the barrel of a revolver.

AMY. That means you're not specially sad about anything. Just thinking.

DOLPHIN. Just thinking.

AMY. What about?

DOLPHIN. Oh, just life, you know—life and letters.

AMY. Letters? Do you mean love letters.

DOLPHIN. No, no. Letters in the sense of literature; letters as opposed to life.

AMY. (disappointed). Oh, literature. They used to teach us literature at school. But I could never understand Emerson. What do you think about literature for?

DOLPHIN. It interests me, you know. I read it; I even try to write it.

AMY (very much excited). What, are you a writer, a poet, Mr. Dolphin?

DOLPHIN. Alas, it is only too true; I am.

AMY. But what do you write?

DOLPHIN. Verse and prose, Miss Toomis. Just verse and prose.

AMY (with enthusiasm). Isn't that interesting. I've never met a poet before, you know.

DOLPHIN. Fortunate being. Why, before I left England I attended a luncheon of the Poetry Union at which no less than a hundred and eighty-nine poets were present. The sight of them made me decide to go to Italy.

AMY. Will you show me your books?

DOLPHIN. Certainly not, Miss Toomis. That would ruin our friendship. I am insufferable in my writings. In them I give vent to all the horrible thoughts and impulses which I am too timid to express or put into practice in real life. Take me as you find me here, a decent specimen of a man, shy but able to talk intelligently when the layers of ice are broken, aimless, ineffective, but on the whole quite a good sort.

AMY. But I know that man already, Mr. Dolphin. I want to know the poet. Tell me what the poet is like.

DOLPHIN. He is older, Miss Toomis, than the rocks on which he sits. He is villainous. He is ... but there, I really must stop. It was you who set me going, though. Did you do it on purpose.

AMY. Do what on purpose?

DOLPHIN. Make me talk about myself. If you want to get people to like you, you must always lead the conversation on to the subject of their characters. Nothing pleases them so much. They'll talk with enthusiasm for hours and go away saying that you're the most charming, cleverest person they've ever met. But of course you knew that already. You're Machiavellian.

AMY. Machiavellian? You're the first person that's ever said that. I always thought I was very simple and straight-forward. People say about me that.... Ah, now I'm talking about myself. That was unscrupulous of you. But you shouldn't have told me about the trick if you wanted it to succeed.

DOLPHIN. Yes. It was silly of me. If I hadn't, you'd have gone on talking about yourself and thought me the nicest man in the world.

AMY. I want to hear about your poetry. Are you writing any now?

DOLPHIN. I have composed the first line of a magnificent epic. But I can't get any further.

AMY. How does it go?

DOLPHIN. Like this (he clears his throat). "Casbeen has been, and Moghreb is no more." Ah, the transience of all sublunary things! But inspiration has stopped short there.

AMY. What exactly does it mean?

DOLPHIN. Ah, there you're asking too much, Miss Toomis. Waiter, some coffee for two.

WAITER (who is standing in the door of the lounge). Sì, Signore. Will the lady and gentleman take it here, or in the gardens, perhaps?

DOLPHIN. A good suggestion. Why shouldn't the lady and gentleman take it in the garden?

AMY. Why not?

DOLPHIN. By the fountain, then, Waiter. We can talk about ourselves there to the tune of falling waters.

AMY. And you shall recite your poetry, Mr. Dolphin. I just love poetry. Do you know Mrs. Wilcox's Poems of Passion? (They go out to the left. A nightingale utters two or three phrases of song and from far down the bells of the city jangle the three-quarters and die slowly away into the silence out of which they rose and came together.)

(LUCREZIA GRATTAROL has come out of the hotel just in time to overhear Miss Toomis's last remark, just in time to see her walk slowly away with

a hand on SIDNEY DOLPHIN's arm. LUCREZIA has a fine thoroughbred appearance, an aquiline nose, a finely curved sensual mouth, a superb white brow, a quivering nostril. She is the last of a family whose name is as illustrious in Venetian annals as that of Foscarini, Tiepolo, or Tron. She stamps a preposterously high-heeled foot and tosses her head.) LUCREZIA. Passion! Passion, indeed. An American! (She starts to run after the retreating couple, when ALBERTO, who has been sitting with his head between his hands, looks up and catches sight of the newcomer.)

ALBERTO. Lucrezia!

LUCREZIA (starts, for in the shade beneath the trees she had not seen him). Oh! You gave me such a fright, Alberto. I'm in a hurry now. Later on, if you....

ALBERTO (in a desperate voice that breaks into a sob). Lucrezia! You must come and talk to me. You must.

LUCREZIA. But I tell you I can't now, Alberto. Later on.

ALBERTO (the tears streaming down his cheeks). Now, now, now! You must come now. I am lost if you don't.

LUCREZIA (looking indecisively first at ALBERTO and then along the path down which AMY and SIDNEY DOLPHIN have disappeared). But supposing I am lost if I do come?

ALBERTO. But you couldn't be as much lost as I am. Ah, you don't know what it is to suffer. Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt weiss wass ich leide. Oh, Lucrezia.... (He sobs unrestrainedly.)

LUCREZIA (goes over to where ALBERTO is sitting. She pats his shoulder and his bowed head of black curly hair). There, there, my little Bertino. Tell me what it is. You mustn't cry. There, there.

ALBERTO (drying his eyes and rubbing his head, like a cat, avid of caresses, against her hand). How can I thank you enough, Lucrezia? You are like a mother to me.

LUCREZIA. I know. That's just what's so dangerous.

ALBERTO (lets his head fall upon her bosom). I come to you for comfort, like a tired child, Lucrezia.

LUCREZIA. Poor darling! (She strokes his hair, twines its thick black tendrils round her fingers, ALBERTO is abjectly pathetic.)

ALBERTO (with closed eyes and a seraphic smile). Ah, the suavity, the beauty of this maternal instinct!

LUCREZIA (with a sudden access of energy and passion). The disgustingness of it, you mean. (She pushes him from her. His head wobbles once, as though it were inanimate, before he straightens into life.) The maternal instinct. Ugh. It's been the undoing of too many women. You men come with your sentimental babyishness and exploit it for your own lusts. Be a man, Bertino. Be a woman, I mean, if you can.

ALBERTO (looking up at her with eyes full of doglike, dumb reproach). Lucrezia! You, too? Is there nobody who cares for me? This is the unkindest cut of all. I may as well die. (He relapses into tears.)

LUCREZIA (who has started to go, turns back, irresolute). Now, don't cry, Bertino. Can't you behave like a reasonable being? (She makes as though to go again.)

ALBERTO (through his sobs). You too, Lucrezia! Oh, I can't bear it, I can't bear it.

LUCREZIA (turning back desperately). But what do you want me to do? Why should you expect me to hold your hand?

ALBERTO. I thought better of you, Lucrezia. Let me go. There is nothing left for me now but death. (He rises to his feet, takes a step or two, and then collapses into another chair, unable to move.)

LUCREZIA (torn between anger and remorse). Now do behave yourself sensibly, Bertino. There, there ... you mustn't cry. I'm sorry if I've hurt you. (Looking towards the left along the path taken by AMY and DOLPHIN.) Oh, damnation! (She stamps her foot.) Here, Bertino, do pull yourself together. (She raises him up.) There, now you must stop crying. (But as soon as she lets go of him his head falls back on to the iron table with an unpleasant, meaty bump. That bump is too much for LUCREZIA. She bends over him, strokes his head, even kisses the lustrous curls.) Oh, forgive me, forgive me! I have been a beast. But, tell me first, what's the matter, Bertino? What is it, my poor darling? Tell me.

ALBERTO. Nobody loves me.

LUCREZIA. But we're all devoted to you, Bertino mio.

ALBERTO. She isn't. To-day she shut the door in my face.

LUCREZIA. She? You mean the French-woman, the one you told me about? Louise, wasn't she?

ALBERTO. Yes, the one with the golden hair.

LUCREZIA. And the white legs. I remember: you saw her bathing.

ALBERTO (lays his hand on his heart). Ah, don't remind me of it. (His face twitches convulsively.)

LUCREZIA. And now she's gone and shut the door in your face.

ALBERTO. In my face, Lucrezia.

LUCREZIA. Poor darling!

ALBERTO. For me there is nothing now but the outer darkness.

LUCREZIA. Is the door shut forever, then?

ALBERTO. Definitely, for ever.

LUCREZIA. But have you tried knocking? Perhaps, after all, it might be opened again, if only a crack.

ALBERTO. What, bruise my hands against the granite of her heart?

LUCREZIA. Don't be too poetical, Bertino mio. Why not try again, in any case?

ALBERTO. You give me courage.

LUCREZIA. There's no harm in trying, you know.

ALBERTO. Courage to live, to conquer. (He beats his breast.) I am a man again, thanks to you, Lucrezia, my inspirer, my Muse, my Egeria. How can I be sufficiently grateful. (He kisses her.) I am the child of your spirit. (He kisses her again.)

LUCREZIA. Enough, enough. I am not ambitious to be a mother, yet awhile. Quickly now, Bertino, I know you will succeed.

ALBERTO (cramming his hat down on his head and knocking with his walking-stick on the ground). Succeed or die, Lucrezia. (He goes out with a loud martial stamp.)

LUCREZIA (to the waiter who is passing across the stage with a coffee-pot and cups on a tray). Have you seen the Signorina Toomis, Giuseppe?

WAITER. The Signorina is down in the garden. So is the Signore Dolphin. By the fountain, Signorina. This is the Signore's coffee.

LUCREZIA. Have you a mother, Giuseppe?

WAITER. Unfortunately, Signorina.

LUCREZIA. Unfortunately? Does she treat you badly, then?

WAITER. Like a dog, Signorina.

LUCREZIA. Ah, I should like to see your mother. I should like to ask her to give me some hints on how to bring up children.

WAITER. But surely, Signorina, you are not expecting, you-ah....

LUCREZIA. Only figuratively, Giuseppe. My children are spiritual children.

WAITER. Precisely, precisely. My mother, alas! is not a spiritual relation. Nor is my fiancée.

LUCREZIA. I didn't know you were engaged.

WAITER. To an angel of perdition. Believe me, Signorina, I go to my destruction in that woman—go with open eyes. There is no escape. She is what is called in the Holy Bible (crosses himself) a Fisher of Men.

LUCREZIA. You have remarkable connections, Giuseppe.

WAITER. I am honoured by your words, Signorina. But the coffee becomes cold. (He hurries out to the left.)

LUCREZIA. In the garden! By the fountain! And there's the nightingale beginning to sing in earnest! Good heavens! what may not already have happened? (She runs out after the waiter.)

(Two persons emerge from the hotel, the VICOMTE DE BARBAZANGE and the BARONESS KOCH DE WORMS. PAUL DE BARBAZANGE is a young man—twenty-six perhaps of exquisite grace. Five foot ten, well built, dark hair, sleek as marble, the most refined aristocratic features, and a monocle, SIMONE DE WORMS is forty, a ripe Semitic beauty. Five years more and the bursting point of overripeness will have been reached. But now, thanks to massage, powerful corsets, skin foods, and powder, she is still a beauty—a beauty of the type Italians admire, cushioned, steatopygous. PAUL, who has a faultless taste in bric-à-brac and women, and is by instinct and upbringing an ardent anti-Semite, finds her infinitely repulsive. The Baronne enters with a loud shrill giggle. She gives PAUL a slap with her green feather fan.)

SIMONE. Oh, you naughty boy! Quelle histoire. Mon Dieu! How dare you tell me such a story!

PAUL. For you, Baronne, I would risk anything even your displeasure.

SIMONE. Charming boy. But stories of that kind.... And you look so innocent, too! Do you know any more like it?

PAUL (suddenly grave). Not of that description. But I will tell you a story of another kind, a true story, a tragic story.

SIMONE. Did I ever tell you how I saw a woman run over by a train? Cut to pieces, literally, to pieces. So disagreeable. I'll tell you later. But now, what about your story?

PAUL. Oh, it's nothing, nothing.

SIMONE. But you promised to tell it me.

PAUL. It's only a commonplace anecdote. A young man, poor but noble, with a name and a position to keep up. A few youthful follies, a mountain of debts, and no way out except the revolver. This is all dull and obvious enough. But now follows the interesting part of the story. He is about to take that way out, when he meets the woman of his dreams, the goddess, the angel, the ideal. He loves, and he must die without a word. (He turns his face away from the Baronne, as though his emotion were too much for him, which indeed it is.)

SIMONE. Vicomte—Paul—this young man is you?

PAUL (solemnly). He is.

SIMONE. And the woman?

PAUL. Oh, I can't, I mayn't tell you.

SIMONE. The woman! Tell me, Paul.

PAUL (turning towards her and falling on his knees). The woman, Simone, is you. Ah, but I had no right to say it.

SIMONE (quivering with emotion). My Paul. (She clasps his head to her bosom. A grimace of disgust contorts Paul's classical features. He endures Simone's caresses with a stoical patience.) But what is this about a revolver? That is only a joke, Paul, isn't it? Say it isn't true.

PAUL. Alas, Simone, too true. (He taps his coat pocket.) There it lies. To-morrow I have a hundred and seventy thousand francs to pay, or be dishonoured. I cannot pay the sum. A Barbazange does not survive dishonour. My ancestors were Crusaders, preux chevaliers to a man. Their code is mine. Dishonour for me is worse than death.

SIMONE. Mon Dieu, Paul, how noble you are! (She lays her hands on his shoulder, leans back, and surveys him at arm's length, a look of pride and anxious happiness on her face.)

PAUL (dropping his eyes modestly). Not at all. I was born noble, and noblesse oblige, as we say in our family. Farewell, Simone, I love you—and I must die. My last thought will be of you. (He kisses her hand, rises to his feet, and makes as though to go.)

SIMONE (clutching him by the arm). No, Paul, no. You must not, shall not, do anything rash. A hundred and seventy thousand francs, did you say? It is paltry. Is there no one who could lend or give you the money?

PAUL. Not a soul. Farewell, Simone.

SIMONE. Stay, Paul. I hardly dare to ask it of you—you with such lofty ideas of honour—but would you ... from me?

PAUL. Take money from a woman? Ah, Simone, tempt me no more. I might do an ignoble act.

SIMONE. But from me, Paul, from me. I am not in your eyes a woman like any other woman, am I?

PAUL. It is true that my ancestors, the Crusaders, the preux chevaliers, might in all honour receive gifts from the ladies of their choice—chargers, swords, armour, or tenderer mementoes, such as gloves or garters. But money—no; who ever heard of their taking money?

SIMONE. But what would be the use of my giving you swords and horses? You could never use them. Consider, my knight, my noble Sir Paul, in these days the contests of chivalry have assumed a different form; the weapons and the armour have changed. Your sword must be of gold and paper; your breastplate of hard cash; your charger of gilt-edged securities. I offer you the shining panoply of the modern crusader. Will you accept it?

PAUL. You are eloquent, Simone. You could win over the devil himself with that angelic voice of yours. But it cannot be. Money is always money. The code is clear. I cannot accept your offer. Here is the way out. (He takes an automatic pistol out of his pocket.) Thank you, Simone, and good-bye. How wonderful is the love of a pure woman.

SIMONE. Paul, Paul, give that to me! (She snatches the pistol from his hand.) If anything were to happen to you, Paul, I should kill myself with this. You must live, you must consent to accept the money. You mustn't let your honour make a martyr of you.

PAUL (brushing a tear from his eyes). No, I can't.... Give me that pistol, I beg you.

SIMONE. For my sake, Paul.

PAUL. Oh, you make it impossible for me to act as the voices of dead ancestors tell me I should.... For your sake, then, Simone, I consent to live. For your sake I dare to accept the gift you offer.

SIMONE (kissing his hand in an outburst of gratitude). Thank you, thank you, Paul. How happy I am!

PAUL. I, too, light of my life.

SIMONE. My month's allowance arrived to-day. I have the cheque here. (She takes it out of her corsage.) Two hundred thousand francs. It's signed already. You can get it cashed as soon as the hanks open to-morrow.

PAUL (moved by an outburst of genuine emotion kisses indiscriminately the cheque, the Baronne, his own hands). My angel, you have saved me. How can I thank you? How can I love you enough? Ah, mon petit bouton de rose.

SIMONE. Oh, naughty, naughty! Not now, my Paul; you must wait till some other time.

PAUL. I burn with impatience.

SIMONE. Quelle fougue! Listen, then. In an hour's time, Paul chéri, in my boudoir; I shall be alone.

PAUL. An hour? It is an eternity.

SIMONE (playfully). An hour. I won't relent. Till then, my Paul. (She blows a kiss and runs out: the scenery trembles at her passage.)

(PAUL looks at the cheque, then pulls out a large silk handkerchief and wipes his neck inside his collar.) (DOLPHIN drifts in from the left. He is smoking a cigarette, but he does not seem to be enjoying it.)

PAUL. Alone?

DOLPHIN. Alas!

PAUL. Brooding on the universe as usual? I envy you your philosophic detachment. Personally, I find that the world is very much too much with us, and the devil too; (he looks at the cheque in his hand) and above all the flesh. My god, the flesh.... (He wipes his neck again.)

DOLPHIN. My philosophic detachment? But it's only a mask to hide the ineffectual longings I have to achieve contact with the world.

PAUL. But surely nothing is easier. One just makes a movement and impinges on one's fellow-beings.

DOLPHIN. Not with a temperament like mine. Imagine a shyness more powerful than curiosity or desire, a paralysis of all the faculties. You are a man of the world. You were born with a forehead of brass to affront every social emergency. Ah, if you knew what a torture it is to find yourself in the presence of someone a woman, perhaps—someone in whom you take an interest that is not merely philosophic; to find oneself in the presence of such a person and to be incapable, yes, physically incapable, of saying a word to express your interest in her or your desire to possess her intimacy. Ah, I notice I have slipped into the feminine. Inevitably, for of course the person is always a she.

PAUL. Of course, of course. That goes without saying. But what's the trouble? Women are so simple to deal with.

DOLPHIN. I know. Perfectly simply if one's in the right state of mind. I have found that out myself, for moments come alas, how rarely!—when I am filled with a spirit of confidence, possessed by some angel or devil of power. Ah, then I feel myself to be superb. I carry all before me. In those brief moments the whole secret of the world is revealed to me. I perceive that the supreme quality in the human soul is effrontery. Genius in the man of action is simply the apotheosis of charlatanism. Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Mr. Gladstone, Lloyd George—what are they? Just ordinary human beings projected through the magic lantern of a prodigious effrontery and so magnified to a thousand times larger than life. Look at me. I am far more intelligent than any of these fabulous figures; my sensibility is more refined than theirs, I am morally superior to any of them. And yet, by my lack of charlatanism, I am made less than nothing. My qualities are projected through the wrong end of a telescope and the world perceives me far smaller than I really am. But the world—who cares about the world? The only people who matter are the women.

PAUL. Very true, my dear Dolphin. The women.... (He looks at the cheque and mops himself once more with his mauve silk handkerchief.)

DOLPHIN. To-night was one of my moments of triumph. I felt myself suddenly free of all my inhibitions.

PAUL. I hope you profited by the auspicious occasion.

DOLPHIN. I did. I was making headway. I had—but I don't know why I should bore you with my confidences. Curious that one should be dumb before intimates and open one's mind to an all but stranger. I must apologise.

PAUL. But I am all attention and sympathy, my dear Dolphin. And I take it a little hardly that you should regard me as a stranger. (He lays a hand on Dolphin's shoulder.)



DOLPHIN. Thank you, Barbazange, thank you. Well, if you consent to be the receptacle of my woes, I shall go on pouring them out.... Miss Toomis.... But tell me frankly what you think of her.

PAUL. Well....

DOLPHIN. A little too ingenuous, a little silly even, eh?

PAUL. Now you say so, she certainly isn't very intellectually stimulating.

DOLPHIN. Precisely. But ... oh, those china-blue eyes, that ingenuousness, that pathetic and enchanting silliness! She touches lost chords in one's heart. I love the Chromatic Fantasia of Bach, I am transported by Beethoven's hundred-and-eleventh Sonata; but the fact doesn't prevent my being moved to tears by the last luscious waltz played by the hotel orchestra. In the best constructed brains there are always spongy surfaces that are sensitive to picture postcards and Little Nelly and the End of a Perfect Day. Miss Toomis has found out my Achilles's heel. She is boring, ridiculous, absurd to a degree, but oh! how moving, how adorable.

PAUL. You're done for, my poor Dolphin, sunk—spurlos.

DOLPHIN. And I was getting on so well, was revelling in my new-found confidence, and, knowing its transience, was exploiting it for all I was worth. I had covered an enormous amount of ground and then, hey presto! at a blow all my labour was undone. Actuated by what malice I don't know, la Lucrezia swoops down like a vulture, and without a by-your-leave or excuse of any kind carries off Miss Toomis from under my very eyes. What a woman! She terrifies me. I am always running away from her.

PAUL. Which means, I suppose, that she is always pursuing you.

DOLPHIN. She has ruined my evening and, it may me, all my chances of success. My precious hour of self-confidence will be wasted (though I hope you'll not take offence at the word)—wasted on you.

PAUL. It will return.

DOLPHIN. But when—but when? Till it does I shall be impotent and in agony.

PAUL. I know the agony of waiting. I myself was engaged to a Rumanian princess in 1916. But owing to the sad collapse in the Rumanian rate of exchange I have had to postpone our union indefinitely. It is painful, but, believe me, it can be borne. (He looks at the cheque and then at his watch.) There are other things which are much worse. Believe me, Dolphin, it can be borne.

DOLPHIN. I suppose it can. For, when all is said, there are damned few of us who really take things much to heart. Julie de Lespinasses are happily not common. I am even subnormal. At twenty I believed myself passionate: one does at that age. But now, when I come to consider myself candidly, I find that I am really one of those who never deeply felt nor strongly willed. Everything is profoundly indifferent to me. I sometimes try to depress myself with the thought that the world is a cess-pool, that men are pathetic degenerates from the ape whose laboriously manufactured ideals are pure nonsense and find no rhyme in reality, that the whole of life is a bad joke which takes a long time coming to an end. But it really doesn't upset me. I don't care a curse. It's deplorable; one ought to care. The best people do care. Still, I must say I should like to get possession of Miss Toomis. Confound that Grattarol woman. What on earth did she want to rush me like that for, do you suppose?

PAUL. I expect we shall find out now. (PAUL jerks his head towards the left. LUCREZIA and AMY are seen entering from the garden, LUCREZIA holds

her companion's arm and marches with a firm step towards the two men. AMY suffers herself to be drugged along.)

LUCREZIA. Vicomte, Miss Toomis wants you to tell her all about Correggio.

AMY (rather scared). Oh, really—I....

LUCREZIA. And (sternly)—and Michelangelo. She is so much interested in art.

AMY. But please—don't trouble....

PAUL (bowing gracefully). I shall be delighted. And in return I hope Miss Toomis will tell me all about Longfellow.

AMY (brightening). Oh yes, don't you just love Evangeline?

PAUL. I do; and with your help, Miss Toomis, I hope I shall learn to love her better.

LUCREZIA (to DOLPHIN, who has been looking from AMY to the VICOMTE and back again at AMY with eyes that betray a certain disquietude). You really must come and look at the moon rising over the hills, Mr. Dolphin. One sees it best from the lower terrace. Shall we go?

DOLPHIN (starts and shrinks). But it's rather cold, isn't it? I mean—I think I ought to go and write a letter.

LUCREZIA. Oh, you can do that to-morrow.

DOLPHIN. But really.

LUCREZIA. You've no idea how lovely the moon looks.

DOLPHIN. But I must....

LUCREZIA (lays her hand on his sleeve and tosses hint after her, crying as she goes). The moon, the moon.... (PAUL and AMY regard their exit in silence.)

PAUL. He doesn't look as though he much wanted to go and see the moon.

AMY. Perhaps he guesses what's in store for him.

PAUL (surprised). What, you don't mean to say you realised all the time?

AMY. Realised what?

PAUL. About la belle Lucrezia.

AMY. I don't know what you mean. All I know is that she means to give Mr. Dolphin a good talking to. He's so mercenary. It made me quite indignant when she told me about him. Such a schemer, too. You know in America we have very definite ideas about honour.

PAUL. Here too, Miss Toomis.

AMY. Not Mr. Dolphin. Oh dear, it made me so sad; more sad than angry. I can never be grateful enough to Signorina Grattarol.

PAUL. But I'm still at a loss to know exactly what you're talking about.

AMY. And I am quite bewildered myself. Would you have believed it of him? I thought him such a nice man.

PAUL. What has he done?

AMY. It's all for my money, Miss Grattarol told me. She knows. He was just asking me to marry him, and I believe I would have said Yes. But she came in just in the nick of time. It seems he only wanted to marry me because I'm so rich. He doesn't care for me at all. Miss Grattarol knows what he's like. It's awful, isn't it? Oh dear, I wouldn't have thought it of him.

PAUL. But you must forgive him, Miss Toomis. Money is a great temptation. Perhaps if you gave him another chance....

AMY. Impossible.

PAUL. Poor Dolphin! He's such a nice young fellow.

AMY. I thought so too. But he's false.

PAUL. Don't be too hard on him. Money probably means too much to him. It's the fault of his upbringing. No one who has not lived among the traditions of our ancient aristocracy can be expected to have that contempt, almost that hatred of wealth, which is the sign of true nobility. If he had been brought up, as I was, in an old machicolated castle on the Loire, surrounded by ancestral ghosts, imbued with the

spirit of the Crusaders and preux chevaliers who had inhabited the place in the past, if he had learnt to know what noblesse oblige really means, believe me, Miss Toomis, he could never have done such a thing.

AMY. I should just think he couldn't, Monsieur de Barbazange.

PAUL. You have no idea, Miss Toomis, how difficult it is for a man of truly noble feelings to get over the fact of your great wealth. When I heard that you were the possessor of a hundred million dollars....

AMY. Oh, I'm afraid it's more than that. It's two hundred million.

PAUL. ... of two hundred million dollars, then ... it only makes it worse; I was very melancholy, Miss Toomis. For those two hundred million dollars were a barrier, which a descendant of Crusaders and preux chevaliers could not overleap. Honour, Miss Toomis, honour forbade. Ah, if only that accursed money had not stood in the way.... When I first saw you oh, how I was moved by that vision of beauty and innocence—I wanted nothing better than to stand gazing on you for ever. But then I heard about those millions. Dolphin was lucky to have felt no restraints. But enough, enough. (He checks a rising tide of emotion.) Give poor Dolphin another chance, Miss Toomis. At bottom he is a good fellow, and he may learn in time to esteem you for your own sake and to forget the dazzling millions.

AMY. Never. I can only marry a man who is entirely disinterested.

PAUL. But, can't you see, no disinterested man could ever bring himself to ask you? How could he prove his disinterestedness? No one would believe the purity of his intentions.

AMY (much moved). It is for me to judge. I know a disinterested man when I see him. Even in America we can understand honour.

PAUL (with a sob in his voice). Good-bye Miss Toomis.

AMY. But no, I don't want it to be good-bye.

PAUL. It must be. Never shall it be said of a Barbazange that he hunted a woman for her money.

AMY. But what does it matter what the world says, if I say the opposite?

PAUL. You say the opposite? Thank you, thank you. But no, good-bye.

AMY. Stop. Oh! you're forcing me to do a most unwomanly thing. You're making me ask you to marry me. You're the only disinterested man I've ever met or, to judge from what I've seen of the world, I'm ever likely to meet. Haven't you kept away from me in spite of your feelings? Haven't you even tried to make me listen to another man—a man not worthy to black your boots? Oh, it's so wonderful, so noble! It's like something in a picture play. Paul, I offer myself to you. Will you take me in spite of my millions?

PAUL (falling on his knees and kissing the hem of AMY'S skirt). My angel, you're right; what does it matter what the world says as long as you believe in me? Amy, amie, bien-aimée.... Ah, it's too good too, too good to be true! (He rises to his feet and embraces her with an unfeigned enthusiasm.)

AMY. Paul, Paul.... And so this is love. Isn't it wonderful?

PAUL (looking round anxiously). You mustn't tell anyone about our engagement, my Amy. They might say unpleasant things in the hotel, you know.

AMY. Of course I won't talk about it. We'll keep our happiness to ourselves, won't we?

PAUL. Entirely to ourselves; and to-morrow we'll go to Paris and arrange about being married.

AMY. Yes, yes; we'll take the eight o'clock train.

PAUL. Not the eight o'clock, my darling. I have to go to the bank to-morrow to do a little business. We must wait till the twelve thirty.

AMY. Very well, then. The twelve-thirty. Oh, how happy I am!

PAUL. So am I, my sweetheart. More than I can tell you. (The sound of a window being opened is heard. They look up and see the BARONESS dressed in a peignoir of the tenderest blue, emerging on to the right hand of the three balconies.)

AMY. Oh, my soul! I think I'd better go in. Good-night, my Paul. (She runs in.)

SIMONE. Has that horrid little American girl gone? (She peers down, then, reassured, she blows a kiss to PAUL.) My Romeo!

PAUL. I come, Juliet.

SIMONE. There's a kiss for you.

PAUL (throwing kisses with both hands). And there's one for you. And another, and another. Two hundred million kisses, my angel.

SIMONE (giggling). What a lot!

PAUL. It is; you're quite right. Two hundred million.... I come, my Juliet. (He darts into the hotel, pausing when just inside the door and out of sight of the BARONESS, to mop himself once again with his enormous handkerchief. The operation over, he advances with a resolute step, The BARONESS stands for a moment on the balcony. Then, seeing DOLPHIN and LUCREZIA coming in from the left, she retires, closing the window and drawing the curtains behind her. DOLPHIN comes striding in; LUCREZIA follows a little behind, looking anxiously up at him.)

LUCREZIA. Please, please....

DOLPHIN. NO, I won't listen to anything more. (He walks with an agitated step up and down the stage. LUCREZIA stands with one hand resting on the back of a chair and the other pressed on her heart.) Do you mean to say you deliberately went and told her that I was only after her money? Oh, it's too bad, too bad. It's infamous. And I hadn't the faintest notion that she had any money. Besides, I don't want money; I have quite enough of my own. It's infamous, infamous!

LUCREZIA. I know it was a horrible thing to do. But I couldn't help it. How could I stand by and see you being carried off by that silly little creature?

DOLPHIN. But I cared for her.

LUCREZIA. But not as I cared for you. I've got red blood in my veins; she's got nothing but milk and water. You couldn't have been happy with her. I can give you love of a kind she could never dream of. What does she know of passion?

DOLPHIN. Nothing, I am thankful to say. I don't want passion; can't you understand that? I don't possess it myself and don't like it in others. I am a man of sentimental affections, with a touch of quiet sensuality. I don't want passion, I tell you. It's too violent; it frightens me. I couldn't possibly live with you. You'd utterly shatter my peace of mind in a day. Oh, how I wish you'd go away.

LUCREZIA. But Sidney, Sidney, can't you understand what it is to be madly in love with somebody? You can't be so cruel.

DOLPHIN. You didn't think much of my well-being when you interfered between Miss Toomis and me, did you? You've probably ruined my whole life, that's all. I really don't see why you should expect me to have any pity for you.

LUCREZIA. Very well, then, I shall kill myself. (She bursts into tears.)

DOLPHIN. Oh, but I assure you, one doesn't kill oneself for things like that. (He approaches her and pats her on the shoulder.) Come, come, don't worry about it.

LUCREZIA (throws her arms round his neck). Oh, Sidney, Sidney....

DOLPHIN (freeing himself with surprising energy and promptitude from her embrace). No, no, none of that, I beg. Another moment and we shall be losing our heads. Personally I think I shall go to bed now. I should advise you to do the same, Miss Grattarol. You're overwrought. We might all be better for a small dose of bromide. (He goes in.)

LUCREZIA (looking up and stretching forth her hands). Sidney.... (DOLPHIN does not look round, and disappears through the glass door into the hotel, LUCREZIA covers her face with her hands and sits for a little sobbing silently. The nightingale sings on. Midnight sounds with an infinite melancholy from all the twenty campaniles of the city in the valley. From far away comes the spasmodic throbbing of a guitar and the singing of an Italian voice, high-pitched, passionate, throaty. The seconds pass, LUCREZIA rises to her feet and walks slowly into the hotel. On the threshold she encounters the VICOMTE coming out.)

PAUL. You, Signorina Lucrezia? I've escaped for a breath of fresh, cool air. Mightn't we take a turn together? (LUCREZIA shakes her head.) Ah, well, then, good-night. You'll be glad to hear that Miss Toomis knows all about Correggio now.

(He inhales a deep breath of air. Then looking at his dinner-jacket he begins brushing at it with his hand. A lamentable figure creeps in from the left. It is ALBERTO. If he had a tail, it would be trailing on the ground between his legs.)

PAUL. Hullo, Alberto. What is it? Been losing at cards?

ALBERTO. Worse than that.

PAUL. Creditors foreclosing?

ALBERTO. Much worse.

PAUL. Father ruined by imprudent speculations?

ALBERTO. No, no, no. It's nothing to do with money.

PAUL. Oh, well, then. It can't be anything very serious. It's women, I suppose.

ALBERTO. My mistress refuses to see me. I have been beating on her door for hours in vain.

PAUL. I wish we all had your luck, Bertino. Mine opens her door only too promptly. The difficulty is to get out again. Does yours use such an awful lot of this evil-smelling powder? I'm simply covered with it. Ugh! (He brushes his coat again.)

ALBERTO. Can't you be serious, Paul?

PAUL. Of course I can ... about a serious matter. But you can't expect me to pull a long face about your mistress, can you, now? Do look at things in their right proportions.

ALBERTO. It's no use talking to you. You're heartless, soulless.

PAUL. What you mean, my dear Alberto, is that I'm relatively speaking bodiless. Physical passion never goes to my head. I'm always compos mentis. You aren't, that's all.

ALBERTO. Oh, you disgust me. I think I shall hang myself to-night.

PAUL. Do. It will give us something to talk about at lunch to-morrow.

ALBERTO. Monster! (He goes into the hotel, PAUL strolls out towards the garden, whistling an air from Mozart as he goes. The window on the left opens and LUCREZIA steps on to her balcony. Uncoiled, her red hair falls almost to her waist. Her nightdress is always half slipping off one shoulder or the other, like those loose-bodied Restoration gowns that reveal the tight-blown charms of Kneller's Beauties. Her feet are bare. She is a marvellously romantic figure, as she stands there, leaning on the balustrade, and with eyes more sombre than night, gazing into the darkness. The nightingales, the bells, the guitar, and passionate voice strike up. Great stars palpitate in the sky.)

The moon has swum imperceptibly to the height of heaven. In the garden below flowers are yielding their souls into the air, censers invisible. It is too much, too much.... Large tears roll down LUCREZIA's cheeks and fall with a splash to the ground. Suddenly, but with the noiselessness of a cat, ALBERTO appears, childish-looking in pink pajamas, on the middle of the three balconies. He sees LUCREZIA, but she is much too deeply absorbed in thought to have noticed his coming, ALBERTO plants his elbows on the rail of the balcony, covers his face, and begins to sob, at first inaudibly, then in a gradual quickening crescendo. At the seventh sob LUCREZIA starts and becomes aware of his presence.)

LUCREZIA. Alberto. I didn't know.... Have you been there long? (ALBERTO makes no articulate reply, but his sobs keep on growing louder.) Alberto, are you unhappy? Answer me.

ALBERTO (with difficulty, after a pause). Yes.

LUCREZIA. Didn't she let you in?

ALBERTO. No. (His sobs become convulsive.)

LUCREZIA. Poor boy.

ALBERTO (lifting up a blubbered face to the moonlight). I am so unhappy.

LUCREZIA. You can't be more unhappy than I am.

ALBERTO. Oh yes, I am. It's impossible to be unhappier than me.

LUCREZIA. But I am more unhappy.

ALBERTO. You re not. Oh, how can you be so cruel Lucrezia? (He covers his face once more.)

LUCREZIA. But I only said I was unhappy Alberto.

ALBERTO. Yes, I know. That showed you weren't thinking of me. Nobody loves me. I shall hang myself to-night with the cord of my dressing-gown.

LUCREZIA. NO, no, Alberto. You mustn't do anything rash.

ALBERTO. I shall. Your cruelty has been the last straw.

LUCREZIA. I'm sorry, Bertino mio. But if you only knew how miserable I was feeling. I didn't mean to be unsympathetic. Poor boy. I'm so sorry. There, don't cry, poor darling.

ALBERTO. Oh, I knew you wouldn't desert me, Lucrezia. You've always been a mother to me. (He stretches out his hand and seizes hers, which has gone half-way to meet him; but the balconies are too far apart to allow him to kiss it. He makes an effort and fails. He is too short in the body,) Will you let me come onto your balcony, Lucrezia? I want to tell you how grateful I am.

LUCREZIA. But you can do that from your own balcony.

ALBERTO. Please, please, Lucrezia. You mustn't be cruel to me again. I can't bear it.

LUCREZIA. Well, then.... Just for a moment, but for no more, (BERTINO climbs from one balcony to the other. One is a little reminded of the trousered monkeys on the barrel organs. Arrived, he kneels down and kisses LUCREZIA'S hand.)

ALBERTO. You've saved me. You've given given me a fresh desire to live and a fresh faith in life. How can I thank you enough, Lucrezia, darling?

LUCREZIA (patting his head). There, there. We are just two unhappy creatures. We must try and comfort one another.

ALBERTO. What a brute I am! I never thought of your unhappiness. I am so selfish. What is it, Lucrezia?

LUCREZIA. I can't tell you, Bertino; but it's very painful.

ALBERTO. Poor child, poor child. (His kisses, which started at the hand, have mounted, by this time, some way up the arm, changing perceptibly in character as they rise. At the shoulder they have a warmth which could not have been inferred from the respectful salutes which barely touched the fingers.) Poor darling! You've given me consolation. Now you must let me comfort your unhappiness.

LUCREZIA (with an effort). I think you ought to go back now, Bertino.  
ALBERTO. In a minute, my darling. There, there, poor Lucrezia. (He puts an arm round her, kisses her hair and neck. LUCREZIA leans her bowed head against his chest. The sound of footsteps is heard. They both look up with scared, wide-open eyes.)

LUCREZIA. We mustn't be seen here, Bertino. What would people think?

ALBERTO. I'll go back.

LUCREZIA. There's no time. You must come into my room. Quickly.

(They slip through the French window, but not quickly enough to have escaped the notice of PAUL, returning from his midnight stroll. The VICOMTE stands for a moment looking up at the empty balcony. He laughs softly to himself, and, throwing his cigarette away, passes through the glass door into the house.

All is now silent, save for the nightingales and the distant bells. The curtain comes down for a moment to indicate the passage of several hours. It rises again with the sun. LUCREZIA's window opens and she appears on the balcony. She stands a moment with one foot over the threshold of the long window in a listening pose.

Then her eyes fall on the better half of a pair of pink pyjamas lying crumpled on the floor, like a body bereft of its soul; with her bare foot she turns it over. A little shudder plucks at her nerves, and she shakes her head as though, by this symbolic act, to shake off something clinging and contaminating. Then she steps out into the full glory of the early sun, stretching out her arms to the radiance. She bows her face into her hands, crying out loud to herself.) LUCREZIA.

Oh, why, why, why? (The last of these Why's is caught by the WAITER, who has crept forth in shirt-sleeves and list-slippers, duster in hand, to clean the tables. He looks up at her admiringly, passes his tongue over his lips. Then, with a sigh, turns to dust the tables.)

CURTAIN.

The End