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Sketches in Lavender, Blue and Green

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REGINALD BLAKE, FINANCIER AND CAD

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The advantage of literature over life is that its characters are clearly defined, and act consistently. Nature, always inartistic, takes pleasure in creating the impossible. Reginald Blake was as typical a specimen of the well-bred cad as one could hope to find between Piccadilly Circus and Hyde Park Corner. Vicious without passion, and possessing brain without mind, existence presented to him no difficulties, while his pleasures brought him no pains. His morality was bounded by the doctor on the one side, and the magistrate on the other. Careful never to outrage the decrees of either, he was at forty-five still healthy, though stout; and had achieved the not too easy task of amassing a fortune while avoiding all risk of Holloway. He and his wife, Edith (née Eppington), were as ill-matched a couple as could be conceived by any dramatist seeking material for a problem play. As they stood before the altar on their wedding morn, they might have been taken as symbolising satyr and saint. More than twenty years his junior, beautiful with the beauty of a Raphael's Madonna, his every touch of her seemed a sacrilege. Yet once in his life Mr. Blake played the part of a great gentleman; Mrs. Blake, on the same occasion, contenting herself with a singularly mean rôle—mean even for a woman in love.

The affair, of course, had been a marriage of convenience. Blake, to do him justice, had made no pretence to anything beyond admiration and regard. Few things grow monotonous sooner than irregularity. He would tickle his

jaded palate with respectability, and try for a change the companionship of a good woman. The girl's face drew him, as the moonlight holds a man who, bored by the noise, turns from a heated room to press his forehead to the windowpane. Accustomed to bid for what he wanted, he offered his price. The Eppington family was poor and numerous. The girl, bred up to the false notions of duty inculcated by a narrow conventionality, and, feminine like, half in love with martyrdom for its own sake, let her father bargain for a higher price, and then sold herself.

To a drama of this description, a lover is necessary, if the complications are to be of interest to the outside world. Harry Sennett, a pleasant-looking enough young fellow, in spite of his receding chin, was possessed, perhaps, of more good intention than sense. Under the influence of Edith's stronger character he was soon persuaded to acquiesce meekly in the proposed arrangement. Both succeeded in convincing themselves that they were acting nobly. The tone of the farewell interview, arranged for the eve of the wedding, would have been fit and proper to the occasion had Edith been a modern Joan of Arc about to sacrifice her own happiness on the altar of a great cause; as the girl was merely selling herself into ease and luxury, for no higher motive than the desire to enable a certain number of more or less worthy relatives to continue living beyond their legitimate means, the sentiment was perhaps exaggerated. Many tears were shed, and many everlasting good-byes spoken, though, seeing that Edith's new home would be only a few streets off, and that of necessity their social set would continue to be the same, more experienced persons might have counselled hope. Three months after the marriage they found themselves side by side at the same dinner-table; and after a little melodramatic fencing with what they were pleased to regard as fate, they accommodated themselves to the customary positions.

Blake was guite aware that Sennett had been Edith's lover. So had half a dozen other men, some younger, some older than himself. He felt no more embarrassment at meeting them than, standing on the pavement outside the Stock Exchange, he would have experienced greeting his brother jobbers after a settling day that had transferred a fortune from their hands into his. Sennett, in particular, he liked and encouraged. Our whole social system, always a mystery to the philosopher, owes its existence to the fact that few men and women possess sufficient intelligence to be interesting to themselves. Blake liked company, but not much company liked Blake. Young Sennett, however, could always be relied upon to break the tediousness of the domestic dialogue. A common love of sport drew the two men together. Most of us improve upon closer knowledge, and so they came to find good in one another.

"That is the man you ought to have married," said Blake one night to his wife, half laughingly, half seriously, as they sat alone, listening to Sennett's departing footsteps echoing upon the deserted pavement. "He's a good fellow—not a mere money-grubbing machine like me."

And a week later Sennett, sitting alone with Edith, suddenly broke out with:

"He's a better man than I am, with all my high-falutin' talk, and, upon my soul, he loves you. Shall I go abroad?"

"If you like," was the answer.

"What would you do?"

"Kill myself," replied the other, with a laugh, "or run away with the first man that asked me."

So Sennett stayed on.

Blake himself had made the path easy to them. There was little need for either fear or caution. Indeed, their safest course lay in recklessness, and they took it. To Sennett the house was always open. It was Blake himself who, when unable to accompany his wife, would suggest Sennett as a substitute. Club friends shrugged their shoulders. Was the man completely under his wife's thumb; or, tired of her, was he playing some devil's game of his own? To most of his acquaintances the latter explanation seemed the more plausible.

The gossip, in due course, reached the parental home. Mrs. Eppington shook the vials of her wrath over the head of her son-in-law. The father, always a cautious man, felt inclined to blame his child for her want of prudence.

"She'll ruin everything," he said. "Why the devil can't she be careful?"

"I believe the man is deliberately plotting to get rid of her," said Mrs. Eppington. "I shall tell him plainly what I think."

"You're a fool, Hannah," replied her husband, allowing himself the licence of the domestic hearth. "If you are right, you will only precipitate matters; if you are wrong, you will tell him what there is no need for him to know. Leave the matter to me. I can sound him without giving anything away, and meanwhile you talk to Edith."

So matters were arranged, but the interview between mother and daughter hardly improved the position. Mrs. Eppington was conventionally moral; Edith had been thinking for herself, and thinking in a bad atmosphere. Mrs. Eppington, grew angry at the girl's callousness.

"Have you no sense of shame?" she cried.

"I had once," was Edith's reply, "before I came to live here. Do you know what this house is for me, with its gilded mirrors, its couches, its soft carpets? Do you know what I am, and have been for two years?"

The elder woman rose, with a frightened pleading look upon her face, and the other stopped and turned away towards the window.

"We all thought it for the best," continued Mrs. Eppington meekly.

The girl spoke wearily without looking round.

"Oh! every silly thing that was ever done, was done for the best. I thought it would be for the best, myself. Everything would be so simple if only we were not alive. Don't let's talk any more. All you can say is quite right."

The silence continued for a while, the Dresden-china clock on the mantelpiece ticking louder and louder as if to say, "I, Time, am here. Do not make your plans forgetting me, little mortals; I change your thoughts and wills. You are but my puppets."

"Then what do you intend to do?" demanded Mrs. Eppington at length.

"Intend! Oh, the right thing of course. We all intend that. I shall send Harry away with a few well-chosen words of farewell, learn to love my husband and settle down to a life of quiet domestic bliss. Oh, it's easy enough to intend!"

The girl's face wrinkled with a laugh that aged her. In that moment it was a hard, evil face, and with a pang the elder woman thought of that other face, so like, yet so unlike—the sweet pure face of a girl that had given to a sordid home its one touch of nobility. As under the lightning's flash we see the whole arc of the horizon, so Mrs. Eppington looked and

saw her child's life. The gilded, over-furnished room vanished. She and a big-eyed, fair-haired child, the only one of her children she had ever understood, were playing wonderful games in the twilight among the shadows of a tiny attic. Now she was the wolf, devouring Edith, who was Red Riding Hood, with kisses. Now Cinderella's prince, now both her wicked sisters. But in the favourite game of all, Mrs. Eppington was a beautiful princess, bewitched by a wicked dragon, so that she seemed to be an old, worn woman. But curly-headed Edith fought the dragon, represented by the three-legged rocking-horse, and slew him with much shouting and the toasting-fork. Then Mrs. Eppington became again a beautiful princess, and went away with Edith back to her own people.

In this twilight hour the misbehaviour of the "General," the importunity of the family butcher, and the airs assumed by cousin Jane, who kept two servants, were forgotten.

The games ended. The little curly head would be laid against her breast "for five minutes' love," while the restless little brain framed the endless question that children are for ever asking in all its thousand forms, "What is life, mother? I am very little, and I think, and think, until I grow frightened. Oh, mother, tell me, what is life?"

Had she dealt with these questions wisely? Might it not have been better to have treated them more seriously? Could life after all be ruled by maxims learned from copy-books? She had answered as she had been answered in her own farback days of questioning. Might it not have been better had she thought for herself?

Suddenly Edith was kneeling on the floor beside her.

"I will try to be good, mother."

It was the old baby cry, the cry of us all, children that we are, till mother Nature kisses us and bids us go to sleep.

Their arms were round each other now, and so they sat, mother and child once more. And the twilight of the old attic, creeping westward from the east, found them again.

The masculine duet had more result, but was not conducted with the *finesse* that Mr. Eppington, who prided himself on his diplomacy, had intended. Indeed, so evidently ill at ease was that gentleman, when the moment came for talk, and so palpably were his pointless remarks mere efforts to delay an unpleasant subject, that Blake, always direct bluntly though not ill-naturedly asked him, "How much?"

Mr. Eppington was disconcerted.

"It's not that—at least that's not what I have come about," he answered confusedly.

"What have you come about?"

Inwardly Mr. Eppington cursed himself for a fool, for the which he was perhaps not altogether without excuse. He had meant to act the part of a clever counsel, acquiring information while giving none; by a blunder, he found himself in the witness-box.

"Oh, nothing," was the feeble response, "merely looked in to see how Edith was."

"Much the same as at dinner last night, when you were here," answered Blake. "Come, out with it."

It seemed the best course now, and Mr. Eppington took the plunge.

"Don't you think," he said, unconsciously glancing round the room to be sure they were alone, "that young Sennett is a little too much about the house?"

Blake stared at him.

"Of course, we know it is all right—as nice a young fellow as ever lived—and Edith—and all that. Of course, it's absurd, but—"

"But what?"

"Well, people will talk."

"What do they say?"

The other shrugged his shoulders.

Blake rose. He had an ugly look when angry, and his language was apt to be coarse.

"Tell them to mind their own business, and leave me and my wife alone." That was the sense of what he said; he expressed himself at greater length, and in stronger language.

"But, my dear Blake," urged Mr. Eppington, "for your own sake, is it wise? There was a sort of boy and girl attachment between them—nothing of any moment, but all that gives colour to gossip. Forgive me, but I am her father; I do not like to hear my child talked about."

"Then don't open your ears to the chatter of a pack of fools," replied his son-in-law roughly. But the next instant a softer expression passed over his face, and he laid his hand on the older man's arm.

"Perhaps there are many more, but there's one good woman in the world," he said, "and that's your daughter. Come and tell me that the Bank of England is getting shaky on its legs, and I'll listen to you." But the stronger the faith, the deeper strike the roots of suspicion. Blake said no further word on the subject, and Sennett was as welcome as before. But Edith, looking up suddenly, would sometimes find her husband's eyes fixed on her with a troubled look as of some dumb creature trying to understand; and often he would slip out of the house of an evening by himself, returning home hours afterwards, tired and mud-stained.

He made attempts to show his affection. This was the most fatal thing he could have done. Ill-temper, ill-treatment even, she might have borne. His clumsy caresses, his foolish, halting words of tenderness became a horror to her. She wondered whether to laugh or to strike at his upturned face. His tactless devotion filled her life as with some sickly perfume, stifling her. If only she could be by herself for a little while to think! But he was with her night and day. There were times when, as he would cross the room towards her, he grew monstrous until he towered above her, a formless thing such as children dream of. And she would sit with her lips tight pressed, clutching the chair lest she should start up screaming.

Her only thought was to escape from him. One day she hastily packed a few necessaries in a small hand-bag and crept unperceived from the house. She drove to Charing Cross, but the Continental Express did not leave for an hour, and she had time to think.

Of what use was it? Her slender stock of money would soon be gone; how could she live? He would find her and follow her. It was all so hopeless!

Suddenly a fierce desire of life seized hold of her, the angry answer of her young blood to despair. Why should she die, never having known what it was to live? Why should she prostrate herself before this juggernaut of other people's respectability? Joy called to her; only her own cowardice stayed her from stretching forth her hand and gathering it. She returned home a different woman, for hope had come to her.

A week later the butler entered the dining room, and handed Blake a letter addressed to him in his wife's handwriting. He took it without a word, as though he had been expecting it. It simply told him that she had left him for ever.

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The world is small, and money commands many services. Sennett had gone out for a stroll; Edith was left in the tiny salon of their appartement at Fécamp. It was the third day of their arrival in the town. The door was opened and closed, and Blake stood before her.

She rose frightened, but by a motion he reassured her. There was a quiet dignity about the man that was strange to her.

"Why have you followed me?" she asked.

"I want you to return home."

"Home!" she cried. "You must be mad. Do you not know—"

He interrupted her vehemently. "I know nothing. I wish to know nothing. Go back to London at once. I have made everything right; no one suspects. I shall not be there; you will never see me again, and you will have an opportunity of undoing your mistake—our mistake."

She listened. Hers was not a great nature, and the desire to obtain happiness without paying the price was strong upon her. As for his good name, what could that matter? he urged. People would only say that he had gone back to the

evil from which he had emerged, and few would be surprised. His life would go on much as it had done, and she would only be pitied.

She quite understood his plan; it seemed mean of her to accept his proposal, and she argued feebly against it. But he overcame all her objections. For his own sake, he told her, he would prefer the scandal to be connected with his name rather than with that of his wife. As he unfolded his scheme, she began to feel that in acquiescing she was conferring a favour. It was not the first deception he had arranged for the public, and he appeared to be half in love with his own cleverness. She even found herself laughing at his mimicry of what this acquaintance and that would say. Her spirits rose; the play that might have been a painful drama seemed turning out an amusing farce.

The thing settled, he rose to go, and held out his hand. As she looked up into his face, something about the line of his lips smote upon her.

"You will be well rid of me," she said. "I have brought you nothing but trouble."

"Oh, trouble," he answered. "If that were all! A man can bear trouble."

"What else?" she asked.

His eyes travelled aimlessly about the room. "They taught me a lot of things when I was a boy," he said, "my mother and others—they meant well—which as I grew older I discovered to be lies; and so I came to think that nothing good was true, and that everything and everybody was evil. And then—"

His wandering eyes came round to her and he broke off abruptly. "Good-bye," he said, and the next moment he was

gone.

She sat wondering for a while what he had meant. Then Sennett returned, and the words went out of her head.

* * * * *

A good deal of sympathy was felt for Mrs. Blake. The man had a charming wife; he might have kept straight; but as his friends added, "Blake always was a cad."

AN ITEM OF FASHIONABLE INTELLIGENCE

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Speaking personally, I do not like the Countess of ---. She is not the type of woman I could love. I hesitate the less giving expression to this sentiment by reason of the conviction that the Countess of --- would not be unduly depressed even were the fact to reach her ears. I cannot conceive the Countess of ---'s being troubled by the opinion concerning her of any being, human or divine, other than the Countess of ---.

But to be honest. I must admit that for the Earl of --- she makes an ideal wife. She rules him as she rules all others. relations and retainers, from the curate to the dowager, but the rod, though firmly held, is wielded with justice and kindly intent. Nor is it possible to imagine the Earl of ---'s living as contentedly as he does with any partner of a less dominating turn of mind. He is one of those weak-headed, strong-limbed, good-natured, childish men, born to be guided in all matters, from the tying of a neck-cloth to the choice of a political party, by their women folk. Such men are in clover when their proprietor happens to be a good and sensible woman, but are to be pitied when they get into the hands of the selfish or the foolish. As very young men, they too often fall victims to bad-tempered chorus girls or to middle-aged matrons of the class from which Pope judged all womankind. They make capital husbands when well managed; treated badly, they say little, but set to work,

after the manner of a dissatisfied cat, to find a kinder mistress, generally succeeding. The Earl of --- adored his wife, deeming himself the most fortunate of husbands, and better testimonial than such no wife should hope for. Till the day she snatched him away from all other competitors, and claimed him for her own, he had obeyed his mother with a dutifulness bordering on folly. Were the countess to die tomorrow, he would be unable to tell you his mind on any single subject until his eldest daughter and his still unmarried sister, ladies both of strong character, attracted towards one another by a mutual antagonism, had settled between themselves which was to be mistress of him and of his house.

However, there is little fear (bar accidents) but that my friend the countess will continue to direct the hereditary vote of the Earl of --- towards the goal of common sense and public good, guide his social policy with judgment and kindness, and manage his estates with prudence and economy for many years to come. She is a hearty, vigorous lady, of generous proportions, with the blood of sturdy forebears in her veins, and one who takes the same excellent good care of herself that she bestows on all others dependent upon her guidance.

"I remember," said the doctor—we were dining with the doctor in homely fashion, and our wives had adjourned to the drawing-room to discuss servants and husbands and other domestic matters with greater freedom, leaving us to the claret and the twilight—"I remember when we had the cholera in the village—it must be twenty years ago now—that woman gave up the London season to stay down here and take the whole burden of the trouble upon her own shoulders. I do not feel any call to praise her; she liked the work, and she was in her element, but it was good work for all that. She had no fear. She would carry the children in her

arms if time pressed and the little ambulance was not at hand. I have known her sit all night in a room not twelve feet square, between a dying man and his dying wife. But the thing never touched her. Six years ago we had the small-pox, and she went all through that in just the same way. I don't believe she has ever had a day's illness in her life. She will be physicking this parish when my bones are rattling in my coffin, and she will be laying down the laws of literature long after your statue has become a familiar ornament of Westminster Abbey. She's a wonderful woman, but a trifle masterful."

He laughed, but I detected a touch of irritation in his voice. My host looked a man wishful to be masterful himself. I do not think he quite relished the calm way in which this grand dame took possession of all things around her, himself and his work included.

"Did you ever hear the story of the marriage?" he asked.

"No," I replied, "whose marriage? The earl's?"

"I should call it the countess's," he answered. "It was the gossip of the county when I first came here, but other curious things have happened among us to push it gradually out of memory. Most people, I really believe, have quite forgotten that the Countess of --- once served behind a baker's counter."

"You don't say so," I exclaimed. The remark, I admit, sounds weak when written down; the most natural remarks always do.

"It's a fact," said the doctor, "though she does not suggest the shop-girl, does she? But then I have known countesses, descended in a direct line from William the Conqueror, who did, so things balance one another. Mary, Countess of ---, was, thirty years ago, Mary Sewell, daughter of a Taunton

linen-draper. The business, profitable enough as country businesses go, was inadequate for the needs of the Sewell family, consisting, as I believe it did, of seven boys and eight girls. Mary, the youngest, as soon as her brief schooling was over, had to shift for herself. She seems to have tried her hand at one or two things, finally taking service with a cousin, a baker and confectioner, who was doing well in Oxford Street. She must have been a remarkably attractive girl; she's a handsome woman now. I can picture that soft creamy skin when it was fresh and smooth, and the West of England girls run naturally to dimples and eyes that glisten as though they had been just washed in morning dew. The shop did a good trade in ladies' lunches—it was the glass of sherry and sweet biscuit period. I expect they dressed her in some neat-fitting grey or black dress, with short sleeves, showing her plump arms, and that she flitted around the marble-topped tables, smiling, and looking cool and sweet. There the present Earl of ---, then young Lord C---, fresh from Oxford, and new to the dangers of London bachelordom, first saw her. He had accompanied some female relatives to the photographer's, and, hotels and restaurants being deemed impossible in those days for ladies, had taken them to Sewell's to lunch. Mary Sewell waited upon the party; and now as many of that party as are above ground wait upon Mary Sewell."

"He showed good sense in marrying her," I said, "I admire him for it." The doctor's sixty-four Lafitte was excellent. I felt charitably inclined towards all men and women, even towards earls and countesses.

"I don't think he had much to do with it," laughed the doctor, "beyond being, like Barkis, 'willing.' It's a queer story; some people profess not to believe it, but those who know her ladyship best think it is just the story that must be true, because it is so characteristic of her. And besides, I happen to know that it is true."

"I should like to hear it," I said.

"I am going to tell it you," said the doctor, lighting a fresh cigar, and pushing the box towards me.

* * * *

I will leave you to imagine the lad's suddenly developed appetite for decantered sherry at sixpence a glass, and the familiar currant bun of our youth. He lunched at Sewell's shop, he tea'd at Sewell's, occasionally he dined at Sewell's, off cutlets, followed by assorted pastry. Possibly, merely from fear lest the affair should reach his mother's ears, for he was neither worldly-wise nor vicious, he made love to Mary under an assumed name; and to do the girl justice, it must be remembered that she fell in love with and agreed to marry plain Mr. John Robinson, son of a colonial merchant, a gentleman, as she must have seen, and a young man of easy means, but of a position not so very much superior to her own. The first intimation she received that her lover was none other than Lord C---, the future Earl of ---, was vouchsafed her during a painful interview with his lordship's mother.

"I never knew it, madam," asserted Mary, standing by the window of the drawing-room above the shop, "upon my word of honour, I never knew it"

"Perhaps not," answered her ladyship coldly. "Would you have refused him if you had?"

"I cannot tell," was the girl's answer; "it would have been different from the beginning. He courted me and asked me to be his wife." "We won't go into all that," interrupted the other; "I am not here to defend him. I do not say he acted well. The question is, how much will compensate you for your natural disappointment?"

Her ladyship prided herself upon her bluntness and practicability. As she spoke she took her cheque-book out of her reticule, and, opening it, dipped her pen into the ink. I am inclined to think that the flutter of that cheque-book was her ladyship's mistake. The girl had common sense, and must have seen the difficulties in the way of a marriage between the heir to an earldom and a linen-draper's daughter; and had the old lady been a person of discernment, the interview might have ended more to her satisfaction. She made the error of judging the world by one standard, forgetting there are individualities. Mary Sewell came from a West of England stock that, in the days of Drake and Frobisher, had given more than one able-bodied pirate to the service of the country, and that insult of the cheque-book put the fight into her. Her lips closed with a little snap, and the fear fell from her.

"I am sorry I don't see my way to obliging your ladyship," she said.

"What do you mean, girl?" asked the elder woman.

"I don't mean to be disappointed," answered the girl, but she spoke quietly and respectfully. "We have pledged our word to one another. If he is a gentleman, as I know he is, he will keep his, and I shall keep mine."

Then her ladyship began to talk reason, as people do when it is too late. She pointed out to the girl the difference of social position, and explained to her the miseries that come from marrying out of one's station. But the girl by this time had got over her surprise, and perhaps had begun to reflect