

but her eyes fastened on the hands of her friends, that were tightly clasped, and on their hands she saw their wedding rings. She knew then why Molly had said

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Silence! Stories

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The Becker Wives

When Ernest, the third of the Beckers to marry, chose a girl with no more to recommend her than the normal attributes of health, respectability and certain superficial good looks, the other two - James and Henrietta - felt they could at last ignore Theobald and his nonsense. Theobald had been a bit young to proffer advice to them, but Ernest had had the full benefit of their youngest brother's counsel and warnings. Yet Ernest had gone his own way too: Julia, the new bride, was no more remarkable than James's wife Charlotte. Both had had to earn their living while in the single state, and neither had brought anything into the family by way of dowry beyond the small amount they had put aside in a savings bank during the period of their engagements, engagements that in both cases had been long enough for the Beckers to ascertain all particulars that could possibly be expected to have a bearing on their suitability for marriage and child-bearing.

'And these, mind you, are the things that count,' James said to Samuel, now the only unmarried Becker - except Theobald. 'Of course every man is entitled to make his own choice,' he added with a touch of patronage, because no matter how Theobald might lump the two wives together, the fact remained that Ernest had taken Julia from behind the counter of the shop where he bought his morning paper, whereas his Charlotte had been a stenographer in the firm of Croker and Croker, a firm that might justifiably consider itself a serious rival to the firm of Becker and Becker. But Theobald ignored such niceties of classification. In his eyes both of his brothers' wives came from the wrong side of the river, as he put it, and neither of them differed much - in anything but their sex - from Robert, the husband of Henrietta. Robert had been just a lading-clerk whom James had met in the course of business, but since it had never been certain that Henrietta would secure a husband of any kind, the rest of the family - except Theobald of course - thought she'd done right to jump at him. Theobald had even expected *her* to make a good marriage. But once Robert had been raised from the status of a clerk

to that of husband, it had been a relatively small matter to absorb him into the Becker business.

The Beckers were corn merchants. They carried on their trade in a moderate-sized premise on the quays, and they lived on the premise. But if anyone were foolish enough to entertain doubts about the scale and importance of the business conducted on the ground floor, he had only to be given a glimpse of the comfort and luxury of the upper storeys, to be disabused of his error. The Beckers believed in the solid comforts, and the business paid for them amply.

Old Bartholomew Becker, father of the present members of the firm, had built up a sizeable trade by the good old principles of constant application and prudent transaction. Then, having made room in the firm for each of his three older sons, one after another, and having put his youngest son Theobald into the Law to ensure that the family interests would be fully safeguarded, the old man took to his big brass-bound bed - a bed solemnified by a canopy of red velvet, and made easy of ascent by a tier of mahogany steps clipped to the side rail - and died. He died at exactly the moment most opportune for the business to be brought abreast of the times by a little judicious innovation.

In his last moments, old Bartholomew had gathered his sons around him in the high-ceilinged bedroom in which he had beget them, and ordering them to prop him upright, had given them one final injunction, to marry, and try to see that their sister married too.

The unmarried state had been abhorrent to old Bartholomew. He had held it to be not only dangerous to a man's soul, but destructive to his business as well. In short, to old Bartholomew, marriage represented safety and security. To his own early marriage with Anna, the daughter of his head salesman, he attributed the greater part of his success. He had married Anna when he was twenty-two and she was eighteen. And the dowry she brought with her was Content. By centring her young husband's desires within the four walls of the house on the quayside, Anna had contributed more than she knew to the success of the firm. For, when other young men of that day, associates and rivals, were out till all hours in pursuit of pleasure and the satisfaction of their desires, Bartholomew Becker was to be found in his countinghouse, working at his ledgers, secure in the knowledge that the object of his desires was tucked away upstairs in their great brass bed. And as the years went on, the thought of his big soft Anna more often than not heavy with child, sitting up pretending to read, but in reality yawning and listening for his step on the stairs, had in it just the right blend of desire and

promise of fulfilment that enabled him to keep at the ledgers and not go up to her until he'd got through them. In this way he made more and more money for her. Anna might not take credit for every penny Bartholomew made, but she was undoubtedly responsible for those extra pence, earned while other men slept or revelled, that made all the difference between a firm like Beckers and other firms in the same trade. It was inevitable, of course, that the more money Anna inspired her husband to amass, the more her beauty became smothered in the luxury with which he surrounded her. Yet, on his death-bed, his memory being more accurate than his eyesight, it was of Anna's young beauty that he spoke. And reminding her of their own happiness, he laid on her a last injunction to be good to his sons' wives. He made no mention of how she should conduct herself towards a son-in-law, no doubt fearing it unlikely such a person would put in an appearance. Anna gave the dying man an unconditional promise.

Theobald therefore had his mother to contend with as well as his brothers when he objected to each of his sisters-in-law as they came on the scene.

'Have you forgotten your father's last words, Theobald?' Anna pleaded, each time. 'How can you take this absurd attitude? What is to be said against this marriage?'

'What is to be said in its favour?' Theobald snapped back.

And on the occasion of Ernest's engagement, when Theobald had put this infuriating question for the third time, his mother had been goaded into giving him an almost unseemly answer.

'After all,' she said, 'the same could have been said about your father's marriage to me!'

That, of course, was the whole point of Theobald's argument, although he could not very well say so to Anna. Surely he and his brothers ought to do better than their father: to go a step further, as it were, not stay in the same rut. It was one thing for old Bartholomew, at the outset of his career, to give himself the comfort of marrying a girl of his own class, but it was another thing altogether for his sons, whom he had established securely on the road towards success, to turn around and marry wives who were no better than their mother.

'No better than Mother!' Henrietta was outraged. She could hardly credit her ears. She had the highest regard for Charlotte and Julia, but a sister-in-law was a sister-in-law, and the implication that either of them could be put on the same plane as her mother was unthinkable. 'No better than Mother!' she repeated, her voice shrill with vexation. 'As if they could be compared with her for one

moment. "It is asked that you could be so disrespectful, Theobald," But Theobald was always twisting people's words.

"Do you disagree with me, Henrietta?" he said.
 "I do not," Henrietta shouted, "but you know very well that both James and Ernest would be the first to admit that no matter how nice Charlotte and Julia are they could never hold a candle to Mother. They've said as much many many times, and you've heard them."
 It was true.

On his wedding day James had stood up, and putting his arm around his bride's waist and causing her to blush furiously, he had addressed his family and friends.

"If Charlotte is all as good a wife as Mother, I'll be a fortunate man," he said.

And Ernest, on his wedding day, had said exactly the same, giving James a chance to correct his sentiments.

"My very words," James said, and all three wives, Anna, and the two young ones, Charlotte and Julia, had reddened, and all three together in chorus had disclaimed the compliment. Although old Anna had chuckled and nodded her head towards the big ornate sideboard, laden with bottles of wine and spirits and great glittering magnums of champagne, from the excellent cellar laid down by old Bartholomew.

"I never heed compliments paid to me at a wedding," old Anna said. They all could see through that she was pleased and happy. But just then, happening to catch a glimpse of her youngest son between the red carnations and fronds of maidenhair fern that sprayed out from the silver-bracketed epergne in the centre of the bridal table, Anna leant back in her chair, and lowered her voice for a word with James who was passing behind her with a bottle of *Veuve Cliquot* that he didn't care to trust to any hands but his own. "For goodness' sake, fill up Theobald's glass," she said. "It makes me nervous just to look at him, sitting here with that face on!"

For Theobald sat there and glared between Henrietta and Samuel, when he had still only placed himself, thereby entirely altering the arrangement of the table, and causing the bride's elder sister and her maiden aunt to be seated side by side. Theobald had flatly refused to sit between them, and it had been considered unwise to press the matter.

"I would have made him sit where he was told," Charlotte said to James, when he came back to her side after pouring the champagne and she had ascertained what Anna had whispered to him. "Theobald is odd, but he'd hardly be impolite to strangers."

"I don't know about that," James said monosyllabically. "Don't forget the

way he behaved at our wedding. He wasn't very polite to—" James stepped short. He'd been about to say "your people" but he altered the words quickly to "our guests."

"Oh, that was different," Charlotte said. "That was the first wedding in the family."

James wasn't listening though. He was trying to read the expression on Theobald's face as, just then, his youngest brother turned and spoke to Henrietta. Henrietta frowned. What was the confounded fellow saying now?

It was just as well James could not hear. Theobald was on his hobby horse. "The joke of it is, Henrietta," he said, "that for all their protestations to the contrary, both James and Ernest would get the shock of their lives if anyone saw the smallest similarity between their wives and our dear mother."

"Well, there are differences of appearance, of course," Henrietta said crisply. "No one denies that." She always felt that in every criticism of her sister-in-law there was an implied criticism of Robert, and she was annoyed, but on this occasion she was ill at ease as well in case Theobald would be overheard. He hadn't taken the trouble to lower his voice.

"My dear Henrietta," he exclaimed. "You would hardly expect our brothers' wives to wear spectacles and elastic stockings on their wedding day and take size forty-eight corsets, would you? Give them a little time. For my own part I'd like to think my wife would have something more to depend upon for attraction than slim ankles and a narrow waist."

Yet, even Theobald could hardly have foreseen the rapidity with which his sisters-in-law lost their youthful figures. The punctual pregnancy of Julia coinciding with the somewhat delayed pregnancy of Charlotte made both women look prematurely heavy, and there was something about their figures that made it seem they would never again snap back to their original shape. Indeed, since both of them thought it advisable to conceal their condition under massive fur coats, soon there wasn't a great deal—unless you were at close quarters—to distinguish one from the other of the three Becker wives.

After their confinements, of course, Charlotte and Julia regained some of their differentiating qualities, but even then, due to having followed the advice of Anna and adopted such old-fashioned maxims as "eating for two" and putting up their feet at every possible chance, neither their ankles nor their waists would ever be slender again. Now, too, Charlotte and Julia felt entitled to accept freely the fur capes, fur tippetts, and fleece-lined boots that they had been a bit

diffident of demanding when they were dowdier brides. In level as the years went on, they came to regard these things more in relation to the effect they made up on each other than to the effect upon their own figures, so that when finally Anna passed to her last reward, and the fallals and trappings she had won in happy conjugal contest with Bartholomew were dispersed among her three daughters, it seemed at times that instead of passing from the scene Anna had been but divided in three, to dwell with her sons anew. And nowhere was their resemblance to Anna as noticeable as when, in accordance with a custom first started by Bartholomew, one strictly kept up by James, the Becks went out for an evening meal in a good restaurant. But when, as formerly Anna had set at the head of the table, comfortable and heavy in furs and jewellery, there were now three replicas of her seated on three sides of the table.

Henrietta, Charlotte, and Julia. There they sat, all three of them, all fat, heavy, and turned out like Anna, all emanating, in spite of the money lavished on them, such an air of ordinariness and mediocrity that Theobald, when duty compelled him to be of the party, spurned in his seat all the time, and rolled bread into pellets from nervousness and embarrassment. Yet he had to attend these family functions. One had to put a face on things, as he explained to Samuel, who came nearest to sharing his views. After all, although it was for the benefit of the family that old Bartholomew had made a lawyer out of his youngest son, Theobald was not without a return of benefit. His practice was mainly dependent on family connections and he just couldn't afford to ignore family ceremonial. But it went against the grain. Indeed, ever since he was a mere youth of sixteen or seventeen Theobald had nurtured strange notions of pride and ambition, and when to these had been added intellectual snobbery and professional stiffness, it became a positive ordeal for him to have to endure the Becker parties. In Anna's time, a small spark of filial devotion had made them bearable. Without her it was all he could do to force himself to go through with them. But once at the party, however, he could at least make an effort to keep control of the situations that sometimes arose. With a little tact it was possible to gloss over the limitations of the others.

'Not there, Henrietta?' Just in time he'd put his hand under his sister's elbow and shepherd them all to a quiet corner of the restaurant, whereas left to themselves they would have made straight for a table in the centre of the room. 'How about over there?' he'd murmur, and guide them towards a table in a corner behind a pillar, or a pot of ferns.

It was not that he was ashamed of them. There was nothing of

which to be ashamed. Indeed, the Beckers were the most respectably dressed people in the restaurant, and they were certainly better mannered than most. Moreover, one and all they possessed robust palates that almost made up for their hit-and-miss pronunciation of the items on the menu. And James, who as the eldest was always the official host, was more than liberal with tips to the waiters. Nevertheless, Theobald was ill at ease and cordially detested every minute of the meal.

'Are you suffering from nerves, Theobald?' Henrietta asked one evening, frowning at the disgusting pellets of bread all round his plate. She was the one who was most piqued at being led to an out-of-the-way table. 'I don't know why you had us sit here. The table isn't large enough in the first place, and in the second place we can hardly hear ourselves thinking, we're so near the orchestra.'

The table was in a rather dark corner, behind a potted palm, and it was indeed so near the orchestra that James had to point out with his finger the various choices from the menu, in order to come to an understanding with the waiter.

'I wanted to sit over there,' Henrietta said, indicating an undoubtedly larger and better placed table, but just then the orchestra reached a lightly scored passage, and overhearing his sister, James looked up from the menu.

'Would you like to change tables, Henrietta?' he asked. 'It's not too late yet; I haven't given the order.'

Theobald shrank back into his chair at the mere thought of the fuss that would accompany the move. Charlotte and Julia were already gathering up their wraps and their handbags and scraping back their chairs. His left eye had begun to twitch, and the back of his neck had begun to redden uncomfortably.

'Aren't we all right here?' he cried. 'Why should we make ourselves conspicuous?' In spite of herself, Henrietta felt sorry for him.

'Oh, we may as well stay here, James,' she said, settling back into her chair again and throwing her fur stole over the arm of it. 'We can't satisfy everyone, although I must say I don't know what Theobald is talking about when he says we'd make ourselves noticeable, because I for one can't see that anyone is taking the least notice of us.'

There was a thin, high note of irritability in his sister's voice that made Theobald more embarrassed than ever. Under the table he crossed and uncrossed his long legs, and took out his handkerchief twice in the course of one minute, as he tried in vain to disassociate himself from them all. The paradox of his sister's words suddenly

came home to him. She put her finger on what was wrong with them. His discomfort came precisely from the fact that there was no one looking at them. They were the only people in the whole restaurant who were totally inconspicuous. Around them, at every other table, he saw people who were in one way or another distinguished. And faces whom he did not recognize looked interesting, too. The women stood out partly because of their appearance, but mostly because of their manner, which was in all cases impetuous. The men were distinguished by some quality, which although a bit obscure to Theobald, made itself strongly felt by the waiters and which the Beckers often had a wait of ten or even twenty minutes between courses, these men had only to flick their fingers to have even water in the room at their beck and call. As well as that, most people seemed to know each other. They were constantly calling across to each other, and exchanging gossip from table to table.

Yes, it was true for Henrietta. No one was taking the slightest notice of the Beckers. In that noisy, unselfconscious gathering, the Beckers were conspicuous only by being so very inconspicuous. It was mainly because they liked to stare at other people that the Beckers went out to dinner. Theobald looked around the table at the womenfolk, at his family. There they sat, stolid and silent, their mouths moving as they chewed their food, but their eyes immobile as they stared at someone or other who had caught their fancy at another table. There was little or no conversation among them, such as there was being confined to supply each other's wants in matters of sauces or condiments.

As for the men, Theobald looked at his brothers. They too were unable to keep their eyes upon their own plates, and following the gaze of their wives, their gaze too wandered over the other diners. They had a little more to say to each other than their women, but the flow of their conversation was impeded by having to converse with each other across the intervening bulks of their wives.

Theobald bit his lip in vexation and began to drink his soup with abandon. He felt more critical of them than usual. Was it for this they had dragged him out of his comfortable apartment — to stare at strangers? He was mortified for himself, and still more mortified for them. Such an admission of inferiority! And why should they feel inferior? So far as money was concerned, weren't they in as sound a position as anyone in the city? And as for ability — well, money like theirs wasn't made now days by pushheads or duffers, James was probably the next astutest business man you'd meet in a day's march. There was no earthly reason why his family should play second fiddle to anyone in the town.

'Look here!' Theobald roused himself. As long as he was of the party, he might as well try to put some spirit into it. He leant across the table. 'I heard an amusing thing today at the Courts,' he said, determined to draw the attention of his family back to some common focus. To help his own concentration he fastened his eyes on a big plated cruet-stand on the table. His story might gather up their scattered attention and make it seem that they were interested in each other, that they had come here to enjoy each other's company, to have a good meal, or even to listen to the music: anything, anything but expose themselves by gaping at other people. 'I said I heard an amusing thing at the Courts this morning,' he repeated, because his remark had passed unheard or unheeded the first time, the gaze of all the Beckers having at that moment gone towards a prominent actor who had just seated himself at an adjoining table. But Theobald's simple ruse seemed doomed to failure. Only James appeared to be listening.

'I didn't think the Courts were sitting yet,' James said. 'I didn't know the Long Vacation was over.' In Theobald's story he displayed no interest at all. He had done no more than, as it were, listlessly lift his fork to pick out a small morsel of familiar food before pushing aside the rest of what was offered.

Theobald did not know for a moment whether to be amused or annoyed. It might perhaps be an idea to try and make a joke of their inattention. If only he could rouse them to one good genuine laugh, he'd be satisfied. If only he could gather them for once into a self-absorbed group! But how? Just then, however, to his surprise he found Charlotte had been attending to what James had said.

'Of course the Courts are sitting,' she said, and the glance she gave her husband had an exasperated glint. Theobald was about to metaphorically link arms with her and enlist her as a supporter, when she leant forward to reprimand her husband. 'How could you be so stupid, James? Didn't you see the Chief Justice and his wife in the foyer when we were coming in here tonight? You know they wouldn't be back in town unless the Supreme Court was sitting.' But after another scathing glance she turned the other way, and this time leaning across Theobald, she caught Henrietta's sleeve and gave it a tug. 'They're sitting at a table to the right of the door, Henrietta, if you'd like to see them. She has a magnificent ring on her finger. I can see it from here. And that's their daughter in the velvet cloak. What do you think of her? She's supposed to be pretty.'

Theobald's story was not mentioned any more that evening by anyone, least of all by himself, and he had the further mortification of knowing that it was due to his abortive attempt to tell it that Henrietta and James, the least curious of the Beckers, and the least

56 The Becker Wives

given to gossip, by rearranging their necks, all during the meal to see the Chief Justice's wife and daughter. As if they were a different race of beings! Some species of superior animal which they - the Beckers - were kindly permitted to observe.

And those were exactly the words he used, later that night, when he and Samuel were walking home. Being unmarried, they were the only two of the Becker men who were at liberty to walk home from these gatherings. James and Ernest, and Henrietta's husband, had to hire cabs to convey their wives to their abodes.

Samuel and Theobald were in rooms, but not of course in the same locality. Samuel thinking it advisable to reside near the business, and Theobald feeling that for the sake of his practice he had to live further out in a more fashionable area, although he admitted that at times it was inconvenient.

'A good address is essential to a man in my position,' he said. It irritated him that he had to explain this so often to the others. Samuel was the only one who understood. He had even made mention once or twice of doing likewise. For the present, however, Samuel was alright where he was. As bachelor's quarters his rooms were quite comfortable.

The two brothers walked along the streets talking without great interest, but with a certain affection, and looking down as they walked at the pavement vanishing under their feet, except when, intermittently in the patches of pale light from the street lamps they raised their heads and appeared to look at each other, giving the impression that they were attending to what was being said.

Samuel had enjoyed his dinner. He was also enjoying the walk home. The streets late at night had an air of unreality that appealed to him. Like limelight the moon shone greenly down making the lighted windows of the houses appear artificial, as if they were squares of celluloid, illuminated only for the sake of illusion. He hoped Theobald would not insist on dragging him back to reality. But he might have known better.

'Did you see them tonight, Samuel? Did you see them staring at the Chief Justice and his wife? Did you see the way they were turning around in their chairs?'

'I didn't notice particularly,' Samuel said. He still hoped to hold himself aloof. High up in a window on the other side of the street a light went out. What was going on up in that room? What unknown people were intent on what unknown purposes? Vague curiosity stirred in him.

Theobald was relentless. 'What do you mean?' he fumed. 'You were as bad as anyone yourself.'

Samuel reluctantly lowered his eyes and looked at his brother and sighed.

'What harm is it to look at people?' he asked mildly.

Theobald came to a stand. 'You know the answer to that as well as I do, Samuel,' he said. 'You know it marks people off at once as coming from a certain class, to stare at anyone who has raised himself the least bit above the common level. It's tantamount to acknowledging one's own inferiority, and I for one won't do that.' All Theobald's pent-up vexation of the evening threatened to break over the head of the defenceless Samuel. 'How is it no one ever stares at us when we go into these places? Isn't there a single one of us distinguished enough in some way to attract a little attention from others instead of our always being attracted to them?'

Samuel did not reply, not knowing whether it was wiser to reply or to remain silent. Theobald's words might be no more than a protracted exclamation, and a reply might provoke an argument. As they walked on a few more paces in silence it seemed as if he had followed the wisest course. But when they were passing under another lamp-post Theobald stood again.

'I'll never get used to it,' he cried.

This time Samuel was genuinely caught. 'To what?' he asked, taken by surprise.

But it was only the same old pill in another coating.

'To the poor marriages they made,' Theobald said, and of course he was talking about James and Ernest. Samuel sighed. He was into the thick of it. 'It makes me sad every time I think of them,' Theobald went on. 'I don't feel so bad about Henrietta, but I hate to think of the chances our brothers let slip - with their positions and their looks, and above all, with their money. Think of the opportunities they had. They might have made excellent marriages. Instead of that - what did they do?' Unable to find words caustic enough to answer his own question, Theobald made a noise in his throat to indicate the greatest of contempt. Then he put out his hand and patted Samuel on the shoulder. 'The only hope we have rests in you, old man,' he said.

Except for the fact that Theobald was younger than him, which gave an unpleasant sense of patronage to his brother's words and gestures, Samuel felt flattered. He immediately paid more heed than the Beckers normally paid to Theobald. This did not mean he approved of Theobald's nonsense. He was just vaguely titillated by his brother's confidence in him, though there was something about his brother's attitude that he still didn't like.

'When your time comes, Samuel,' Theobald said. 'I hope you'll do

the Becker Wives.

"...be better for yourself than the others. I hope you'll have some aspiration toward the better social level."

That was it. That was the undertone Samuel disliked. He had not been able to put his finger on it before. All this talk about lifting themselves up to a higher level implied a criticism of their present level which was decidedly disagreeable to him.

"Look here, Theobald," he said. They were passing under yet another lamp post, but it was he this time who came to a stand. "I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't know what levels you want to reach, but personally I don't think there is anyone in this city, whatever his position, with whom I am unacquainted. Why only this morning I was talking to Sir Joshua Landon over a cup of coffee and—"

Samuel was going to speak casually, but as he uttered the baronet's name his voice rose to a higher and thinner note, and his eyes bulged slightly with the strain of trying to appear indifferent. He drew back a pace or two on the pretext of clearing his throat behind a large grey silk handkerchief heavily monogrammed in purple silk to match the silk clocks that ran up the outer sides of his grey lisle socks; he was the most elegant of the Beckers. But he was smart enough to know that the only time their younger brother's views were acceptable to any of them was when the fellow managed to get hold of one of them separately — as now — because while they were all unable to apply his counsels and criticisms to themselves, they came within reasonable distance of agreeing with him when discussing each other.

And, of course, in the present case Samuel felt sure there could not possibly be any personal application intended. Unless Theobald was using the past of the others as a future warning to him, who, though he might have the elegance, had few other attributes of the real dead-in-the-way-of-bachelor. Samuel indeed entirely lacked the stamina of the successful bachelor, and at the time of this late night walk with Theobald, he was almost at the end of his tether. So he was at one and the same time drawn towards the dangerous topic of matrimony and anxious to skirt it. He felt, however, that his reference to the baronet had been particularly clever, because it might serve to draw Theobald out in his views without leaving him, Samuel, open to direct examination. Yet when he saw the look that came on Theobald's face, he had an uneasy feeling that he had made a false move, and he was about to be out-flanked.

"Yes," he said bravely, repeating his words, as if having taken up a poor position, he felt it was best to dig himself in — "Yes, Sir Joshua Landon. I came over and sat down at my table. We had a most interesting talk."

But whereas on the first occasion he had looked at Theobald as much as to say "What do you think of that?" he now looked at him as much as to ask "What can you say against that?"

Theobald, however, had another most irritating habit, learned no doubt from his profession. He kept people in suspense before replying to their simplest remarks, thereby giving his own words a disturbing preponderance.

"My dear Samuel," he said at last. "I have no doubt but that you have often sat down with people as notable — and I hope a bit more interesting — than old Sir Joshua. One meets all kinds of people in public places."

Under Samuel's heavy chin a blush began to spread. That was a confounding insinuation. No doubt it was another trick of the trade. No Becker had ever been bred to such cute ways. Not that he, Samuel, couldn't summon up certain wiles if needed and beat the damn fellow at his own game. He knew very well what was implied. And he'd give an answer in the same wrapping.

"Curious — that's just what Sir Joshua was saying to me only today," he said, as casually as possible. "He was remarking on that very thing — the promiscuity of persons one meets with when one ventures into public places. "As a matter of fact, Becker," he said to me. "I'm always delighted to see you, or someone like you, with whom one can suitably sit down when one is forced to come into this kind of place!"

As he spoke, Samuel's confidence returned, and he felt there was no small skill in the way he parried the lawyer's thrust. He even felt for an instant that the Old Man could as readily have sent him, Samuel, for the Bar as the younger brother. Now, of course, after a number of years, training told, but if it came to native wit and natural aptitude he believed he would be prepared to cross swords with Theobald any day. Why, Theobald was as good as eating his words. Listen to him!

"I didn't think you knew the baronet so well. Theobald was saying. And in spite of Samuel's efforts to twitch it away, a look of gratification stole over his face. This was almost an apology. He felt he could afford now to be magnanimous about the whole thing.

"Oh, yes, yes. I've known him a long time," he said. "I'd like you to meet him — I must arrange something some day. You might come and have a meal with me in the city?" He looked at his younger brother. The fellow appeared to be thoroughly deflated. Oh, how Samuel wished that James or Ernest could see him. "Yes," he said, intent on enjoying his position, "as a matter of fact I have had it in mind for some time to make you two acquainted. The baronet might be of some assistance to you. And I think he'd be glad of a chance to

do me a favour, please I don't mind telling you I have obliged him in a number of ways over the years.'

'Thank you, Samuel,' Theobald said, and Samuel could hardly credit the look of humility that he thought he saw on the other's face. But all at once he felt a twinge of uneasiness. Surely there was an excessive quiet in the tone of Theobald's voice? Yes, undoubtedly there was. And what was he saying? However suave it sounded Samuel was on the alert.

But Theobald was only thanking him.

'Thank you, Samuel,' he'd said. 'I'd like that very much indeed.' Then he paused. 'I have often thought that Lady Lundon looked more intelligent than the old man. I'd be most interested in making her acquaintance - for when shall we arrange?'

For one moment Samuel measured eyes with Theobald and thought of taking refuge in dissimulation, saying that he would drop him a line when he had arranged something. But at the thought of the calculating way he had been led into this conversational trap, his temper so got the better of him that dissimulation was impossible. A feeling of positive hatred for Theobald rose within him, and he felt a vein begin to pulsate in his forehead, and his jaw to twitch involuntarily. He was only too well aware of these distressing indications of ill temper, and his awareness did nothing to ease them.

The young curate apostrophized. He was well suited to the Law. A fox to the snout. He himself could do nothing but bark out the truth.

'It's Lady Lundon you want to meet you can get someone else to introduce you,' he said sourly. 'I only know the old man.'

This, of course, was what Theobald was waiting to hear. He met the explanation with one simple word.

'Ah!' he said, and that, no more. 'Ah!' The vein in Samuel's temple throbbled more violently, but Theobald put out his hand and patted him on the shoulder. 'Take it easy, Samuel,' he said. 'I'm sorry for bailing you, but it gets to be a habit with us fellows at the Courts, I'm afraid.'

As he patted his brother approvingly, however, Theobald looked anxiously at him. How the chap shook when he got agitated! But when Samuel relaxed again into his usual complacency, Theobald abruptly withdrew his hand. 'You did rather ask for it though, old fellow,' he said.

They had reached the street in which Samuel resided and had slackened pace to lengthen the time at their disposal, for in spite of a customary invitation to do so, it was not a practice for the brothers to accept hospitality from each other on such occasions. Tonight,

however, Theobald wanted a little more time with Samuel to say something important he thought ought to be said.

'For heaven's sake let's drop the pretence, Samuel,' he cried. 'Don't try to pall the wool over my eyes with your social contacts in public places. Of course, you don't know Lady Lundon, or anyone like her if it comes to that, and if you did you'd keep your mouth shut about it or the rest of the family would be living vicariously on your relationship.' Dropping his normal tone, Theobald affected a thin, high and wholly unnatural tone, instantly recognizable to his brother as the voice of their sister-in-law Julia. 'Oh, Lady Lundon,' he mimicked. 'Oh yes. Oh yes. I haven't met her myself yet, personally, but she's a great friend of Samuel's. I believe she is a charming person - simply charming - and most unassuming. I understand she is a very friendly person, and so simple - just like anyone else in fact.'

Theobald as he imitated her was so like Ernest's wife that Samuel had to smile in spite of himself. And some of his resentment left him.

'Isn't that true?' Theobald asked, although he had not actually formulated a question.

'Well - up to a point I suppose it's true,' Samuel said, knowing what Theobald meant.

'Of course, you understand I have nothing against them,' Theobald said, and in spite of a certain ambiguity in his use of the pronoun, it was possible to tell by the derogatory tone of his voice that Theobald was referring to his sisters-in-law. 'In fact,' he said more explicitly, 'Julia is a very decent sort really. Those socks she knit for me last winter look as if they'll never wear out, although the colour is a bit drastic, but all the same she meant well and poor Charlotte isn't a bad sort either. It's only a pity James and Ernest didn't do a little bit better for themselves.'

Samuel couldn't let this pass.

'They're happy!' he protested weakly.

'Happy! Well, I should hope so!' Theobald said with a flash of contempt. 'That's all they considered at the time, their own comfort and pleasure. If they'd been let down about that I wouldn't know what to say. But happy or not, I still maintain, and will do so till my dying day, that it's a pity their wives hadn't a little more to recommend them.'

'It is certainly regrettable that not one of them - Robert included - had a single penny to bring into the business,' Samuel said with a sudden burst of animation.

'There you are!' Theobald was delighted by Samuel's agreement.

do me a favour because I don't mind asking you I have obliged him in a number of ways over the years.

'Thank you, Samuel,' Theobald said, and Samuel could hardly credit the less than familiarity that he thought he saw on the other's face. But as he spoke he felt a twinge of uneasiness. Surely there was an excessive amount of the tone of Theobald's voice? Yes, undoubtedly there was. An amount was he saying? However suave it sounded Samuel was on his alert.

But Theobald was only thanking him.

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although as a matter of fact he himself had not been thinking of his brothers, he believed that at least he had made an impression on Samuel.

There were as a matter of fact two special reasons why Theobald was glad to think he had influenced Samuel. The first was that he had sensed for some time past that the crowd of Samuel's celebrity would not continue to stand much longer, and that he himself had just in the nick of time. The second reason was that he himself had begun to engage the mind with plans of his own in a certain interesting direction, and he did not want to have any more needless controversies to have to drag out into the light.

Well, goodnight, Samuel, he said abruptly.

They had reached the foot of the steps that led up to the old Georgian house where Samuel still resided in single dignity. Taking a last look at him, Theobald congratulated himself again on having admitted himself into the house he started to savor on his way, giving himself up, with more ease of mind than he had done for some time, by the way, he told himself, he would shortly have to divulge anything to anyone, Samuel's capitulation had taken place.

Before, however, Theobald had time to divulge anything to anyone, Samuel's capitulation had taken place.

What would Theobald say? What would Theobald do? The question went from lip to lip all that day as one after another he says.

That was what they all wanted to know - what Theobald would say.

Did he get any hint of it at all? Charlotte had asked eagerly, when it was whispered to her, 'I'd give anything to be there when he's told.'

This will silence Theobald for good and all, James had said earlier in the day, when as the head of the family he had been given an intimation of what Samuel planned before it was announced to the others.

Perhaps you didn't understand that, Theobald? Henrietta said, willing to give him another chance to alter his extraordinary attitude, his head sadly. It was the rest of them that did not understand. To express himself, there was not much point in making speculations as to the relative importance of the two firms since now undoubtedly there would be an amalgamation between them, Honora being the sole heiress to Croker and Croker.

Did you hear that, Theobald? Henrietta cried, her face purple with excitement. All the Beckers - but Theobald - loved weddings. There was nothing they enjoyed more, unless perhaps christenings. Did you hear that Samuel says he was largely guided by you in picking his bride?

Is that so? Theobald said modestly. Well, all I can say is that he wasn't guided very far!

Theobald! What do you mean? Henrietta cried, but she didn't wait for him to answer. Really, there is no understanding you at all, she said. And indeed it seemed that there was not, because unlike the rest of them Samuel was marrying money. He was uniting himself to Honora, only daughter of the elder Croker of the firm of Croker and Croker, which was the only other firm of com merchants in the city which might be said to be in any way comparable in size and importance with the firm of Becker and Becker. Although, as James had quietly expressed himself, there was not much point in making speculations as to the relative importance of the two firms since now undoubtedly there would be an amalgamation between them, Honora being the sole heiress to Croker and Croker.

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and I was guided a great deal by you, Theobald, in making my choice, Samuel said, turning to his younger brother with a special courtesy over he had made the announcement of his forthcoming marriage to the rest of the family. I was greatly impressed by that conversation we had the other evening.

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Beckers put on a hunt to each other of the felicitous step Samuel was taking, and alone refrained from his eager questioning because Theobald's countenance, which he had maintained, would have nothing to say now, Samuel had come in from the room under his feet.

And that was exactly what Samuel himself felt he had done.

'Then why did you come out with it?' Samuel said. 'But I'd dearly like to know what's in your mind.'

And although Samuel got a shock when he was told what Theobald had come out with, he did not let his younger brother's words rattle him, because he felt that in cases like this one always had to make allowances for a certain amount of jealousy.

Only when he was alone with Honoria did Samuel allow himself to brood over Theobald's reaction.

'Theobald is our youngest brother, isn't he?' Honoria asked. 'To an only child, the Becker family seemed at times bewilderingly large. I heard something or other about him, I think,' she said, 'but I can't remember exactly what it was - Anyway I'm dying to meet him.'

'You'll surely be meeting them all, my dear,' Samuel said. 'James is giving a concert for that purpose I understand.' Then suddenly remembering the last dinner party James had given, and his walk through the empty streets afterwards with Theobald, he frowned. 'I hope James will agree to giving it in his own house,' he said. 'It would be more suitable than in a restaurant, don't you think?'

'Oh, I don't know so much about that,' Honoria said, and she seemed disappointed. 'I love eating out,' she said. 'I love looking at the other people's father and I go out for dinner occasionally, just for that alone - to look at people. We went out last evening, and, Samuel, you can never guess who was sitting at the next table to us - father knows him slightly - Sir Joshua Landon. Father whispered who he was to me. And Lady Landon was with him. Oh Samuel, she was so nice - just as simple as could be! She ordered the simplest food too, just like you or me, or anybody else.'

Where had Samuel heard that before? Familiar and unpleasant echoes sounded in his brain. Had he himself not said something like this to Theobald recently and been promptly and severely shown his error?

'It would be more suitable for us to meet in James's house,' he said, and he resolved to insist on it.

When Samuel mentioned the matter to James, James agreed - if reluctantly.

'Very well, my son. I'll tell Charlotte and we'll arrange for some night next week. All right?'

It was more than all right. It was perfect. For once the whole

family was in accord in its preference for the betrothal celebrations to be as private as possible. For once their attention was focused fully on themselves. There was not one member of the family but wanted to witness Theobald's reaction to the wealthy bride-to-be. Their interest was centred on their own affairs for another reason too. Was there not a growing rumour that Theobald himself was about to introduce a new member into the family? And might it not be possible that in the intimacy of Samuel's party there could be further disclosures made? The hearts of the Becker women beat faster at the thought. The girl that was good enough for Theobald! How they longed to see her.

Who was she? What would she be like? Above all, would she live up to Theobald's own lofty notions? Not one single member of the family but was sorely tempted to hope she would not. And this, from no more unworthy motive than the common one of self-preservation. It would be such an ease to everyone if Theobald's mouth could be shut once and for ever.

And as the rumour grew this ungenerous feeling grew with it until finally the nearest any of his sisters and brothers could go to letting themselves believe Theobald's principles were inviolable was to disbelieve the rumour entirely.

'It can't be true,' Henrietta declared flatly on the morning of the day James and Charlotte were giving their little dinner for Samuel and Honoria. 'I don't believe it!'

'Well, I do!' Charlotte said. 'And so does Julia.'

'What about you, Robert? What do you think?' Henrietta asked, because Robert had come along with her to James's place to see if they could give a hand in the last-minute preparations.

'I must say I'm inclined to believe the rumours,' Robert said with a grin he couldn't seem to control.

'Why don't you ask Theobald straight out, Henrietta?' Charlotte said slyly.

'That's just what I intend doing,' Henrietta said. 'I'll make a point of asking him the very next opportunity - that is to say the very next time I'm alone with him.'

It was therefore rather unfortunate for Henrietta that a few minutes later, having volunteered to collect a few pet plants in town for Charlotte and having left Robert behind to attend to some hitch in the lighting arrangements, who should she run into - right outside Charlotte's door - right under the windows in fact - but her younger brother. There was nothing to do but take a rush at him.

'Is it true, Theobald?' she demanded, and she actually put out her arm to bar his way as if she feared he might bolt off.

"Henry said?" Theobald asked coldly and looked at her even more coldly. "Are you doing all right, Henrietta?"

For the life of Henrietta could not bring herself to speak any plainer, but neither forced to say something, she took refuge behind brother obscurity.

"Well, if it is true," she said, "all I can say is I hope you'll do as well for yourself as he did."

Then, telling her of she had done what she proclaimed she would do, Henrietta tilted her triumphant glance up at the windows of the house behind her, feeling pretty sure that Charlotte would be watching them from behind the curtains. She was so carried away by a sense of personal courage she wished Charlotte could have heard her, as well as seen her.

It was perfectly no harm that her sister-in-law had not heard, because Theobald did not seem to understand what she'd been driving at. Or did it? Really, he was impossible. No one could ever tell what he was thinking. Henrietta stared at him to try and figure out what was in the back of his mind. But the next minute she stepped back in doors. Theobald's face had begun to work as if he was going to bang his fist.

"What's the matter, Theobald?" she cried.

"The matter?" Theobald, although he had calmed down again, still looked very peculiar. "Pray tell me, Henrietta," he said then, "in what way you consider your brother Samuel has done so well for himself?"

Henrietta smiled, did not know what to make of him. Who were they talking about anyway? Him or Samuel? She'd been under the impression that she'd unearthed information about *him*.

"Well," she said, taken aback, "Honora has plenty of money."

"Money?" Theobald positively sneered at the word. "What does money matter? To Samuel anyway! What does he want with any more than he has already? Money, my dear Henrietta, is not the only thing in this world."

Was it not? Henrietta allowed herself to have mental reservations in the matter, but on the moment she was concerned with a less general aspect of what was being revealed. Very quickly she came to a decision. If there was any truth in the rumours about Theobald, well then it looked very much as if his intended was penniless. But Theobald was still ranting on about Samuel.

"I never thought I'd be so short-sighted," he said. "He's making a worse mistake than any of you."

Henrietta had allowed too many of these jibes to object to one more, and anyway she was just beginning to think she might draw hers out a bit after all.

"How is that?" she asked faintly.

"Oh, can't you see?" Theobald cried impatiently. "What difference does it make to Samuel whether he has thirty thousand or fifty thousand. It isn't more money Samuel needs, it's less. And that applies to all of us."

"Less?" The daughter of the Beckers felt faint at the suggestion.

"Exactly," Theobald said. "I thought Samuel would have had the wit to forget about money for once and try and acquire some of the things of which this family stands in such sore need."

"And what are they?" Henrietta gaped.

Theobald fixed her with a cold eye.

"Social position for one thing, and distinction for another, preferably the latter. But instead of that Samuel turns up with this mediocre Croker person. As I said before, he's made a worse mistake than any of you. What did the rest of you do? - Well, to put it bluntly you did no worse than keep wailing, whereas Samuel has widened, the circle of our mediocrity."

In his vexation Theobald made several extravagant gestures, that to Henrietta appeared most unseemly in the street, but when his arms fell suddenly to his sides she felt still more uneasy about him.

"Tell me," he said in a low despairing voice. "I expect this girl has a horde of relatives? How many of them do you think there will be at James's tonight?"

"Only her father, I think," Henrietta said quickly, "and maybe an old aunt, but the aunt is deaf." The question had made her very anxious. "Why?"

"Because," Theobald said, "I was thinking that if there weren't too many Crokers there, tonight might be as good a time as any for the family to meet my Flora."

"Flora?" Henrietta said stupidly, and then with a rush of blood to the head, she realized that this Flora, whoever she was, must be the living embodiment of the very rumours she had been trying to run to earth. "Why, Theobald," she cried, "is her name Flora? I mean is it true? What I mean to say is we heard a rumour but -"

"That's all right, Henrietta," Theobald said, cutting her short, and he allowed her to find and briefly hold the hand she was vaguely feeling for, as her words stumbled and tumbled over each other. Her muttered incoherence was painful to him, and it was painful too for him to have to watch what he took to be her embarrassment, knowing that Flora would call it gaucheerie.

But Theobald was wrong, for although Henrietta was confused, her confusion came, not from embarrassment, but from trying to do two things at the one time, to talk, and to think. She was thinking

forwardly, and whatever attributes this Flora of his might possess, she, Henrietta, must be right in assuming that untold wealth was not one of them. Flora certainly couldn't claim to be the heiress that she was. How far therefore was it wise - she was thinking in terms of worldly wisdom - to make use of the party given in honour of Honoria to introduce into the family another prospective bride who could, money apart, if Theobald's prognostications were true, put poor Honoria's nose out of joint? Was it even more prudent, and above all, was she, Henrietta, to be the only one to know of the bomb-shell that her young brother was planning to throw into the middle that night? If so, the responsibility was just too much for one pair of shoulders. Should she tell him so? Decidedly she would have to tell him.

These were the thoughts that were running through her head while actually she was shaking his hand in felicitation.

"Of course I'm going to meet her, Theobald," she said, when she resumed her seat. "I'm just wondering if tonight is the proper occasion for introducing her to me."

"Why not?" Theobald said. "She has to meet you sometime."

Memories of certain scathing remarks Theobald had made about Robert still ran on with Henrietta, and they bred a sudden vicious hope in her mind. "Was he ashamed of this Flora?"

But she was actually and in fact rudely she was how wrong she was. It was not of this that Theobald was ashamed.

"I'll have to meet it over some time or another," he said. "It's something that will have to be faced sooner or later, and anyhow I'm sure Flora will be allowed her allowances. It is always people like her who are most under-estimated when it comes to the shortcomings of others."

Henrietta swallowed quickly, and took a deep breath. Was it possible that she had accomplished the feat he expected of himself? She swallowed again. All the more reason, then, to protect poor Honoria from the hazards of a comparison.

"All the same," Theobald, she said firmly. "I think it wouldn't be wise - for your own sake, I mean - to introduce her to us casually like that. I think we ought to wait and talk to James and get him to name a definite evening for the purpose. It's nice to be formal about these things don't you think?"

She spoke so solemnly Theobald threw back his head and gave a loud guffaw.

"Formal? So what? Easily seen you don't know her. My dear Henrietta - do you think for a moment that she's the kind of person who'd sit down to one of our vulgar spreads. Why, I don't believe Flora has ever such orgies visit. After all, they are purely

middle-class functions. As a matter of fact when I was telling her about this evening's party I must confess that I more or less conveyed that we ourselves didn't ordinarily go in for this kind of gathering. I'm afraid I told a white lie - I rather gave the impression that we were going through with it mainly to please the Crokers, who were a bit old-fashioned. I sort of suggested that for us it was going to be quite an ordeal. So I'd be glad, Henrietta - this time it was he who reached for her hand - if you'd help me out a bit and play up that suggestion?"

"Well -" Henrietta said slowly. "if you insist on bringing her, I suppose I can't show you up for a liar. But it will be very hard to do it convincingly."

"I know that," said Theobald dryly. "Henrietta wasn't sure what he meant, and she didn't at all like his tone, but she felt she more or less had him at a disadvantage."

"We must warn the others, Theobald," she said.

"On no account must that be done, Henrietta," Theobald cried. His voice rose urgently and he glanced over Henrietta's head towards the windows of the house in case the wind might have carried their words in that direction. "I don't want anyone to know about it, only you and me and Flora. I want to take everyone by surprise. Indeed these were the only conditions under which I could make Flora consent to come. She wouldn't come under any other."

"But, Theobald!" Henrietta protested once more. She felt her responsibility in the matter come down on her with an insuperable weight. "I'll have to tell James. And I'll have to tell Charlotte. We might get away with keeping it from the others, but we'll have to tell them. You can't possibly expect to land an extra person down on them without notice - and for that matter - you can't let Flora arrive and find no place set for her! There mightn't even be enough chairs!" Henrietta was as embarrassed as if she were the hostess and Theobald's bombshell was about to fall on her dinner table.

Theobald only laughed. "Don't worry about that, Henrietta," he said. "We're only going to look in on you for a minute or two towards the end of the meal. We're not going to stay. We're not to be counted as far as place setting and that are concerned." He looked sternly at her. "I thought I made it plain to you that Flora wouldn't understand sitting down to the big gorges that James and Charlotte provide." He gave another laugh, a different sort, a pleased laugh. "Flora doesn't eat as much as a bird."

A bird? All the time they'd been talking, Henrietta had been trying unsuccessfully to visualize the appearance of this person, Flora. Now, all at once, with Theobald's mention of her birdly appetite,

Henrietta's imagination rose with a beat of wings, and before her mind's eye flew lovely images of bright-plumed creatures of the air. They waded, quite dizzy, those images, until they merged at last into one final image of a little creature, volatile as a lark, a summer warbler, so light and airy that it hardly rested on the ground at all—perhaps not a lark—a chaffinch, maybe? A minute little creature with a heavy golden hair.

"Oh, is it wise, Theobald?" she cried again. "Is it wise under the circumstances?"

"What circumstances?" Theobald asked curiously, but then as he saw Henrietta realize he understood, "Oh, you needn't worry on that score either. Her life is too rich, too filled with variety, to notice that at all. Be sure you she isn't the kind of person to take in little details."

"Little details?" Henrietta reddened, this time with annoyance. There was only one detail and she wouldn't call it little. You wouldn't have to stare very hard to be aware of it. One of the circumstances to which she had alluded was the fact that she was pregnant again, and beginning to be more than a little remarkable. The other circumstances were the pregnancies of her two sisters-in-law, both of whom were in the same condition, only more advanced. A nice time, she thought, to bring to the house a giddy little bird like this Flora. Because now Henrietta's conception of Flora's appearance had hardened like cement.

"You don't understand, Theobald," she said stiffly. "It could be embarrassing for a unmarried young woman."

"Nonsense!" Theobald said. "But if so, what about embarrassing Honoria?"

"Oh, it's different for Honoria," Henrietta replied, although immediately after she'd spoken, it occurred to her that she hadn't been very kind to Samuel's intended. Honoria's plump, well-fed figure was furred and beeboned as much as any matron in token of her independent means, and there wouldn't be anything like the same embarrassment for her that there could be for a birdy bride-like creature with a nose like Flora. Why Honoria might as well have been a matron already.

"Oh, it's altogether different for Honoria," she said, trying to make emphasis do for explanation. It was not a matter one could explain to a man, least of all a man like Theobald who was so lacking in modesty.

Lacking in modesty, and Theobald certainly appeared to be that day.

"I think you're right, Henrietta," he said. "I can only attribute it to

your condition. I'm sorry I mentioned the matter. Please forget it." Raising his hat, her brother was about to move away.

Henrietta was speechless. This made things worse. She did not know whether he was going to carry out his intention or not. It was impossible to remain in such uncertainty.

"Theobald!" she called.

Theobald, upon being called, turned with forced politeness.

"Does that mean you are not going to bring her?" Henrietta asked.

"It does not!" Theobald stopped. "I'm not going to miss an opportunity like this for killing two stones with the one—I mean two birds with the one stone. Good morning, Henrietta." This time he quite definitely walked away.

Henrietta stared after him, more upset than ever. Her brother usually affected such a slow and deliberate manner of speech there was seldom danger of a verbal mishap such as he had just suffered. Henrietta shook her head. He must be out of his mind about this Flora, she thought, and she shivered. To think of having to meet and entertain a person capable of turning the head of a man like Theobald!

All during that morning as Henrietta tried to do Charlotte's messages for her, she continued to experience unpleasant shivers of apprehension, and several times when Theobald's slip of the tongue came to her mind, she had a sensation of the ground going from under her. But at bottom Henrietta was a sound and sensible woman. By the time she'd done the messages and got back to James's house she had made up her mind—Theobald's injunctions apart. She'd say nothing at all about the impending surprise. For, unlikely as it seemed that Theobald would play a joke, the thought had occurred to her that he might be having her on. And if that were the case, what a fool she'd make of herself in the eyes of the others. Henrietta deposited with Charlotte the flowers, the trills for the rattles, and an extra carton of fresh cream, and departed with Robert, taking with her the secret about Flora.

It was really only later that evening when she took her place at Charlotte's beautifully appointed table where she'd been seated between Honoria's father and Ernest that the burden of her guilty knowledge began to tell.

"Are you feeling all right, Henrietta?" Charlotte asked on at least two occasions, once during the soup, and once during the fish, when Henrietta, thinking she'd heard a footfall on the stairs, began to perspire across her forehead.

Oh, why hadn't she told someone—if only Robert? She looked across the table at him in desperation. Could she, even now, convey

her tears to him? But Robert was not attending to Julia on his left, much less to Henrietta across the board, because Robert was nervous at swallowing small fish bones. He made it a rule never to talk when eating fish.

The fish, however, had gone the way of the soup and there was no sign of Theobald, and soon the dinner was mid-way through its courses at least with regard to the number of dishes consumed, although considering the rich nature of these first dishes it might perhaps be said to be nearing an end. The guests having, as it were, successfully crossed the biggest of the fences, were coming into the straight, and would no doubt gather speed now for the gallop home. In other words, having consumed the turtle soup, the curled whiting, the crown of roast young pork (accompanied by mounds of mashed potatoes, little heaps of brussels sprouts and a ladle or two of apple sauce), might be expected to make quicker progress through the green salad, the peach melba, the anchovy on toast, the coffee, and the crême de menthe. Still no sign of Theobald! He must arrive soon if he expected them to be still at the table as Henrietta understood him to have intended.

In spite of her irritation with him, Henrietta found herself trying to go slow with her peach melba, until feeling Charlotte's eye upon her, and fearing her sisters-in-law might think there was something wrong with the dessert, she had to act like everybody else and gobble it up.

In a trice the anchovies were being passed. In a trice their remains were being removed, and the cheese and crackers were being carried on stage.

It was then, just as the crunch of crackers made hearing difficult, that Henrietta once more fancied she heard sounds indicative of Theobald's arrival. A cab had stopped in the street below, right outside James's door: it must be Theobald! Henrietta told herself that she might have known that a person like Flora would have insisted on arriving by cab. She put down her cracker and listened. Yes, there were voices in the hall. There was laughing. She looked around the table. Did no one else hear? Apparently not. Henrietta's heart stood still. Then, all at once, with a belated access of loyalty she came to a decision: she'd have to let the others know what was about to befall them: she must prepare them for the shock.

'Excuse me. Forgive me for interrupting,' she cried, breaking in upon what, unfortunately, was the first time the whole evening that Honoria had essayed to display the confidence to which her position entitled her by telling a story. Realizing how unfortunate her interruption was, Henrietta felt she had no option but to continue.

'I must tell you all something,' she went on desperately. 'I knew it since morning, but he wanted it to be a surprise.'

Normally, having a rather squeaky voice, Henrietta might not have made herself heard if she tried to address the whole table, but as everyone was giving punctilious attention to the story Honoria was trying to tell, every single word of what Henrietta had to say fell on upright ears.

'What's that?' several of the Beckers cried, speaking all together, and looking first at Henrietta and then at each other.

James alone kept his head.

'Who wanted what to be a surprise?' he asked, almost shouting at Henrietta.

'Theobald, of course,' Henrietta said impatiently, because surely the others had ears as well as herself and ought to be able to recognize Theobald's laugh, rare as it was, and he had just given a hearty laugh on the stairs. 'Theobald, of course, who else?' she said, permitting herself this tick-off, before she fastened her own eyes on the dining-room door.

'Theobald?' James seemed to affect some diminution of interest at the sound of his brother's name. Indeed a curious frigidity had fallen on the company in general, because if Theobald had not come this would have been the first occasion that a member of the Becker family had voluntarily absented himself from a family celebration. And although on this occasion Theobald had been formally excused, there was an underground feeling of dissatisfaction with him.

'Theobald?' Honoria's deaf aunt asked loudly, addressing herself to no one in particular.

'Oh, he's another brother,' Honoria replied impatiently.

'Is it the one you dislike so much?' Honoria's father asked, and as the Beckers all seemed to be at hounds and hares, he didn't feel it necessary to lower his voice all that much. Charlotte, in fact, was the only one to hear and as hostess felt obliged to cover up for her brother, Theobald.

'It's nice that he's been able to join us after all,' she said. Truth will out, however, and she added an unfortunate rider. 'I can't believe that whatever appointment he said he had would have kept him busy all day and all evening. I'm glad he has decided to look in on us even for a few minutes!'

'But that - ' Henrietta cried, addressing herself to Charlotte first and foremost, and then the whole family - 'that is just what I wanted to tell you. He is coming! It was to be a surprise!' In her excitement she rose in her chair. 'And now he's here with her!'

'With her? With whom?' they all cried.

"Flora! Henrietta!" he cried, because at the sound of the name a vague memory stirred in him and gaudy and tinsel images pirouetted before his mind's eye. Hadn't there been an operetta in his youth called *The Flora*? What an earth was coming over Henrietta, he wondered? Flora? Flora? What are you talking about?" he demanded.

It was all Henrietta could do to refrain from saying that Flora was a bird. But suddenly she recalled Theobald's slip of the tongue about killing two stones with the one bird, and whatever about his fiancée, it seemed to her that when, at that moment the dining-room door was flung open by Theobald, all the seated Beckers, and all their seated guests, seemed to have been turned into stone.

And the bird?

Henrietta stared. Perched on Theobald's arm, or rather hanging from it by one small hand, was the little chaffinch type of thing she had expected to see.

Flora was small. She was exceedingly small. She was fine-boned as well, so that, as with a bird, you felt if you pressed her too hard she would be crushed. But in spite of her smallness, like a bird she was exquisitely proportioned, and her clothes, that were an assortment of light colors, seemed to cling to her like feathers, a part of her being, a part moreover of which she herself was entirely unconscious. She accepted her clothes as the birds their feathers: an inevitable raiment.

Indeed Flora appeared to be entirely unconscious of her person. She was hardly into the room before her bright eyes darted from one face to another, her own small pointed face eager with interest in them. It was a birdlike face, thin and sharp, and since her chin was slightly undershot, she gave the impression that like a bird her head was tilted at right angles in her little body. She was evidently very curious about them all, but unlike the curiosity of the Beckers that strove to conceal itself, her curiosity had taken open possession of her. It almost seemed that the excited beating of her heart was causing her frail frame to vibrate and tremble, and that she would simply have to find some outlet: beat her wings, flutter her feathers, or cluck at her perch and burst into song, song so rapturous the perch too would sway up and down.

Theobald, however, was not that kind of perch, and no tremor of Flora's excitement shook the arm to which she clung. Theobald was intent on making his entry.

"Well, everybody?" he said, and with his free hand he possessively clamped to his arm Flora's little hand with its long varnished fingernails. "Hello, Samuel. Hello, Honoria. I want you all to meet another future Becker bride."

Had the Beckers been totally unprepared for this shock there is no knowing how the seated table would have reacted, but Henrietta had, as it were, broken the fall for them. And so when Theobald looked around for evidence of surprise, all he saw was stupefaction. The faces that stared at Flora and himself seemed to stare at them out of a coma.

"Well?" he repeated, a little half-heartedly. "Aren't you going to welcome us?"

At this, James, who had been the most stunned of all, upon being given a dig in the ribs by Julia, got awkwardly to his feet.

"We are unfortunately nearly finished dinner," he said, looking around the table, "but we are just going to have coffee." He ventured his first real look at Flora. "Perhaps you'd care for a cup?"

"Ah! That was better. Good old James!" The Beckers relaxed and began to breathe again.

"Where will they sit?" Julia asked, and she went to move her chair to one side. Not that there was much room for movement round the massive mahogany table because it was already so crowded. It was doubtful if a single extra chair, much less two, could be squeezed in at any point. And since, to add to the difficulty, everyone at the table was following Julia's example and trying to make room for the newcomers, there was soon complete confusion. As Julia moved her chair to the right, Henrietta at the same moment was trying to move hers to the left, and on Henrietta's other side Ernest, moving right, was clashing with Charlotte, moving left.

"They look as if they are playing some game," Flora said to Theobald in a whisper, but a whisper which Charlotte to her intense mortification overheard while she was leaning forward to try and catch the attention of that stupid, stupid James, as she crossly apostrophized him in her mind. Giving up discretion, Charlotte shouted at him.

"Why don't we have coffee in the other room?"

"Just a minute!"

To everyone's surprise the voice that sang out was as sweet and melodious as a bar of music. It was Flora's.

"Please don't move, any of you!" she cried. "Please, please stay as you are. We've had dinner. Just ignore us."

There was such poised authority in Flora's voice that one or two of the Beckers who had stood up, sat down again immediately. In fact

only James remained standing, and he did so from uncertainty about his duties as host. But Charlotte gratefully seized on Flora's words.

"Don't please leave James!" she said, and she turned to Theobald. "If you're sure you've had your dinner, why don't you both go into the drawing room while we finish our coffee. You can show Flora the albums while you're waiting."

But as she made the suggestion, Charlotte knew it was not a very good one. Yet what was the alternative? They couldn't be let stand there. Really this was an outrageous thing for Theobald to have done. To bring a strange girl in on top of them like this, and take them at such a disadvantage, particularly when — as Charlotte couldn't fail to see — there was something so distinctive about the girl, something unusual, something indeed downright remarkable.

All at once, irrelevant though it might seem, Charlotte was shot through with bitter regret that she had not had the dining-room redecorated last month as she had intended. But enough of that! What was to be done with the pair now — they didn't seem to be moving off into the drawing-room?

During her brief reverie, however, Charlotte had missed something. Flora had smiled, and Flora's smile was not something to be missed. It was what the Beckers were always to remember about her — her sudden, humorous smile. And on that first occasion that it shone out, it transformed their awkwardness into gaiety. Flora had saved the situation.

"You simply *mustn't* move!" she cried. "Such a charming group as you make." Then, from the purely exclamatory, her voice changed to the intimately conversational as she turned to Theobald. "Isn't it a wonder photographers never seem to think of posing people around a table this way?" With a charming gesture she indicated the group before her, and smiled again. This time Charlotte didn't miss the smile, and she too, like the rest of the Beckers, felt warmed by it, as by yellow sunlight. "Oh," Flora cried, "oh how I wish I was a photographer." Then suddenly she did the funniest thing. "Let's pretend that I am one," she cried, and bending down her head in the drollest way, just as if she had a tripod in front of her, and letting her yellow hair fall down over her face like a shutter curtain, she made a circle with her fingers and held them up to her eyes to act as a lens for her make-believe camera. "I think I can get you all in," she said, turning her head from side to side to get them in better focus. "Keep still, everyone. Look at the dickie-bird. And smile! Smile! Then, when she had them all smiling, she reached down her hand and squeezed the imaginary rubber bulb that controlled the shutter.

It was the most unexpected thing that could possibly have

happened. It was exactly as if she was a real photographer. The Beckers had unconsciously stiffened into the unnatural and rigid postures of people being taken by the camera. Then, when the girl straightened up and pushed back her hair, the group came to life again. Realizing how ridiculous they must have looked, Julia laughed. Then they all laughed, even the parlour-maid, even Honoria, who looked as if she didn't often do so. Above all, Theobald laughed. He was delighted with himself. He looked proudly at his fiancée. She'd be able for any situation.

"Isn't she wonderful?" he said to Charlotte.

But they must be introduced to her.

"Come, Flora," he said, starting to lead her round the table, beginning, of course, with the head of the house. "This is James," he said, and in no way constrained now, he had his hand on his older brother's shoulder.

In the hilarious mood that had developed, no one really expected Flora to put out her hand and utter conventional commonplaces. They watched her eagerly.

"James?" Flora said, and there was a pert little note in her voice that made some of the family titter. Then, to the accompaniment of general laughter, she circled her eyes with her fingers again and bent once more over her make-believe camera and took a head-and-shoulders portrait of James.

It was quite a few minutes before anyone could speak, they were laughing so much, and James himself, although he was startled for a second, soon saw what the funny girl was up to, and he too gave way to the merriment.

"I hope I didn't break the camera, my dear?" he said.

Theobald's pride in Flora was infectious. It even infected stuffy old James. He was charmed by her.

Flora herself didn't smile. She was doing something to her camera. And her serious expression convulsed the group. She straightened again.

"I must take one of each of you," she said, and she turned to her next subject. "Who are you? You're Julia, aren't you?" she asked, while she was adjusting the lens. "Just a minute please. Try not to move." From the intent way she was looking at her it seemed Julia was a difficult subject, which fortunately Julia found flattering. "Smile!" Flora ordered suddenly. But when Julia laughed as the bulb was being squeezed, the photographer was quite annoyed. "You moved," she said severely. "Your picture will be blurred." She turned around. "Who's next?"

It was Samuel, and she had to speak sternly to him too. "I can't

take you, you know, while you're grinning like that! Please try to keep still. Look at the dickie-bird!" When she'd taken him she didn't seem altogether satisfied, and she took another shot. "You're Samuel, aren't you?" she said. "You're a bad subject I'm afraid, but with a bit of luck it may come out quite well." She moved her apparatus further along. Her sobriety was the best part of the fun.

"Who have I now?" she asked. It was Henrietta. "You're very photogenic," she said to the delighted Henrietta. "Your face is so angular. Turn your head a little to one side, if you please. Yes - I think a profile would be best in your case."

It was side splitting. Never in their lives had the Beckers met anyone remotely like this.

"Well, what do you think of her?" Theobald asked James in an undertone. "This performance is nothing! She's a sort of genius really. You've no idea how people stare at her everywhere we go. Of course, she's well known anyway; she comes from a very old family, but that doesn't account for all the attention she attracts. It's because she's so amazing. There is nothing she cannot do." He laughed. "And nothing she won't attempt too, if she takes it into her head. She's very accomplished. You should hear her play the piano. And she paints. You should see her water colours. She's going to hold an exhibition one of these days. And I believe she has tried her hand at poetry too, if you don't mind! Some publisher has approached her with a view to bringing out a little volume. Oh, there's no end to her gifts. But I always tell her that her real talent is for acting. You've just seen for yourself! And she's a wonderful mimic. You should see her impersonations!"

"Well, if that was any indication!" Samuel said admiringly, coming up to the other two just then, because the party had loosened up and one or two people were going around with Flora pretending to be her assistants, helping to move her equipment and pose those yet to be taken.

They were just about to photograph Honora's father, and at the expression on the father's face even Honora burst out laughing, although up to now her laughter had only been following suit.

"Look at my father's face. Please, please," she begged, and she was laughing so much she had to hold her sides to keep from shaking the whole table.

"That girl is a born actress," Samuel said, happy to be able to give free rein to his admiration because up to then he'd had some misgivings about offending Honora, having noticed that her merriment had been somewhat more subdued than that of his family.

Now he could let himself go and enjoy this extraordinarily exciting young woman who unbelievably - thanks to that dry stick Theobald - was about to become one of them.

Samuel ventured a good look at Flora. This he had avoided doing previously, as it didn't seem generous to do so with Honora present. And he was surprised at a boyish quality about her, because unconsciously, and perhaps because of her name, his first impression had been of quite extravagant girlishness. In fact before he'd met her at all, from the first instant he'd heard the name Flora, it had brought a vision to his mind of a nymph in a misty white dress, with bare feet and cloudy yellow hair, who in a flowering meadow skipped about, gathering flower heads and entwining them in a garland. It was a bit of a shock to see she was wearing a trim black suit and that her small black shoes had buckles, not bows. There was just one thing about her that was flowery though: her perfume. Honora never wore perfume. Samuel wished she would. It was captivating.

Captivating was the word; all the Beckers were captivated. Flora was not in their midst more than a few minutes before they had all succumbed to her charm. As Ernest expressed it afterwards when he and Julia were going home, there was only one thing that bothered him and that was to think that such a fascinating person should be tying herself up to a bore like Theobald.

"He is a bore, Julia, you know, with all his theories and principles." "He has put them into practice, though," Julia said, "you must admit that. I'll confess something now, Ernest: it was always my belief he'd make a fool of himself in the long run. People who are too particular always do. I felt certain he'd make a disastrous marriage. I really did."

Ernest would have liked to confess that he too had often thought the same, but at that moment he felt so well disposed towards his young brother that he hedged.

"Theobald hasn't made many mistakes in his day," he said.

"That's what I mean!" Julia cried. "It's that kind of person who makes the worst mistake of all in the end."

But Ernest wasn't listening. He was thinking about his brother. So there had been something behind his nonsense. He wasn't such a blower after all. Ernest felt subdued. He wondered if Flora had money? The jewellery she was wearing must have cost something. He tried to recall it in greater detail, but as he did he got confused. Had she jewellery on at all? He was puzzled. It didn't seem possible that someone as observant as he prided himself on being could be

one can't see a significant detail. First it was so perplexed his wife had to repeat it twice before she got his attention.

'What is the matter with you, Ernest? Aren't you deaf? I said her fake photographs are the dearest thing I've seen in years.'

'Oh yes, she's certainly only a bit of an actress.'

'More than a bit, I'd say!' Julia replied, but there was something in the tone of her voice that made Ernest look at her out of the corner of his eye.

'What do you mean by that?'

'Oh nothing,' Julia said lightly. 'Only I thought once or twice that she carried it just a bit too far. I'd say she doesn't believe in hiding her light under a bushel. And quite honestly, I thought she went into the realm of absurdity altogether when we were saying good-bye on the steps.'

'Why? I didn't notice.'

'Oh, you really have heard what she said to James? He was shaking hands with her with a deadly straight face, she said she'd let him have the proofs of the photographs as soon as ever she had them developed.'

But in spite of the small trace of consensuousness with which she had started to make the incident, Julia couldn't help laughing herself at the recollection. 'James's face was a scream,' she said, 'and that was it all! When James got her moaning at last and started to laugh, she really carried the thing to extremes. She put on an injured air, as if her dignity had been offended, and took Theobald's arm and went off down the steps without another word. Oh, it was really funny. I don't believe one person in ten thousand would have been able to go away like that without dropping the pretence at some point.'

'There is no doubt about it,' Ernest said. 'Theobald is right. There is a touch of genius about her. Now that you mention it, I think I did notice that she was carrying the thing a bit far at the end of the evening. I saw her pretending to pack up her photographic equipment, and when Theobald gave her his arm, she made as if she was changing it to her other hand. As a matter of fact Theobald didn't twig it at all; he still slow sometimes in spite of his high opinion of himself. I saw the joke immediately. And I let her see I did. "Why don't you let Theobald carry it for you?" I said, and went as if to assist her myself. "That's all right," she said. "I can manage." And she smiled. Good lord, that smile!'

'Oh, she's something now in our lives and no mistake,' Julia said, but seeing that they had reached their own street and were approaching their own door, she waited until Ernest had turned the key and admitted them before she gave him a little jab.

'I still can't help thinking it's a pity Theobald has had the

satisfaction of knowing he's done so much better for himself than the rest of you.'

This just about expressed the reaction of all the Beckers. Not one of them but could see the distinction and talents possessed by his intended, yet not one but felt that in the long run these would only add to his conceit.

'Never mind though. Their wedding would be the next thing. They had that to look forward to anyway. When would it be?'

The wedding would take place quite soon. Flora didn't believe in long engagements, it seemed, a fact which might have elicited some cynical remarks were it not that the family all agreed. Theobald wasn't half good enough for her, and the quicker he made sure of her the better.

James kept his head, though, and pointed out that family protocol demanded that Samuel's wedding be first. He glanced at Flora's hand; Theobald had not got the engagement ring yet.

But, it appeared, that was another thing Flora didn't believe in - engagement rings. And this the Becker women found completely baffling.

'She says the feel of a ring on her finger makes her fidgety,' Charlotte reported.

'She'll have to wear a wedding ring, won't she?' Julia said.

'I wouldn't be too sure of that either,' Charlotte said. 'I heard her saying they look dowdy.'

Charlotte and Julia looked down at their own thick bands of gold, guarded by big solitaires set in massive claws. They used to be so proud of them, but now at every minute they found their notions of things suffering a jolt. And soon the jolting was as good as continuous.

First of all Theobald broke it to them that he was not going to buy a house. He and Flora were going to live in apartments. It now appeared Flora could not saddle herself with a house. She was at that particular time engaged in bringing out her book of poems, and she had a responsibility to her publisher. Afterwards they might consider the possibility of a house; but not until afterwards.

'That may be all very well now,' James said, 'but it could be awkward later on.'

The others nodded. They knew what he meant.

'Although, mind you, I wouldn't be surprised -' Henrietta said, beginning to say something, but stopping. She had recollected the presence among them of Honoria, who although only one month married might take offence. Afterwards she had a private word with Charlotte.

'Of course,' she said to Charlotte, 'it would not matter so much in

Flora's case, she is sought in other directions. And I don't believe Theobald would mind as much as another man - he'd have such a lot of compensations.

Flora's gifts were indeed many. A few weeks before the wedding her book of poems came out, and although frankly the Beckers were unable to understand two words of it, their pride in her was even greater than Theobald's. Samuel was particularly pleased. He made it his business to go down to the club every day to see if there were any reviews of the book.

'She should have had "Illustrated," he maintained every time the book was mentioned. 'She should bring out an illustrated edition.'

Samuel in fact went one further than them all at times in his admiration for her, and actually took a censorious attitude towards poor Theobald. 'That fellow doesn't realize a man has responsibilities towards a woman like Flora,' he muttered. 'He should take her around more. There was an exhibition of modern paintings last week in Charleville House. I read about it in the paper. But I bet Theobald knew nothing about it. I hope she didn't have to go without an escort, because I'm sure it's the kind of thing she wouldn't want to miss.'

And there and then he promised himself that when she was his sister-in-law, he'd make a point of remedying Theobald's deficiencies in such matters. He was beginning to suspect that Theobald, for all his talk, did not really have a very deep feeling for the Arts. He, Samuel, might not understand a great deal about art, and with one thing and another he hadn't had much time for it, but he intended to do something about it. And now, with the added security of Honoria's dowry he might even venture to buy a few pictures; start a small private collection perhaps. If bought wisely, pictures could be a profitable investment he'd heard. And in this sphere Flora's advice would probably be invaluable. He'd make a start at once; go to a few galleries, make a few enquiries. If Flora were with him he'd feel safe. Yes, they'd make a few tentative expeditions.

The prospect of entering the realm of art in the company of Flora was a particularly pleasant one for Samuel just then, because he would soon be temporarily deprived of Honoria's company. A few weeks after Henrietta's careful regard for her feelings on a certain subject, Honoria had given evidence that such tact was superfluous. But he must not let his enthusiasm run away with him. The proprieties had to be considered. Oh well! The wedding was just around the corner.

Meanwhile there was no question of the wedding presents.

Presents were a main concern with the Beckers. Every occasion for

making an exchange of gifts was eagerly seized on by them, weddings of course being the best occasions of all. The giving and receiving of presents had always been a way of expressing emotions which nervous reticence made it impossible to express in any other way. Presents were a silent symbol of their family solidarity. They spoke loud to the Beckers, and in a language they understood. Thus, when the James Beckers went to visit the Ernest Beckers it always gave them a feeling of family unity to drink coffee after dinner from the Crown Derby service they themselves had given the couple on their wedding day. The Ernest Beckers in turn felt something identical when having spent an evening with James and Charlotte, they were obliged to acquaint themselves with the time by consulting the big ormolu clock of which they were the donors on a recent anniversary of the marriage of their host and hostess. And both the James Beckers and the Ernest Beckers found it pleasurable, when visiting Henrietta and Robert, to be given tea from an old Georgian silver service, the tray of which had been the gift of one and the service itself of the other, both bought separately, as it happened, but matching exactly due to the tact and intelligence of the very reliable antique dealer from whom the Beckers had bought all their furniture, porcelain and silver since time began.

The Becker men, and Henrietta, of course, had grown up in an aura of good sound taste, and it hadn't taken the Becker wives long to learn from them. It hadn't taken them long to profit by good example and to realize the stigma that attached itself to the brand-new furniture that in their single state they used to admire in the shop windows of Grafton Street. Just exactly what the stigma was they were not certain, but nevertheless they weren't long in resolving at all costs to avoid having it attach itself to anything belonging to them. They rapidly reduced their disturbing new knowledge to the working formula that nothing was worth buying that was less than a hundred years old.

It was therefore the biggest jolt of all for the Becker wives to learn that Flora had other ideas about furniture and decoration. Flora, or so she declared, would not tolerate anything in her home that wasn't as fresh as paint. They were not only startled; they were dumbfounded. This was clearly not another case of their own former ignorance, when they had been unable to distinguish between the merely old and the antique and had contemptuously classed both as second-hand. Not that they often dwelt on those days. Sometimes, however, they had to entertain friends from those early days, friends who had made less fortunate marriages - and who were inclined to voice surprise that they, the Becker wives, having

married mood, and not have newer furniture, and then, smugly, Julia and Charlotte would put those people right. And if they failed to convince their friends they convinced themselves by thinking to what zenith their own taste had soared.

Yet here was Flora making positively heretical statements, not only about tables and chairs, but about glass and table ware and even jewelry, and with her it was clear they were up against something different from their own early lack of knowledge. There was more behind her prejudice than there had been behind their former ignorance, no matter what the surface similarities. It was most bewildering, and a disturbing thought entered their minds — was there perhaps another world more esoteric even than the world of antiques? A world of which they yet knew nothing? Oh, but how willing and eager they were to learn!

Flora had a phrase and they grasped at it: *The antiques of tomorrow*. That was what the new bride intended to have in her apartment, and for weeks prior to the wedding her conversation abounded in the names of joiners and cabinet makers, designers, brass-workers and handlers, of gold leaf, craftsmen of whom neither James nor Ernest had ever heard, living in streets not even Robert knew existed, peculiar lines, dead ends, and back alleys. It was odd. It was distracting. And although the James Beccers and Henrietta and Robert had made valiant efforts to catch and memorize the names of some of these obscure craftsmen, and track them down to their haunts, they found it exceedingly hard to believe that any value could be set upon the shapeless and colourless articles they were seriously offering for sale.

Samuel was the only one with an ounce of real courage, and one day he instructed Flora not to hesitate any longer, but go out and buy, as their present for Flora, a large canvas on which there was inscribed a name he had definitely heard Flora mention, although, apart from the signature, there was nothing else intelligible to him on the canvas.

After Samuel had purchased the painting and Flora had been quite pleased with it, some of the others took courage. Ernest and Julia bought a matching, and Henrietta a most uncomfortable modern chair. But they never got the same feeling of pride in these presents that they formerly used to get buying things for each other. They could not feel either that they would get the same pleasure when dining with the Theobalds that they got when dining with each other, or — to say the feeling of pride in their own selective judgment. There would be little or nothing of themselves in their gifts, and they had had no fun in buying them. Of course they had

to allow that they might not see very much of these presents after they left their hands, because they might not be very prominently displayed by the Theobalds, or even displayed at all. Not that they would resent this, recognizing that the fault could be in themselves: they might not have really mastered all the nuances of the new brand of good taste.

In consequence Flora became vested with still greater charm. Only Samuel claimed to come anywhere near understanding her. He had in fact confided to Henrietta that in some ways he had a greater affinity with her than Theobald. And when he was requested to be the best man at their wedding, he felt it was a tribute to this affinity and that Flora was behind the request.

'My height is about right, I dare say,' he said deprecatingly when talking to James. 'I expect they have to look into that kind of thing at a large fashionable wedding where there will be newsmen galore and photographers.'

'Will there be a lot of photographers?' James asked. He really was stupid at times, Samuel thought, in spite of his business capabilities.

'Don't you know there will!' Samuel said curtly, 'with a bride like that!'

'I suppose you're right,' James said, and he began to feel nervous at the prospect of such publicity. But his nervousness was quickly superseded by a feeling of family pride. Theobald's acquisition of Flora was the best thing that had happened to the Beckers for a long time.

Everywhere she went Flora attracted attention. Shades of the days when Theobald had sighed over the nonentity of his family! Now, wherever they went — that is to say if Flora was with them — they were followed at every step by glances of admiration or curiosity. And if they happened to take a meal out in a public restaurant, which they did not do so often nowadays, far from worrying Theobald by staring around the room, it was almost absurd the way the Beckers fastened their eyes on Flora and kept them on her. They certainly had a common focus now, as indeed did everyone in the room. The funny part of it was that it began to look as if in this regard Theobald could have had too much of a good thing. To the amusement of his brothers and sister it seemed at times that he rather wished he could hide Flora's light under a bushel.

'I think he's jealous,' Flora herself said jokingly in his hearing to Samuel the day she and Theobald came home from their honeymoon, when he and some of the others called at the apartment to pay their respects to the happy pair.

'That is absurd,' Theobald replied, disclaiming such unworthy

motives. He'd only been trying to put some small curb on a wife who didn't really seem to know when to stop. It wasn't everyone who could appreciate her high-flying talk and antics. At the hotel where they'd been staying when they came away she had been unique. To the other guests her energy, her fire, her undiminishable vitality had made her seem like someone from another planet. Her wit, her sallies, her word-pictures had left them breathless. As for her impersonations, these had left everyone, including himself, exhausted.

'You have no idea, Flora, the effect you had upon those people,' he said, trying to sound a little crossly to her because it really had been embarrassing. 'He turned to the others. "She was like a flame playing over them incessantly, withering the life out of them."

'A flame?' Flora had heard him. 'Oh, how lovely!' she cried. She ran over and gave him a kiss. 'That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me, Theobald.' She closed her eyes and a trail smile played over her face, a reflection perhaps of some inward thought that caused her also to sway slightly from side to side and then, after a minute, to tremble.

Watching her Samuel saw that she had begun to glow, to grow more vivid and more vital. Under the influence of the compliment she seemed to vibrate as if a strange new force ran through her. The flesh and blood Flora had vanished, and where her feet had rested a flame struggled in the air.

But that was absurd, he thought. He was getting over-imaginative and he would have been a bit worried about himself only Theobald just then got very cross with her.

'I know what you're up to, Flora. Stop it,' Theobald said. 'See! She's at it again,' he said, turning to Samuel. 'Trying to imagine what it's like to be a flame!'

Samuel sighed with relief. It had not been his imagination then. He was greatly reassured and pleased, too. It just showed how alive he was to Flora's moods. No longer alarmed, he looked at her appraisingly. It was good to see why Theobald was so put out. What a dull dog he was!

It was this way all the time at the hotel. Theobald said 'You'd only be mentioning something and Flora would start to personify it.' He took her arm and shook it rather violently. 'Stop it, Flora.'

As if drenched with cold water, the flame that was Flora died down. Theobald looked ridiculously relieved. He laughed uncomfortably. 'I wish you wouldn't encourage her, Samuel,' he said, because Samuel was complimenting her.

'You have a great job, my dear,' his brother was saying as he pressed her hand.

'Now, Theobald! Do you hear that?' Flora cried. She turned confidently to Samuel. 'I wish Theobald had your appreciation of things. Why! he was even annoyed with my little green dragon.'

In spite of himself Theobald had to laugh at her this time. He didn't approve greatly, but there was something irresistible about the casual, intimate way Flora spoke of these imaginative creations of hers.

'What green dragon? Is this something new?' Samuel asked.

'A green dragon?' At the other end of the room Henrietta had overheard and given a little fictitious scream as she hurried over to them. 'What are you talking about?' she cried, and in a minute everyone was clamouring for an explanation.

The green dragon was evidently one of Flora's most successful performances, and the one she had put on most frequently at the hotel. The affair of the photography on the first day they met her had been impromptu, but the green dragon was apparently part of a steady repertoire.

'Oh, do it for us. Do it! Please, Flora,' several of her new relatives cried, speaking all together.

'I don't do it,' Flora said. 'I so it.'

They did not understand.

'It's really very clever,' Theobald was settling. 'I have to admit that. It's absurd of her to say I was annoyed about it. It was only that I thought she put on the act too often. And that strangers wouldn't understand anyway. They were a dull lot on the whole in that hotel!'

Samuel appealed to his new sister-in-law.

'I beg you, Flora, please remove the imputed stigma that we are no better than that dull lot. May we please see the green dragon?'

Theobald nodded his consent. He even tried to make it easier for his family to enter into the spirit of the thing.

'It's quite a simple trick, basically,' he explained. 'Flora just stands up and looks in front of her and claims she sees it - sitting on the table or on a chair - anywhere in fact. That's all there is to it, but the way she stares at it you'd swear it was there. Her way of looking at it is so convincing. And she puts on such a comical expression.'

'Oh, it sounds most amusing,' Henrietta said. 'Please, Flora, please.'

'Please what?' Flora asked, and truly her expression was masterly at that moment. No one could have been more serious. That was the core of her genius: that she could keep her face straight when everyone else was doubled up with laughter. They were all sure that she was going to oblige with the entertainment. There was a look of expectancy on every face.

But Theobald, who was able to read Flora's face a little better now

than before they were married, saw an obscurity in it that the others didn't see. For a moment he had the feeling that he used to have years earlier, when Henrietta was a girl - a big awkward girl - who when asked to play on the piano used to wear away the whole evening with wailing or refusals that were part vanity, part hysteria. There wasn't time to be that kind of stupid scene now, was there? He looked steadily at his wife. But he'd misjudged her. Turning suddenly he looked around at one of the small gilt chairs that were so fragile the Beckers were afraid to sit on them, and then at the curious marble table that they found so hard to consider suitable for a meal, and when finally she looked at Henrietta it was with the faintest trace of contempt.

'I'm sorry I can't give it to you,' she said. 'I don't see it anywhere. It must have gone to the garden.'

Each regushines, but at the same time, such a graceful way to refuse. It was almost as good as putting on the act. Everyone was looking around the room, and Samuel stepped over to the window and looked out. The green dragon's absence was almost as positive as his presence would have been. Theobald saw that his family could almost afford the little creature. All his own pride in Flora came back. He did not mind how she showed off in the bosom of the family. And this wasn't just showing off. She had handled the situation very well. If he hadn't felt like performing and she'd got out of it with tact - that of course was the reason her little charades were always so successful; she did not attempt them unless she felt the temptation of an inspiration, or whatever you fancied calling it.

Then, as if to compensate her husband and just as the others were taking their leave and were about to go, the wives secure in their warm wraps and furs, and Ernest with their mufflers already round their necks, Flora, who had come to the door with Theobald to see them off, poured suddenly out of the open doorway into the dark street.

'Ah, there he is!' cried. 'I'm glad he's come back before you left, see him?'

'See who?' some of the slower ones asked, staring out.

'The green dragon, of course - who else?' Flora said, affecting impudence as she sat down and held out her arms. 'Come here, my pet,' she said, and he made a feint of catching something that had, as it were, floated through the air at her bidding and was now coiled against her.

'Well, isn't that the most amazing thing you could see in a month of Sundays?' James said. 'You'd swear she had something in her arms.'

'Isn't he a darling?' Flora said. 'Look! He likes me to tickle him behind his ear.'

'Oh please, please, Flora.' The Becker Ladies begged for mercy. They had already laughed so much they couldn't bear to watch any more. But Flora went on. It was exactly - oh but exactly - as if she had a little animal in her arms - cuddling it and talking to it and tickling it, in much the same way that they themselves - some of them anyway - Robert perhaps - might play with a kitten or puppy; except - and this was important - except that Flora's fingers moved delicately, guardedly, as if her pet had some prohibitive quality, such as a scaly skin.

'Genius. Sheer genius,' Samuel said.

Even James rose to the occasion with another rare flash of wit.

'Take him inside, my dear,' he said. 'Good night, good night. We'll find our way ourselves. Don't stand out here in the night air. The little fellow might catch cold.'

The little fellow! He meant the little dragon. James had never been known to make such a good joke. It showed how he responded to his new sister-in-law.

There was a further peal of laughter, and shaking with merriment the women had difficulty finding their feet on the steps. Theobald stared after them. Had the Beckers ever before laughed out loud like that in the street? A change had certainly come over them. And this was only the beginning. With Flora around, new and surprising things would be happening every hour.

Some days, with no more than a few hours' warning, the Theobald Beckers would invite the whole family to join them at the theatre, and all because Flora, when she went out to buy fish, had booked a whole row of seats for the theatre, and it would take every available Becker to fill them if Theobald's money was not to be thrown upon the waters.

Another time it would be a picnic in the country. Theobald would have to make a hurried round of calls to gather the James Beckers or the Ernests or the Samuels or Henrietta and Robert to fill the seats on a side-car that Flora had seen outside the Shelbourne Hotel and couldn't resist hiring. And if any of them felt it made them too remarkable to be seen sitting up on an old-fashioned vehicle, no matter, the next week it could be a char-a-banc. Forward in time or back in time, it made no difference to Flora as long as she could escape from the tedium and boredom of the present, just as it didn't matter to her whether it was Henrietta or Honora she was impersonating as long as she stripped out of her own personality and became another being. When this desire for change came over her nothing was allowed to come between her and making the change. Often in

the middle of a sentence, a word, she had been kissing her feet and turning a picture face to the wall.

'I could have held it a single minute longer,' she'd explain. In her own mind it didn't matter so much, of course, but Julia felt it was going a little far when she did it in Charlotte's eye-water colour which, as a matter of fact, Julia herself had given to James and Charlotte. Another day it was a vase to which she took exception and put out of sight.

'It may be a little affectation,' Charlotte said, when she and Julia were discussing the matter later.

'That's not a crime,' Julia said. She was still the only one of the Beckers who had not completely capitulated to Flora's charm.

'Julia is just as if you ask me,' Honoria said to Charlotte when Charlotte took her about Julia's attitude. 'One's just plain jealous because Flora has got such good taste. I think Flora was quite right about the vase. It was hideous,' she added, feeling no disrespect in speaking her mind about the vase because it was she who had given it to Charlotte. 'As a matter of fact,' she went on, loosing around her own lavishly furnished drawing-room. 'I'm always nervous when her eye falls on those china dogs my aunt gave me.' She stood up, moved heavily over to the mantelpiece and took down the dogs. Holding them out from her, as if they had the mange, she rang the bell for the servant.

'Throw them out, please,' she said to the astonished maid, 'and this too,' she added as an afterthought, reaching up and taking down a water-colour that was over the mantelpiece. 'And if I were you, Charlotte,' she said, 'I'd take your condition into consideration and get rid of them. I had James gave you last year. It can't be good for you at present to have to stare it in the face - well, to have to stare at it anyway - every time you sit down in your own drawing-room.'

'But what could I do with it?' Charlotte asked, although after seeing Honoria's treatment of the china dogs she could guess what her sister-in-law could say. Honoria did not go in for short measures.

Honoria's vandalism was of course a lot easier to take than Julia's and Charlotte's, neither of whom had brought a penny of dowry into the family, one when they too began to throw things out their husbands would have been critical. The only good that could be said for taking such drastic steps was that they were influenced by Flora. That and the fact that their rooms looked unquestionably better without the old things. Into all their homes, as into their lives, more air had come, more colour, more light. Even Henrietta made changes, and Charlotte finally did throw out the Buddha, or rather she gave it to the washerwoman.

Charlotte's washerwoman was what was called a 'character'. She was one of the people that Flora could imitate to the life. If there was a dull moment in a conversation, or even a lull, Flora was liable to say something in a voice utterly unlike her own.

'Charlotte's washerwoman!' four or five people would shout out at once, as if it was a guessing game. There was never any need to tell them who was being impersonated, yet Flora's appearance hadn't altered in any way. Of course there were times when she took more trouble, pulled her hair over her face and dragged her clothes half off to make herself look disorderly. When she did that you'd swear it was the washerwoman, she even looked like her.

Flora really enjoyed impersonating people but she liked them to recognize at once who it was she was representing. And it was surprising how irritable she could become if anyone guessed wrongly.

'No! How could you be so stupid!' she said crossly to poor James one evening when he took her to be doing Henrietta. 'I'm Charlotte,' she said. 'Are you blind? Didn't you see me bending when I came in the door?' For Charlotte being unusually tall had a nervous tendency to dip her head when she came through the doorway although there was no danger of hitting her head in her own home where the rooms were spacious and high-ceilinged.

'But you weren't Charlotte when you were coming into the room!' James said a bit argumentatively, Samuel thought, because looking at Flora now anyone could see she was holding herself exactly like Charlotte.

Flora herself gave James a deadly look.

'Charlotte I was born,' she said, 'and Charlotte I will remain!'

There was a peal of laughter at this which James did not quite understand, not having been of the company on the previous evening when, in answer to a suggestion from Flora that she should call herself Lottie, Charlotte had taken umbrage, and uttered almost the same words in identically that tone.

'Charlotte I was born and Charlotte I will remain until I die!' Flora was Charlotte to the life.

There were, however, times when Flora's impersonations were a bit too subtle for anyone to guess. These were times when avoiding the obvious landmarks of voice and gesture, she ventured into the interpretation of some inner characteristic, some quality normally hidden in the other person. There were even times when regardless of an audience, almost it seemed indifferent to one, undesirous of one, for some purely creative satisfaction she could be observed trying to project herself into another person. That, Samuel thought, was the mark of the real artist. He had caught her at this on a

number of occasions. He'd see her stare at someone, and then after a minute her lovely, alive eyes would elter and fill with curiosity, a curiosity which would grow stronger, would make her eyes deeper and their light more inward. It was really awe-inspiring then to see how her whole face would change, and her eyes would lose their lustre, their vivacity, their depth, but above all, their luminous glow and take on instead an actual physical resemblance to the eyes of the person at whom Flora had been staring. He had seen in a lovely eyes grow narrow, and the lids come down obliquely as into them crept the chilly, supercilious expression that was habitual to Julia. He had seen them empty of all depth and stare outward with the naive and childish expression of Honoria. He had seen them become so cold and shallow they seemed to have changed colour like the sea over sand, and he knew Flora was being Theobald.

It was becoming Samuel's biggest pleasure to watch his new sister-in-law in the act of departing from her own body and entering that of someone else. But he was careful to guard her secret for her, and even when he saw the transformation coming, he'd bend one part of himself to the task of diverting the attention of the family, while the other part of him he'd give over to furtively watching her and sharing in her adventure. Only when he was in doubt as to who she was taking off, would he venture to intrude his curiosity upon her. He'd go up to her then, quietly, and bending down understandingly, he'd whisper a name in her ear.

'Charlotte?'

If he was right Flora would look up and smile. If he was wrong - but this rarely happened - although she was not able to conceal her annoyance, she never failed to make a witty answer, correcting his error in some original or comical way.

'What's the matter with you?' she would ask. 'Are you blind? That's Charlotte over there!'

Samuel, however, was seldom wrong. Even when one evening in the very act of raising a glass of claret to her lips at a small party given in a restaurant by the Ernest Beckers, he saw Flora pause and look into her glass for a second before she drank, in that instant, although there had been neither word nor gesture to fasten upon, he knew Flora had become Theobald - Theobald arresting the flow of his consciousness, becoming aware of himself, trying to catch himself as it were, in the act of living. That evening Samuel could not forbear leaning across the table to her.

'Theobald?' he whispered.

For a moment Flora seemed startled. Then she nodded, but curtly, and at once for some reason - possibly to cover embarrassment - she

answered out loud, and her voice was impatient. 'What do you want?' she said.

Samuel was always very understanding. He made allowances. She was probably afraid the others would discover her secret game. He resolved not to intrude on her in that way again. And when a few days later he did, it was only under the compulsion of unbearable curiosity, because not for the world would he want to forfeit her friendship. He was becoming more and more dependent on it, particularly of late, because Honoria, although in no way noticeable yet, had already taken to staying home in the evenings and having Charlotte or Henrietta come over to sit with her. Very considerably she refused to keep Samuel tied to the house. One or two nights a week at least she insisted he go out, and if it weren't for having Theobald and Flora, where would he spend those evenings? Certainly not with James or Ernest. And to put oneself voluntarily into Robert's company would, of course, have been ludicrous. So to Flora's he went, every evening Honoria could spare him.

Then came one particular evening. Samuel had had dinner at home, but after dinner walked over to the Theobald Beckers to spend a short while with them before retiring. It was a summer evening and the lamps were not lit when the servant admitted him. The master, she said, was dining at the club that evening, but the mistress was in the drawing-room. Would she announce him, or would he go in to her?

Samuel went across the hall and opened the dining room door. For a moment he thought there was no one at all in the room. It was only faintly lit by the paling daylight and the furniture had begun to confound itself with its own long shadows on the wall. Beyond the window the trees in the garden were still visible. Samuel was staring at the black branches when he saw Flora.

She was standing by the side of the window, leaning back against the white woodwork to which her back was closely pressed, her shoulder blades drawn downward, and her face tilted upward more than usual. She seemed to be staring through the upper panes of the glass, and when he moved nearer, Samuel saw the thin spikes of the first stars. She was like the bowsprit of an ancient ship, he thought, and as sightless - at any rate sightless so far as he was concerned. She was unaware of him until he came close - or so it seemed, although he did not think it possible she had not heard him when he first entered. But then, when he'd come close and seen the rigidity of her body and the intensity of her expression, he was paralysed with embarrassment. He did not dare to break in upon her, but stood silent too, afraid to breathe. He felt as if he was in the presence

of someone he had never known, and he began to tremble and his face to twitch in a way it had not done for a long time.

This was not Theobald's wife. This was someone else. But who? It was someone Samuel had never seen before. He pulled himself together. It was, of course, quite possible that it was some former acquaintance of his. Or it could even be some person who did not exist at all except in her imagination, someone who borrowed life from her as characters in a book borrow life from their creator. If novelists and dramatists could invent people, well then, why not Flora? She must imitate, he thought. A play perhaps? She must! She must! She must! Nothing more than speaking it, he whispered the question that tormented him.

"Who is it?" he whispered. "Who are you now?"

First Theobald's wife shuddered. Then she turned, and her eyes were sad and wistful. Samuel felt a catch at his heart. Was there something wrong? But her voice was normal enough when she spoke.

"Why Samuel? What a strange thing to ask! I'm Flora, of course who else?"

"Who else indeed? Who else would have made such an answer?"

Yes, it was Flora—but if ever a person was caught in the act of self-impersonation, that person was Theobald's wife, for in that tense, motionless gaze which a moment before had been unaware of his presence, he realized that Flora had concentrated her whole personality. And the essence of that personality was so salt-bitter that a salt-sadness came into his heart too.

"I understand," he said quickly. "I won't intrude." Turning away swiftly he went out of the house.

Yet, the next evening Flora was as gay as ever. If possible she was more hilarious, in higher spirits, and more irrepressible than they'd ever seen her. Except for Julia, the Beckers were all enthralled.

"Irresponsible just what I'd call her, not just irrepressible," Julia said when during the course of the evening Flora had twice mimicked Theobald when he was out of the room. "If he ever finds out he'll never forgive her."

"Oh, he won't find out," Charlotte said. "She'd hate to have missed that particular bit. It was the one she enjoyed the best of the lot. It was so very amusing," she said, laughing again at the thought of it. "She only stood with her back to us but there was something about her that would make you swear she was Theobald."

"All the same," he carped, "I think it is disloyal of her, and what is more, I think some of her other impersonations are coarse."

"Coarse? Julia!" Charlotte was astonished at the viciousness of the accusation.

"Well," Julia said, determined to be even more explicit, "I suppose I oughtn't to mind as long as Honoria herself doesn't seem to care."

"Oh that! Charlotte was relieved and she laughed again. It was, perhaps, a bit coarse, but at the same time it was comical to watch a little scrap of a thing like Flora imitating—and with such success—a big lump like Honoria, particularly in view of Honoria's increased size. "Anyway, Honoria enjoys it as much as any of us," she said, defending Flora further. Charlotte, being the most insipid of the Beckers except for her height, had up to then been relatively safe from Flora's mimicry, and so, next after Samuel, she had the keenest appreciation of it. But it was true that Honoria took the imitations in surprisingly good part, considering how often she was the victim.

In fact, where, at the beginning of her relationship with the Beckers, Flora had been continually calling upon them to witness that she was now Henrietta, now Charlotte, now James, now Julia, now Ernest, and now perhaps one of the servants, or a tradesman with whom they were all familiar, of late she had confined herself to making Honoria the butt of her humour. She had merely to smile in a certain way, or go up to Samuel and pick a bit of fluff off his sleeve, or do no more than take out her handkerchief and blow her nose, and everybody screamed.

"Look at Honoria! they'd cry.

Once or twice Flora carried things so far as to answer for the real Honoria when Samuel came into the room and called his wife.

"I'm here, Samuel," she said. "What do you want?" And once when Honoria answered at the same time, Flora was so funny, so amusing. She turned on the real Honoria and gave her a chilling look, calling her Flora.

"Please, Flora," she said. "Please give up these childish impersonations." As if it was Honoria who had been pretending!

It was side-splitting.

And in spite of Julia's misgivings, when summer came and at Flora's instigation the Beckers made a big family party and rented a villa on the coast, it was enlivening for them all in the monotony of their rural surroundings to have her with them, up to her pranks and antics.

"I realize all that," Julia said, when this was pointed out to her, "but I still say she shouldn't pick on Honoria. If I were you, Samuel, I'd put an end to it quick, now that Honoria is so near to her time."

"Oh but surely," Charlotte interrupted, and she was about to say that Flora would have too great a delicacy to continue making fun of Honoria much longer, until at that very moment she saw Theobald's wife going over to Samuel, and she was walking with a most peculiar gait. Julia saw her too.

'It's disgusting!' Julia cried. 'What are I tell you! It's disgusting to be called "the Honoria"!' 'Honoria?' 'For too baby, too!'

At the time that her name might have become somewhat derogatory, the fourth time for Charlotte - she felt they could be supposed to be hostile to her Honoria who was pregnant for the first time. 'I'm going to put a stop to it at once,' she said, and she went straight over to Flora. 'Look here, Flora, what do you think you're doing?' she asked in a harsh tone.

But Flora answered so sweetly Julia was momentarily disarmed. 'Please don't call me by the wrong name, Julia,' Flora said sweetly. 'Can't you see it's not Flora? I'm Honoria. How can you mix us up, particularly now?'

In spite of herself Samuel chuckled. Julia turned on him. 'What is wrong with you?' she cried. 'Why do you think it so funny? Then she shrugged her shoulders. 'If that's the attitude you intend to take, I may as well mind my own business.'

It was on the tip of Samuel's tongue to say 'Please do!' but instead he said 'Oh!' and turned to the rest of the company.

'How about some music, ladies?' he asked, and only after he'd spoken did he realize how rarely it was they played the piano since Flora had been playing them with her diverting ways. 'Well, how about some music,' he repeated, although he was surprised at his deprecation because Julia was the musician of the family, and his suggestion might appease her. But before Julia had time to lift the piano lid Flora had snatched at the suggestion and converted it to her own use.

'I'll play,' she said, still speaking with the voice of Honoria. 'I'll play the tune Samuel likes best!' she cried, and the next minute she was seated on the piano stool playing the only tune that Honoria's memory had managed to retain from all the long and expensive music lessons that had formed the largest part of her education.

Flora played Honoria's tune. She played it and replayed it. And she might as well have been Honoria, so faithfully did she reproduce all the little details of the wrist, turns of the waist and nods of the head by which Honoria had learned to make up for the deficiencies of her musical talent.

'Well?' Charlotte whispered to Henrietta. 'That seems harmless enough.'

'Do you think so?' Julia missed, cutting in on them. 'Well, if you think that, please look at the way she is sitting on the piano stool.'

True enough, Flora was sitting peculiarly. Charlotte and Henrietta both had to admit there was something awlward about it. She was sitting at least a foot further away from the keyboard than was either necessary or normal.

'It's disgusting! I've said so before,' Julia said. 'I'll say it again.' She glanced around her to make sure the women were alone. 'I hope the men don't notice,' she said. 'It's making a mockery of motherhood.' And having glanced pertinently at the waist-line of the other two, she indicated her own loosely slung garments. 'It's all due to jealousy, I hope you realize that. Flora is jealous of all of us, but particularly of Honoria because they were married so nearly the same time.'

Whatever malice underlay these words however miscarried of its effect because both Charlotte and Henrietta suffered a sudden suffusion of pity for Theobald's poor little bride.

'Oh, poor, poor Flora,' they cried, and both together they looked in her direction. 'Perhaps -?' they began eagerly, but Flora's waist was as slim as ever, and her figure gave a complete denial to their kindly hopes for her. Julia hadn't bothered to look at Flora at all.

'Quite the contrary,' she said, then she lowered her voice. 'And if I'm any judge of these things, that will be the fly in Theobald's ointment.'

'Oh!' Charlotte exclaimed. 'You don't think so, really, do you? It would be such a pity.' Her thoughts raced to the nursery upstairs where her big pale baby lay sucking its thumb. 'Why, I've heard of dozens of cases where there was no sign of anything for much, much longer than this, and yet there was success before the end!'

But two days later, it was Charlotte herself who had to bring up the subject again.

'Are you sure, Julia?' she asked. 'Are you sure there couldn't be some possibility of mistake in what you said yesterday?'

'Why?' Julia said coldly.

'Because,' Charlotte said, 'I couldn't help noticing how she acted at supper last night.' No need now to name names. 'She used to love pickled onions, you know that? Well, last night she didn't have any. Wouldn't touch them in fact! And it was the same with the apple sauce. She used to love that too. I couldn't help thinking it odd after what you were saying because I myself couldn't bear anything with the slightest flavour of onion in it when I was expecting, and I couldn't touch apple sauce. It used to give me the most appalling heartburn. But that wasn't all. During supper - the whole time in fact - she sat - well she sat a foot out from the table just like when she was playing the piano. It may be that the thing has got on my nerves, but as well as everything else, I thought she was walking queerly after supper when she and I went for a short stroll in the garden. The stroll was at her suggestion, mind you, which I thought odd - and here's another thing! - I hope you won't think me coarse to mention it, but I couldn't help noticing that she never buttons her

68 The Becker Wives

time, not possible anyway, she let it hang out loosely from her nose like an earflap is that, do you think?"

"Why do you think?" Julia asked. But she was only leading Charlotte on a tall.

"Well," Charlotte said, "I was wondering if there was any possibility that you could be wrong, and that she might be going to have a baby after all."

This was what Julia had anticipated, and she was ready for it.

"In that case," she said acidly, "isn't it odd that it's thinner Flora is getting, not fatter?"

For a moment Charlotte was defeated. Then she came to the fore again. "Some women do get thin in the early stages."

"Is that so?" Julia was more than doubtful. Then tell me, in a case like that does the woman have to sit a full foot out from the table? Does she have to wear her coat unbuttoned? And above all, does she have to walk like Flora walks?" For Flora had certainly taken to a most peculiar gait. "No," said Julia, answering her own questions so emphatically that Charlotte was silenced. "I tell you, I'm tired of your talk of impersonations. It's not impersonation. It's mockery. Flora is making a mockery out of poor defenceless Honoria."

"Oh for people's sake, Julia," Charlotte cried. "Are you losing your senses or your honour? Anyway, if what you say is true, why would Flora be doing it when she's alone?"

"What on earth do you mean, Charlotte?"

Julia's start! Hook made Charlotte falter.

"Well, I was at going to mention it," she said, "but the evening before we came down here, I called in to Theobald's with a message from James, and I was shown into the drawing-room, and for an instant I thought I was alone there until suddenly I saw there was someone else there after all. Oh, Julia, I know it sounds a bit daft - the lamps weren't lit - but for a minute I was positive it was Honoria. I nearly said the name. But it was Flora. She was walking up and down her own drawing-room floor, and if you only saw the way her hips were swaying. Why, even Samuel would have been forgiven if he mistook her for his wife. And when the maid had carried in the lamps and after I knew it was Flora, I still couldn't take my eyes off her, because I could still have sworn she was twice the size she'd appeared when I first came in the door. I've often heard of optical illusions - but I never thought I'd experience one!"

Julia said nothing for a minute.

"It seems to me," she said then slowly, "that we are all experiencing them these days. Ernest was saying only this morning that James had commented on the resemblance between Flora and Honoria.

resemblance! Did you ever hear anything more absurd?"

"It does seem a bit absurd, doesn't it?" Charlotte said. "On the other hand, I must say I did think once or twice that Flora was beginning to have a look of Honoria. I'm interested to hear James noticed it. I wonder if any of the others did?"

When discreet enquiries were made in the course of that same afternoon, Henrietta too thought she had noticed a slight resemblance.

"I thought it was only my imagination," she declared, "and I didn't like to mention it to anyone in case it might be put down to my condition. I'd hate anyone to think I was getting nervy or hysterical, or beginning to get fancies."

That, however, was just exactly what was happening to all the Beckers, and especially to the Becker wives.

"It's all Flora's fault," Julia said.

"Isn't it strange, though, that Honoria doesn't appear to notice?" Charlotte said.

"Oh, that's part of her nature," Henrietta said, "but all the same it's my belief she's more upset than we think. I came across her by surprise the other day and I could have sworn she had been crying."

"Crying?" The other two women started up in matronly concern.

"A fit of crying would be the worst thing in the world for her at the present time. It could be the cause of anything!" With this far from lucid statement Julia stood up. "I'm going to speak to Samuel again," she said.

Charlotte felt her knees tremble. Samuel was Flora's stoutest champion. She'd have thought it would be more difficult to approach him than Theobald, and to approach Theobald of course was unthinkable.

Samuel, however, was no match for Julia. When he tried to pooh-pooh her complaints, she went for him with fire in her eyes.

"Samuel Becker," she cried, "are you going to put Flora before Honoria? I'm telling you that for some reason or other, Theobald's wife is deliberately trying to make your wife look ridiculous, and what is more, Honoria is beginning to notice."

Samuel's face was white and drawn. He made one last effort to evade the issue.

"It's not deliberate," he said speaking lowly. "If Flora is giving offence I am certain she is unconscious of it."

So he was willing to admit offence was given. Julia relaxed somewhat.

"Consciously or unconsciously," she said, "it has got to stop, and stop immediately. Today! Did you know that Honoria has been

having fits of crying lately? And what do you think is the cause of that? Alsw'e all, may I ask what effect you suppose this state of mind will have on your unborn child?

Samuel's face went white.

Where is Flora now? he asked. 'I'll speak to her.'

Flora was not far away. She was in the breakfast room sitting by the window, sewing. As a matter of fact Charlotte and Julia thought Samuel could hardly have gone farther than the end of the passage when he was there again, but they knew at once by his face that something had happened.

'What's the matter?' Charlotte cried. Then a sudden inexplicable fear came over her and she shouted for James.

'James, James!' he called, relieved to remember that he was sitting on a garden seat just under the open window, reading in the sunshine.

'What in heaven's name do you want, Charlotte?' James said, starting up and leaning in across the window-sill, but instantly he too felt there was something wrong. 'Ernest! Robert!' he cried, seeing the two men walking along a gravel path to one side of the villa. Then, without waiting to go around to the door, stiff as he was, he put his leg over the window ledge and joined the women at once. 'Oh, you're here too, Samuel,' he said with relief.

But whatever had upset Samuel he was now turning at the fuss that was being made. 'What is the matter with you people?' He turned to Julia. 'I only wanted to speak to you, Julia,' he said. 'I don't understand what is the meaning of this commotion? Yet when Ernest and Robert hurried in he couldn't help deriving some comfort from the proximity of so many Beckers. 'There's nothing wrong,' he said. 'I only wanted to have a word with Julia - or Charlotte - or Henrietta.' He hesitated. 'I wanted one of them to step to the door of the other room with me. He hesitated again. 'It's Flora.'

Charlotte put her hand to her heart. 'Is there something the matter with her?' she cried.

'Oh no - at least I don't think so,' Samuel said, 'but I was a bit worried because she didn't answer when I spoke to her. She was sewing, and when I called her she just went on drawing the needle in and out and didn't even turn her head.'

'She didn't hear me, that's all,' James said, with an elderly frown. He'd given his knee a knock on the window ledge. It was vexatious. 'Was it to tell us she was deaf you brought us in from the sunshine? I thought the place was on fire.' He was turning to go out again when Samuel put out his hand and laid it on his older brother's arm.

'Wait a minute, James. The odd thing is that I know she heard

me. He turned back to the women, they were more understanding. 'I know she did. I called her by name, not once, but twice or three times, and yet she went on sewing. And the last time I called she was putting the thread between her teeth to break it, and I could see by the way she paused that she was listening. Then, ignoring me, she bit the thread and broke it and bent her head again.'

It wasn't much - but it was decidedly odd.

'What is she sewing anyway?' James asked suddenly. 'She's at it all the time.'

'Oh, for goodness' sake, James,' Charlotte said, 'what does it matter what she's sewing? It was so like James to fasten on something trivial. She turned back to Samuel. 'Why didn't you go over to her?'

It was only after Samuel answered that they all began to feel anxious.

'I thought one of you women should do that,' he said. 'That's why I came back for one of you.' He looked at Julia. 'I thought you might be best, Julia.'

'Me?' In spite of being the most aggressive earlier on in her assertions that something ought to be done, Julia was most reluctant to put herself forward now. 'Will you come with me, Charlotte?'

'I will of course,' Charlotte said readily enough, but she made a sign to the men. 'Please stay near at hand,' she said. Then she addressed herself to Samuel in particular, and her voice was very kind. 'We'll leave the door open,' she said, 'and you can stand outside and listen.'

'But be quiet,' Julia warned, because James was still inclined to protest that they were making a fuss about nothing. 'Where is Theobald?' they could hear him ask. 'Why isn't he here? Why didn't someone fetch him along? If there's anything wrong it's his business more than it's ours.'

Afterwards everyone remembered what James had said, but they all felt it was fortunate that Theobald was not there. For Flora gave Julia and Charlotte a very different reception from the one she had given Samuel. Being prepared for similar treatment, they were paralysed with fright when she sprang to her feet the instant they called her name. They'd only called once, and as casually as possible.

'Flora?' they'd said timidly. 'Flora?'

But the name had hardly left their lips when Flora sprang up. Lithe as a cat, she swung herself around, and gripped the back of the chair in which she had been sitting. Her sewing had fallen to the floor. Her eyes were blazing.

'What is the matter with you all?' she demanded. 'Have you gone

mad? Why are you coming in here and calling me names? And then, as if it was - or in some way divided - that the rest of the family was also too, huddled together outside the door, she shook her fist in their direction. Julia and Charlotte drew together, and didn't advance any further. Tell me this, Julia Becker, or you, Charlotte Becker!" Flora cried. "Is it a joke? Because, if it is, you'd better stop it at once. You must know by now that one thing I detest is being called names."

"But I never called you names, Flora," Julia cried.

"None of us did, Flora," Charlotte said.

They seemed to have only made things worse, however. Flora's face became convulsed.

"There you go again," she cried, and she nodded towards the hallway where the others were rooted to the ground. With her long thin finger she pointed out through the window that looked on the garden. "As for that one," she said, "that wretched creature out there if someone doesn't stop her from driving me mad, I won't answer for what will become of her!"

They looked

Out in the sun, on a stone bench, not too far from the house but just beyond compass of what had gone on within it, Julia saw that Honoria was taking her mid-day rest with her eyes shut and a newspaper over her face to keep her skin from getting too red.

Sensing that behind her the others had come close, Julia called out to them.

"You'd better come in altogether," she said.

Flora swung around. "Yes, come in. All of you," she cried. "Let's have this out. And make her come in too," she added, nodding back over her shoulder to indicate the figure at the end of the garden.

James was the first to enter the room.

"Now, now," he said placatingly, "there's no need to disturb Honoria. If we have had some little disturbance among ourselves, there is no need to drag poor Honoria into it. It's best for her to be kept as quiet as possible under the circumstances."

Something in James's words seemed to rattle Flora into another ungovernable fury. There was moisture gathering on her forehead and more alarmingly at the corners of her mouth -

"Honoria?" she asked. "Under the circumstances? So you are all playing the same game." She caught at the neck of her dress and tore it open. "Very well. I warned you. I won't stand it. It was bad enough when it was only her that was tormenting me" - she pointed again at the unsuspecting Honoria. "I pretended not to take any notice. But if you're all at it, I can't stand it. I can't and I won't!" She

clapped her hands over her ears, and tears sprang into her eyes.

"But what are we doing?" Charlotte cried. "We don't know what you're talking about, Flora!"

"Flora! Flora! Flora!" The girl was almost beside herself. "You do want to drive me mad. You do! You do!" Her eyes ran over the faces one by one, and then she scanned them all as a group in a wild sweeping glance. "It's a shame for you!" she said. "You ought at least to consider my condition!"

From where he stood at the back of the group, looking down at the carpet, Samuel started violently and looked up.

"Yes - a shame," Flora repeated. "If people only knew how I'm treated! She wrung her hands. "Oh, how terrible - I have no one to help me." Suddenly she placed her hands on her small flat abdomen. "It's not myself I'm thinking about - it's the child!"

At that the Beckers, all except Charlotte, went rigid. Charlotte laughed hysterically.

"Oh, it's only an impersonation," she shrieked, but even as she spoke her blood ran cold. Flora's tears had dried as quickly as they'd rushed forth.

"If it's only an impersonation," she cried, "then it's time an end was put to it!" She ran over to the window. "Look at her now. Look at the brazen creature! At this very moment she's out there making a mockery of me. Oh, how can she do it? How can she be so coarse? How can you all see her at it day after day and not be revolted? Don't you notice the way she sits at the table? Don't you notice the way she wears her clothes, not fastening the buttons? Suddenly she stooped and picked up the piece of material she had been sewing. "She even went to my work-basket and took out this and pretended it was hers."

The frightened gaze of the Becker women fell on a small white flannel chemise that was only half-finished. But as she held it up the sight of it made Flora wail. "I wouldn't mind if she were a normal woman," she cried, "a woman that might have a child of her own some day, but look at her, with her hips like a scissors, and her chest like a cardboard doll! She'll never have a child. It's just that she's jealous; jealous of me. That's what it is!"

For one moment Flora's face became radiant, glorified, and then the light died out and it was once more haggard and harassed and aged-looking. "Oh, I can't stand it," she said in a voice that was now small and whimpering. She put her hand up to her head as if it ached. "She's got me so confused." Then, as if she was taking them into her confidence, she tried to steady her voice. "I'm fighting against it," she told them. "See! Tumbling among the laces on the

front of her. "Gress she pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. When she says something to put me astray I look at this paper. It has my name written on it. Oh, I won't let her get the better of me. She won't drive me mad!"

Urgently, frantically, she pushed the paper into James's hand, then before he had time to uncrumple it, she pulled it back and showed it into another hand and then into another and another. But all any of them could see was a blur of wretchedly bad handwriting. Snatching it back she stuffed it back into her bosom. And now the look on her face was crafty.

"You see, I'm able for her," she said. "I'm able for all of you." She spread out her fingers and again placed them over her boyish body. "I have to look after my child," she said. And it was the change in her voice that was hardest to bear: it had become wondrously gentle again.

"Oh my dear!" Charlotte said, muffled her cry with her handkerchief. Next minute she was sobbing convulsively and James had to call on Samuel and Ernest.

"Get her out of here quick," he ordered.

Flora, however, had not understood it was Charlotte he meant.

"Get who out of here?" she screamed, starting up like a hare. "No one is going to lay a hand on me!"

"Hush, hush, he wasn't talking about you, my dear," Samuel said, and he endeavored to take her hand.

"Are you out?" Flora's eyes filled first with suspicion and then with fear, and finally with something else, indefinable to the Beckers. They stared at their brother Samuel, who had pushed James aside and seemed to have taken over command of the situation. Flora too recognized that Samuel had put himself in authority. She caught at his lapels. That's what she wants, you know - to have me sent away. She let go the front of his jacket and seizing his hands she clutched them so that the skin went thin on her knuckles and the bone showed through. "You'll help me, won't you?" she pleaded. "You're the only one I trust. You won't let her drive me mad, will you, like she's been driven mad herself. That's it, you see. No one knows but me and I didn't tell anyone before now. But I knew it all the time. She's mad. Mad! She was really always mad. Her family was mad - all of them. Her father died in a madhouse. She can't tell that to Theobald, I bet? She didn't tell it to any of you. But she found out and that's why she had this set against me. She wants to make me mad too. But she won't. None of you will. You can keep on calling me Flora all you like. Flora! Go on! Call it to me, Flora! Flora! I won't listen. I'll stick my fingers in my

ears so I won't hear." With a wild distracted gesture Theobald's wife pulled her hands away from Samuel's again and went to stick her fingers in her ears, but halfway through the gesture her hands dropped to her sides. "Where is my piece of paper?" she cried and again she fumbled and found it once more. "As long as I have my name written down on this bit of paper no one will succeed in getting me mixed up," she said. Then, having stared at the piece of paper and soundlessly moved her lips two or three times as if memorizing something, she stowed it away again, and rammed her fingers into her ears as far as they'd go.

"She'll pierce her ear-drums," James said. And as if Flora had gone out of the room the Beckers' tongues were loosened.

"What happened to her?" That was what they all wanted to know. But Samuel raised his hand and it looked as if he'd scourge them. "Oh, you fools!" he yelled. "Get out of here, all of you. Leave this to me." There was such a look on his face that Robert was already backing out of the room.

"Are you sure it's all right for you to stay alone with her?" James asked from the doorway.

"Oh, James, what do you mean?" Charlotte cried. "You don't mean - ?" But she didn't dare finish the sentence.

James's meaning was made clear, however, before the door shut. They saw Samuel put his arm around Flora's thin shoulders, and his words sent a chill through their hearts.

"Hush, Honora. Hush, hush," Samuel was saying. To Flora!

"Please, Honora - please hush!"

Then the door shut them out.

"Oh God in heaven," Charlotte said, and burst into tears again.

"What on earth will we do with her?" Julia asked.

"How was it we didn't find this out before now? That was what puzzled Henrietta.

"I kept telling you all that something was wrong," Julia said, "but none of you wanted to believe me."

"What good would it have done if we had listened to you?" Henrietta said tartly. "Sooner or later - what difference does it make - the disgrace is the same."

"Disgrace? Oh, how can you speak about it like that?" Charlotte stopped crying out loud but tears ran silently down her face. "How can you use such a word. It's all so terribly sad."

"And there's Theobald to think about!" James said suddenly. "What about him? Where is he? When will he be back? And who is going to break this to him?" But knowing it would probably be up to him to do it, he sank down on a chair in the hall and began to mop

his forehead with the handkerchief out of his breast pocket that was normally only for show. 'This is only the beginning,' he said.

But even in the room with Flora this was not what Samuel was thinking. He held her hands tightly in his, and tried to keep her calm by focusing himself to her delusion, calling her Honoria over and over again. It was all over. That's what Samuel was thinking.

'Hush, Honoria. Hush, hush,' he said. They would have to send for Theobald. They would have to get a doctor and make arrangements to have her taken away somewhere - for a time at least - to try and restore the balance of her poor jangled mind. It might not be for ever, or even so very long, but all the same Samuel knew that the terrible, terrible sadness that had settled on his heart would lie upon it for ever.

It was all over the fun and the gaiety. Their brief journey into another world had been rudely cut short. They had merely glimpsed from afar a strange and exciting vista, but they had established no foothold in that far place. And the bright, enchanting creature that had opened that vista to them had been but a flitting spirit never meant to mix with the likes of them.

Across Flora's shoulder he looked out the window into the garden. The children of Charlotte and Julia and Henrietta had come back from a walk with their nanny and were playing under a tree; a heavy set little girl and two stodgy boys. And on the grass Charlotte's fat cat sat sucking its thumb. Beckers to the bone, all of them. And the child that his wife Honoria was carrying would be like them, as like as peas in a pea-pod.

His eyes came back to rest on Flora. The tempest of her passion had died down.

'You'll be all right in a little while, my dear. Try to rest. Try to forget everything. Rest on me -' he paused - 'rest on me, Honoria.'

But when Flora's sobbing finally ceased and, exhausted, she rested against him, her weight was so slight he started. It was as if she had begun to dissolve once more into the wraith-like creature of light that had first flashed on them all in its airy brilliance on the night of his own betrothal party: a spirit which they in their presumption had come to regard - so erroneously - as one of themselves, just another of the Becker wives, like Julia or Charlotte, or the real Honoria.

A Single Lady

Apart from anything else he wasn't that kind of man; the reverse indeed, distant, cool in his manner. And as for his manner towards the servants, in her mother's time at least he used to treat them as if they were made of wood; as if they had no feelings whatever. Latterly, of course, things had changed so much that they both had to alter their attitude towards them. And when it came to having only the one wretched creature for all the drudgery of the great barrack of a house, there had been times when she herself had felt it necessary to be familiar. But even then, even when she had made concession after concession, it was a long time before he unbent to any degree. Was it any wonder, then, that she discredited people's hints and insinuations. At least in the beginning! What daughter in the world would have given any credence to them. And yet the remarks continued to be made.

Oh, but it all seemed so unreal, so impossible. At his age! Why! If he had any inclinations of that sort he could have satisfied them long ago in a manner compatible with his position. There had been nothing in the past fourteen years to prevent him from remarrying if he wished to do so. Up to quite recently he had kept his appearance fairly well, and with that and his first wife's fortune he stood a fairly good chance of marrying some person of suitability. Even five years ago he cut a passable figure. But this! This! Who could blame her for having refused credence to this! Her father - and a common servant! If she were even that! but a wretched little slut. Yes! What was the use of denying it. Had she not, right from the start, been repulsed at the idea of having to have such a poor type of creature in the house. Isabel shuddered. Hadn't she been disgusted by the food? Hadn't she been afraid to look too closely at anything the creature handled? And as for the creature's room, in spite of the fact that she knew it was her duty to do so, she had never once gone into it. She knew so well what it would be like, smelly and close, the windows never opened, and the bedclothes bundled about like rags. A servant indeed. Too good a word for her!

To think that she, Isabel, was responsible for bringing the creature