

Why They Married

By Mrs. Belloc Lowndes

“God doeth all things well, though by what strange, solemn, and murderous contrivances.”

I

John Coxeter was sitting with his back to the engine in a first-class carriage in the Paris-Boulogne night train. Not only Englishman, but Englishman of a peculiarly definite class, that of the London civil servant, was written all over his spare, still active figure.

It was late September, and the rush homewards had begun; so Coxeter, being a man of precise and careful habit, had reserved a corner seat. Then, just before the train had started, a certain Mrs. Archdale, a young widowed lady with whom he was acquainted, had come up to him on the Paris platform, and to her he had given up his seat.

Coxeter had willingly made the little sacrifice of his personal comfort, but he had felt annoyed when Mrs. Archdale in her turn had yielded the corner place with foolish altruism to a French lad exchanging vociferous farewells with his parents. When the train started the boy did not give the seat back to the courteous Englishwoman to whom it belonged, and Coxeter, more vexed by the matter than it was worth, would have liked to punch the boy's head.

And yet, as he now looked straight before him, sitting upright in the carriage which was rocking and jolting as only a French railway carriage can rock and jolt, he realized that he himself had gained by the lad's lack of honesty. By having thus given away something which did not belong to her, Mrs. Archdale was now seated, if uncomfortably hemmed in and encompassed on each side, just opposite to Coxeter himself.

Coxeter was well aware that to stare at a woman is the height of bad breeding, but unconsciously he drew a great distinction between what is good taste to do when one is being observed, and that which one does when no one can catch one doing it. Without making the slightest effort, in fact by looking straight before him, Nan Archdale fell into his direct line of vision, and he allowed his eyes to rest on her with an unwilling sense that there was nothing in the world he had rather they rested on. Her appearance pleased his fastidious, rather old-fashioned taste. Mrs. Archdale was wearing a long grey cloak. On her head was poised a dark hat trimmed with Mercury wings; it rested lightly on the pale golden hair which formed so agreeable a contrast to her deep blue eyes.

Coxeter did not believe in luck; the word which means so much to many men had no place in his vocabulary, or even in his imagination. But, still, the sudden appearance of Mrs. Archdale in the great Paris station had been an agreeable surprise, one of those incidents which, just because of their unexpectedness, make a man feel not only pleased with himself, but at one with the world.

Before Mrs. Archdale had come up to the carriage door at which he was standing, several things had contributed to put Coxeter in an ill-humour.

It had seemed to his critical British phlegm that he was surrounded, immersed against his will, in floods of emotion. Among his fellow travellers the French element predominated. Heavens! how they talked—jabbered would be the better word—laughed and cried! How they hugged and embraced one another! Coxeter thanked God he was an Englishman.

His feeling of bored disgust was intensified by the conduct of a long-nosed, sallow man, who had put his luggage into the same carriage as that where Coxeter's seat had been reserved.

Strange how the peculiar characteristics common to the Jewish race survive, whatever be the accident of nationality. This man also was saying good-bye, his wife being a dark, thin, eager-looking woman of a very common French type. Coxeter looked at them critically, he wondered idly if the woman was Jewish too. On the whole he thought not. She was half crying, half laughing, her hands now clasping her husband's arm, now travelling, with a gesture of tenderness, up to his fleshy face, while he seemed to tolerate rather than respond to her endearments and extravagant terms of affection. "*Adieu, mon petit homme adoré!*" she finally exclaimed, just as the tickets were being examined, and to Coxeter's surprise the adored one answered in a very English voice, albeit the utterance was slightly thick, "There, there! That'll do, my dear girl. It's only for a fortnight after all."

Coxeter felt a pang of sincere pity for the poor fellow; a cad, no doubt—but an English cad, cursed with an emotional French wife!

Then his attention had been most happily diverted by the unexpected appearance of Mrs. Archdale. She had come up behind him very quietly, and he had heard her speak before actually seeing her. "Mr. Coxeter, are you going back to England, or have you only come to see someone off?"

Not even then had Coxeter—to use a phrase which he himself would not have used, for he avoided the use of slang—"given himself away." Over his lantern-shaped face, across his thin, determined mouth, there had still lingered a trace of the supercilious smile with which he had been looking round him. And, as he had helped Mrs. Archdale into the compartment, as he indicated to her the comfortable seat he had reserved for himself, not even she—noted though she was for her powers of sympathy and understanding—had divined the delicious tremor, the curious state of mingled joy and discomfort into which her sudden presence had thrown the man whom she had greeted a little doubtfully, by no means sure that he would welcome her companionship on a long journey.

And, indeed, in spite of the effect she produced upon him, in spite of the fact that she was the only human being who had ever had, or was ever likely to have, the power of making him feel humble, not quite satisfied with himself—Coxeter disapproved of Mrs. Archdale. At the present moment he disapproved of her rather more than usual, for if she meant to give up that corner seat, why had she not so arranged as to sit by him? Instead, she was now talking to the French boy who occupied what should have been her seat.

But Nan Archdale, as all her friends called her, was always like that. Coxeter never saw her, never met her at the houses to which he went simply in order that he might meet her, without wondering why she wasted so much of the time she might have spent in talking to him, and above all in listening to him, in talking and listening to other people.

Four years ago, not long after their first acquaintance, he had made her an offer of marriage, impelled by something which had appeared at the time quite outside himself and his usual wise, ponderate view of life. He had been relieved, as well as keenly hurt, when she had refused him.

Everything that concerned himself appeared to John Coxeter of such moment and importance that at the time it had seemed incredible that Nan Archdale would be able to keep to herself the peculiar honour which had befallen her,—one, by the way, which Coxeter had never seriously thought of conferring on any other woman. But as time went on he became aware that she had actually kept the secret which was not hers to betray, and, emboldened by the knowledge that she alone knew of his humiliating bondship, he had again, after a certain interval, written and asked

her if she would marry him. Again she had refused, in a kind, impersonal little note, and this last time she had gone so far as to declare that in this matter she really knew far better than he did himself what was good for him, and once more something deep in his heart had said "Amen."

When he thought about it, and he went on thinking about it more than was quite agreeable for his own comfort or peace of mind, Coxeter would tell himself, with what he believed to be a vicarious pang of regret, that Mrs. Archdale had made a sad mistake as regarded her own interest. He felt sure she was not fit to live alone; he knew she ought to be surrounded by the kind of care and protection which only a husband can properly bestow on a woman. He, Coxeter, would have known how to detach her from the unsuitable people by whom she was always surrounded.

Nan Archdale, and Coxeter was much concerned that it was so, had an instinctive attraction for those poor souls who lead forlorn hopes, and of whom—they being unsuccessful in their fine endeavours—the world never hears. She also had a strange patience and tenderness for those ne'er-do-wells of whom even the kindest grow weary after a time. Nan had a mass of queer friends, old protégés for whom she worked unceasingly in a curious, detached fashion, which was quite her own, and utterly apart from any of the myriad philanthropic societies with which the world she lived in, and to which she belonged by birth, interests its prosperous and intelligent leisure.

It was characteristic that Nan's liking for John Coxeter often took the form of asking him to help these queer, unsatisfactory people. Why, even in this last week, while he had been in Paris, he had come into close relation with one of Mrs. Archdale's "odd-come-shorts." This time the man was an inventor, and of all unpractical and useless things he had patented an appliance for saving life at sea!

Nan Archdale had given the man a note to Coxeter, and it was characteristic of the latter that, while resenting what Mrs. Archdale had done, he had been at some pains when in Paris to see the man in question. The invention-as Coxeter had of course known would be the case—was a ridiculous affair, but for Nan's sake he had agreed to submit it to the Admiralty expert whose business it is to consider and pronounce on such futile things. The queer little model which its maker believed would in time supersede the life-belts now carried on every British ship, had but one merit, it was small and portable: at the present moment it lay curled up, looking like a cross between a serpent's cast skin and a child's spent balloon, in Coxeter's portmanteau. Even while he had accepted the parcel with a coolly civil word of thanks, he had mentally composed the letter with which he would ultimately dash the poor inventor's hopes.

To-night, however, sitting opposite to her, he felt glad that he had been to see the man, and he looked forward to telling her about it. Scarcely consciously to himself, it always made Coxeter glad to feel that he had given Nan pleasure, even pleasure of which he disapproved.

And yet how widely apart were these two people's sympathies and interests! Putting Nan aside, John Coxeter was only concerned with two things in life—his work at the Treasury and himself—and people only interested him in relation to these two major problems of existence. Nan Archdale was a citizen of the world—a freewoman of that dear kingdom of romance which still contains so many fragrant byways and sunny oases for those who have the will to find them. But for her freedom of this kingdom she would have been a very sad woman, oppressed by the griefs and sorrows of that other world to which she also belonged, for Nan's human circle was ever widening, and in her strange heart there seemed always room for those whom others rejected and despised.

She had the power no human being had ever had—that of making John Coxeter jealous. This was the harder to bear inasmuch as he was well aware that jealousy is a very ridiculous human failing, and one with which he had no sympathy or understanding when it affected—as it sometimes did—his acquaintances and colleagues. Fortunately for himself, he was not retrospectively jealous—jealous that is of the dead man of whom certain people belonging to his and to Nan’s circle sometimes spoke of as “poor Jim Archdale.” Coxeter knew vaguely that Archdale had been a bad lot, though never actually unkind to his wife; nay, more, during the short time their married life had lasted, Archdale, it seemed, had to a certain extent reformed.

Although he was unconscious of it, John Coxeter was a very material human being, and this no doubt was why this woman had so compelling an attraction for him; for Nan Archdale appeared to be all spirit, and that in spite of her eager, sympathetic concern in the lives which circled about hers.

And yet? Yet there was certainly a strong, unspoken link between them, this man and woman who had so little in common the one with the other. They met often, if only because they both lived in Marylebone, that most conventional quarter of old Georgian London, she in Wimpole Street, he in a flat in Wigmore Street. She always was glad to see him, and seemed a little sorry when he left her. Coxeter was one of the rare human beings to whom Nan ever spoke of herself and of her own concerns. But, in spite of that curious kindness, she did not do what so many people who knew John Coxeter instinctively did—ask his advice, and, what was, of course, more seldom done—take it. In fact he had sometimes angrily told himself that Nan attached no weight to his opinion, and as time had gone on he had almost given up offering her unsought advice.

John Coxeter attached great importance to health. He realized that a perfect physical condition is a great possession, and he took considerable pains to keep himself what he called “fit.” Now Mrs. Archdale was recklessly imprudent concerning her health, the health, that is, which was of so great a value to him, her friend. She took her meals at such odd times; she did not seem to mind, hardly to know, what she ate and drank!

Of the many strange things Coxeter had known her to do, by far the strangest, and one which he could scarcely think of without an inward tremor, had happened only a few months ago.

Nan had been with an ailing friend, and the ailing friend’s only son, in the Highlands, and this friend, a foolish woman,—when recalling the matter Coxeter never omitted to call this lady a foolish woman—on sending her boy back to school, had given him what she had thought to be a dose of medicine out of the wrong bottle, a bottle marked “Poison.” Nothing could be done, for the boy had started on his long railway journey south before the mistake had been discovered, and even Coxeter, when hearing the story told, had realized that had he been there he would have been sorry, really sorry, for the foolish mother.

But Nan’s sympathy—and on this point Coxeter always dwelt with a special sense of injury—had taken a practical shape. She had poured out a similar dose from the bottle marked “Poison” and had calmly drunk it, observing as she did so, “I don’t believe it is poison in the real sense of the word, but at any rate we shall soon be able to find out exactly what is happening to Dick.”

Nothing, or at least nothing but a bad headache, had followed, and so far had Nan been justified of her folly. But to Coxeter it was terrible to think of what might have happened, and he had not shared in any degree the mingled amusement and admiration which the story, as told afterwards by the culpable mother, had drawn forth. In fact, so deeply had he felt about it that he had not trusted himself to speak of the matter to Mrs. Archdale.

But Mrs. Archdale was not only reckless of her health; she was also reckless—perhaps uncaring would be the truer word—of something which John Coxeter supposed every nice woman

to value even more than her health or appearance, that is the curiously intangible, and yet so easily frayed, human vesture termed reputation.

To John Coxeter the women of his own class, if worthy, that is, of consideration and respect, went clad in a delicate robe of ermine, and the thought that this ermine should have even a shade cast on its fairness was most repugnant to him. Now Nan Archdale was not as careful in this matter of keeping her ermine unspoiled and delicately white as she ought to have been, and this was the stranger inasmuch as even Coxeter realized that there was about his friend a Una-like quality which made her unafraid, because unsuspecting, of evil.

Another of the cardinal points of Coxeter's carefully thought-out philosophy of life was that in this world no woman can touch pitch without being defiled. And yet on one occasion, at least, the woman who now sat opposite to him had proved the falsity of this view. Nan Archdale, apparently indifferent to the opinion of those who wished her well, had allowed herself to be closely associated with one of those unfortunate members of her own sex who, at certain intervals in the history of the civilized world, become heroines of a drama of which each act takes place in the Law Courts. Of these dramas every whispered word, every piece of "business"—to pursue the analogy to its logical end—is overheard and visualized not by thousands but by millions,—in fact by all those of an age to read a newspaper.

Had the woman in the case been Mrs. Archdale's sister, Coxeter with a groan would have admitted that she owed her a duty, though a duty which he would fain have had her shirk or rather delegate to another. But this woman was no sister, not even a friend, simply an old acquaintance known to Nan, 'tis true, over many years. Nan had done what she had done, had taken her in and sheltered her, going to the Court with her every day, simply because there seemed absolutely no one else willing to do it.

When he had first heard of what Mrs. Archdale was undertaking to do, Coxeter had been so dismayed that he had felt called upon to expostulate with her.

Very few words had passed between them. "Is it possible," he had asked, "that you think her innocent? That you believe her own story?"

To this Mrs. Archdale had answered with some distress, "I don't know, I haven't thought about it—As she says she is—I hope she is. If she's not, I'd rather not know it."

It had been a confused utterance, and somehow she had made him feel sorry that he had said anything. Afterwards, to his surprise and unwilling relief, he discovered that Mrs. Archdale had not suffered in reputation as he had expected her to do. But it made him feel, more than ever, that she needed a strong, wise man to take care of her, and to keep her out of the mischief into which her unfortunate good-nature—that was the way Coxeter phrased it to himself—was so apt to lead her.

It was just after this incident that he had again asked her to marry him, and that she had again refused him. But it was since then that he had become really her friend.

At last Mrs. Archdale turned away, or else the French boy had come to an end of his eloquence. Perhaps she would now lean a little forward and speak to him—the friend whom she had not seen for some weeks and whom she had seemed so sincerely glad to see half an hour ago? But no; she remained silent, her face full of thought.

Coxeter leant back; as a rule he never read in a train, for he was aware that it is injurious to the eyesight to do so. But to-night he suddenly told himself that after all he might just as well look at the English paper he had bought at the station. He might at least see what sort of crossing they were going to have to-night. Not that he minded for himself. He was a good sailor and always

stayed on deck whatever the weather, but he hoped it would be smooth for Mrs. Archdale's sake. It was so unpleasant for a lady to have a rough passage.

Again, before opening the paper, he glanced across at her. She did not look strong; that air of delicacy, combined as it was with perfect health—for Mrs. Archdale was never ill—was one of the things that made her attractive to John Coxeter. When he was with a woman, he liked to feel that he was taking care of her, and that she was more or less dependent on his good offices. Somehow or other he always felt this concerning Nan Archdale, and that even when she was doing something of which he disapproved and which he would fain have prevented her doing.

Coxeter turned round so that the light should fall on the page at which he had opened his newspaper, which, it need hardly be said, was the *Morning Post*. Presently there came to him the murmuring of two voices, Mrs. Archdale's clear, low utterances, and another's, guttural and full.

Ah! then he had been right; the fellow sitting there, on Nan's other side, was a Jew: probably something financial, connected with the Stock Exchange. Coxeter of the Treasury looked at the man he took to be a financier with considerable contempt. Coxeter prided himself on his knowledge of human beings,—or rather of men, for even his self-satisfaction did not go so far as to make him suppose that he entirely understood women; there had been a time when he had thought so, but that was a long while ago.

He began reading his newspaper. There was a most interesting article on education. After having glanced at this, he studied more carefully various little items of social news which reminded him that he had been away from London for some weeks. Then, as he read on, the conversation between Nan Archdale and the man next to her became more audible to him. All the other people in the carriage were French, and so first one, and then the other, window had been closed.

His ears had grown accustomed to the muffled, thundering sounds caused by the train, and gradually he became aware that Nan Archdale was receiving some singular confidences from the man with whom she was now speaking. The fellow was actually unrolling before her the whole of his not very interesting life, and by degrees Coxeter began rather to overhear than to listen consciously to what was being said.

The Jew, though English by birth, now lived in France. As a young man he had failed in business in London, and then he had made a fresh start abroad, apparently impelled thereto by his great affection for his mother. The Jewish race, so Coxeter reminded himself, are admirable in every relation of private life, and it was apparently in order that his mother might not have to alter her style of living that the person on whom Mrs. Archdale was now fixing her attention had finally accepted a post in a Paris house of business—no, not financial, something connected with the sweetmeat trade.

Coxeter gathered that the speaker had at last saved enough money to make a start for himself, and that now he was very prosperous. He spoke of what he had done with legitimate pride, and when describing the struggle he had gone through, the fellow used a very odd expression, "It wasn't all jam!" he said. Now he was in a big way of business, going over to London every three months, partly in connection with his work, partly to see his old mother.

Behind his newspaper Coxeter told himself that it was amazing any human being should tell so much of his private concerns to a stranger. Even more amazing was it that a refined, rather peculiar, woman like Nan Archdale should care to listen to such a commonplace story. But listening she was, saying a word here and there, asking, too, very quaint, practical questions concerning the sweetmeat trade. Why, even Coxeter became interested in spite of himself, for the

Jew was an intelligent man, and as he talked on Coxeter learned with surprise that there is a romantic and exciting side even to making sweets.

“What a pity it is,” he heard Nan say at last in her low, even voice, “that you can’t now come back to England and settle down there. Surely it would make your mother much happier, and you don’t seem to like Paris so very much?”

“That is true,” said the man, “but—well, unluckily there’s an obstacle to my doing that—”

Coxeter looked up from his paper. The stranger’s face had become troubled, pre-occupied, and his eyes were fixed, or so Coxeter fancied them to be, on Nan Archdale’s left hand, the slender bare hand on which the only ring was her wedding ring.

Coxeter once more returned to his paper, but for some minutes he made no attempt to follow the dancing lines of print.

“I trust you won’t be offended if I ask whether you are, or are not, a married lady?” The sweetmeat man’s voice had a curious note of shamed interrogation threading itself through the words.

Coxeter felt surprised and rather shocked. This was what came of allowing oneself to become familiar with an underbred stranger! But Nan had apparently not so taken the impertinent question, for, “I am a widow,” Coxeter heard her answer gently, in a voice that had no touch of offence in it.

And then, after a few moments, staring with frowning eyes at the spread-out sheet of newspaper before him, Coxeter, with increasing distaste and revolt, became aware that Mrs. Archdale was now receiving very untoward confidences—confidences which Coxeter had always imagined were never made save under the unspoken seal of secrecy by one man to another. This objectionable stranger was telling Nan Archdale the story of the woman who had seen him off at the station, and whose absurd phrase, “*Adieu, mon petit homme adoré,*” had rung so unpleasantly in his, Coxeter’s, ears.

The eavesdropper was well aware that such stories are among the everyday occurrences of life, but his knowledge was largely theoretical; John Coxeter was not the sort of man to whom other men are willing to confide their shames, sorrows, or even successes in a field of which the aftermath is generally bitter.

In as far as such a tale can be told with decent ambiguity it was so told by this man of whose refinement Coxeter had formed so poor an opinion, but still the fact that he was telling it remained—and it was a fact which to such a man as Coxeter constituted an outrage on the decencies of life.

Mrs. Archdale, by her foolish good-nature, had placed herself in such a position as to be consulted in a case of conscience concerning a Jewish tradesman and his light o’ love, and now the man was debating with her as with himself, as to whether he should marry this woman, as to whether he should force on his respectable English mother a French daughter-in-law of unmentionable antecedents! Coxeter gathered that the liaison had lasted ten years—that it had begun, in fact, very soon after the man had first come to Paris.

In addition to his feeling of wrath that Nan Archdale should become cognisant of so sordid a tale, there was associated a feeling of shame that he, Coxeter, had overheard what it had not been meant that he should hear.

Perforce the story went on to its melancholy and inconclusive end, and then, suddenly, Coxeter became possessed with a desire to see Nan Archdale’s face. He glanced across at her. To his surprise her face was expressionless; but her left hand was no longer lying on her knee, it was supporting her chin, and she was looking straight before her.

"I suppose," she said at last, "that you have made a proper provision for your—your friend? I mean in case of your death. I hope you have so arranged matters that if anything should happen to you, this poor woman who loves you would not have to go back to the kind of life from which you took her." Even Coxeter divined that Nan had not found it easy to say this thing.

"Why, no, I haven't done anything of that sort. I never thought of doing it; she's always been the delicate party. I am as strong as a horse!"

"Still—still, life's very uncertain." Mrs. Archdale was now looking straight into the face of the stranger on whom she was thrusting unsought advice.

"She has no claim on me, none at all—" the man spoke defensively. "I don't think she'd expect anything of that sort. She's had a very good time with me. After all, I haven't treated her badly."

"I'm sure you haven't," Nan spoke very gently. "I am sure you have been always kind to her. But, if I may use the simile you used just now, life, even to the happiest, the most sheltered, of women, isn't all jam!"

The man looked at her with a doubting, shame-faced glance. "I expect you're right," he said abruptly. "I ought to have thought of it. I'll make my will when I'm in England this time—I ought to have done so before."

Suddenly Coxeter leant forward. He felt the time had come when he really must put an end to this most unseemly conversation.

"Mrs. Archdale?" he spoke loudly, insistently. She looked up, startled at the sharpness of the tone, and the man next her, whose eyes had been fixed on her face with so moved and doubting a look, sat back. "I want to tell you that I've seen your inventor, and that I've promised to put his invention before the right quarter at the Admiralty.

In a moment Nan was all eagerness. "It really is a very wonderful thing," she said "I'm so grateful, Mr. Coxeter. Did you go and see it tried? I did, last time I was in Paris; the man took me to a swimming-bath on the Seine—such an odd place—and there he tested it before me. I was really very much impressed. I do hope you will say a word for it. I am sure they would value your opinion.

Coxeter looked at her rather grimly. "No, I didn't see it tested." To think that she should have wasted even an hour of her time in such a foolish manner, and in such a queer place, too! "I didn't see the use of doing so, though of course the man was very anxious I should. I'm afraid the thing's no good. How could it be?" He smiled superciliously, and he saw her redden.

"How unfair that is!" she exclaimed. "How can you possibly tell whether it's no good if you haven't seen it tried? Now I have seen the thing tried."

There was such a tone of protest in her voice that Coxeter felt called upon to defend himself. "I daresay the thing's all right in theory," he said quickly, "and I believe what he says about the ordinary life-belts; it's quite true, I mean, that they drown more people than they save: but that's only because people don't know how to put them on. This thing's a toy—not practical at all." He spoke more irritably than he generally allowed himself to speak, for he could see that the Jew was listening to all that they were saying.

All at once, Mrs. Archdale actually included the sweetmeat stranger in their conversation, and Coxeter at last found himself at her request most unwillingly taking the absurd model out of his bag. "Of course you've got to imagine this in a rough sea," he said sulkily, playing the devil's advocate, "and not in a fresh water river bath."

"Well, I wouldn't mind trying it in a rough sea, Mr. Coxeter." Nan smiled as she spoke.

Coxeter wondered if she was really serious. Sometimes he suspected that Mrs. Archdale was making fun of him—but that surely was impossible.

II

When at last they reached Boulogne and went on board the packet, Coxeter's ill-humour vanished. It was cold, raw, and foggy, and most of their fellow-passengers at once hurried below, but Mrs. Archdale decided to stay on the upper deck. This pleased her companion; now at last he would have her to himself.

In his precise and formal way he went to a good deal of trouble to make Nan comfortable; and she, so accustomed to take thought for others, stood aside and watched him find a sheltered corner, secure with some difficulty a deck chair, and then defend it with grim determination against two or three people who tried to lay hands upon it.

At last he beckoned to her to sit down. "Where's your rug?" he asked. She answered meekly, "I haven't brought one."

He put his own rug,—large, light, warm, the best money could buy—round her knees; and in the pleasure it gave him to wait on her thus he did not utter aloud the reproof which had been on his lips. But she saw him shake his head over a more unaccountable omission—on the journey she had somehow lost her gloves. He took his own off, and with a touch of masterfulness made her put them on, himself fastening the big bone buttons over each of her small, childish wrists; but his manner while he did all these things—he would have scorned himself had it been otherwise—was impersonal, businesslike.

There are men whose every gesture in connection with a woman becomes an instinctive caress. Such men, as every woman learns in time, are not good "stayers," but they make the time go by very quickly—sometimes.

With Coxeter every minute lasted sixty seconds. But Nan Archdale found herself looking at him with unwonted kindness. At last she said, a little tremulously, and with a wondering tone in her voice, "You're very kind to me, Mr. Coxeter." Those who spend their lives in speeding others on their way are generally allowed to trudge along alone; so at least this woman had found it to be. Coxeter made no answer to her words—perhaps he did not hear them.

Even in the few minutes which had elapsed since they came on board, the fog had deepened. The shadowy figures moving about the deck only took substance when they stepped into the circle of brightness cast by a swinging globe of light which hung just above Nan Archdale's head. Coxeter moved forward and took up his place in front of the deck-chair, protecting its occupant from the jostling of the crowd, for the sheltered place he had found stood but a little way back from the passage between the land gangway and the iron staircase leading to the lower deck.

There were more passengers that night than usual. They passed, a seemingly endless procession, moving slowly out of the darkness into the circle of light and then again into the white, engulfing mist.

At last the deck became clear of moving figures; the cold, raw fog had driven almost everyone below. But Coxeter felt curiously content, rather absurdly happy. This was to him a great adventure. . . .

He took out his watch. If the boat started to time they would be off in another five minutes. He told himself that this was turning out a very pleasant journey; as a rule when crossing the Channel one meets tiresome people one knows, and they insist on talking to one. And then, just as he was thinking this, there suddenly surged forward out of the foggy mist two people, a newly married couple named Rendel, with whom both he and Mrs. Archdale were acquainted, at whose

wedding indeed they had both been present some six or seven weeks ago. So absorbed in earnest talk with one another were the bride and bridegroom that they did not seem to see where they were going; but when close to Mrs. Archdale they stopped short, and turned towards one another, still talking so eagerly as to be quite oblivious of possible eavesdroppers.

John Coxeter, standing back in the shadow, felt a sudden gust of envious pain. They were evidently on their way home from their honeymoon, these happy young people, blessed with good looks, money, health, and love; their marriage had been the outcome of quite a pretty romance.

But stay,—what was this they were saying? Both he and Nan unwillingly heard the quick interchange of words, the wife's shrill, angry utterances, the husband's good-humoured expostulations. "I won't stay on the boat, Bob. I don't see why we should risk our lives in order that you may be back in town to-morrow. I know it's not safe—my great-uncle, the Admiral, always said that the worst storm at sea was not as bad as quite a small fog!" Then the gruff answer: "My dear child, don't be a fool! The boat wouldn't start if there was the slightest danger. You heard what that man told us. The fog was much worse this morning, and the boat was only an hour late!" "Well, you can do as you like, but I won't cross to-night. Where's the use of taking any risk? Mother's uncle, the Admiral—" and Coxeter heard with shocked approval the man's "Damn your great-uncle, the Admiral!"

There they stood, not more than three yards off, the pretty, angry little spitfire looking up at her indignant, helpless husband. Coxeter, if disgusted, was amused; there was also the comfort of knowing that they would certainly pretend not to see him, even if by chance they recognized him, intent as they were on their absurd difference.

"I shall go back and spend the night at the station hotel. No, you needn't trouble to find Stockton for me—there's no time." Coxeter and Nan heard the laughing gibe, "Then you don't mind your poor maid being drowned as well as your poor husband," but the bride went on as if he hadn't spoken—"I've quite enough money with me; you needn't give me anything—good-bye."

She disappeared into the fog in the direction of the gangway, and Coxeter moved hastily to one side. He wished to save Bob Rendel the annoyance of recognizing him; but then, with amazing suddenness, something happened which made Coxeter realize that after all women were even more inexplicable, unreasonable beings than even he had always known them to be.

There came the quick patter of feet over the damp deck, and Mrs. Rendel was back again, close to where her husband was standing.

"I've made up my mind to stay on the boat," she said quietly. "I think you are very unwise, as well as very obstinate, to cross in this fog; but if you won't give way, then I'd rather be with you, and share the danger."

Bob Rendel laughed, not very kindly, and together they went across to the stair leading below.

Coxeter opened his mouth to speak, then he closed it again. What a scene! What a commentary on married life! And these two people were supposed to be "in love" with one another.

The little episode had shocked him, jarred his contentment. "If you don't mind, I'll go and smoke a pipe," he said stiffly.

Mrs. Archdale looked up. "Oh yes, please do," and yet she felt suddenly bereft of something warm, enveloping, kindly. The words formed themselves on her lips, "Don't go too far away," but she did not speak them aloud. But, as if in answer to her unspoken request, Coxeter called out, "I'm just here, close by, if you want anything," and the commonplace words gave her a curious feeling of security,—a feeling, though she herself was unaware of it, which her own care

and tenderness for others often afforded to those round whom she threw the sheltering mantle of her kindness.

Perhaps because he was so near, John Coxeter remained in her thoughts. Almost alone of those human beings with whom life brought her in contact, he made no demand on her sympathy, and very little on her time. In fact, his first offer of marriage had taken her so much by surprise as to strike her as slightly absurd; she had also felt it, at the time, to be an offence, for she had given him no right to encroach on the inner shrine of her being.

Trying to account for what he had done, she had supposed that John Coxeter, being a man who evidently ordered his life according to some kind of system, had believed himself ripe for the honourable estate of marriage, and had chosen her as being "suitable."

When writing her cold letter of refusal, she had expected to hear within a few weeks of his engagement to some "nice" girl. But time had gone by and nothing of the sort had happened. Coxeter's second offer, conveyed, as had been the first, in a formal letter, had found her in a very different mood, for it had followed very closely on that done by her of which he, John Coxeter, had so greatly disapproved. She had been touched this second time and not at all offended, and gradually they had become friends. It was after his second offer that Nan began making use of him, not so much for herself as on behalf of other people.

Nan Archdale led her life without reference to what those about her considered appropriate or desirable; and years had gone by since the boldest busybody among them would have ventured a word of rebuke. Her social background was composed of happy, prosperous people. They had but little to do with her, however, save when by some amazing mischance things went wrong with them; when all went well they were apt to forget Nan Archdale. But John Coxeter, though essentially one of them by birth and instinct, and though it had been through them that she had first met him, never forgot her.

Yet though they had become, in a sense, intimate, he made on her none of those demands which endear a man to a woman. Living up on a pleasant tableland of self-approval, he never touched the heights or depths which go to form the relief map of most human beings' lives. He always did his duty and generally enjoyed doing it, and he had no patience, only contempt, for those who shirked theirs.

The passion of love, that greatest of the Protean riddles set by nature to civilized man and woman, played no part, or so Nan Archdale believed, in John Coxeter's life. At the time she had received the letter in which he had first asked her to marry him, there had come to her, seen through the softening mists of time, a sharp, poignant remembrance of Jim Archdale's offer, "If you won't have me, Nan, I'll do something desperate! You'll be sorry then!" So poor Jim Archdale had conquered her; and looking back, when she recalled their brief married life, she forgot the selfishness and remembered only the love, the love which had made Jim so dependent on her presence and her sympathy.

But if John Coxeter were incapable of love, she now knew him to be a good friend, and it was the friend—so she believed, and was grateful to him for it,—who had asked her to accept what he had quixotically supposed would be the shelter of his name when she had done that thing of which he had disapproved.

To-night Nan could not help wondering if he would ever again ask her to marry him. She thought not—she hoped not. She told herself quite seriously that he was one of those men who are far happier unwedded. His standard, not so much of feminine virtue as of feminine behaviour, was too high. Take what had happened just now; she had listened indulgently,

tenderly, to the quarrel of the newly married couple, but she had seen the effect it had produced on John Coxeter. To him it had been a tragedy, and an ugly, ignoble tragedy to boot.

The deck was now clear of passengers. Out in the open sea the fog had become so thick as to be impenetrable, and the boat seemed to be groping its way, heralded by the mournful screaming of the siren. Mrs. Archdale felt drowsy; she leant back and closed her eyes. Coxeter was close by, puffing steadily at his pipe. She felt a pleasant sensation of security.

She was roused, rather startled, by a man bending over her, while a voice said gruffly, "I think, ma'am, that you'd better get into shelter. The deck saloon is close by. Allow me to lead you to it."

Nan rose obediently. With the petty officer on one side and Coxeter on the other, she made a slow progress across the deck, and so to the large, brilliantly lighted saloon. There the fog had been successfully shut out, and some fifteen to twenty people sat on the velvet benches; among them was the sweetmeat merchant to whom Nan had talked in the train.

Coxeter found a comfortable place for Nan rather apart from the others, and sitting down he began to talk to her. The fog-horn, which was trumpeting more loudly, more insistently than ever, did not, he thought, interfere with their conversation as much as it might have done.

"We shan't be there till morning," Coxeter heard a man say, "till morning doth appear, at this rate

"I suppose we're all right. There's no real danger in a fog—not in the Channel; there never has been an accident on the Channel passage—not an accident of any serious kind."

"Yes, there was—to one of the Dieppe boats—a very bad accident!"

And then several of those present joined in the discussion. The man who had recalled the Dieppe boat accident could be heard, self-assertive, pragmatical, his voice raised above the voices around him. "I've been all over the world in my time, and when I'm caught in a fog at sea I always get up, dress, and go up on deck, however sleepy I may be."

Coxeter, sitting apart by Nan's side, listened with some amusement. His rather thin sense of humour was roused by the fact that the people around him were talking in so absurd a manner. This delay was not pleasant; it might even mean that he would be a few hours late at the Treasury, a thing he had never once been after a holiday, for Coxeter prided himself on his punctuality in the little as well as the great things of life. But, of course, all traffic in the Channel would be delayed by this fog, and his absence would be accounted for by the fact.

Sitting there, close to Mrs. Archdale, with no one sufficiently near to attract her attention, or, what was more likely, to appeal to her for sympathy, he felt he could well afford to wait till the fog cleared off. As for the loud, insistent screaming of the siren, that sound which apparently got on the nerves of most of those present in the deck saloon, of course it was a disagreeable noise, but then they all knew it was a necessary precaution, so why make a fuss about it?

Coxeter turned and looked at his companion, and as he looked at her he felt a little possessive thrill of pride. Mrs. Archdale alone among the people there seemed content and at ease, indeed she was now smiling, smiling very brightly and sweetly, and, following the direction of her eyes, he saw that they rested on a child lying asleep in its mother's arms. . . .

Perhaps after all it was a good thing that Nan was so detached from material things. Before that burst of foolish talk provoked by the fog, he had been speaking to her about a matter very interesting to himself—something connected with his work, something, by the way, of which he would not have thought of speaking to any other woman; but then Mrs. Archdale, as Coxeter had

good reason to know, was exceptionally discreet. . . . She had evidently been very much interested in all he had told her, and he had enjoyed the conversation.

Coxeter became dimly conscious of what it would mean to him to have Nan to come back to when work, and the couple of hours he usually spent at his club, were over. Perhaps if Nan were waiting for him, he would not wish to stay as long as two hours at his club. But then of course he would want Nan all to himself. Jealous? Certainly not. He was far too sensible a man to feel jealous, but he would expect his wife to put him first—a very long way in front of anybody else. It might be old-fashioned, but he was that sort of man.

Coxeter's thoughts leapt back into the present with disagreeable abruptness. Their Jewish fellow-traveller, the man who had thrust on Mrs. Archdale such unseemly confidences, had got up. He was now heading straight for the place where Mrs. Archdale was sitting.

Coxeter quickly decided that the fellow must not be allowed to bore Mrs. Archdale. She was in his, Coxeter's, care to-night, and he alone had a right to her interest and attention. So he got up and walked down the saloon. To his surprise the other, on seeing him come near, stopped dead. "I want to speak to you," he said in a low voice, "Mr.—er—Coxeter."

Coxeter looked at him, surprised, then reminded himself that his full name, "John Coxeter," was painted on his portmanteau. Also that Mrs. Archdale had called him "Mr. Coxeter" at least once, when discussing that life-saving toy. Still, sharp, observant fellows, Jews! One should always be on one's guard with them. "Yes?" he said interrogatively.

"Well, Mr. Coxeter, I want to ask you to do me a little favour. The truth is I've just made my will—only a few lines—and I want you to be my second witness. I've no objection, none in the world, to your seeing what I want you to witness."

He spoke very deliberately, as if he had prepared the form of words in which he made his strange request, and as he spoke he held out a sheet of paper apparently torn out of a notebook. "I asked that gentleman over there"—he jerked his thumb over his shoulder—"to be my first witness, and he kindly consented. I'd be much obliged if you'd sign your name just here. I'll also ask you to take charge of it—only a small envelope, as you see. It's addressed to my mother. I've made her executor and residuary legatee."

Coxeter felt a strong impulse to refuse. He never mixed himself up with other people's affairs; he always refused to do so on principle.

The man standing opposite to him divined what was passing through his mind, and broke in, "Only just while we're on this boat. You can tear it up and chuck the pieces away once we're on land again—" he spoke nervously, and with contemptuous amazement Coxeter told himself that the fellow was *afraid*. "Surely you don't think there's any danger?" he asked. "D'you mean you've made this will because you think something may happen to the boat?"

The other nodded, "Accidents do happen"; he smiled rather foolishly as he said the words, pronouncing the last one, as Coxeter noted with disapproval, "habben." He was holding out a fountain pen; he had an ingratiating manner, and Coxeter, to his own surprise, suddenly gave way.

"All right," he said, and taking the paper in his hand he glanced over it. He had no desire to pry into any man's private affairs, but he wasn't going to sign anything without first reading it.

This odd little will consisted of only two sentences, written in a clear, clerkly hand. The first bequeathed an annuity of £240 (six thousand francs) to Léonie Lenoir, of Rue Lafayette, Paris; the second appointed the testator's mother, Mrs. Solomon Munich, of Scott Terrace, Maida Vale, residuary legatee and executor. The will was signed "Victor Munich."

“Very well, I’ll sign it,” said Coxeter, at last, “and I’ll take charge of it till we’re on land. But look here—I won’t keep it a moment longer!” Then, perhaps a little ashamed of his ungraciousness, “I say, Mr. Munich, if I were you I’d go below and take a stiffish glass of brandy and water. I once had a fright, I was nearly run over by a brewer’s dray at Charing Cross, and I did that—took some brandy I mean—” he jerked the words out, conscious that the other’s sallow face had reddened.

Then he signed his name at the bottom of the sheet of paper, and busied himself with putting the envelope carefully into his pocketbook. “There,” he said, with the slight supercilious smile which was his most marked physical peculiarity, but of which he was quite unconscious, “your will is quite safe now! If we meet at Folkestone I’ll hand it you back; if we miss one another in the—er—fog I’ll destroy it, as arranged.”

He turned and began walking back to where Nan Archdale was sitting. What a very odd thing! How extraordinary, how unexpected!

Then a light broke in on him. Why, of course, it was Nan who had brought this about! She had touched up the Jew fellow’s conscience, frightened him about that woman—the woman who had so absurdly termed him her “*petit homme adoré*.” That’s what came of mixing up in other people’s business; but Coxeter’s eyes nevertheless rested on the sitting figure of his friend with a certain curious indulgence. Odd, sentimental, sensitive creatures—women! But brave—not lacking in moral courage anyway.

As he came close up to her, Mrs. Archdale moved a little, making room for him to sit down by her. It was a graceful, welcoming gesture. and John Coxeter’s pulse began to quicken. . . . He told himself that this also was an extraordinary thing—this journey with the woman he had wished to make his wife. He felt her to be so tantalizingly near, and yet in a sense so very far away.

His eyes fell on her right hand, still encased in his large brown glove. As he had buttoned that glove, he had touched her soft wrist, and a wild impulse had come to him to bend yet a little closer and press his lips to the white triangle of yielding flesh. Of course he had resisted the temptation, reminding himself sternly that it was a caddish thing even to have thought of taking advantage of Nan’s confiding friendliness. Yet now he wondered whether he had been a fool not to do it. Other men did those things.

There came a dragging, grating sound, the boat shuddering as if in response. Coxeter had the odd sensation that he was being gently but irresistibly pushed round, and yet he sat quite still, with nothing in the saloon changed in relation to himself.

Someone near him exclaimed in a matter-of-fact voice, “We’ve struck; we’re on a rock.” Everyone stood up, and he saw an awful look of doubt, of unease, cross the faces of the men and women about him.

The fog-horn ceased trumpeting, and there rose confused sounds, loud hoarse shouts and thin shrill cries, accompanying the dull thunder caused by the tramping of feet. Then the lights went out, all but the yellow flame of a small oil lamp which none of them had known was there.

The glass-panelled door opened widely, and a burly figure holding a torch, which flared up in the still, moist air, was outlined against the steamy waves of fog.

“Come out of here!” he cried; and then, as some people tried to push past him, “Steady, keep cool! There’ll be room in the boats for every soul on board,” and Coxeter, looking at the pale, glistening face, told himself that the man was lying, and that he knew he lied.

They stumbled out, one by one, and joined the great company which was now swarming over the upper deck, each man and woman forlorn and lonely as human beings must ever be when individually face to face with death.

Coxeter's right hand gripped firmly Mrs. Archdale's arm. She was pressing closely to his side, shrinking back from the rough crowd surging about them, and he was filled with a fierce protective tenderness which left no room in his mind for any thought of self. His one thought was how to preserve his companion from contact with some of those about them; wild-eyed, already distraught creatures, swayed with a terror which set them apart from the mass of quiet, apparently dazed people who stood patiently waiting to do what they were told.

Close to Nan and Coxeter two men were talking Spanish; they were gesticulating, and seemed to be disagreeing angrily as to what course to pursue. Presently one of them suddenly produced a long knife which glittered in the torchlight; with it he made a gesture as if to show the other that he meant to cut his way through the crowd towards the spot, now railed off with rope barriers, where the boats were being got ready for the water.

With a quick movement Coxeter unbuttoned his cloak and drew Nan within its folds; putting his arms round her he held her, loosely and yet how firmly clasped to his breast. "I can't help it," he muttered apologetically. "Forgive me!" As only answer she seemed to draw yet closer to him, and then she lay, still and silent, within his sheltering arms,—and at that moment he remembered to be glad he had not kissed her wrist.

They two stood there, encompassed by a living wall, and yet how strangely alone. The fog had become less dense, or else the resin torches which flared up all about them cleared the air.

From the captain's bridge there whistled every quarter minute a high rocket, and soon from behind the wall of fog came in answer distant signals full of a mingled mockery and hope to the people waiting there.

But for John Coxeter the drama of his own soul took precedence of that going on round him. Had he been alone he would have shared to the full the awful, exasperating feeling of being trapped, of there being nothing to be done, which possessed all the thinking minds about him. But he was not alone—Nan, lying on his breast, seemed to pour virtue into him—to make him extraordinarily alive. Never had he felt death, extinction so near, and yet there seemed to be something outside himself, a spirit informing, uplifting, and conquering the flesh.

Perceptions, sympathies, which had lain dormant during the whole of his thirty-nine years of life, now sprang into being. His imagination awoke. He saw that it was this woman, now standing, with such complete trust in the niceness of his honour, heart to heart with him, who had made the best of that at once solitary and companioned journey which we call life. He had thought her to be a fool; he now saw that, if a fool, she had been a divine fool, ever engaged while on her pilgrimage with the only things that now mattered. How great was the sum of her achievement compared with his. She had been a beacon diffusing light and warmth; he a shadow among shadows. If to-night he were engulfed in the unknown, for so death was visioned by John Coxeter, who would miss him, who would feel the poorer for his sudden obliteration?

Coxeter came back into the present; he looked round him, and for the first time he felt the disabling clutch of physical fear. The life-belts were being given out, and there came to him a horrid vision of the people round him as they might be an hour hence, drowned, heads down, legs up, done to death by those monstrous yellow bracelets which they were now putting on with such clumsy, feverish eagerness.

He was touched on the arm, and a husky voice, with which he was by now familiar, said urgently, "Mr. Coxeter—see, I've brought your bag out of the saloon." The man whose name he knew to be Victor Munich was standing at his elbow. "Look here, don't take offence, Mr. Coxeter, I think better of the——" he hesitated—"the life-saver that you've got in this bag of yours than you do. I'm willing to give you a fancy price for it—what would you say to a thousand pounds? I daresay I shan't have occasion to use it, but of course I take that risk."

Coxeter, with a quick, unobtrusive movement, released Mrs. Archdale. He turned and stared, not pleasantly, at the man who was making him so odd an offer. Damn the fellow's impudence! "The life-saver is not for sale," he said shortly.

Nan had heard but little of the quick colloquy. She did not connect it with the fact that the strong protecting arms which had been about her were now withdrawn,—and the tears came into her eyes. She felt both in a physical and in a spiritual sense suddenly alone. John Coxeter, the one human being who ever attempted to place himself on a more intimate, personal plane with her, happened, by a strange irony of fate, to be her companion in this awful adventure. But even he had now turned away from her. . . .

Nay, that was not quite true. He was again looking down at her, and she felt his hand groping for hers. As he found and clasped it, he made a movement as if he wished again to draw her towards him. Gently she resisted, and at once she felt that he responded to her feeling of recoil, and Nan, with a confused sense of shame and anger, was now hurt by his submission. Most men in his place would have made short work of her resistance,—would have taken her, masterfully, into the shelter of his arms.

There came a little stir among the people on the deck. Coxeter heard a voice call out in would-be-cheery tones, "Now then, ladies! Please step out—ladies and children only. Look sharp!" A sailor close by whispered gruffly to his mate, "I'll stick to her anyhow. No crowded boats for me! I expect she'll be a good hour settling—perhaps a bit longer."

As the first boat-load swung into the water, some of the people about them gave a little cheer. Coxeter thought, but he will never be quite sure, that in that cheer Nan joined. There was a delay of a minute; then again the captain's voice rang out, this time in a sharper, more peremptory tone, "Now, ladies, look sharp! Come along, please."

Coxeter unclasped Nan's hand—he did not know how tightly he had been holding it. He loved her. God, how he loved her! And now he must send her away—away into the shrouding fog—away, just as he had found her. If what he had overheard were true, might he not be sending Nan to a worse fate than that of staying to take the risk with him?

But the very man who had spoken so doubtfully of the boats just now came forward. "You'd best hurry your lady forward, sir. There's no time to lose." There was an anxious, warning note in the rough voice.

"You must go now," said Coxeter heavily. "I shall be all right, Mrs. Archdale," for she was making no movement forward. "There'll be plenty of room for the men in the next boat. I'd walk across the deck with you, but I'm afraid they won't allow that." He spoke in his usual matter-of-fact, rather dry tone, and Nan looked up at him doubtfully. Did he really wish her to leave him?

Flickering streaks of light fell on his face. It was convulsed with feeling,—with what had become an agony of renunciation. She withdrew her eyes, feeling a shamed, exultant pang of joy. "I'll wait till there's room for you, too, Mr. Coxeter." She breathed rather than actually uttered the words aloud.

Another woman standing close by was saying the same thing to her companion, but in far more eager, more vociferous tones. "Is it likely that I should go away now and leave you, Bob? Of

course not—don't be ridiculous!" But the Rendels pushed forward, and finally both found places in this, the last boat but one.

Victor Munich was still standing close to John Coxeter, and Mrs. Archdale, glancing at his sallow, terror-stricken face, felt a thrill of generous pity for the man. "Mr. Coxeter," she whispered, "do give him that life-saver! Did he not ask you for it just now? We don't want it."

Coxeter bent down and unstrapped his portmanteau. He handed to Nan the odd, toy-like thing by which he had set so little store, but which now he let go with a touch of reluctance. He saw her move close to the man whose name she did not know. "Here is the life-saver," she said kindly; "I heard you say you would like it."

"But you?"—he stammered—"how about you?"

"I don't want it. I shall be all right. I shouldn't put it on in any case."

He took it then, avidly; and they saw him go forward with a quick, stealthy movement to the place where the last boat was being got ready for the water.

"There's plenty of room for you and the lady now, sir!" Coxeter hurried Nan across the deck, but suddenly they were pushed roughly back. The rope barriers had been cut, and a hand-to-hand struggle was taking place round the boat,—an ugly scrimmage to which as little reference as possible was made at the wreck inquiry afterwards. To those who looked on it was a horrible, an unnerving sight; and this time Coxeter with sudden strength took Nan back into his arms. He felt her trembling, shuddering against him,—what she had just seen had loosed fear from its leash.

"I'm frightened," she moaned. "Oh, Mr. Coxeter, I'm so horribly frightened of those men! Are they all gone?"

"Yes," he said grimly, "most of them managed to get into the boat. Don't be frightened. I think we're safer here than we should be with those ruffians."

Another man would have found easy terms of endearment and comfort for almost any woman so thrust on his protection and care, but the very depth of Coxeter's feeling seemed to make him dumb,—that and his anguished fear lest by his fault, by his own want of quickness, she had perhaps missed her chance of being saved.

But what he was lacking another man supplied. This was the captain, and Nan, listening to the cheering, commonplace words, felt her nerve, her courage, come back.

"Stayed with your husband?" he said, coming up to them. "Quite right, mum! Don't you be frightened. Look at me and my men, we're not frightened—not a bit of it! My boat will last right enough for us to be picked off ten times over. I tell you quite fairly and squarely, if I'd my wife aboard I'd 'a kept her with me. I'd rather be on this boat of mine than I would be out there, on the open water, in this fog." But as he walked back to the place where stood the rocket apparatus, Coxeter heard him mutter, "The brutes! Not all seconds or thirds either. I wish I had 'em here, I'd give 'em what for!"

Later, when reading the narratives supplied by some of the passengers who perforce had remained on the doomed boat, Coxeter was surprised to learn how many thrilling experiences he had apparently missed during the long four hours which elapsed before their rescue. And yet the time of waiting and suspense probably appeared as long to him as it did to any of the fifty odd souls who stayed, all close together, on the upper deck waiting with what seemed a stolid resignation for what might next befall them.

From the captain, Coxeter, leaving Mrs. Archdale for a moment, had extracted the truth. They had drifted down the French coast. They were on a dangerous reef of rock, and the rising of the wind, the lifting of the fog, for which they all looked so eagerly, might be the signal for the breaking up of the boat. On the other hand, the boat might hold for days. It was all a chance.

Coxeter kept what he had learnt to himself, but he was filled with a dull, aching sensation of suspense. His remorse that he had not hurried Mrs. Archdale into one of the first boats became almost intolerable. Why had he not placed her in the care even of the Jew, Victor Munich, who was actually seated in the last boat before the scramble round it had begun?

More fortunate than he, Mrs. Archdale found occupation in tending the few forlorn women who had been thrust back. He watched her moving among them with an admiration no longer unwilling; she looked bright, happy, almost gay, and the people to whom she talked, to whom she listened, caught something of her spirit. Coxeter would have liked to follow her example, but though he saw that some of the men round him were eager to talk and to discuss the situation, his tongue refused to form words of commonplace cheer.

When with the coming of the dawn the fog lifted, Nan came up to Coxeter as he stood apart, while the other passengers were crowding round a fire which had been lit on the open deck. Together in silence they watched the rolling away of the enshrouding mist; together they caught sight of the fleet of French fishing boats from which was to come succour.

As he turned and clasped her hand, he heard her say, more to herself than to him, "I did not think we should be saved."

III

John Coxeter was standing in the library of Mrs. Archdale's home in Wimpole Street. Two nights had elapsed since their arrival in London, and now he was to see her for the first time since they had parted on the Charing Cross platform, in the presence of the crowd of people comprised of unknown sympathisers, acquaintances, and friends who had come to meet them.

He looked round him with a curious sense of unfamiliarity. The colouring of the room was grey and white, with touches of deep-toned mahogany. It was Nan's favourite sitting-room, though it still looked what it had been ever since Nan could remember it—a man's room. In his day her father had been a collector of books, medals, and engravings connected with the severer type of eighteenth-century art and letters.

In a sense this room always pleased Coxeter's fancy, partly because it implied a great many things that money and even modern culture cannot buy. But now, this morning—for it was still early, and he was on his way to his office for the first time since what an aunt of his had called his mysterious preservation from death—he seemed to see everything in this room in another light. Everything which had once been to him important had become, if not worthless, then unessential.

He had sometimes secretly wondered why Mrs. Archdale, possessed as she was of considerable means, had not altered the old house, had not made it pretty as her friends' houses and rooms were pretty; but to-day he no longer wondered at this. His knowledge of the fleetingness of life, and of the unimportance of all he had once thought so important, was too vividly present. . . .

She came into the room, and he saw that she was dressed in a more feminine kind of garment than that in which he generally saw her. It was white, and though girdled with a black ribbon, it made her look very young, almost girlish.

For a moment they looked at one another in constraint. Mrs. Archdale also had altered, altered far less than John Coxeter, but she was aware, as he was not aware, of the changes which long nearness to death had brought her; and for almost the first time in her life she was more absorbed in her own sensations than in those of the person with her.

Seeing John Coxeter standing there waiting for her, looking so like his old self, so absolutely unchanged, confused her and made her feel desperately shy.

She held out her hand, but Coxeter scarcely touched it. After having held her so long in his arms, he did not care to take her hand in formal greeting. She mistook his gesture, thought that he was annoyed at having received no word from her since they had parted. The long day in between had been to Nan Archdale full of nervous horror, for relations, friends, acquaintances had come in troops to see her, and would not be denied.

Already she had received two or three angry notes from people who thought they loved her, and who were bitterly incensed that she had refused to see them when they had rushed to hear her account of an adventure which might so easily have happened to them. She made the mistake of confusing Coxeter with these selfish people.

"I am so sorry," she said in a low voice, "that when you called yesterday I was supposed to be asleep. I have been most anxious to see you"—she waited a moment and then added his name—"Mr. Coxeter. I knew that you would have the latest news, and that you would tell it me."

"There is news," he said, "of all the boats; good news—with the exception of the last boat—" His voice sounded strangely to himself.

"Oh, but that must be all right too, Mr. Coxeter. The captain said the boats might drift about for a long time."

Coxeter shook his head. "I'm afraid not," he said. "In fact"—he waited a moment, and she came close up to him.

"Tell me," she commanded in a low voice, "tell me what you know. They say I ought to put it all out of my mind, but I can think of nothing else. Whenever I close my eyes I see the awful struggle that went on round that last boat!" She gave a quick, convulsive sob.

Coxeter was dismayed. How wildly she spoke, how unlike herself she seemed to-day—how unlike what she had been during the whole of their terrible ordeal.

Already that ordeal had become, to him, something to be treasured. There is no lack of physical courage in the breed of Englishmen to which John Coxeter belonged. Pain, entirely unassociated with shame, holds out comparatively little terror to such as he. There was something rueful in the look he gave her.

"The last boat was run down in the fog," he said briefly. "Some of the bodies have been washed up on the French coast."

She looked at him apprehensively. "Any of the people we had spoken to? Any of those who were with us in the railway carriage?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to say that one of the bodies washed up is that of the person who sat next to you."

"That poor French boy?"

Coxeter shook his head. "No, no—he's all right; at least I believe he's all right. It—the body I mean—was that of your other neighbour; " he added, unnecessarily, "the man who made sweets."

And then for the first time Coxeter saw Nan Archdale really moved out of herself. What he had just said had had the power to touch her, to cause her greater anguish than anything which had happened during the long hours of terror they had gone through. She turned and, moving as if blindly, pressed her hand to her face as if to shut out some terrible and pitiful sight.

"Ah!" she exclaimed in a low voice, "I shall never forgive myself over that! Do you know I had a kind of instinct that I ought to ask that man the name, the address"—her voice quivered and broke—"of his friend—of that poor young woman who saw him off at the Paris station."

Till this moment Coxeter had not known that Nan had been aware of what had, to himself, been so odious, so ridiculous, and so grotesque, a scene. But now he felt differently about this, as about everything else that touched on the quick of life. For the first time he understood, even sympathized with, Nan's concern for that majority of human beings who are born to suffering and who are bare to the storm. . . .

"Look here," he said awkwardly, "don't be unhappy. It's all right. That man spoke to me on the boat—he did what you wished, he made a will providing for that woman; I took charge of it for him. As a matter of fact I went and saw his old mother yesterday. She behaved splendidly."

"Then the life-saver was no good after all?"

"No good," he said, and he avoided looking at her. "At least so it would seem, but who can tell?"

Nan's eyes filled with tears; something beckoning, appealing seemed to pass from her to him..

The door suddenly opened.

"Mrs. Eaton, ma'am. She says she only heard what happened, to-day, and she's sure you will see her."

Before Mrs. Archdale could answer, a woman had pushed her way past the maid into the room. "Nan? Poor darling! What an awful thing! I am glad I came so early; now you will be able to tell me all about it!"

The visitor, looking round her, saw John Coxeter, and seemed surprised. Fortunately she did not know him, and, feeling as if, had he stayed, he must have struck the woman, he escaped from the room.

As Coxeter went through the hall, filled with a perplexity and pain very alien from his positive nature, a good-looking, clean-shaven man, who gave him a quick measured glance, passed by. With him there had been no parleying at the door as in Coxeter's own case.

"Who's that?" he asked, with a scowl, of the servant.

"The doctor, sir," and he felt absurdly relieved. "We sent for him yesterday, for Mrs. Archdale seemed very bad last night." The servant dropped her voice, "It's the doctor, sir, as says Mrs. Archdale oughtn't to see visitors. You see it was in all the papers about the shipwreck, sir, and of course Mrs. Archdale's friends all come and see her to hear about it. They've never stopped. The doctor, he says that she ought to have stayed in bed and been quite quiet. But what would be the good of that, seeing she don't seem able to sleep? I suppose you've not suffered that way yourself, sir?"

The young woman was staring furtively at Coxeter, but, noting his cold manner and imperturbable face, she felt that he was indeed a disappointing hero of romance—not at all the sort of gentleman with whom one would care to be shipwrecked, if it came to a matter of choice.

"No," he said solemnly, "I can't say that I have."

He looked thoughtfully out into what had never been to him a "long unlovely street," and which just now was the only place in the world where he desired to stay. Coxeter, always so sure of himself, and of what was the best and wisest thing to do in every circumstance of life, felt for the first time unable to cope with a situation presented to his notice.

As he was hesitating, a carriage drove up, and a footman came forward with a card, while the occupant of the carriage called out, making anxious inquiries as to Mrs. Archdale's condition, and promising to call again the same afternoon.

Coxeter suddenly told himself that it behoved him to see the doctor, and ascertain from him whether Mrs. Archdale was really ill.

He crossed the street, and began pacing up and down, and unconsciously he quickened his steps as he went over every moment of his brief interview with Nan. All that was himself—and there was a good deal more of John Coxeter than even he was at all aware of—had gone out to her in a rapture of memory and longing, but she, or so it seemed to him, had purposely made herself remote.

At last, after what seemed a very long time, the doctor came out of Mrs. Archdale's house and began walking quickly down the street.

Coxeter crossed over and touched him on the arm. "If I may," he said, "I should like a word with you. I want to ask you—I mean I trust that Mrs. Archdale is recovering from the effect of the terrible experience she went through the other night." He spoke awkwardly, stiffly. "I saw her for a few minutes just before you came, and I was sorry to find her very unlike herself."

The doctor went on walking; he looked coldly at Coxeter.

"It's a great pity that Mrs. Archdale's friends can't leave her alone! As to being unlike herself, you and I would probably be very unlike ourselves if we had gone through what this poor lady had just gone through!"

"You see, I was with her on the boat. We were not travelling together," Coxeter corrected himself hastily, "I happened to meet her merely on the journey. My name is Coxeter."

The other man's manner entirely altered. He slackened in his quick walk. "I beg your pardon," he said; "of course I had no notion who you were. She says you saved her life! That but for you she would have been in that boat—the boat that was lost."

Coxeter tried to say something in denial of this surprising statement, but the doctor hurried on, "I may tell you that I'm very worried about Mrs. Archdale—in fact seriously concerned at her condition. If you have any influence with her, I beg you to persuade her to refuse herself to the endless busybodies who want to hear her account of what happened. She won't have a trained nurse, but there ought to be someone on guard—a human watchdog warranted to snarl and bite!"

"Do you think she ought to go away from London?" asked Coxeter in a low voice.

"No, I don't think that—at least not for the present," the medical man frowned thoughtfully. "What she wants is to be taken out of herself. If I could prescribe what I believe would be the best thing for her, I should advise that she go away to some other part of London with someone who will never speak to her of what happened, and yet who will always listen to her when she wants to talk about it—some sensible, commonplace person who could distract her mind without tiring her, and who would make her do things she has never done before. If she was an ordinary smart lady, I should prescribe philanthropy"—he made a slight grimace—"make her go and see some of my poorer patients—come into contact with a little real trouble. But that would be no change to Mrs. Archdale. No; what she wants is someone who will force her to be selfish—who will take her up the Monument one day, and to a music-hall the next, motor her out to Richmond Park, make her take a good long walk, and then sit by the sofa and hold her hand if she feels like crying—" He stopped, a little ashamed of his energy.

"Thank you," said Coxeter very seriously, "I'm much obliged to you for telling me this. I can see the sense of what you say.

"You know, in spite of her quiet manner, Mrs. Archdale's a nervous, sensitive woman"—the doctor was looking narrowly at Coxeter as he spoke.

"She was perfectly calm and—and very brave at the time—"

"That means nothing! Pluck's not a matter of nerve—it ought to be, but it isn't! But I admit you're a remarkable example of the presence of the one coupled with the absence of the other. You don't seem a penny the worse, and yet it must have been a very terrible experience."

“You see, it came at the end of my holiday,” said Coxeter gravely, “and, as a matter of fact”—he hesitated—“I feel quite well, in fact, remarkably well. Do you see any objection to my calling again, I mean to-day, on Mrs. Archdale? I might put what you have just said before her.”

“Yes, do! Do that by all means! Seeing how well you have come through it”—the doctor could not help smiling a slightly satirical smile—“ought to be a lesson to Mrs. Archdale. It ought to show her that after all she is perhaps making a great deal of fuss about nothing.”

“Hardly that,” said Coxeter with a frown.

They had now come to the corner of Queen Anne Street. He put out his hand hesitatingly. The doctor took it, and, oddly enough, held it for a moment while he spoke.

“Think over what I’ve said, Mr. Coxeter. It’s a matter of hours. Mrs. Archdale ought to be taken in hand at once.” Then he went off, crossing the street. “Pity the man’s such a dry stick,” he said to himself; “now’s his chance, if he only knew it!”

John Coxeter walked straight on. He had written the day before to say that he would be at his office as usual this morning, but now the fact quite slipped his mind.

Wild thoughts were surging through his brain; they were running away with him and to such unexpected places!

The Monument? He had never thought of going up the Monument; he would formerly have thought it a sad waste of time, but now the Monument became to John Coxeter a place of pilgrimage, a spot of secret healing. A man had once told him that the best way to see the City was at night, but that if you were taking a lady you should choose a Sunday morning, and go there on the top of a ’bus. He had thought the man who said this very eccentric, but now he remembered the advice and thought it well worth following.

By the time Coxeter turned into Cavendish Square he had travelled far further than the Monument. He was in Richmond Park; Nan’s hand was thrust through his arm, as it had been while they had watched the first boat fill slowly with the women and children.

To lovers who remember, the streets of a great town, far more than country roads and lanes, hold over the long years precious, poignant memories, for a background of stones and mortar has about it a character of permanence which holds captive and echoes the scenes and words enacted and uttered there.

Coxeter has not often occasion to go the little round he went that morning, but when some accidental circumstance causes him to do so, he finds himself again in the heart of that kingdom of romance from which he was so long an alien, and of which he has now become a naturalized subject. As most of us know, many ways lead to the kingdom of romance; Coxeter found his way there by a water-way.

And so it is that when he reaches the turning into Queen Anne Street there seems to rise round him the atmosphere of what Londoners call the City—the City as it is at night, uncannily deserted save for the ghosts and lovers who haunt its solitary thoroughfares after the bustle of the day is stilled. It was then that he and Nan first learnt to wander there. From there he travels on into golden sunlight; he is again in Richmond Park as it was during the whole of that beautiful October.

Walking up the west side of Cavendish Square, Coxeter again becomes absorbed in his great adventure,—a far greater adventure than that with which his friends and acquaintances still associate his name. With some surprise, even perhaps with some discomfiture, he sees himself—for he has not wholly cast out the old Adam—he sees himself as he was that memorable morning, carried, that is, wholly out of his usual wise, ponderate self. Perhaps he even wonders a

little how he could ever have found courage to do what he did—he who has always thought so much, in a hidden way, of the world's opinion and of what people will say.

He could still tell you which lamp-post he was striding past when he realized, with a thrill of relief, that in any case Nan Archdale would not treat him as would almost certainly do one of those women whom he had honoured with his cold approval something less than a week ago. Any one of those women would have regarded what he was now going to ask Nan to do as an outrage on the conventions of life. But Nan Archdale would be guided only by what she herself thought right and seemly. . . .

And then, as he turns again into Wimpole Street, as he comes near to what was once his wife's house, his long steady stride becomes slower. Unwillingly he is living again those doubtful moments when he knocked at her door, when he gave the surprised maid the confused explanation that he had a message from the doctor for Mrs. Archdale. He hears the young woman say, "Mrs. Archdale is just going out, sir. The doctor thought she ought to take a walk;" and his muttered answer, "I won't keep her a moment. . . ."

Again he feels the exultant, breathless thrill which seized him when she slipped, neither of them exactly knew how, into his arms, and when the sentences he had prepared, the arguments he meant to use, in his hurried rush up the long street, were all forgotten. He hears himself imploring her to come away with him now, at once. Is she not dressed to go out? Instinct teaches him for the first time to make to her the one appeal to which she ever responds. He had meant to tell her what the doctor had said—to let that explain his great temerity—but instead he tells her only that he wants her, that he cannot go on living apart from her. Is there any good reason why they should not start now, this moment, for Doctors' Commons, in order to see how soon they can be married?

So it is that when John Coxeter stands in Wimpole Street, so typical a Londoner belonging to the leisured and conventional class that none of the people passing by even glance his way, he lives again through the immortal moment when she said, "Very well."

To this day, so transforming is the miracle of love, Nan Coxeter believes that during their curious honeymoon it was she who was taking care of John, not he of her.