

A PHOENIX IN THE
PARK -
Early novel

A PHOENIX IN THE PARK.

by

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Class institutions and social institutions decay. As they decay this small, quick-stepping fellow named Stephen Harlow, broker's clerk, succumbs gradually, easily, gently to the pressure from under the earth; his spirit folds over, like a flower, to the source of decay, reflects it, receives it, and finally droops wretchedly down, forsaken. Harlow is not precisely young, but you would not say that he had yet forgotten the experiences of his adolescence: how his suburban first love had punished his soul; how the discovery thereafter of sin and the delight of furtive acts had healed his soul; how once he had wished to flee the city, the country, the friends, for fictional places of adventure, the Congos, the ranches, the Erewhons; how finally he had assumed a man's responsibilities, the job, the wife, the dog, and, only three or four months after his marriage - on account of a miscalculation for which his mother never forgave him - the child. All four are vicious and noisy burdens. But it is not beneath these that Stephen Harlow bends: it is beneath the burden of a dead society; it is amid the ghosts of his world. He has neither self-respect nor moral standards. His steps are too emphatic for the dirty pavement and the unimportance

of his life: feeling this, hearing their fastidious click, he slows his pace; for he is not a one to say that he is made of better stuff than the next man. - Not at all. He is decaying.

If we slip into the tiny house called No. 4. Simcøtt Avenue, we shall find ourselves in the compaay of Mrs. Marion Harlow, who, since she is a lower middle-class housewife with social ambitions, is stupid, sycophantic and mean. She dislikes her husband on account of his behaviour^f in the bed. She, like her husband, extracts most delight from those acts of which she is most ashamed.

The door is small, the door-knob is polished, the curtains of the front window are pink and clean. The passage, dark and confined, leads from the door to the foot of a staircase which seems almost too small for a person to mount it comfortably. There is one mat inside the hall and one long carpet which extends to the foot of the stairs: the mat is designed to steal mud from the shoes, the carpet is designed to entertain the visitor's eye; thus the first is ugly and the second so garish that it sends up a faint glow of red into the face of anyone stepping across it. A visitor will be smiled at and nodded to: he will also be stared at surreptitiously, lest he should be a robber, a social superior, or a religious fanatic; the fact that he might be a friend (that is if he has not already become known as a friend) is one which is not given a moment's thought. Mrs. Marion

Harlow leads the visitor forward into the dark corner near the staircase, where there is a door leading into a small low-ceilinged, close-furnished room. In this room, the door once closed against the air from outside, the smell evolved by the regular, ill-tempered, scrambled life of three human beings ~~surrounding the child, that is~~ becomes intense, almost suffocating.

It was on account of this smell that we decided to follow Stephen Harlow on his way from the broker's office to a cafe, in mid afternoon, rather than go directly to his marital home. His child, moreover, will at this hour be screaming for Mother, even though that woman is incompetent to give him solace. It is strange how very young children are like crucified, agonised symbols of the union which called them into being. Strange and terrifying, especially when they scream to remind us.

The child is male. If he is going to pursue the Harlow tradition it is probable that he will put an end to it altogether, for the tradition is not strong enough to be further pursued. He is the son in whom all those tendencies towards self-murder which should have resided in generations past of the Harlow family will find their sovereign territory. For him there is no future, since there is no hope.

In so far as he is proud of anything Stephen Harlow is proud of his child. He calls him 'My son' and as he speaks his eyes take on a more positive aspect than usually they possess: in the short phrase 'My son' are enclosed all those hopes which

f, he has never dared to entertain for himself. His own mother and father were not precisely poor, nor were they precisely wealthy; they were not precisely determined and they were not precisely weak. Because they were not precisely anything Stephen Harlow has inherited a kind of ^fvagueness in speech and thought, a kind of prosaic indifference to the world, and a formless countenance whose deepening crevices do nothing to give it definition. His eyes - fearful, peering tunnels which are ever, it seems, trying to escape the function for which they were designed - have not cooperated with the motions of the rest of his face for many a year, so that they seem to writhe, like round, embarrassed little men, in a red-streaked, sclerotic pool.

He is proud of his son because he expects it to make the best of the opportunities which he offers it. He is utterly wrong, because the opportunities he offers are confined by the ugliness and airlessness of the city in which he lives, by the presence of his wife and last, but unhappily for the child not at all least, by Stephen Harlow's own inability to play any human role with zest or purpose. He does not precisely dote over his son but on the other hand he is never precisely inaccessible to it. For he is a kind man. It is natural that the child should seek his breast when the maternal breast is cold, should seek his voice when the maternal voice is shrill with indictment, should seek his lips when the maternal lips are bloodless with rancour. It is natural, too, that Stephen Harlow should give himself freely when he is sought, much to the demonstrated disgust of his wife: it is natural because noone

else in his life has previously sought his presence. The child is not happy: it has conceived a fear of its mother, a hatred of noise (with the result that it is in a condition of tearful hatred for the better part of every day) and an attitude of disdainful condescension towards its father.

Stephen Harlow is aware of none of these things: he is only aware, now and then, of the fact that life is not going as well as it might have gone, had he been rich, had he been handsome, had he been clever, or had he been well-bred. We have described him as a drooping flower, but he had not the delicate and soothing aspect of a flower even before he began to droop: some twenty-five years ago, indeed, when he was ten, he was coarse, awkward, already forsaken, quite unlike a flower but a month from its spring.

Stephen Harlow's pace becomes untidy and erratic at the point in the main street where it seems to recoil darkly away from the pavement. Here is the cafe where he intends going: it is withdrawn and unadvertised, apart from a sole notice designed two decades since to draw lorry-drivers and working-men into its cosy shelter. Stephen Harlow is not strictly, of course, a working-man: he lacks both the robustness and the stoicism of the working-man. But the cafe is cheap and it is one of his habits to visit it whenever his day at the broker's office finishes early. Eating is one of his primary pleasures, for Mrs. Marion Harlow is neither an immaculate nor a generous cook; it is therefore no dissipation on his part to take a meal but thirty minutes before what is described by Mrs.

Harlow as 'dinner' - a stale, twice-cooked meal - is brought from the oven into the low-ceilinged, close-furnished room at No. 4. Simcott Avenue. Stephen Harlow does not confide his predilection for the lorry-drivers' cosy shelter to his wife, and it is precisely the surreptitious nature of his visits here which makes them a source of pleasure, even - if the terms are not too vivid - a source of excitement to him.

The cafe ^{is} like a surgical theatre created primitively from planks of strong timber: where the doctor's rostrum would be is the entrance from the street; the tables and chairs are arranged in four steeply rising tiers, ending above in a platform from which the meals are served. Steam lingers about the ceiling, so that the distemper there is cracked and hanging. There are only a few working-men in the cafe at this time: one of them is blowing the steam from his cup of tea, preparing to swallow it; another is bowed frowningly over his dish: Both have a fine reflective air about them, as if they are doing something of which, in their unpretentious way, they are quite proud.

One of the two waitresses, standing on the raised platform, smiles down at Stephen Harlow as he enters, in recognition. She raises her eyebrows, silently asking for his order. He ponders a little, standing on the second tier, and then, without gazing at her directly, orders Hamburger steak and mash. He concludes his sentence with a smile, but finds when he glances up, that she has already turned her back. For his impulses are slow in producing action, so that in fact probably

some few seconds passed between the end of his sentence and the beginning of his smile.

"O. An' some tea, please," he says.

The waitress clearly understands him, for she nods her head, but she does not turn round to look at him again.

Drawing in his breath and bending his head, like a man surrounded by many people who are gazing up at him, he sits down on the edge of one of the wooden seats, nearest the gangway.

"Allo, Steve!"

There is a quiet, consoling recognition in the voice which murmurs to him from the other end of the table. He looks up and finds that one of his friends called Sid is sitting there with a cup of tea in his right hand, staring towards him pleasantly. Stephen Harlow is not surprised by the encounter, because he has never failed to meet this same Sid on any of his visits to the cafe. For Sid is to all intents and purposes one of the cafe's complacent institutions.

They talk together quietly, and Stephen Harlow agrees with most of what his friend says. He signifies his agreement by nodding his head once and murmuring, "Mm"; if it is his duty to confirm a criticism of some outrageous theory or person or social phenomenon he nods his head and makes a brief clicking noise with his ~~xxxx~~ tongue, as if to deprecate.

Stephen Harlow offers little to the conversation. He withdraws his elbows from the table when the waitress comes with a dish and a cup of tea. He thanks her with a blink and a restrained smile as she puts them down before him.

When he discovers that she has brought him coffee and not tea, he turns round towards the platform and hesitatingly cries:

"Oo, waitress, yew've given me coffee!"

The waitress answers in a much louder voice and explains that she could swear he said coffee and that her day would be considerably less arduous if some of her customers (she makes it clear to whom, in particular, she is referring) would "jest speak up a bit!"

As she comes from the platform it is easy to see that Stephen Harlow has already regretted his complaint. For he turns to her before she reaches the table and murmurs: "O, that's alright, if its any trouble. Not all that fond of tea, anyway!"

She ponders hugely over him.

"Yew shore?" she cries. Then more restrainedly, more sympathetically: "Only it does make more work!"

Quick to cooperate with the intimate intonation, Stephen Harlow nods twice or three times and says: "Don't you worry!"

While he is eating his friend Sid continues to talk, pleasantly, pessimistically.

"That's what it is," he says.

"Mm," replies Stephen Harlow, "'spose we're goin down the drain!"

"Well, jest look at it. No Empire, no money. It stands to reason, the government's got no money!"

"Might as well pack up now!"

If he casts his gaze towards the door of the cafe Stephen Harlow can see the street outside, the passing vehicles, the brown-red houses and shops opposite, the dark roofs, a telegraph pole and beyond it the low, tempestuous sky.

The city seems to draw the cafe into its turbulent bosom, to stifle it, to darken it with an embrace. When Stephen Harlow does raise his eyes he catches sight of a bird which alights on the telegraph wire, turns sharply this way and that, hops about a little, and then flies up over the roofs and out of sight. He continues to gaze at the wire which the bird has left, and he begins to feel ~~him~~ a little excited within, whether or not as a result of seeing the bird it is impossible to say.

Perhaps, if only for an instant, in the most shapeless fashion, his mind has dwelt for a moment on a vision of the skies and the winds and the birds and the escaping autumnal smells of a less tortured landscape than this, a landscape which might bring to him a more lasting sense of contentment than any he could derive from riches, from handsome looks, from cleverness, or from good breeding. Alas! A pen is free to roam what confused, eccentric, unviolated passages of the mind it will, but even the present pen cannot invoke thoughts in Stephen Harlow's mind which he will never be able to entertain.

Yet he speaks, immediately.

"Courtneywold," he says, "That's it. The right idea

for this time of year!"

Surprisingly, Sid seems to understand, for he replies:

"Courtneywold again? That's a bit of luck!"

We are not bound to dwell with Stephen Harlow until he leaves the cafe. It has been useful to us, as Sid has been useful to us, but we need give neither any further thought. Let us push ahead a little in time and observe that not more than a week later a park some seventy miles from London is lying silent under a solemn afternoon sky: the park undulates, as if its green surface had once stirred like an easy sea and then been stilled again in a sea's shape for eternity; its shallows are of the deepest green, seeming to hold mysteries; it is wonderfully darkened here and there by clusters of tall, down-peering yew-trees, swept, so that they seem to cry hoarsely one to another, by long, and never brutal, autumnal breezes. Everything seems to slumber within and around this park.

Suddenly, however - and we are still gazing into the future - there is a clatter and a whir from one of the tallest trees and a large bird, many-feathered, gold, russett, blue and grey, bursts from the thin shroud of autumnal leaves and with a long, echoing cry, an ecstatic beating of wings, flies with steep ascent into the sky. For some seconds, as it flies, the leaves continue to fall one by one from its body; it plunges up with neck and tiny, crested head stretched forward as if to outdo the motion of its wings; higher and higher still it soars, like a flaming cloud; higher and higher until the solemn sky has enclosed it and all is silent again.

It is strange that such a large and garishly-bedecked bird should be seen flying from the head of a tree. For we associate such an animal with the ground, with decorous, strutting ways, with a life devoted to soil-grubbing and serene proliferation.

The name of the park is Courtneywold. It is a small part of the property of Mr. and Mrs. Humphrey Manners: an inheritance on the male side. Humphrey Manners is the son of the Hon. Deryk Manners, while Violet, his wife, is one of the few survivors of a family no less aristocratic. The couple were married twenty years ago amid a deal of tasteful publicity, it still being possible at that time to associate publicity with taste. Humphrey Manners is a middle-aged gentleman of the type who is found at his most typical and persuasive when he is dressed in a loosely-fitting tweed suit, his neck and shoulders bent a little, as if he were pondering something, and a pipe in his mouth. He has the appearance of one who has pursued his own interests so successfully that he has more than half his mind available for the problems of others. He looks like a man whose tranquillity is not easily disturbed, whose moral conscience forgives more than it forbids, and who stands on no ceremony when ceremony embarrasses those whom it is designed to honour. In fact his patience and his good will have declined with the years. He is an embellishment living at a time when his people, for better or for worse, have dispensed with embellishments. He is complete, and therefore uncreative. But, like Stephen

Harlow, he is a kind man, and, unlike Stephen Harlow, he is intelligent. This is his difficulty.

Humphrey Manners has conceded little to the requirements of a levelling society. He has, in a manner of speaking, gone out to meet it. For, although he is an aristocrat, he is still a wealthy man. In his youth he was wise and calculating enough to realise that in a society ~~and~~ no longer sustained by a landed gentry his inherited fortune could either evaporate of its own accord or augment itself at his own hands. He chose for it the latter course by becoming a business man, by entering, so to speak, the counting houses of his social inferiors. He enjoyed the zest and even the concealed brutality of middle class competition. But he was surprised when he found, moving casually among the newly rich, that social haughtiness began ~~with~~ with those whom once he had regarded naturally as his social inferiors. Gradually he learned to admire in men virtue which seemed more or less ashamed of itself, even though he seldom felt shame on his own account.

Now, at the age of fifty-three, he has many problems. The walls of his house are mellowed with ivy and wysteria; within them lives the proper complement of housemaids and cooks, even though Humphrey Manners has long since forgone the luxury of a butler and a personal valet. The park lies impervious to the attempts of house-builders, factory-builders and civil servants to nibble at its edge or ravage its centre. But Humphrey Manners is aware that he is straining at the lead, trying to pull society the wrong way when society —

a huge, lumbering monster - never chooses the way of lone men but the way of multitudes. Humphrey Manners has devoted the last two decades to the writing of books and to more or less dilettante studies. He disapproves of his society's soulless empiricism, its sentimentality and its tyrannical equalities. He does not look like a drooping, forsaken flower; yet ~~perhaps~~ he is more surely forsaken than even Mr. Stephen Harlow. He will never allow himself to droop, but he cannot prevent society from forsaking him.

Violet, his wife, has the bemused, smiling face, the through-gazing, reflective eyes of a leisured woman. Like Humphrey Manners she has never associated leisure with sin, but on the other hand she accepts a society which insists on such an association with a good deal more - not resignation, for she will never be resigned to anything - but a good deal more serenity than her husband. Her speech is clear: it takes some time to convince her that anything in which she believes strongly is illusory or untrue. While her husband's books are largely devoted to remote philosophical subjects and equally remote travel-adventures, her own, as yet unpublished, are more deliberately literary creations, written in that somnambulatory condition which was once ~~the~~ a requisite of the highest genius and which is now a feminine preserve. For the hostile forces in a society attack first the male, dividing his powers, abusing his moral attitudes, withdrawing his sources of hope; they deal much more gently

with the woman, for she is a more primitive creature, more passive to life's punishing whips, happier with short-term pleasures and makeshift compromises: Like the strange bird we have already observed in the park, she grubs and proliferates in serene disregard of ultimate truths and future disasters, so that her flights, when she does undertake them, are all the more remarkable, as the flight of our bird was remarkable.

When he is not visiting the city and entertaining his business friends, Humphrey Manners is normally sitting quietly in his study or strolling ponderously in the park, or talking to his wife, - a humouring, inattentive audience.

Violet, on her side, is happiest when she is entertaining her literary friends, who visit her sometimes to obtain her patronage, sometimes merely to enjoy her company, and sometimes - if not usually - for solace. She judges them harshly. They are mostly middle-class editors and writers whose conversation is a faithful replica, she says, of conversations which not long ago figured only in the cleverest novels; the theme of their publications is a desperate one, for, since they perceive no future for themselves, they insist that there should be none for the rest of society, even for that immense and inchoate class which is usurping their powers; when they create they tend to snatch a morbid fancy from the clouds rather than a brighter fancy from an earth which does not allure them; invariably they publish under a pseudonym, since while they have convictions they have not always the courage of them; they profess to an interest in what are sometimes called, in Violet Manner's society, working class writers,

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those martyrs to the slum who write as fish-wives talk because they have been too idle and too sentimental to learn a harder, and more expressive, tongue; now and again they attempt to do some violence to themselves by becoming Bohemian, which, in a society whose members are easily tamed, means keeping late hours, drinking more than is good for either the liver or the sanity, haunting illicit beds with ever-diminishing lust and substituting a broad-minded, that is to say, by modern usage, a mindless morality for the respectable one in which they are most truly at home. It does not occur to Violet Manners that her criticism is too severe because her standards of human behaviour are too exacting. ~~In this she is the opposite of her husband.~~ She enjoys the company of her literary friends, but insists that finally they are worthless people. In their presence she sits upright in her armchair and smiles at them with a secret-withholding, ^mbeused expression. They, on their side, know her only as a shrewd woman, not as a critic.

But how is it that Stephen Harlow, neither a literary man nor a business-friend nor even an entertaining fellow in own right, should suddenly decide, in a damp and ill-lit cafe, to visit the seat of Mr. and Mrs. Manners?

The reason resided in the fat, heaving, cheerful body of one Kate Thompson, now since five years dust. She was the first housekeeper to be engaged by Mr. and Mrs. Manners after their marriage, having served for some time previously in the household of one of Violet Manner's aunts. We need only know that Kate Thompson's

know that Kate Thompson's unenlightened appetite for work, together with her intimate side-digging ways, had evoked love and admiration in Mr. and Mrs. Manners within a few weeks of her entering their service. When the first, and, as matters were to turn out, the only son of Mr. and Mrs. Manners was born, Kate Thompson gave sound advice to the mother and began sharing the nursing duties of her own accord. When she died, in the first year of the second world war, the son, then a lad of twenty, showed more sorrow than it is usual for a young man of his social position to show for a housekeeper. He himself was killed by a hand-grenade on the Italian front a few years later.

Kate Thompson's daughter is now Mrs. Marion Harlow. As a child Mrs. Marion Harlow was a regular visitor to Courtneywold: we cannot claim that she evoked love in Mr. and Mrs. Manners as her mother had evoked it. But ^{her} ~~her~~ visits did become more frequent when Kate Thompson died. Now that the young Manners is also dead, she brings to Humphrey and Violet Manners agreeable associations from the past, so that ^{they} manage to enjoy her presence in a quiet fashion.

For her last few visits to Courtneywold Mrs. Marion Harlow has brought Mr. Stephen ~~Harlow~~ with her. He is for the most part a silent companion. He is aware that Mr. and Mrs. Manners are no better than himself merely because they have a ^{large} ~~large~~ house and income enough to maintain it, but he cannot surpress in ^{his} ~~his~~ mind a sense of being flattered when he is at Courtneywold, a sense - not of rising, for he knows

that they are not his superiors - but a sense of being, at least for the time of his stay at Courtneywold, rather different from the men with whom he talks familiarly at the office. At once, then, Courtneywold is for him a source of pleasure and perplexity.

When he leaves the cafe Stephen Harlow goes directly to his home at No. 4. Simcott Avenue. His wife does not look up from the table when he enters the dark room behind the staircase. He is going to tell her about his decision immediately.

"What about Courtneywold for nextweekedd, duck?" he asks. "Came to me in the office."

Mrs. Marion Harlow looks up slowly. She takes stock with her eyes of his face, his suit, and his shoes, methodically. Then she raises her shoulders and imitates, quite effectively, a proper lady in high dudgeon, her lips pursed, her stare stern.

"O," she says, making a very round noise. "Courtneywold! So he thought we'd go to Courtneywold, did he?" She is being impossibly charming. "It ceem to him in the office, did it?"

Now she leans on the table and her impersonation is at an end. But she retains her stern stare.

"And where does the money come from, may I ask?"

There is no charm in her question. Stephen Harlow sits down and receives her gaze with a neutral calm.

"Where it always comes from," he replies, "Out of one of these pockets"

It is perhaps the original and derring-do quality of his reply that finally persuades Mrs. Marion Harlow

to telephone Courtneywold Manor and warn Mr. and Mrs. Manners of her coming. In fact, she is even happier to be leaving Simcott Avenue for two or three days than her husband.

The telephone conversation is a surprising one for Mrs. Marion Harlow. Not only does Violet Manners say that she is agreeable to a visit but adds that it would be a 'welcome relief'; she has had it in mind for some time to invite Mrs. Marion Harlow down. The latter is proud, for she has few friends who do not in some way despise her and whom in some way she does not despise. What, she asks herself a little cautiously, can be the cause of Violet Manners' friendliness?

Courtneywold does not dress itself up for visitors. It never loses its slumbering appearance. Thus it is that when Mr. and Mrs. Harlow arrive, with one attache-case, and umbrella and two raincoats, they are received with poise and shown immediately to their rooms overlooking the park. They meet their hosts for the first time at tea.

Conversation is of course spasmodic and cautious. Humphrey Manners appears to be uncomfortable in the presence of the Harlows and after he has put a few polite and smiling questions to them he sits silently in his chair or goes to the window and gazes out, while his wife talks. His attempts to draw Stephen Harlow into some kind of masculine conversation, about travel or trade or interior decoration, have always failed: for when he puts forward a thesis of his own he is discouraged by Stephen Harlow's immediate and even then inarticulate,

agreement: when he asks for Stephen Harlow's views he hears either nothing in reply or else a brief self-deprecating chuckle.

Mrs. Harlow and Mrs. Manners seem, on the other hand, to have a good deal in common, for they talk quietly and earnestly with each other when they are alone. As the day moves forward they more and more confine their gazes to each other and sometimes they do not consult the men when they make arrangements for the whole party. Mrs. Marion Harlow has always disregarded her husband, but now she tends to disregard a man for whom she has a profound, even servile, respect, namely Humphrey Manners. For her stupidity, to which we have already referred, betrays itself in a kind of worshipping devotion to Violet Manners; the sycophant in her has now a single purpose, to become like Violet Manners; her meanness has become calculation to keep Violet Manners to herself. Small, muscular-looking, primly-clothed, she constantly watches Violet Manners: her wide, rather insensate black eyes follow all her quiet gestures as she talks, easily, confidently, precisely.

The first day passes awkwardly for the two men: at meals they linger nervously at the edge of a feminine conversation. When Mr. and Mrs. Harlow retire to bed at ten o'clock Humphrey Manners goes to his study and settles down to four hours' work.

After tea on the second day Violet Manners suggests that they all take a turn in the park. She and Mrs. Harlow walk together while the men stroll on either side of them, Humphrey Manners humming to himself, hands in pocket, head bowed,

Stephen Harlow blinking at the sky, coughing every now and then, erect, but a smaller frailer man.

Conversation has for the time ceased when suddenly the same bird which we have already observed frees itself ~~from~~ with a wild clatter from the head of a tree just thirty or forty yards in front of them. They stop immediately and follow with their eyes the bird's swift, steep flight, higher and higher like a flaming cloud, until the solemn sky has enclosed it and all is silent again.

They look at each other astonished.

"Damned extraordinary!" exclaims Humphrey Manners to his wife.

"Queer!" says Mr. Stephen Harlow.

"I don't think I have seen anything so surprising and beautiful in the park," murmurs Violet Manners, gazing into the distance. "What on earth could it have been, Humphrey?"

"Something after its freedom, my dear, but I cannot imagine what!"

Now Stephen Harlow speaks. He has given no warning of his intention to speak. His wife, Humphrey Manners and Violet Manners turn to him in surprise as he opens his mouth.

"Must have ^{bin} ~~been~~ hysterical," he says, "Mad like!"

There is silence. It is difficult to say whether Mrs. Marion Harlow titters, but her expression is one of scorn and impatience. Violet Manners disconsolately lowers her gaze to the earth and for the first time leaves the conversation to revive of its own accord. It does.

For Humphrey Manners has suffered too long and too silently in the company of Mr. Stephen Harlow. At this moment all the feelings of discomfort and resentment and disapprobation which he has stored up too long against society, and particularly against Stephen Harlow if the truth were known, burst forth in one statement of passion, sudden and unexpected. What precisely is there in the word 'hysterical' to draw the thunder of Humphrey Manners' soul? It is a mild word and Stephen Harlow's motives, in calling the attention of the party to the mad quality of the bird's flight, have been of the kindest. But Humphrey Manners takes no account of motives. He knows only that he hates, yes hates, Mr. Stephen Harlow. He takes the pipe from his mouth.

"What do you damned well mean - hysterical!"

He thrusts his head forward and stares at the small, frail man. For a moment we feel that there is no justice in the view which we have already offered, namely that he is a kind man: now he is ferocious; he has forgotten the ladies; he has forgotten to remain unmistakably aristocratic.

Humphrey Manners, his brow heavy and magnificent, advances towards Stephen Harlow and takes him by the lapel of his coat. Surprise and fear have claimed immediate proprietorship of Stephen Harlow's face and their claim has been uncontested.

The women withdraw a little, confused both of them and shocked.

"Humphrey!" murmurs Violet Manners, putting forward a

restraining arm.

"Humphrey my foot!" is the reply she receives. For Humphrey Manners has attention only for his prey.

"Hysterical! Why that bird there, man, that bird there was flying to freedom! Freedom! Something you'll never know with your damned tamed ways. And you're the man I'm supposed to call an equal! Why, I'd take you for a servant and give you a whipping for the pleasure! Hysterical, he says!"

The air is dangerous with threat and the women are now aware that there is nothing either of them can do to stay the course of male fury. Stephen Harlow is gathering his fallen spirit, so to speak, and looks Humphrey Manners ~~for the first~~ in the face for the first time.

"What's that?" he asks. "What's that? So I'm a servant, am I?"

The women are now too surprised to feel fear, for Stephen Harlow is giving evidence of a spirit for the fight which no one would seriously have associated with him.

"Didn't I know it?" he cries. "I thought all along I wasn't good enough for the likes of you. And who the hell do you think you're holding by the coat? Take your rotten hand away!"

"I'll do no such thing, you damned toad!"

"O yes you will! Just because you belong to a class of bloody parasites you think you can do what you like with me, don't you? Well, you can't! Because I work for my living.

You and your highfallutin' style!"

Humphrey Manners takes his hand from the lapel of Stephen Harlow's coat and withdraws a little. They stare at each other tensely and their lips are pursed. Humphrey Manners strikes Stephen Harlow full in the face.

"Take that, you bastard!"

Stephen Harlow stumbles a little, holding his chin, and then, having recovered himself, grasps Humphrey Manners' collar and gives him a blow in the ear. Soon they are scrambling with each other on the grass ~~in the shadow~~ under the deepening shadow of the yew-trees.

Violet Manners and Mrs. Marion Harlow watch them with sad and shocked eyes.

"Come, my dear, there is nothing we can do. They'll make it up and follow us in!"

Violet Manners takes Mrs. Marion Harlow's arm consolingly and they walk slowly towards the house, leaving the sound of gasps and curses and blows behind them.

"Men are so hot-headed sometimes" ~~///~~

"You wait till I get that man indoors. Answering back like that!"

"Ah, but Mr. Harlow was under provocation!"

"It makes no difference. He should learn to hold his tongue. Besides, he is tame and he is a toad and he does need a whipping!"

"Really? You agree with my husband? How strange!"

"You wouldn't think it was strange if you lived at Simcott

Avenue along with me!"

"I do understand. But my husband isn't the easiest person to live with either!"

"Now don't tell me that. He's the kindest old fellow I've ever met!"

"Kindest perhaps. But kindness, you know, must be accompanied by other good qualities. And his other qualities are not easy to live with. We'll have some tea and talk it over!"

When they reach the house Violet Manners opens the French windows of a large drawing room and turns on the light, so that they can sit and watch the dusk grow over the park, making the clusters of yew-trees black and huge.

An hour passes while they chat and drink their tea, and the men still do not return. Now that she is alone with the lady of the house Mrs. Marion Harlow is happier and less restrained. A kind of conspiracy has grown between them; they talk quietly; the hush of the park is like a shroud protecting them.

"You see," Violet Manners says, gazing into the park from her chair, "poor Humphrey has too many problems for a worthy husband. It is such a burden to see him wandering about the park with his chin buried in his collar, just as if he wanted to committ suicide. He is beginning to make the servants feel that they can never please him, which I always think is embarrassing!" She passes a hand over her brow. "And you have no idea, Marion, how much Shaw he reads. You know what I mean by Shaw?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"It is a form of dotage. I taxed him with it the other day and all he had to say was that he'd rather die a Shavian than a charlatan. He dislikes democracy; he says that we have paid our homage to the working man long enough, now it is time to make him work for his living. But in that case why doesn't he do something positive about it or else commit suicide? I am being quite sincere with you, Marion, when I say that I'd rather have him dead than like this. He is so different from the man I married. He avoids my literary friends. He is always rude to politicians, and we know so many of them. He locks himself up in his study for hours on end!" She glances up. "Let me show you something of his that I found yesterday. It typifies his state of mind!"

She brings a slip of paper from the desk and hands it to Mrs. Marion Harlow. It is as follows:

"...emasculated pigmies. Men of wit and learning have no place in such a society, for the material of their lives is in the hands of sophisticated merchants who give a rap for nothing but their own physical well-being. Since education is the process by means of which chameleons and sycophants teach the young to imitate their more shameless vices, it is natural that the educated and the voluble should be well received by such a society as this, a society which, although untyranted from above, yet contains within its bowels a tyrant of insipid convention far more vicious and exacting than any Herod could have been!"

"What does he mean?" asks Mrs. Marion Harlow when she has

read the fragment.

"Nothing at all interesting. He is only grumbling. In some ways, you know, he reminds me of my son. William was always on the edge of solving a problem, and never beyond the edge. That is why he went into the infantry during the war. He had an idea, you know, that he must prove himself, put himself to a kind of ultimate and supreme test in battle, merely because this society wasn't virile enough in peace to assess a man's strength. Really he committed suicide, I suppose. He had only been fighting a month when he was killed!"

"That was a terrible shame!"

"Are you sure? There was a kind of fatality about both of them - William and Humphrey. I think they both felt that society no longer had any use for their capacities!"

"I suppose Mr. Manners was dreadfully cut up about William?"

"Cut up? I never heard the last of it. I kept trying to tell him: I am eleven years younger than you are: I still have time to produce another child. And he told me I was ruthless!"

"Stephen would be the same!"

"I think you and I have this in common, Marion: that we know how very sentimental men can be. But it doesn't do to be sentimental about anything nowadays. How is your little baby, by the way?"

"Well, boys are easier!"

"But you are breeding him for the next war: I suppose you know that?"

"He's not going to be a mummy's boy!"

"Then it is best not to encourage him if he wants to stay too long at school. Temper his curiosities; try to make him simple. God-förbid that he should become learned or artistic. Being a man he would only suffer that way. Women are different: they are stronger perhaps. That is what I think!"

"You're right if you're judging by my marriage. I think I've got more guts in my little finger than Stephen Harlow has in all his body. I'm even getting tired of looking after his baby!"

"Now that is unusual. But it is a good sign in a woman. The maternal instinct is a most dreadful encumbrance at times, you know!"

"I couldn't leave my baby, but I know its going to grow up like Stephen!"

"How terrible!"

"It would be better dead!"

"Quite so. Then you should put it out for adoption or else leave Harlow!"

"I feel like leaving both together sometimes, but only sometimes!"

"That is even better!"

Violet Manners glances towards the open French windows.

"Do you know," she says, "I think they will kill each other?"

"No!"

"I think so!"

"I suppose we ought to go and have a look!"

"We ought to, my dear, but we won't!"

The dusk has passed into night and no sound issues from the park. There is excitement in Violet Manners' gaze.

"I wish you were a better educated woman, Marion: we could plan so much together. But perhaps on the other hand you are fresher, more innocent as you are!" She looks long at Marion Harlow. "I like your instinct to rise in the world!"

"I'd like to get higher than that husband of mine will ever let me go," Marion Harlow replies.

"Precisely. You must read the book I am writing on the subject of rising!"

"That would be lovely!"

"You might understand it if you applied yourself to it earnestly. I think you might then learn how easy it is for you to rise!"

"Is it a long book?"

"It is long and it is concentrated. My literary friends even tell me that it is well written!" She smiles. "Not that their judgements are worth anything. They are happier talking about obtainable foods than they are about serious projects like mine. But they are useful to me; also they pander to me. Some of them have tried to seduce me, but my physical desires are few and far between; when desires are on me it is usually I who do the seducing!"

Marion Harlow giggles.

"Is it nice?" she asks.

"Why do you giggle? You must learn to drop the giggling

attitude. I think one should go directly to what one wants in life: that is a woman's way!"

"Yes, I suppose it is!"

"But my book will interest you because it recognises the necessity of orienting ourselves to a new and, at least for people like Humphrey, brutal world before too late!"

"I think I understand!"

"Really? I think that probably you don't, Marion. But you will. If the men do kill each other, and I think they will, you must come to live with me here. I have a few other women friends who would also like to come, and I shall have more than enough money because I have more than enough business sense. We shall choose our men visitors freely from all classes and all cliques!"

"Exciting!"

"For a time, Marion: until you find that the creation of a new world is very hard work!"

"But you'll help me, Mrs. Manners!"

Marion Harlow gazes eagerly at Violet Manners. Marion Harlow is a lustful woman; she reclines in her chair more easily than she would at No.4 Simcott Avenue.

"You see," Violet Manners continues, "men have abandoned conscience. Stephen Harlow has no idea what is good and what is bad in life; Humphrey has a strong idea but unfortunately noone agrees with him and he is getting very suicidal. Now women have never known good and evil without their men telling them. The moment they learn to sleep with a man they become dependent on him not only for their livelihood but also for

their moral standards"

"I've always said marriage is the trouble"

"Not at all, my dear. But a woman is tamed by marriage, certainly. That is why termagants and whores become upright women when they marry; that is why they try to prevent their children committing the same sins which they so much enjoyed. Now my question is as follows: why should not a woman have a moral doctrine of her own?"

"Why not?"

"The only thing in her way is the maternal instinct. It is this which attaches her to one man, which tames her, which deprives her of what I have called in my book moral originality. The maternal instinct has been your trouble all along, my dear, otherwise you could never have stayed with such a looby as Harlow for so long"

"But I do love babies"

"Ofcourse. The maternal instinct is absolutely necessary and indestructible. But it can be generalised: is there any reason why children should not be bred on a communal basis by the very mothers who have borne them? Everyone is happier as a result: women are then free to indulge those pleasures of which they are starved in marriage, - the pleasures of promiscuity or else the pleasures of a profound devotion to one man which does not dissipate itself in the unwholesome vapours of a marital home"

"We should be free, then?"

"Free, Marion, to work at last. Free to make a life

based on - " Again she smiles. " - feminine stupidity, feminine calculation and feminine envy. Intelligence is after all a male obsession. And look what it has made for us: wars and quarrels which any woman could have ended with a material bargain!"

Violet Manners is now in full possession of Marion Harlow's soul and the latter appears happier for it. We have observed that Violet Manners is a ~~realistic~~^{shrewd} woman, and indeed she has for long made use of her friends, particularly her literary friends, in the service of a cause which she has had in mind, for the most part silently, during the last twenty years. She has devoted herself to it without for one moment appearing more than an intelligent lady of a noble house. Few have suspected her of an interest in the fate of society as a whole, an interest, that is to say, which amounts to more than a lingering anxiety or regret. Her literary friends will see her books in the hands of one of the best publishers in the country, they will even begin to mention her as one of those unsensational feminine influences on social thought which make themselves felt by means of private conversation rather than by public manifesto, but they will not for a long time know the extent of her shrewdness and her determination.

"But I am tiring you with my nonsense," she says.

"O no, not at all!"

Violet Manners rises with a smile.

"The supreme test is coming this evening, Everything depends on whether the men kill each other. But let us take

the matter into our own hands at least for the time being. I'll drive you to my club and we'll discuss the matter there. I have much more to say, ofcourse: it is altogether more elaborate than my words would lead you to think!"

Marion Harlow also rises and they go together towards the door.

"And - " ~~Marion~~ Violet Manners stops and turns to Marion Harlow. " - if you feel the need of male compaay there will plenty of men to choose from. I myself find them desparate and dull, a concupiscent nightmare. But everyone to her taste!"

"I think I want to listen to you!"

As Violet Manners opens the door she says: "I wonder how Humphrey and Stephen are doing!"

"Making it up I expect!"

"They would be fools enough!"

The door closes and they are gone from the room. Some moments later they are gone from the house and the noise of a car-engine dies gradually away on the night. But has Violet Manners' victory been complete? She has gained another soul, yes, but she knows that her final victory rests on the fate of Humphrey Manners and Stephen Harlow, on events that are even now taking place in the shrouded park.

Everything yields to the silence. The women have neglected to ~~turn~~ off the light in the drawing room, so that a long beam of false moonlight is shed onto the undulating parkland and the yew-trees beyond, giving a seemingly illicit lustre to the

breeze-convulsed leaves.

Suddenly a man's scream breaks distantly from out of the night, echoing across the long parkland, from far, far out. Then silence gradually draws over again, the last echo is lost. We are left to speculate whether it is Humphrey or Stephen who has died, or both.

The drawing room is still deserted. Like the bird in the park have the women flown, and as strangely.
