

CHAPTER VI

THE HATTER'S AUTOMATON



The Persian visas, for Val and self, were to be obtained for us by Cook's that afternoon. All that remained was to discover the routes and times—our showman must be consulted. To that end I went by appointment to Humph's office, unaccountably down in the mouth, very sorry for Snooty—very very low, feeling like giving the whole bloody circus the slip. Humph's schemes for me were maturing. He was arranging to have me captured (he had written yesterday), I did not learn how. He obligingly suggested that it would be well to make a will. Not that there was the slightest danger as regards the banditi, but in case we met with a railway accident. (We could unfortunately not go by air all the way.) The amount of ransom likely to be expected for a baronet had, it appeared, been fixed. All was in readiness in fact.

I was amazed at him. But I did not let him see this. Nevertheless he apologized after a fashion, that was when I telephoned. What was the use of employing a Literary Agent if he didn't do these little things for one (he argued)? Did I suppose that by writing books I should ever get a reputation as a writer? Surely I was not so simple as to suppose that? And good books, too, it wasn't as if I did cosy best-sellers—that would be another matter. No, I was thoroughly unreasonable—if I would not write what the cab-driver and his missus wanted, how could I expect my agent to get me on to every cab-driver's lips? If I committed murder, for instance, why there would be some sense in having a Literary Agent then, it would be giving one's agent a chance, and the Literary Critics too. I had a wooden leg, yes. That went for something. But when had I ever done anything with it except stalk about on it? Had I ever pretended to write my books with my wooden leg? No, of course not—not me! I seemed to think that the Literary Agent was a magician. Agenting was a *mystery* of some sort, it appeared! Anyone would think from the way I went on that I believed the "Literary Agent" had something to do with *literature*!—He was very facetious indeed, very awful. I held my peace, while he rattled on.

Well, he said finally, if I insisted upon that unreal principle (or words to that effect), all he could say was that he would be compelled to wash his hands of me—the only other thing for it that he could see was to fall back upon the *Douanier*: and that as I knew was no longer feasible, because of his majesty "The Baronet."—So there I was!

So there I was—in the midst of these maniacs, and shortly I must find myself in the heart of Asia, unless I did something to arrest my progress, the prisoner of some undesirable outlaw, languishing in his inclement cave.—I knew Humph would carry through his plans—the Chin stood for that. I was *his* prisoner, already, in reality!

It was not that I minded. I favoured bandits rather than not. I did not mind Persia—I might as well be in Persia as anywhere else. But Humph was determined to act upon "The Baronet" basis. — So, although I had not planned it out in detail, I had made up my mind to escape from Humph. I would go along with him; but, if I could, I would give him the slip just as he was going to have me caught. — I watched this great prognathous filibuster laying his plans therefore in absolute silence. I followed all his movements with an astonished attention. Nothing escaped me — but I said nothing. *He was the bandit — I saw that quite well. I saw perfectly that I was in his power. No doubt he had something up his sleeve as well but he had not so far given any indication of what it might be. I was unnerved. I must confess, by his mechanical energy. Yes he Had me in the Chin it could be said, to paraphrase — just as old Val Had me in the Bed. That was the fact of the matter. He had me under lock and key in this monumental feature of his person, as if it had been a castle-keep. Heaven knows if I should ever get out sound in wind and limb! I would do my best, that is all I could promise myself.*

So at the hour appointed, very dispirited, I went to Humph's office. When I arrived (late of course to show my self-appointed keeper he was not my master entirely) the room was full of authors and Gossip Column touts, all touting and talking loudly together. The Fleet Street exchanges landed with a vulgar smack, the repartee rattled like a Tin Lizzie.

Humph broke away from them and rushed up to the door as if at all costs I must be prevented from entering. I must not be allowed to come in — he nearly knocked me over in his charge. My hand gripped in his granite paw, he pushed me back against the wall. I fought him off, it was no use — I was as you can imagine speechless with annoyance: and he never said a word either, for several minutes at least. So we stood, or rather danced or shuffled, up against the wall, he gradually edging and thrusting me back into the corner, which was also the jamb of the door, my hand imprisoned all the while in his fist of stone — wooden and dour and blank, his at once full and hollow face staring up into mine, with never a muscle moving upon its meat-flushed, tanned-hide, surface, with never the shadow of a smile. Meantime his bold brown eyes, his expressive auburn eyes, poured their nonsensical messages — all their open conspiracies and patent long-exploded mysteries — into mine, substituting themselves for his tongue. — In fine, his play-acting had never been of a more tiresome order. I was paralysed with repulsion, as I now shrank stiffly back. At last, in a croaking whisper, this preposterous Jack-in-the-Box stammered with an absurd intentness all of a sudden —

"I say I've got some — I say I've got some — I've g-g-g-g-got some!"

"Yes yes" I hissed. "You've got some."

With infinite precautions so that he should not be remarked, imperceptibly he turned his head, and glanced apprehensively over his shoulder into the room.

"I've g-g-g-got some — I've got some!" he stuttered and panted in a still lower key.

Flattered against the wall, I grinned helplessly at him. He had his stocky hobo-pipe gripped in his masticators. It was injured, at least it was damaged (I was not at all surprised), a strip of flannelette was wound round and round the centre of its stem, puttee-fashion. The sweater, under his jutting nautical blue-serge jacket, had its high collar up, and it swept like a ruff (of plover-egg blue) all round his gigantic chin.

"I've got some — I've got some — I've got some *peep!*" he whispered hoarsely in my face — as if he had been a character at some breathless *démouement*, of some fantastic thriller-serial: and he cast a further anxious and surreptitious — but absurdly sturdy and competent — glance over his shoulder (I was in good hands with him, I could rely on his sang-froid in any emergency!). His hand was as firm as a rock, nay firmer, his chin stuck out a yard from his face, and his eyes betrayed no trace of fear — no reader could doubt that he (or rather she) was in the presence of the hero of the tale.

"I've got some *peep!*" he murmured almost sweetly.

I threw my head back and yawned with the utmost unrestraint.

"I've I've g-g-g-got some *peep — pull!*" lowering his voice until it was in his boots in fact, he told me — opening his eyes extremely wide and staring as if in doubt and hesitation as to whether he should confide in me or not.

"So I see" I said. "I can see that — I thought you said you would be alone?" "I know!" he exclaimed under his breath, flinging a menacing half-glance over his shoulder at the company. "I know old man — isn't it sick-en-ing! Do you mind? I'll get rid of them at once!"

He released me, he fell back. I shook myself, and without looking at him I advanced. I passed down the room. The crowd was collected about the Adams fire-place — it was very cold, the damp cold of Old England that chills you to the bone. I passed on to a window and stood up against it staring out at the River Thames.

I gazed down in horror at the cold and yellow Thames. But I reflected, as I must, that a half mile higher up it was flowing past my Fleur-de-Lys (more or less — it naturally did not encircle the kiosk — it was a good quarter of a mile away from it, but you know how you place things along the course of a river for the sake of convenience). That reflection gave me less satisfaction than it had when last I stood before that massive georgian plate-glass of Humph. The shadow of The Baronet had fallen across our

path, our lovers' walk, as I knew, for the present. Perhaps for some time to come. It made the everlasting autumn of London's river, in sickly movement beneath its dirty mist, still more disconsolate. — In Persia, I had heard, phenomenal blizzards rage for quite half the year — it is intensely cold: but I thought that perhaps as it was July we might expect a little sun now and then. For the first time that day there was an anti-cyclone over Snooty, I cheered slightly up. It was my Lily I confess had made this possible. For now England had not even its *Fleur-de-Lys* — it had *nothing*. I was almost glad to be going to Persia with this extraordinary bandit at my back — depressing as that ruffian certainly could be when he really gave his mind to it.

After a time the authors went away and I turned round. There was old Humph behind the table, filling his pipe from his oilskin tobacco-pouch, which lay belly-up and sagging open, upon the back of a fat book, left there by an author, or forgotten by a news-and-gossip tout. He was looking at me. As he filled his pipe he observed his captive. I yawned heavily at him and sat down, sticking out my leg in his direction. Then I yawned again.

At last Humph addressed me from behind the table.

"Snooty!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" I said very aggressively. "Speak out you son of a bitch! What is it!"

"You are a made man!"

I yawned and gnashed my teeth up and down, as if devouring an invisible club-sandwich at one mouthful.

"I met a feller last night who was in Dunsterforce."

I snorted.

"He was captured by a turcoman bandit."

I groaned.

"But listen — by a bandit who used to wrestle with bulls, in order to keep in training! What do you say to that?"

I shrugged my shoulders and tapped my mouth.

"He's corresponded with the bandit-feller ever since."

I looked at his ceiling.

"He's an awful good feller!" he exclaimed with a hearty throatiness, blinking one eye — "Pat Bostock!"

At 'Bostock' I exploded in an insulting cough.

"He can speak five Persian dialects and he passed first out of the Staff-College in Arab and Copt too."

"In Copt too?" I sneered.

"Snooty!"

"Sir!"

"Pat has cleared everything up for us — he knows Persia inside out!"

"Ah, inside-out!"

"He can speak, as I said —"

"Yes yes!"

"He tells me there's only one bandit left in the whole of Persia!"

"Thank God for that!"

"That is to say his friend — the one who captured him. He's given me instructions how to find his lair. It sounds marvellous. The place is a sort of mediaeval castle. Pat says it's extremely comfortable and the guest-rooms are spotlessly clean. It is far superior to the hotels he says — at least any but those in the capital. When he was captured he always had bacon for breakfast and *asaki*."

"What is that for Heaven's sake!"

"A light Japanese beer — they have it all over the East."

"Have you ever been to the East?"

"No" he answered irritably "I haven't."

I looked over my shoulder out of the window.

"Anyway this bandit-feller —"

"Yes?" I said.

"It appears he makes a point of offering his prisoners nothing but the best."

"It sounds like Sing-Sing."

"The feller believes in making his captives as comfortable as possible. He stints nothing. He has an excellent cellar — he has Irish whisky if you prefer that — Pat thinks Scotch a little on the oily side so he got a case of Irish up from Teheran by return of courier. In a word, he's very hospitable. He's a real white man Pat says."

"What did he mean by that?"

"He's a gentleman."

"What an absurd bandit!"

"Not at all!"

"What does it cost all that?" I asked.

"You don't have to bother about all that — I'll fix all that up. You see you'll have a topping time of it — you'll live like a fighting-cock."

He puffed hard at his disabled pipe — it had a split in it, and some of the smoke escaped through the bandage.

"Pat Bostock" he said slowly "tells me that the bandit-feller's very exclusive. But of course in your case it will be perfectly all right, there will be no difficulty at all."

"You think not?"

"I'm positive there won't! There can't be — Pat Bostock said he was sure the bandit-chap would jump at you —"

"Oh will he?"

"He'll be delighted to have you you know—I told Pat what we're after, all about Mithras."

"Did that interest him?"

"Pat's very much Army and Public School—he's a very keen soldier—I don't think that *Mith-ras*!"

"No I suppose not."

I understood perfectly well what the bandit *jumping at me* meant. It meant all was being worked on Baronetish lines—the Baronet would be *persona grata* in the highwayman's lair, that was the idea.

"Who is going to foot the bill?" I asked.

"I've told you you needn't worry your head about anything. Snooty—leave it all to me. What's the use of having an agent? I'll fix everything up—if necessary I'll pay a small ransom in persian dollars—it wouldn't be much. I could charge it up against you—we're going to make a haul on this book, don't you forget it! It'll be another *Trader Horn* or *Good Companions*." We can afford a ransom—but it won't be necessary."

"Why not? Will the brigand put me up for nothing?"

"No. But if you're captured the government will damned well have to pay!"

"Don't be absurd."

"Of course they will! They can't allow the premier baronet of Scotland to rot in a persian bandit's lair!"

I scowled at him. But a deep look of satisfaction came into Humph's face, while I sat staring at him in scowling astonishment.

"But it's better than that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—well as a matter of fact, the old bandit *pays a commission*."

My astonishment deepened.

"How is that?" I said.

"For a—well you know for a *good subject*—"

"A rich prize?"

"Exactly—he allows something on the ransom."

"That's marvellous isn't it?" I said, scowling still more heavily at him.

"Who does he pay the money to?"

"Well he keeps you until he gets the money."

"Yes?"

"Then he pays you your commission out of it, and supplies free of all charge an escort—he gives you a safe-conduct across the desert to the nearest town.—I've a damned good mind to get caught myself!"

Humph laughed—starting very slowly and ending as if he never intended to leave off, he then stopped with unnecessary suddenness.

"Does Pat Bostock get a commission?" I asked.

"Pat?" He called out *Pat* as if no one with such an open devil-may-care name as *Pat* would be capable of touching a commission. "No, old Pat doesn't get anything—at least I don't think so. As far as I know he doesn't."

"I thought that might be why he kept up the correspondence."

"I don't think so. I think it's only because he took a fancy to the jolly old bandit and sort of keeps in touch with him—you know like that. In memory of a very jolly experience."

"I see."

"Being in the Army, Pat couldn't as a matter of fact."

"Haven't the British Government got wise to him?"

"Apparently not."

"When I refuse the commission will the brigand be offended?"

"But you won't refuse the commission I should hope!"

"Oh. Am I to accept it?"

"I thought you understood that."

"No."

"Of course."

"And I hand it on to you?"

"You give me some of it—I think that's only fair!"

"What percentage? Usual agent's fee?"

"No no. We're in on this on a fifty-fifty basis!"

"Oh."

"Supposing the ransom is four hundred pounds for argument's sake."

"I see."

"It might be much more."

"I thought that didn't sound much—for me I mean."

"No it might be a pretty tidy sum. It will depend on the circumstances a good deal. He might for instance threaten to shoot you. I would work up the Consul-General over that."

I began almost to admire this bleak, this owl-like moron, furnished expressly with a mammoth chin. I gave him a smile at that. This he very much appreciated, and he came round from behind the table, and stood up stiffly quite near to me. Smoke poured from his mouth, nose, and pipe all of a sudden, as if the rapid movement he had effected, in the displacement of his mass through the air, had fanned the smouldering fire within and it had burst forth in smoke.—But the Chin was putting up a smoke-screen only, that was what it was—his dung-brown eyes went disgustingly dreamy, in the heart of the tobacco-smoke cumulus.—What next am I in for, I thought with apprehension. I stood up.

"Have you your visa Snooty?" he asked.

"No. But the visas are arranged for. We shall have them by tomorrow."

"When do we start?"

"Well, could you get ready to start at once?"

"What do you call at once?"

"The day after tomorrow?"

"All right."

"I shan't be able to come."

"No?"

"I'm afraid not."

"I'm very sorry."

"I have to go down to Cornwall again. A girl has got stuck at her last chapter but one. The poor girl's under contract to finish her book by next Wednesday, and she can't move an inch forward, not an inch—she is in an absolute jam."

"I say."

"The words simply will not come!"

"Ha!" I said with considerable aspiration.

"I have to go down, there's nothing for it but that."

"You lucky dog! Is she alone?"

"Absolutely, in a cottage right up on the cliff. She only has one bedroom—I have to sleep in two armchairs—at least I *did*" (very archly) "the first night I was there!"

"The first night!"

His Chin burst into a peal of cromagnon laughter. He began pacing rapidly up and down the room.

"But she has got stuck" he said pulling himself up. "I know she's stuck."

"Mind you don't get stuck old boy!"

He was delighted. The Chin broke into a volley of hahas.

"I'll see to that old man! Trust me!—I've done it before!"

"Oh well you slip in and out easily then of her little cottage—how long will you be?"

"That depends—I have to hold her hands or something while she finishes. I often have to do that. I was down with another one of my clients last week, just when you turned up. She'd got stuck at the opening chapter."

"That was worse I suppose? Did she take much shifting?"

"As a matter of fact it's better when it occurs at the *beginning* of the book."

"Do they ever think better of writing it altogether?"

"I've never known one to give up!"

"I suppose not."

"But there's nothing so bad as the last lap, if you get a *pamse*¹ there—"

"Does the muse always return, upon your appearance on the scene?"

"I seem to have some influence with the muse!"

"I'll bet you have!" I hollered, as roguish as he!

"But women are very stupid about it—they wire for me on the slightest provocation. The one I'm going to see tomorrow is very beautiful, she's really a very beautiful girl. She's only nineteen."

"Is she peachy?"

"What you would call *peachy*! She is like a peach as a matter of fact—a perfect complexion, and a little downy.—I've got a photograph of her."

He went quickly over to his desk and came back with a photograph of a thin, apparently very dark, gossoon,¹ in a loin-cloth, stretching in a graceful dislocation, upon a rocky shore. Humph, grinning from ear to ear, was squatting upon a boulder within easy reach, also in sun-bathing kit.

I held the photograph deferentially before me for a minute or two.

"Is she an author?" I asked.

"She's a damned clever kid!" he said. "I think she's a bit of genius!" he confided.

I put the photograph down upon the table near which I stood.

"Not so bad being a Literary Agent eh what!" I exclaimed in a tone of very hearty flattery. "I suppose you get quite a fair amount of tail, first and last—one way or another?"

Humph blinked (as if his place in the sun were pretty hot and dazzling if it came to that) and laughed stupidly over his jolly agenting, and he showed by his whole manner that it were not for considerations of professional etiquette and a high level of discretion, he could tell me a thing or two about our Writing Girls!

"I suppose those who are not lesbians" I said and stopped.

"You don't think *she* looks like a lesbian do you?" he asked a little taken aback. "I had my suspicions to start with."

"I should think lesbians would like you old chap" I said.

He discharged at me a displeased sort of look I thought and taking up the photograph returned it to the spot where it had originally lain.

"They're not all lesbians, by a long way" he exclaimed a little aggressively, unduly soberly.

"No."

"I could show you two or three who are not anyway!"

"Oh but perhaps it is you have given them back their normal interests!"

"I have a suggestion to make" said Humph very much sobered up, after a fairly sullen interval, during which I yawned at the carpet and aggress-

¹ A breakdown.

¹ A lad (Anglo-Irish).

sively stuck out my mechanical leg. I had driven him back to cover, he had returned and again taken up his position behind the table.

I nodded my head.

"I wonder if you would care to go down and see Rob McPhail?"

I shrugged my shoulders with a slight circular movement, as if I had a parasite camping under my skin.

"And see if you can per-suade him!"

I shook my head.

"To come a—long!" He spoke in dragging nasal tones now, slower at each intermittent spasm, and he softened so much the nigger-brown of what he regarded as his velvet glances, that I turned my head away, feeling a little sick. (Humph's sweetbreads were too much for me!) "To come to Persssh—yal" again (after an insinuating pause that he had overdone so much that I had shuffled about like a restless audience) he negligently drawled.

There was another pause—to allow for the too-too soft impeachment of the persuasive nigger-brown—the seductions of the muted voice—to take effect I suppose. Then again there was a burst of speech.

"With us!" dropping his voice down, to come to us, he almost whispered.

"McPhail won't come to Persia or anywhere else" I said abruptly, to put a stop at once to this sickly comedy.

"But have you asked him?" he gasped in almost a breathless plaintive caress of the atmosphere (or of my ear-drums) by his silken vocal-cords.

"No. I tell you it's no use."

"But supposing I—supposing I—supposing I!"

I looked him up and down, he slightly gasped.

"Supposing I com-mission him!"

I did a tattoo with my mechanical foot during a further preposterous pause.

"To do a persssh—lan—book!"

I shook my head, sitting beneath the eye of this over-mannered auctioneer.

"Has McPhail money?—I've been told —"

I shook my head.

"That's what I thought."

He stepped out from behind the table. I knew quite well why he stood behind the table—it was (when he wished to be impressive) in order to conceal the shortness of his legs. That also was why, as a rule, he moved up so close to one: or else dashed about—that had something to do with that too. But now he stood well off from me and said—

"It might appeal to him—how do you know? It might after all are you sure?"

I gave him such a withering look that he went back behind the table, and became a half-length once again.

"I should be delighted to see McPhail" I said, with a great deal of indifference (not to McPhail). "I would far rather go to McPhail than go to Persia for instance."

"No would you really?"

I tapped with my artificial toe.

"I can understand that" he blurted, after one of his pauses. "Well why don't you go—you can I'm sure!"

"Can what?"

"He will come! I bet he will! I bet he —!"

"Of course I will go—give me my ticket, I will start at once. I ask nothing better!"

"That's splendid!"

I was next compelled to act as audience to Humph in "a brown study." He gnawed the stem of his pipe.

"How about the tickets? Which way are we going?" I demanded rudely.

Humph came forward again from behind his table, almost squaring up to me I thought.

"I will tell you tomorrow!"

He turned on his heel, and continuing the "brown study," started to pace up and down, between the door and where I sat.

"Capital!" I nearly shouted.

I will tell you tomorrow!—I like that! I thought—he would give me my orders tomorrow. It was not I had put myself in his hands was it?—it was he had put me there, which was a very different matter. I had made no resistance—that is quite correct, none whatever. This strange agent was to dispose of me as he thought best—that we understood. I must adopt the status of a servant—all this was to defeat "The Baronet."

I smiled to myself—to be seen and not heard was it?—Certainly certainly! That suited me! *For the duration of the trip!*—was that it? He was "my officer." Right—eehoh: Captain Carter!—I enjoyed this immensely. I grinned up at him, as he bore down upon me, and he grinned back at me.

"Oh by the way Snooty—you haven't told me," he halted his rush (again, what first-class brakes!), "I have never asked you—who is your girlfriend—I mean what's her name—I may have to."

I rather squinted at this. I was not prepared for this. There was nothing against his knowing the name as far as I could see. Still I looked at him without speaking.

"Don't tell me if you'd rather not!" he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I only asked—I only thought!"

"Why not? Of course. Her name is —"

"Please don't trouble to say who she is if you'd sooner."

"Nothing of the sort. Why should I? Of course not!"

"It doesn't matter in the least."

"Her name is Ritter — she is Mrs Ritter. Do you want her thumb-prints?"

"Mrs Ritter?"

"Yes Valerie Ritter."

"But I have her thumb-prints!" he bellowed.

As I had said Ritter his face had undergone a violent change, as if a series of shutters of different sorts and sizes were being swiftly operated upon it — shutting off one expression after another, as soon as each flashed up. Finally he burst into a loud rude laugh.

"Valerie Ritter!"

"Valerie Ritter — yes that's her name, as far as I know" I said savagely — I was in no mood to engage in badinage about old Val of all people. It was no laughing matter: whatever else it might be.

"Valerie Ritter!" he repeated softly as if to himself.

"That's it. Why, do you know her?"

He began pounding about the room again, delivering himself of salvos of robust guffaws, while I watched him with growing displeasure.

"I don't know her old boy — I don't know her!" he said at last, in a half-choke of the most affected sort of spasm of fun.

"Why are you laughing then?" I asked pointedly and indignantly. Had he known her, then indeed it would have been ridiculous to object to his laughter, or to expect anything else. But he did not know her. Therefore his indulgence in offensive peals of laughter was intolerable. It was me he must be laughing at.

He stopped in front of me, fixing me with an eye of rich amusement — an eye, as I have said, of nigger-brown, of all colours that I dislike most in eyes (all the dog-shades in fact, and the Down-in-Dixie varieties).^o

"Have you read her books?" he enquired. "I suppose you have."

"I have" I said, with a sinking feeling.

"Look!" he said, as he went over to his desk. "Look," he pulled open a huge drawer. "I've got a drawer full of them!"

This was very bad! He pulled out manuscript after manuscript. I recognized them only too well! The foolish old girl had I knew been sending the stuff out broadcast in every direction, all over Paris and London. Here was doubtless the result of her industry of the last six months — a sort of sterile, bawdy flux — completely filling a substantial drawer.

He opened the first manuscript, pulling away in facetious puffs at his hospital-case of a pipe. He turned over a few pages, shaking with Army-and-Public-School mirth, until he came to something he was looking for.

Then he burst out into a clap of that particular laughter which the Public School reserves for sex with its capital letter on. The fellow began stamping up and down upon his dwarfish agile stumps. A great increase in the characteristic *taken-short* look of which I think I have spoken was noticeable as he did this. Whether it was that he was indulging in the pantomime of a person glandularly affected, or whether he was in fact provoked (by the perusal of such literature as that of old Val) to wet his bags, I cannot say. I should not be at all surprised if it were the latter.

I pulled him up as best I could — I could not have this going on. He was approaching me, splitting his sides as he came, his finger upon some frolicsome passage.

"I know her books — you need not show me that!"

"No but have you seen *this*!"

(Again I am constrained to suppress some sentences full of expressive words, which at this point he spluttered out, since I refused to look at what he pressed me to read. Val's manner of writing and subject-matter is of a nature as I have already indicated to bring a blush to the cheek of Elinor Glyn^o or put out of countenance a bagman accustomed to travel Lady Chatterley.)

"Yes yes" I said very impatiently indeed "I know — they're terribly funny aren't they — are you her agent too then?"

"I? no — she sends these things to me, I don't know why."

"She sends them to everybody."

"I suppose so. I've heard she does."

"Have you? Does she come round?"

"No. I've never seen her. Once I wrote her a polite note, I suppose she thinks I might place them for her!"

"It is possible."

"It of course would be impossible."

"She's mad. But we all have our weaknesses."

"We certainly all *have*," he said, so pointedly that I yawned at him, very wide indeed.

"Is she pretty?" he asked. "I expect she's as ugly as sin — they always are. I mean those that do this kind of stuff."

"Is that so?"

"That's my experience."

"You ought to know."

"I always refuse to see them when they write like this. When I first began agenting it was different — but I soon found that out."

"It sounds to me a pretty useful rule."

"It really is. But she may be different of course. Is she — perhaps she's pretty? Is she?"

I fixed my eye upon him and said very deliberately –

"She's a very pretty girl indeed!"

"Is she? I don't believe a word of it – I believe she's hideous! No is she pretty really? She must be or you wouldn't know her of course!"

I had seen his eye wandering over my person and it had settled upon my mechanical leg. He did not trouble to disguise his opinion that the chances of a poor cripple having a very pretty girl for a friend were fairly slender, and did not impose a belief upon his mind at all events pointing to the great natural beauty of Valerie Ritter.

"She's peachy!" I said.

"Is she?" He flung the manuscript back into the drawer. "So much the better. – I suppose she is coming?"

I sighed.

"I'm afraid so!"

"Why afraid – don't you want her to?"

"She's coming and that's the end of it."

"Excellent. She's very nice I'm sure" he said with heavy patronage.

"That's as it may be. But it was your suggestion in the first place."

"Was it?"

"It was. So be it on your own head!"

"Oh why! It ought to be rather amusing!"

"Do you think so?"

"Of course. Is she like her books?"

"She is the image of her books. Only of course nicer – everybody is!"

"Thank God yes – what a world it would be if they weren't!"

* * *

I went out of Humph's office far more depressed than I came into it. Now I was in their power, and this one showed it by the high-handed conduct of his stunt. His way of disposing of my person, as if I had been an agent's chattel all my life, made me feel quite sea-sick. – Sold into bondage for a Baronet – to my despotic Literary-Manager! Such abstractions as *The Custom House Officer* and *The Baronet* had overshadowed my personal life, that was the fact of the matter, to such a point that I could no longer call my soul my own. Had not my agent been brought in to rescue me from The Baronet? That was so, and he had sold me to that gentleman, that was the long and short of it. All his astonishing best-seller technique led back to Debreit. What resource! What originality!

On my side I had set my traps – one for Val, one for him. But I found myself badly checkmated. My chances of getting Val off on Humph had sunk to zero. There would be no *getting him in the Bed* – he would not go into the Bed – he had just said enough to show the unlikelihood so that

was love's labours lost – no research-work of that order to enliven the proceedings! As to Val. I was not cross but the old girl had known all about my agent all the time. That was not very good. Why had she kept her counsel? But I on my side should say nothing. Holding my tongue was my only chance with them. I knew that – not a word would pass my lips, about agents, or whatever it was. I would redouble my simple precautions. In fact I would cease to talk at all, except to talk nonsense. As to that I had quite made up my mind. These disagreeable puppets should be given rope with which to hang themselves – separately if they refused to do it together.

As to me, in the charge of these machines, they should – up to the last moment – have their way with me. *Up to the last grain of sand*, when the sands at last ran out.

Bundled off to Persia by them I would veto nothing, they should have their way – I would go through with that, step by step (all but the last step) Okaying order after order, accepting all their stipulations – but always snootily of course, otherwise I should arouse their suspicions.

What was the latest? A nice little commission! I was to be sent down to collect McPhail – given my ticket, packed off the day after next, by this Lunn's Tour of a Book-Agent and Bestseller-Expert. (Should I best-sell if I obeyed this booster? I would affect to think that I suffered all in order that I might best-sell!) But I would catch the train they told me, cross on the boat prescribed – all would be in apple-pie-order, throughout – the aggressive minutes of their time-table followed with guard-robot precision. McPhail was the oasis. – As far as I was concerned in the whole stretch of the proposed adventure the only bright spot at all. But that too I would treat as if under orders. *Duty First* should be written all over me when I got there!

They desired me to be their automaton: *I would in the end become their Frankenstein!* I said this loudly to myself – in these words I said it (against my custom – I am no talker, I do not allow my mind to chatter).

Stepping out heavily into the Strand (up from a flight of stone-stairs, which descended between greengrocers into Adelphi!) I entered the traffic without stopping, and reached the north side with my hat in my hand. I give you this detail because of what next happened to me – something very odd indeed, though you may regard it as a common enough occurrence. Fate played me a little trick. Nothing could ever persuade me that what next took place was not a deliberate trap set by destiny. The natural and familiar scene had been tampered with, and who would deny that everything pointed to its being on my account? – Fate may, quite true, have been setting traps all down the Strand, for Tom, Dick and Harry. But however that may have been I distinctly came into her calculations.

I thought I would go to a basement-bar, it was not far down, opposite the shell of the Cecil.^o At that moment I was upon the safety-island which lies in the traffic at the feet of Charing Cross Hospital^o (full of smashed bodies from the machine-ridden streets) my hat in my hand, as I have said. It had been my intention to go up by Hachette's bookshop and so to the Piccadilly Underground. But I thought of the bar where I could get a good Club-sandwich and a goodish Gin-Flizz so I turned back and went eastward up the Strand. My intestines had thrown up the picture in bold plaster-cast relief of a big chicken-hearted Club-sandwich. My spittle-ducts had squirted with a will and all together at the sight of it: so with the above life-size model, in crisp yellow-crustured impasto, of a super-Club-sandwich swelling inside me (blocked out in wind in mid-stomach—a cave, a receptacle—my thunderous belly had modelled a cavity, with a contour of such an object as a monstrous Club-sandwich, to attract my attention) and with my hat hanging in my hand, I took the route my destiny had traced out.

I stare pretty hard at all the people I meet, as a rule I am not particular. More than once I've got an "Eer! On do yoo fink yoo aint arl starin at!" in response, I don't mind: but I never pass down a big shopping-street like this without stopping to look every once in a while into the shop-windows. I am susceptible to shoppers' fever but there is also my field-work to consider—that must never be lost sight of—therefore I stop, scenting out bargains or for research-purposes. When I was about to pass in front of an important Hatter's^o window on this occasion I observed a stationary crowd.

I seldom see a crowd without pushing firmly into it (if only to break it up—nothing gives me so much pleasure as to disintegrate a crowd). I drive my bulk which is considerable into the thick of it and once there am at no pains to keep still—in a crowd I am a *ferment*. But there were only three or four people really and I got in among them without creating too much disturbance (though they all turned round of course) to examine at short range what they were all staring at in such a stupid way. I just pushed forward and stared ahead at what they had under observation.

What the people were looking at was a puppet. It was a Hatter's show-window and the Hatter by means of this ceremonious mannikin was advertising a new straw hat. This little gentleman had been created for that purpose. He belonged to the personnel of the Hatter.

I approached, as I have said, and I placed my hat upon my head (it may have seemed as a retort) at the moment the puppet removed his, with a roguish civility darting his eye at me as a new-comer—just as I thrust my way in amongst his spellbound admirers.

The puppet was a good size, I have called him "a little gentleman" but

his head at all events was at least of average human scale, I am not sure it was not over. He was not "little." He was a sturdy well-kept puppet. He was fashionably-dressed, in a somewhat loud, I thought, summer-suiting. But in England, he might have argued, where the summer is such as it is, the *summer-suit* has to be a bit on the loud side, and over-summery if anything.

His character interested me at once. It is absurd to say these things (if you insist upon calling them *things*) have no character. Those that are made to-day are, like characters in books, often much more real than live people. Next I observed his movements.

He removed his hat with a well-timed flourish, brought it down in a suitable parabola, twisted it about once or twice, to show off its beauties to us—all this time his face working about in the most expressive dumb show—except that it was not dumb show either, for his lips were in constant movement—he was evidently speaking, in a rather mincing way, not loud, but with his lips, and reinforcing his words, with a consummate salesmanship, by a half-closing, seductive veiling, of his eyes. He slowly winked or blinked once or twice. Then suddenly he opened his eyes wide, in a blank but not uncivil stare, as he ceased his salesman's patter, and stuck his hat down jauntily upon his head. Bowing from the waist once more in our direction, he carried to his eye a monocle, and, turning swiftly, looked up into the ceiling of the shop, then slowly he turned back his head, and scrutinized the door upon his right, smiling slightly to himself. —Then once more he removed his hat, with the well-timed flourish, bowing from the waist and smiling at us, he swept it down—turned it hither and thither, delivering, in well-chosen words, his little lecture—moving his eyes from one to the other of us, seeking to read the effect of his words upon our faces—then straightening himself out, put on his hat again at a somewhat rakish angle in his particular, a little dandyish, manner: raised his eyebrows, to admit of the insertion of the monocle, parted his lips to show a well-kept set of teeth—his smile spoke volumes as to his feelings at his position in the window—his nose was wrinkled slightly as he smiled, and I could swear that his eyes lightened as he looked down for a moment in our direction.

But what struck me most was the enormous *chirp* of this creature. It dominated all his appearance. It alone was non-mobile and lifeless. For the rest, the springs that actuated his lips, nose and cheeks were excellently thought out. It was impossible as one watched him not to feel that he was in some real sense *alive*. At certain moments of course the imperfections of the apparatus would betray him. But is not this the case, for the matter of that, with the best of us?—At other times, as I say, he really deceived us—or at least he deceived me. I stood looking in the deepest astonish-

ment at him. And the illusion certainly had communicated itself to the other people who were there.

I know well enough how I look – no one can tell me anything about that. I have made a careful study of myself. (Externally I am perhaps not unlike Sir Walter Scott or Stendhal – I mean that, as to my cast of countenance, I am no oil-painting.) But of all things, I know to perfection that heavy puzzled look that comes into my face apropos of anything almost! When I am uncertain about something – when for instance my brain has some difficulty in establishing contact with something outside it. That's the time to catch the look I mention! I must look as like an utter simpleton as a man can well be, in the face. If you saw me you would take me for a nobody, a great big puzzled dunce.

But, I have said it. I have literally to drill holes in this sheep's-head of mine before it can get an at all difficult notion, or sometimes any at all, into it properly. In all but purely mechanical things, of an external order (that is my strong suit) I am a profoundly dense person, I cannot help it. Mine is anything but a quick mind. – This may be why I am a *behaviorist*. If there is such a thing as a "soul," I at all events have never been able to catch it on the hop. (But I doubt it.) Again, a notion goes so far in with me and not an inch farther. That is what is oddest of all. It seems to stick in the surface shell. It remains embedded in the bone, quite hard and fast. Nothing will budge it. I have often tried but never been able to.

I understand only too well the meaning of the american "bonehead." Someone – a bonehead I guess! – asked me once upon a time what "bonehead" meant, or how the expression had arisen, and abused the Americans for being *obscure* in their slang. Mine was certainly a dud answer – I had never thought about it – I had just said "bonehead" for "stupid" I guess, like any other expression. But the american chap who first used it may have been a bonehead (and so thought of it) but he was no fool. It was a good word. That chap meant a *head like mine* – just opaque and solid skull, or it feels like that if you happen to own one, as I do.

Ideas come out of the blue, fiercely to get us, like wasps, or like a bacillus or a weevil dropped on a cork. I can feel one *strike* me. Then I feel it get stuck, quite plainly – the thing can make no headway at all. This is my difficulty as a research-worker. Yet ideas like me, if one may say that – I am "susceptible to ideas." But I keep them stuck on the outside of me. They will not penetrate it's no use. – I tell you all this to account for that painful baffled mask I have got. That in its turn affects people's behavior to me, as you can guess. They look at my frowning and puzzled stare and they act accordingly. That is only natural. And I act back –

that's only good sense too. That's "Behavior."

As for the puppet, he went through his evolutions over and over again – each cycle was quite elaborate. I watched him with a painful amazement, attempting to penetrate what he meant, by being what he was. I had replaced my hat – I again removed it, as it happened it was just as he was taking off his. The fellow who was standing at my elbow had been watching me in the plate-glass window I think – I suppose I had pushed him. He had I suppose remarked that I was *partly* mechanical myself. My leg had not escaped his attention in short as it seemed to me, and now something about my manner appeared to amuse him. I became conscious of this. He was looking at *me*, instead of at the puppet. Of course this must have been because of my expression. I was not surprised of course, nor do I mind such creatures examining me as if I were of another clay. That is all in the day's work – the day's *field-work*.

That dull and baffled look you would see if you came face to face with me – heaven avert the omen, you would find it a strange encounter! If I could come out of this paper at you, you would find me a manner of man such as you did not expect I think, you would burst your eyes in your effort to fix me, if I rose from the floor at your feet – terribly *real*, with a whiff of stale tobacco, rough, crippled, with my staring startled difficultly-focussed glances and corn-lemon hair – that tense-as-well-as-dense expression, which when it lifts leaves an empty face behind it – for me to grin with and yawn with. But in the ordinary commerce of life I am always a little astonished if not startled – often I am absolutely amazed. So this Hatter's puppet was large, and in addition to his chin he possessed another characteristic belonging to Captain Carter. Namely, he was all trunk with practically no legs. This was of course in the case of the automaton done in order to give him more solidity and poise, essential in a puppet – also, to make him more startlingly grotesque. But was not that also perhaps the reason for Humph's appearance? It was highly probable, I was constrained to admit.

I had begun smiling to myself as I thought of Humph. And then the puppet turned to me, bowed from the waist, and, raising his hat, smiled in the most formal and agreeable way possible. The fellow was playacting – and what I resented in this comedy was the fact that I knew (or thought I knew) that he was not *real*. There was something abstruse and unfathomable in this automaton. Beside me a new arrival smiled back at the bowing Hatter's doll. I turned towards him in alarm. Was not perhaps this fellow who had come up beside me a puppet too? I could not swear that he was not! I turned my eyes away from him, back to the smiling phantom in the window, with intense uneasiness. For I thought to myself as I caught sight of him in the glass, smiling away in response

to our mechanical friend, *certainly he is a puppet too!* Of course he was, but dogging that was the brother-thought, *but equally so am I!*— And so I was (a very thoughtful and important puppet—wandering in this sinister thoroughfare, in search of an american Club-sandwich—a place in my breadbasket, scooped out in wind, the size of a small melon like a plaster mould).

Now next why exactly had this light-hearted new-comer, standing beside me, been so ready to smile up? The good man would not smile if an acquaintance raised his hat to himself and his wife as they were taking their Sunday walk in their suburb. That would seem perfectly natural to him, quite solemnly he would return the salute. To me *nothing seemed natural*. Often I have smiled upon occasions of that sort. Every day I was smiling hard at such common or garden things. Everything that passed as natural with him, looked exceedingly odd to me. The most customary things in the world struck me continually as particularly ludicrous. *How ludicrous*—or how normal on the other hand—would depend upon how I was feeling at the moment.

I shifted uneasily up and down upon my real leg and my false leg—I had become almost as much a fixture before the Hatter's window as the puppet inside it. The puppet had begun to notice me. His chin grew larger and larger. And the Hatter himself came out to have a look at me on two occasions as I remarked.

There were six of us now. I regarded with a dark astonishment our uneasy superiority, insecure as everything else about us—we outside (wrapped in our thoughts, disturbed in the secret places of our consciousness) with someone there so profoundly of our kind exhibited for our amusement within the show-window. We stood in a contemplative group without on the pavement (rather an absurd collection), the puppet he stood within. He was on show, but we were not.

There was something *absolute* in this distinction, recognized by everybody there excepting myself. I alone did not see it. What essentially was the difference however? The situation was exactly the same, was it not, as that of the animals in their cages at the Zoo. The other animals (who catch them and keep them there) walking about outside the cages, gazing at them talking and laughing at them—that was us over against the puppet. How surprisingly small is the difference between a mandrill and a man! Certainly—but still slenderer was the difference between this stiffly-bowing so-called automaton, and my literary agent, for example.

Obviously the mandrill was a far more complex machine than was this Hatter's automaton, and men were still more complex than the mandrill. But this automaton *looked*, was dressed and behaved itself, far more like

a man than did a mandrill. And that word *looked*, that was for me *everything*.

What was Humph, for instance, more than an appearance? For me he was a fixed apparition. I believed that this creature before me possessed intestines of sawdust. But I knew no more of Humph's intestines (except by hearsay and unwarrantable assumption) than I did of this chap's in the window.

While I watched this creature, who was so like a man, I was in spite of myself beneath the spell of his reality. I could have spoken to him as if he had been one of us outside on the pavement. He was *one of us*, as much as the people at my side, about whom I knew no more than I knew of him, indeed rather less.

Was I certain, for instance, that Humph still existed, now that I no longer had him beneath my eyes? No I was not. That would be indeed an absurd assumption. It was far *more* absurd to suppose him still moving about, and behaving as I expected him to behave, now that I was no longer there, than to suppose him blotted out or dropped out of existence. (When I next saw him he would tell me all the things he had done in my absence of course, but I should know that that was all the merest bluff, of that *quite likely* it was the merest bluff.)

But while Humph was beneath my eyes—how was that really so different? There was just what I saw there, with my eyes, nothing else. And often he seemed to creak, did he not, or to weaken, or slightly wobble, like a dummy suddenly out of its depth—a machine attempting something for which it was not quite fitted. (Constantly there was this sensation of *strain*, was there not?)

There is of course nothing metaphysical or mysterious about these matters. The contrary in fact. So please do not allow yourself to be rebuffed by such a topic, because you believe it to be 'over your head' or anything of that sort. The world that we imagine—that that we call the world of common sense—existing in independence of our senses, is a far odder one, about that there is no question at all, than that world to which we feel ourself constrained to deny reality, what we can neither see, smell, touch nor hear!

Now of course my coming across this particularly vivid dummy did not teach me to reflect after that fashion. Such modes of thinking were habitual with me. It was the teaching of 'Behavior,' and this had become so much a part of myself that I could with difficulty imagine the time when I saw the world with other eyes—when, in the grip of a complex inherited technique, I shut out illusion, and saw what I did not see, and heard what I did not hear! This little fellow in the shop window I was as much at

home with as a keeper at the Zoo is at home with one of the imprisoned creatures delivered into his care. — It was not that at all.

I have told you that when I get ideas into my head, they only go a *certain distance*. But this is true I think of all of us. You are familiar I am sure with how some reasoning impresses you, to a *greater* or to a *less* extent. Far as it may go in, it could always go *farther*, and get a more convincing hold. Sometimes after remaining stationary for years, it will suddenly move a little deeper in. Do you know that sensation? When some idea with which you are perfectly familiar becomes charged all of a sudden with a far greater reality than before, or takes on other and more intensely coloured aspects?

This was what happened with me now. The inner meaning of "Behavior," as a notion, got *in motion* within my consciousness, stimulated I can only suppose by all the circumstances of my pact with Val and Humph. It went in deeper, that is to say. It penetrated into my consciousness *deeper* than it had ever done before. But another thing that had happened was very curious. "Behavior" had as it were turned round upon me as well. As the man at my side observed me putting on my hat, I was for the first time placed in the position of the *dummy*! I saw all round Behavior as it were — for the first time. I knew that I was not always existing, either: in fact that I was a fitful appearance. That I was apt to go *out* at any moment, and turn up again, in some other place — like a light turned on by accident, or a figure upon a cinematographic screen. — And must I confess it? I was very slightly alarmed. I saw that I had to *compete* with these other creatures bursting up all over the imaginary landscape, and struggling against me to be *real* — like a passionate battle for necessary air, in a confined place. And as a result of all this I said to myself that, in my absurd conceit, I was giving Humph far too much rope. To hang himself — that was the idea. But would he not hang me, perhaps?

I turned away from the Hatter's window a dense scowl settling upon my face. As I looked up I saw, in great letters, posted across the façade of a Picture-theatre, the words —

THE MAN-MADE MONSTER.

Beneath this, in smaller letters, was the word Frankenstein. — Was this an accident? Had I not said, as I emerged from the Adelphi, "I will in the end become their Frankenstein?" And I looked back at the Hatter's window as if to extract an answer from the being inside. All chin, he was smiling sardonically at me, as he bowed from the waist and raised his hat with a well-trained civility. I raised my hat, with a certain sweep, bowed slightly, and — my stomach echoing with report after report, thundering

for the Club-sandwich — I continued on my way to the Luncheon-bar. I had a double whisky as soon as I reached it. Immediately I thought of Lily, and in the light of all that had just occurred I understood why it was I so greatly preferred her, and I made out a telegram then and there. That night I insisted we should be together.