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INDIRECT ACTION.

AN IDYLL OF SUBURBIA.

Burton Green is one of the newer suburbs, situated on the fringe of London. I won't specify its precise locality, but will content myself with saying that it is exactly similar in appearance, character, and the habits of its residents to all other new suburbs. That is to say, it is better than all the rest. They all are!

Its houses are mostly of red-brick, with plenty of "rough-cast" thrown in. This gives them a distinctly "Arty" flavour, with the agreeable advantage to the builder—of using up old bricks without anyone—other than the actual inhabitants, when it rains—being a penny the wiser.

The houses have neat little gardens both back and front, the latter inevitably being bounded by a box-hedge, which provides the master of the house unlimited recreation. Any fine evening in Burton Green you may see nearly every father of a family trimming his box-hedge with shears and assiduity.

But enough, for the moment, of Burton Green. Let me direct your attention to one of its inhabitants, Cecil Coombes by name, black-and-white artist by profession.

Cecil was a pensive young man with an air of perpetual preoccupation. His face was pale, features rather uneven, but not unpleasing, and he was addicted to "flowing" neckwear. It must, however, be mentioned in his favour that he did not affect long hair.

To a feminine beholder, I am inclined to think his face would belong to the "interesting" type. There was a wishful—indeed, almost pathetic—expression in his eyes that appealed at once to the human sympathies. Possibly, this was the result of two or three years' experience of drawing for the lighter journals—I don't know.

Cecil lived a quiet and sedate life in diggings. He had a few men-friends, but, strange to relate, none belonging to the "unfair" sex, for he was a man of shy temperament and reserved nature.

Hence this story. One evening in early October Cecil Coombes was in the sitting-room of his lodgings with his two special cronies, Benjamin Panton and Reginald Slice.

"Cecil," said Benjamin, "you're not your usual bright and merry self to-night! What ails thee, my boyee?"

Cecil sighed. "Touch of indigestion?" suggested Reginald, a tall, fair, good-looking, young man, who never had had a day's illness in his life, consequently, who was always imagining himself and other people to be suffering from various complaints.

"No, it's not indigestion," said Cecil.

"Mental trouble," remarked Benjamin. "The lad's got something on his mind. Come on, Cecil, out with it! Have you fallen in love or only committed a murder?"

Cecil was silent. Taking his pipe from off the mantelpiece, he began gloomily to fill it.

"As a matter of fact," he said, at length, "I don't mind telling you—in strict confidence, mind—that I am feeling rather worried over a girl."

"Ah," said Benjamin sagaciously. "I thought as much. I guessed it was heart trouble. Well, if there's anything we can do—"

"You can count on our help, old man," put in Reggie.

Cecil eyed them stonily. "I know," he said. "It's awfully good of you, but I don't see what you can do. The whole thing's so absurd—so hopeless!"

Ben sat back in his chair, and eyed his friend judiciously.

"Tell us the whole truth from the beginning," he said.

"There's really very little to tell," said Cecil, after a short pause. "About three weeks ago I was getting into a 'bus at the foot of Mare's Hill. Before I could get on several passengers had to alight first. Of the others I took no notice but one was a strikingly beautiful girl of about twenty. I don't suppose my eyes rested on her for more than a few seconds, yet, at the same time, something caused my heart to beat wildly!"

"Mm!" murmured Ben.

"Ah!" said Reggie.

"I climbed on to the top of the 'bus' continued Cecil, "and a minute later the

thing started, but, although I turned round to watch the girl, in a very short time she disappeared from sight. But, though the incident was so slight—almost trivial, in fact—I found that all the afternoon and evening I could not rid my mind of the vivid impression made by the girl's face.

"The next morning you would have expected me to have forgotten all about it. To my astonishment, however, such was not the case. Indeed, I breakfasted but lightly, and during the day found it very difficult to keep my mind on my work."

"Remarkable!" said Reggie.

"Most astonishing!" exclaimed Ben.

"The following day, in the afternoon, I went for a stroll, and was returning homewards along Rex Lane—my mind still occupied by the picture of the girl, I might mention—when suddenly I espied in the distance, approaching me—who do you think?"

"Not the—" began Ben.

"Surely, it couldn't have been the—" broke in Reggie.

"Yes, it was the girl herself. Needless to say, I was so excited I could scarcely contain myself. I positively trembled at the knees. There we were, walking steadily towards one another! No wonder I felt my pulses race! Now we were fifty yards apart, now forty, then thirty, after that only twenty. And presently we were only ten yards distant from one another."

"Only ten yards! Fancy that!" exclaimed Ben.

"It's almost incredible!" said Reggie.

"What happened next?" asked Ben, getting so excited that he put the lighted end of his cigarette in his mouth by mistake.

"We passed one another," said Cecil, affecting a spurious calm.

"One moment," said Reggie. "Let me get this right. Do I understand you to say you actually passed each other?"

"That is so," said Cecil. "As we drew steadily closer, I raised my eyes reverently to her face. Great heavens! How beautiful she is! For the fraction of a second, our eyes met in one exquisite, lingering glance. Then she turned her gaze away, and an instant later had passed by."

"When did this happen?" asked Ben.

"Over a fortnight ago. Since then I have seen her on three occasions. Once by the gates of Mopfield Park, once getting out of the train at Burton Green Station, and once by the Council offices."

Ben gazed meaningfully at Reginald.

"Tell me, Cecil," he said, "and please don't misunderstand me, for I merely ask the question to satisfy myself upon all points, have your feelings undergone no change, no modification, since you first saw her?"

Cecil heaved a great sigh. "Though I've only seen her five times, though I've never spoken to her, though I don't even know her name, yet I love her more than life itself!"

During this conversation, Reginald had produced from his pocket a small notebook, and had been taking copious notes. He made an entry at this juncture.

"Lvs hr mr thn life itself," wrote Reginald in his notebook.

Benjamin became exceedingly business-like in his manner.

"Cecil," he said, "if you're quite sure of yourself, and sincerely desire to become acquainted with this young lady, I'm convinced that Reginald can help you."

"But how, my dear chaps?"

"Now," said Ben, ignoring the question, "have you found out where she lives?"

"No—except that I fancy it is somewhere in Rex Lane, for I saw her go into a house there."

"Well, then, that's the first step!"

"What is?"

"Next time you see her follow her, follow her—at a respectful distance, of course—home."

Cecil looked a little shocked.

"I say," he said, "that's not quite the game, what?"

"In the ordinary way," retorted Benjamin, raising a reassuring hand, "no! But this case is exceptional. The girl has not aroused merely your passing curiosity. You've actually fallen in love with her."

"That is so."

"All right. Follow her home; then get a local directory, and look up her name. After that report to us, and we will debate upon the next step."

Cecil pondered for a few minutes, then he said:

"I think you're right, after all. I'll do it. Yes, by Jove, I'll do it! For, by hook or by crook, I mean to meet that girl, and I'll exert every effort to win her!"

Reggie bent over his notebook.

"Hk or ck mns to mt and ext evy efft to wn hr," he wrote, with pursed lips and puckered brow.

II.

The scene now shifts to the interior of a drawingroom in No. 97, Rex Lane. It was the evening following the foregoing conversation. The dramatic personae—as playwrights say—were three sisters, named, respectively, Estelle, Dorice, and Ella. For the benefit of any readers who may be interested in this point, I may add that their surname was Oakley.

Of the three, Estelle was the oldest, Ella the youngest, and Dorice betwixt the two. All three were singularly pretty girls, yet of widely different type of beauty, for Estelle was fair, whereas Ella was dark. Dorice, on the other hand, was neither fair nor dark.

Now, it is a curious and satisfying fact that all three sisters were extremely shy and rather excessively reserved. Curious, because this phenomenon is somewhat rare amongst the feminine gender nowadays, satisfying because it fits the plot of my story.

At the present moment all three were engaged in a like manner. All were knitting jumpers (they were still on the 5 puri and 5 plain section), and all were talking about men—not infrequently all at once.

"I saw him again to-day," remarked Ella suddenly, after a pause in the conversation.

"Mm," murmured Estelle, "I thought you'd got something you were bursting to tell us."

"It makes no difference to me whether I tell you or not," retorted Ella, pouting slightly.

Estelle smiled sardonically.

"Let's hear all about him," said Dorice, in soothing tones. She generally played the part of peacemaker between her two rather temperamental sisters.

"He's rather nice," said Ella pensively. "He was standing at the Triangle, at the bottom of Mare's Hill. He blushed a little when he saw me, and stared awfully hard."

"I suppose he didn't—er—speak?" asked Dorice.

"No. I thought he was going to raise his hat, though, so I looked away, with a speak-to-me-sir-if-you-dare expression. But it was no good. He just gazed with a rather pathetic air. I think he must be very shy."

(Reader: I will spare you unnecessary anguish. The shy gentleman in question was and is, none other than Cecil Coombes, whilst Ella was the girl to whom he had lost his heart.)

"I came home very soon after that," continued Ella, "and I'm certain he was following me. At any rate, he was coming in the same direction, for when I entered the gate I glanced back, to find him about fifty yards behind me, walking up the lane."

The next day was Saturday. It was a mild and sunny afternoon. For October, the weather was quite warm.

About four o'clock, Estelle, by chance, was seated at the front-room window, gazing idly into the street.

As she did so three figures presently arrived upon the focus of her vision—three men. They were on the other side of the road, and when they reached the spot immediately opposite No. 97 they halted, and plunged into what seemed an absorbing conversation.

Something about their demeanour aroused Estelle's curiosity. She retired into the hinterland of the room, where she could regard them without being seen herself.

Estelle stared at them closely for several minutes, when suddenly she was inspired with the meaning of their behaviour.

She started from the room.

"Ella! Dorice!" she cried. "Come here—quickly!"

"What's the matter?" cried Ella and Dorice simultaneously.

"Oh, hurry up!" said Estelle.

The other two came scampering into the room.

"Look!" said Estelle, pointing. "Is he one of those?"

They looked.

"Yes," said Ella calmly. "That's he, The one in the middle, in the brown suit."

"I wonder what they're doing!" said Dorice, trembling with excitement.

All unconscious of being overlooked, Cecil, Ben, and Reginald were standing on the pavement on the other side of the road, deep in solemn confabulation.

"We'd better not stand here," Cecil anxiously. "Let's stroll along Mopfield Park, where we can discuss things at our ease."

The others agreed, and the conversation broke up, to move off in a southerly direction.

Ella and Dorice returned to the house that had been occupying their attention.

But within a couple of minutes Cecil and Co. departing, a slim figure, amongst other things, in a sports coat, tam-o-shanter sort of hat, left 97 Lane.

It was Estelle.

III.

"Let us sit here," said Ben, quietly and secluded."

The trio were in Mopfield Park, by the ornamental lake. They took seats in three small, green chairs, beneath the shade of a tree.

"Now, Ben," said Cecil, "I will go over your plan again, carefully, seemed foolish—not to say, risky—you sketched it out before."

"There's nothing foolish about it," said Ben. "It's simple itself. Personally, I suggest your doing it out as soon as possible—why to-morrow afternoon?"

He turned to Reggie.

"You're not doing anything to-morrow are you?"

The latter nodded negation.

"Well, then," continued Ben, "to-morrow it shall be."

A girl in a vivid sports coat was entering along behind them, but so absorbed were they in their affairs that they noted her.

"You and I," said Ben to Cecil, "that the coast is clear, and there are people about. Then we stroll up to house. You suddenly collapse, as hurriedly drag you into the front den. I rush up to the door, and I loudly. When they come, I explain you've either sprained or broken ankle, and beg to bring you in to fetch a doctor."

"After that I go away. The rest is easy. After about half an hour, I ought to give you time to introduce self and get on a friendly footing, turn with the doctor. Reggie will be doctor, understand? He will have the ankle, and together we'll get you a doctor. After that—well, you've got an entry the house and an excuse for calling, everything!"

Cecil thoughtfully scratched his chin. "It sounds all right," he said. "But I shall look an awful if I'm found out!"

"You won't be," said Ben. "Don't you worry about that, old Reggie and I will see you through. Nothing to fear at all."

"Well," said Cecil, "I'll do it, fair, I suppose. Still, all the same, don't like it."

"Nonsense!" laughed Ben. "A week's time you'll be showering us upon us—won't he, Reggie?"

Reggie laughed acquiescence.

Someone else laughed, too, but were too absorbed to notice her. presently Estelle melted gently away features suffused with an expression of mysterious glee.

The following afternoon, at about quarter to four, the figures of the conspirators lurked at the end of Lane.

"You stay here Reggie," ordered who was stagemanaging the act, "hang around till I come back for you."

Ben then took the diffident, and a what reluctant Cecil by the arm, together, they walked slowly up Rex Lane on the opposite side of the road to 97.

It was a dull afternoon, and for the moment the street was deserted.

At length, the house they sought came in sight. Whilst crossing the road, whispered his final instructions into Cecil's ear.

"Trip on the kerbstone, old man. Put that shout as loud as you like. Put the rest."

At that instant they reached the pavement. When the psychological moment actually arrived, Cecil's heart began to fail him. Could he carry this through. He began to tremble at the knees.

He made a half-hearted attempt to catch his toe on the kerbstone. Then, as that failed, he turned to his assistance, a shove that nearly overbalanced him. Finding himself falling, Cecil for everything in the desire to save himself. He lurched, half-recovered, then fell the ground, with a shock that shook considerably.

In doing so, he twisted his foot. The next second he felt a burning sensation in his left ankle, as though someone were tickling him with red-hot knitting needles.

"Quick!"

Ben seized him roughly by the shoulders and dragged him, through the gate into the front garden of No. 97.