IN OUR METROPOLIS

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First-Novel Library No. 110

HUTCHINSON & CO. (Publishers), LTD.

LONDON :: AND :: MELBOURNE

PRINTED IN
GREAT BRITAIN,
AT THE ANCHOR
PRESS, TIPTREE,
:: ESSEX ::

To
DAVID

PART ONE

I

WITH THE BANGING OF THE FRONT DOOR ELIZABETH ROUSED herself from her lethargy, stretched her slender body and gave a few meaningless though important touches to her hair (important from the stance of *amour propre* and meaningless in constructive value), and was already lounging, arm on mantelpiece, at the entrance of her husband.

"Sweetheart ?" Why was there always that query in his voice when he greeted her ? she wondered.

"Darling !" They embraced. They kissed long and tenderly. She pressed her lips to his chest. He ran impatient fingers through her hair.

"Sherry ?" said he. "Well, now, tell me what you have been doing all day." Ralph Ware sipped at his sherry and picked up the *Evening Standard.*

For a few seconds Elizabeth did not reply. She sipped at her sherry too and wondered if she should dive into her latest Penguin purchase (out of spite). But, of course, he might not notice. . . . Oh, hell !

"If you want me to talk to you, you might at least listen !"

"Sorry, duck." Ralph finished reading the particular item that interested him, then put down the paper with the air of a clergyman laying down his Bible (or other Holy Book) prior to admonishing an inattentive flock.

"Well, did you look for a job ?" Ralph poured himself more sherry.

"No, I did not." Elizabeth snapped out the words. Her lips set in a hard, angry line.

"Well, heaven only knows how you expect to get a job if you never do anything about it. You're not Sarah Bernhardt, you know," he added sarcastically.

"How can I look for a job !" Elizabeth was indignant. "I've got to run the flat ; that horrid Bertram takes up far too much of my time. . . ."

"Nonsense !" Ralph picked up the paper again. "Bertram is a very good child. You've got a maid——"

"Oh, hell! It's no good talking to you. If you had any imagination you'd burst. A child of nine needs some supervision. Besides, I have to teach him something, don't I? Why you won't let him go to the free school——"

"Elizabeth, we've had all this out before. Did you go to a board school? No. Did I? No . . . we can't afford to send him to a decent school at the moment. It's only a temporary arrangement—you know that as well as I do. You've excellent scholastic qualifications and, I'll admit, you're exceptionally intelligent. If it's too much trouble for you to teach your own son—temporarily—to save him from acquiring a bad accent that will handicap him through life, well . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

"I know we couldn't afford to keep him at his private school any longer. Gentlemen in bowler hats queue up at the door all day, as it is; his school fees would be the last straw. My life is just one dun after another." She tore at a feather that was protruding from a cushion.

"Well, if you looked for a job you wouldn't be here to cope with them." Ralph was triumphant.

Here the sitting-room door opened softly and a little figure stood there in pyjamas and dressing-gown, holding a book tightly under the arm.

"Good evening, Father." The childish treble was grave, polite.

"Well, Bertram!" Ralph's eyes lit up with pleasure, he held out his arms in welcome. Bertram turned to his mother.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Mother, but may I have my milk and brown bread and butter, please? I want to go to sleep."

Elizabeth departed obediently for the kitchen.

"Well, old man." Ralph patted the seat next to him. "What have you been doing all day?"

"I did my lessons with Mother. . . ."

"And what were they?" Ralph stretched his arm along the boy's shoulders.

"History . . . and elocution." Bertram became animated. "Would you like to hear me recite, Father?"

"No, no. Not now, old man. I don't think your mother would like you to tax your brain just when you're going to bed. . . . What are you reading? *A Child's History of England!* So you like history, do you? Funny . . . I didn't at your age."

Elizabeth returned with a tray.

"Would you like to eat here, Bertram ?" She set the tray before him.

"Thank you, Mother." The little boy drank and ate in silence.

When he had finished he wiped his mouth and hands carefully on a paper napkin, picked up his book and went solemnly to the door.

"Good night, Father; good night, Mother. . . ." He closed the door softly behind him.

"Thank God for that ! Smug little brute." Elizabeth lit a cigarette.

"Elizabeth, please !" Ralph was indignant.

"Try spending some time with him and see how you feel about him afterwards. Why women are expected automatically to dote on the product of their wombs, heaven only knows. That child is a common or garden person with growing intelligence and a very definite personality. I'd hate to be called upon to make any supreme sacrifice for him—I'd make it all right ; that kind of thing goes with my sex. But do at least let me be honest with you. I naturally never let him see my feelings. And of course I'm fond of him—in spite of himself."

"Eton will knock him into shape."

"Your sort of shape ?"

"If you're going to be rude, I may as well go out."

"And leave me to sit in with the child ? Like hell, you will. If you go out, then I shall go out too."

"Of course, if you're going to blackmail me, there's nothing more to be said."

Ralph concentrated on the paper, his manner haughty, though injured. Elizabeth sat sullenly, hurt, angry in a dumb, helpless way. She searched her mind savagely for possible escape. If she flounced into the night she had no place to go, and no money with which to buy even temporary respite in a restaurant. If only she could get a job ! Why could not Ralph see some of the obstacles that confronted her ? Certainly she had a daily maid, but it was her job, Elizabeth's, to see that the maid did her job.

"Something's burning !" Ralph flung down the paper and started to his feet.

"It's only the dinner." Elizabeth was weary.

"Only the dinner! Only the dinner!" Ralph shrilled to a high crescendo. "Just the kind of thing you would say. Of all the hopeless, helpless incompetents . . ." He banged out of the room and into the kitchen.

While sounds of culinary efforts being made emanated through the wall Elizabeth stared dully at her reflection in the reproduction Italian style mirror. Well, she reflected, since she had had the job of fixing the vegetables and putting the meat in a position where it could achieve burning (as opposed to remaining raw) she felt she may as well be in at the death.

She joined Ralph in the kitchen.

"You've ruined the meat," he accused her.

She remained silent and mashed the potatoes with milk and butter, feeling a little thrill when their sallow colour turned to a creamy mess.

"We'll eat here." Ralph was definite. "I hate eating in the kitchen, but I'm standing for no more of your tantrums."

Elizabeth threw a gay bit of Basque linen over the table.

"You mean," she said drily, "that you're not taking a chance on having to carry the whole thing into the sitting-room. Suits me."

He carved with delicacy and skill, wincing over the scorched skin of what once had been a live lamb in some clime overseas. He sat and ate solemnly as though he were already a member of the Orleans Club.

Elizabeth longed to chatter. Small talk. She forbore.

"Coffee?" She banged the kettle on the stove and clattered the cups on a tray.

"We'll have it in the sitting-room, don't you think?"

She stood waiting for the kettle to boil while he toiled with the remains of some very stale cheese which had been destined that night to furnish a Woolworth mousetrap, but to which Elizabeth did not feel it diplomatic to refer. Choking back a giggle that was doing its best to emerge, she poured boiling water on to the coffee, then carried the tray demurely through the door, while Ralph politely held it open for her.

Elizabeth poured the coffee, then, crouched on a *prie-dieu*, stirred up the fire, scorching herself in its blaze. Ralph devoured the rest of the *Evening Standard*, then poured himself his customary after-dinner nightcap glass of beer. He seized the *Daily Express*, which he had read from cover to cover at breakfast.

"Chewing the cud !" reflected Elizabeth, but did not voice her reflection.

She stood and slowly shed her garments one by one until she was naked, basking in the heat of the fire.

"Sweetie, get my nightdress and dressing-gown, will you ?"

Ralph looked up from his paper.

"Elizabeth, for heaven's sake ! Are you mad ? Bertram might walk in."

"And so what ! Don't be so disgustingly middle-class. He grew here, didn't he ?" She slapped herself on the belly.

"That's no reason to shock him in this disgraceful manner."

"He's not likely to walk in, idiot, and I promise to conceal all the facts of life from him so that he can get all the information required from the lavatories at Eton. But please get my dressing-gown."

Ralph performed the errand with hurried horror. He listened outside Bertram's door and made sure of his even breathing. He flung his wife her night-clothes with some relief.

"Bertram's asleep," he told her, "but you weren't to know that when you started this sort of thing."

"What sort of thing ?" Elizabeth drew her nightdress slowly down. Its ice-blue colour enhanced the glossy red of her hair. Ralph studied her for a second or two. No one could deny her loveliness, he told himself. And in the subdued lighting, her slender body outlined by the clinging fragility of her gown, she looked like a girl, for all her twenty-eight years. His eyes travelled upwards to her small firm breasts, to her vivid face framed in its halo of fiery hair.

"Darling"—for a second a slight frown showed itself—"your parting's black——"

"I've no doubt it's continued in my soul !" She turned and studied it in the mirror.

"You're right," she affirmed, "except it's my idea of green. I'll have to get it fixed tomorrow—that is, if you really want me to get a job. Only stars can get away with such whimsey. . . . But, darling"—she crossed over and curled herself into a ball beside him on the chesterfield—"I want you to remember something. And tell all your friends. No gentleman ever comments on a lady's hair if he's seen her in the nude. It's sort of hitting below the belt, d'you see. . . ."

II

IT WAS ELIZABETH WHO WOKE UP FIRST. WITH THE realization of the comfortable warmth of her bed and Ralph's body curiously intertwined with hers came the insistent ringing of the door-bell. She raised herself gently on her elbows, so as not to disturb Ralph, and looked at the clock. Half past eight! Heavens, they had overslept! A long peal on the bell again. Ada came at nine, the postman at eight. A cold shiver manifested itself in her spine. A writ.

She sank back miserably. Soon he would go away. Ralph would be pleased and feel rather as though he personally had achieved something. Ralph was an escapist. But he would return, they always did. . . . She touched Ralph's arm.

"Have you made tea yet?" He kissed her on the cheek.

"Someone's ringing the door-bell," she whispered.

"Who is it?" he whispered back.

"I don't know, but I suspect the worst. Some chap flaunting a writ."

"Well, keep quiet. Damned impertinence calling at this hour. I refuse to see anyone."

He lay back pompously on the pillows renewing his attack on the *Evening Standard* which he had brought to bed with him the night before.

"My God! My God!" Elizabeth scrambled out of bed in a panic. "Bertram!"

"What's the matter? What do you mean?" Ralph was alarmed.

"He's gone to the door. Now we're dished."

"I don't care if he has." Ralph was icy. "I refuse to see people at the door—particularly at this hour. If they want me, they can write."

He was interrupted by Bertram knocking on their door.

"Come in." Elizabeth's voice was low.

Bertram, bathed and dressed, came in a little nervously.

"Good morning, Mother; good morning, Father. If

you please, there's a gentleman to see Father. He's waiting in the hall."

"Well, tell him to go away. What the devil does he mean, calling on me when I'm in bed! Tell him to go away at once."

"Hush!" Elizabeth put on her dressing-gown and slippers. "I'll go. It's all right, old man!" She patted Bertram's head. "But don't answer the door, sweetie, unless you're told to—and never early in the morning. The postman, of course, is an exception, and you must rely on your psychic senses to know it's him, as modern flats have deprived him of his good old-fashioned, unmistakable knock."

It was a nasty little man waiting in the hall. Tough, and at one with his job. Well seasoned, reflected Elizabeth.

"I'm afraid you can't see Mr. Ware." She led the attack. "He is not up yet. I suppose you couldn't call at a more convenient hour?"

The nasty little man winked at her. "I like to catch them early." He grinned, a horrid slow grin.

"Fisherman?" Elizabeth queried ingenuously.

The nasty little man's manner became nastier.

"I'll wait," he snapped.

"Not in here," rejoined Elizabeth gently, "but"—she opened the front door and motioned to the passage beyond—"you can hang about there all day—that is, if the porter doesn't object."

"Now, look here!" The little man raised his voice.

"Those tactics are no good. They won't bring my husband here. But I can deal with you . . ." Elizabeth sounded and looked grim.

The little man muttered under his breath and moved towards the open door, which closed upon him with indecent haste.

Elizabeth was trembling badly when she went into the kitchen. Bertram joined her.

"Please, Mother, Father says can he have his tea?"

Elizabeth bit back an angry reply.

"Yes, darling, the kettle won't take long to boil. Look, here's your orange juice." She took a glassful out of the ice-box. "Don't forget to put your glucose in. Would you like a poached egg?"

"Please, Mother."

"Well, I'll fix yours now as I expect you're hungry, and

Father and I bath before breakfast. I expect Father would like the paper. Will you take it to him ? Then I'll make the tea, and you can take that in, and I'll have your breakfast all ready by the time you're back."

Bertram went off obediently.

Elizabeth took much pride in her poached eggs, which she cooked with some skill, and the intrigue of retrieving it intact from the saucepan did much to restore her slightly harassed nerves.

"There !" She served it prettily on a plate.

"Thank you, Mother."

Elizabeth sped off to the bedroom, consumed with a sudden overwhelming lust for tea.

"Well." Ralph, lolling back on the pillows, sipping tea and intent on the *Daily Express*, was redundant with good humour.

"What did he want, duck ?"

"You !" Elizabeth poured herself a cup of warm tea. "Ugh !"

"Don't be facetious. Where was he from ?"

"Missouri."

Ralph flung the paper down. "Of all the irritating, useless—didn't you have the sense to ask him what his business was ?"

Elizabeth just overcame her desire to fling her cup at him.

"Do I hate your guts ! I'm going to take a bath."

"No, you're not. I'm late for the office now."

"I can't help that. If you were so pressed you could have started to bath while I was cooking Bertram's breakfast."

"You could have saved time by cooking mine as well."

"T's . . . t's. So I could an' all. How thoughtless of me."

She made a sudden rush at the door, along the passage and into the bathroom, slamming the door and bolting it behind her. Ralph had followed in hot pursuit. He rattled the handle fiercely.

"Shan't be more than ten minutes," Elizabeth's voice rang out above the sound of the running water.

Ralph looked fearfully round to make sure that Bertram was out of earshot, then, putting his mouth close to the crack of the door:

"Bitch!" he muttered fiercely.

"Good morning, sir!"

He started a trifle foolishly. He had not heard Ada arrive. He pulled up his pyjama trousers, which had slipped half-way down his buttocks.

"Good morning—er—Ada."

"Can I do anything, sir?"

"Yes. . . . Scramble me three eggs and make some coffee. I'm in a hurry."

"Yes, sir."

Ralph strode back to the bedroom with as much dignity as his rumpled condition allowed, bundled back into bed and awaited his breakfast with resignation.

Bertram tapped on the door.

"Father."

"Well, what is it?" Ralph disentangled himself irritably from the *Daily Express*.

"Please can I come in?"

"Yes." There were ten degrees of frost on his tone.

An eager, vital Bertram appeared.

"Would you like me to recite to you, Father—sort of practice for my lesson this morning? . . ."

Ralph stifled an inward groan. Curse Elizabeth for pinching the bath. But the child's eager, trusting eyes defeated him.

"Well, only until Ada brings my breakfast, then," he agreed cautiously.

"But, Father, I can't hurry. . . . There's the expression, you know, and I'm on a classified passage now. I express mirth, you see. Can I begin? And, Father, please, even if Ada should bring your breakfast in, I won't be disturbed, if you don't mind, Father?"

At this moment Ada appeared with a tray, with Elizabeth bounding behind her.

"Ada, make me some fresh tea—no, breakfast. Pig!" She addressed the offensive term to Ralph, who was about to tackle his pile of scrambled eggs.

Ralph ignored her.

"Mother, Father would like me to recite to him."

"Would he? Good! Then we may as well do your lesson now and kill two birds with one stone, shall we?"

Ralph swallowed some hot egg hastily.

"Wouldn't it be better if Bertram left you in peace wh you dress ?"

"Oh, I can make up my face. I needn't dress yet. Th birds felled with the same old brick. Fire away, old man. . Do you remember what I told you ?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Good thing you do, because I don't—I haven't got t book here."

Bertram cleared his throat and stood neatly and easily.

"This is from *Romeo and Juliet*, a play by Willia Shakespeare," he announced. "It occurs in Act one, sce four, and it's expressive of mirth."

Hereupon Bertram contorted himself into outward se blance of bursting with glee while rocking with laughter a began :

> "O, then, I see Queen Mab hath been with you.
> She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
> In shape no bigger than an agate-stone
> On the forefinger of an alderman,
> Drawn with a team of little atomies
> Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep ;
> Her waggon-spokes——"

"One moment, please," Ralph interrupted him, and t expression of glee faded away. "Have you the remote understanding of what you were reciting ?"

"What do you mean, Father ?"

"I mean, what do you mean ? Do you understand wh your recitation was all about ?"

Bertram's face fell.

Elizabeth waved her lipstick in mid air. "Ralph, don vex the child. He recited that passage extraordinarily we and his gesture was good, too. . . . Go and eat an appl sweetie. . . ." She dismissed Bertram and turned her atte tion exclusively to Ralph. "I'm not taking him through the passages for anything other than emotional expression, and doesn't matter in the least whether he understands it or no I don't myself, if it comes to that. . . . It's the only tex book on Elocution I've got. Something less advanced woul be better, I'll admit, but we're too broke to buy one."

"Why waste your time and his on such a useless study ?"

"His diction has improved no end—and his deportment.

"And you're teaching him to make fancy gestures all over the place. Kindly stop that kind of nonsense and help him with studies of some value. Arithmetic, for instance."

Elizabeth looked at him pityingly. "He can teach me that. We do history most of the time." She spat in her eye-black.

"And what about geography? I don't suppose he's heard of there being a few other countries on the map?"

"Don't be absurd. Geography went out when Hitler came in. What's the good of learning anything about Central Europe with him nipping about in frantic fashion, changing the boundaries out of caprice every five minutes or so?"

"I'm worried about the boy. I wish to heaven we hadn't had to take him away from his school."

Elizabeth sipped at her tea.

"I am doing my best. It won't hurt him to learn elocution —and he really enjoys it."

"Betsey!" Ralph stuck one thin leg out of bed. "You don't suppose he'll want to be an actor?"

They gazed at each other with serious awe-stricken faces.

"Keep your fingers crossed," warned Elizabeth; "Freddie Bartholomew—phew!"