The Man Upstairs

P. G. Wodehouse

There were three distinct stages in the evolution of Annette Brougham's attitude towards the knocking in the room above. In the beginning it had been merely a vague discomfort. Absorbed in the composition of her waltz, she had heard it almost subconsciously. The second stage set in when it became a physical pain like red-hot pincers wrenching her mind from her music. Finally, with a thrill in indignation, she knew it for what it was—an insult. The unseen brute disliked her playing, and was intimating his views with a boot-heel.

Defiantly, with her foot on the loud pedal, she struck—almost slapped—the keys once more.

'Bang!' from the room above. 'Bang! Bang!'

Annette rose. Her face was pink, her chin tilted. Her eyes sparkled with the light of battle. She left the room and started to mount the stairs. No spectator, however just, could have helped feeling a pang of pity for the wretched man who stood unconscious of imminent doom, possibly even triumphant, behind the door at which she was on the point of tapping.

'Come in!' cried the voice, rather a pleasant voice; but what is a pleasant voice if the soul be vile?

Annette went in. The room was a typical Chelsea studio, scantily furnished and lacking a carpet. In the centre was an easel, behind which were visible a pair of trousered legs. A cloud of grey smoke was curling up over the top of the easel.

'I beg your pardon,' began Annette.

'I don't want any models at present,' said the Brute. 'Leave your card on the table.'

'I am not a model,' said Annette, coldly. 'I merely came—'

At this the Brute emerged from his fortifications and, removing his pipe from his mouth, jerked his chair out into the open.

'I beg your pardon,' he said. 'Won't you sit down?'

How reckless is Nature in the distribution of her gifts! Not only had this black-hearted knocker on floors a pleasant voice, but, in addition, a pleasing exterior. He was slightly dishevelled at the moment, and his hair stood up in a disordered mop; but in spite of these drawbacks, he was

quite passably good-looking. Annette admitted this. Though wrathful, she was fair.

‘I thought it was another model,’ he explained. ‘They’ve been coming in at the rate of ten an hour ever since I settled here. I didn’t object at first, but after about the eightieth child of sunny Italy had shown up it began to get on my nerves.’

Annette waited coldly till he had finished.

‘I am sorry,’ she said, in a this-is-where-you-get-yours voice, ‘if my playing disturbed you.’

One would have thought nobody but an Eskimo wearing his furs and winter under-clothing could have withstood the iciness of her manner; but the Brute did not freeze.

‘I am sorry,’ repeated Annette, well below zero, ‘if my playing disturbed you. I live in the room below, and I heard you knocking.’

‘No, no,’ protested the young man, affably; ‘I like it. Really I do.’

‘Then why knock on the floor?’ said Annette, turning to go. ‘It is so bad for my ceiling,’ she said over shoulder. ‘I thought you would not mind my mentioning it. Good afternoon.’

‘No; but one moment. Don’t go.’

She stopped. He was surveying her with a friendly smile. She noticed most reluctantly that he had a nice smile. His composure began to enrage her more and more. Long ere this he should have been writhing at her feet in the dust, crushed and abject.

‘You see,’ he said, ‘I’m awfully sorry, but it’s like this. I love music, but what I mean is, you weren’t playing a *tune*. It was just the same bit over and over again.’

‘I was trying to get a phrase,’ said Annette, with dignity, but less coldly. In spite of herself she was beginning to thaw. There was something singularly attractive about this shock-headed youth.

‘A phrase?’

‘Of music. For my waltz. I am composing a waltz.’

A look of such unqualified admiration overspread the young man’s face that the last remnants of the ice-pack melted. For the first time since they had met Annette found herself positively liking this blackguardly floor-smiter.

‘Can you compose music?’ he said, impressed.

‘I have written one or two songs.’

‘It must be great to be able to do things—artistic things, I mean, like composing.’

‘Well, you do, don’t you? You paint.’

The young man shook his head with a cheerful grin.

‘I fancy,’ he said, ‘I should make a pretty good house-painter. I want scope. Canvas seems to cramp me.’

It seemed to cause him no discomfort. He appeared rather amused than otherwise.

‘Let me look.’

She crossed over to the easel.

‘I shouldn’t,’ he warned her. ‘You really want to? Is this not mere recklessness? Very well, then.’

To the eye of an experienced critic the picture would certainly have seemed crude. It was a study of a dark-eyed child holding a large black cat. Statisticians estimate that there is no moment during the day when one or more young artists somewhere on the face of the globe are not painting pictures of children holding cats.

‘I call it “Child and Cat”,’ said the young man. ‘Rather a neat title, don’t you think? Gives you the main idea of the thing right away. That,’ he explained, pointing obligingly with the stem of his pipe, ‘is the cat.’

Annette belonged to that large section of the public which likes or dislikes a picture according to whether its subject happens to please or displease them. Probably there was not one of the million or so child-and-cat eyesores at present in existence which she would not have liked. Besides, he had been very nice about her music.

‘I think it’s splendid,’ she announced.

The young man’s face displayed almost more surprise than joy.

‘Do you really?’ he said. ‘Then I can die happy—that is, if you’ll let me come down and listen to those songs of yours first.’

‘You would only knock on the floor,’ objected Annette.

‘I’ll never knock on another floor as long as I live,’ said the ex-brute, reassuringly. ‘I hate knocking on floors. I don’t see what people want to knock on floors *for*, anyway.’

Friendships ripen quickly in Chelsea. Within the space of an hour and a quarter Annette had learned that the young man’s name was Alan Beverley (for which Family Heraldic affliction she pitied rather than despised him), that he did not depend entirely on his work for a living, having a little money of his own, and that he considered this a fortunate thing. From the very beginning of their talk he pleased her. She found him an absolutely new and original variety of the unsuccessful painter. Unlike Reginald Sellers, who had a studio in the same building, and sometimes dropped in to drink her coffee and pour out his troubles, he did not attribute his non-success to any malice or stupidity on the part of the public. She was so used to hearing Sellers lash the Philistine and hold forth on unappreciated merit that she could hardly believe the miracle when, in answer to a sympathetic bromide on the popular lack of taste in Art, Beverley replied that, as far as he was concerned, the public showed strong good sense. If he had been striving with every nerve to win her esteem, he could not have done it more surely than with that one remark. Though she invariably listened with a sweet patience which encouraged them to continue long after the point at which she had begun in spirit to throw things at them, Annette had no sympathy with men who whined. She herself was a fighter. She hated as much as anyone the sickening blows which Fate hands out to the struggling and ambitious; but she never made them the basis of a monologue act. Often, after a dreary trip round the offices of the music-publishers, she would howl bitterly in secret, and even gnaw her pillow in the watches of the night; but in public her pride kept her unvaryingly bright and cheerful.

Today, for the first time, she revealed something of her woes. There was that about the mop-headed young man which invited confidences. She told him of the stony-heartedness of music-publishers, of the difficulty of getting songs printed unless you paid for them, of their wretched sales.

‘But those songs you’ve been playing,’ said Beverley, ‘they’ve been published?’

‘Yes, those three. But they are the only ones.’

‘And didn’t they sell?’

‘Hardly at all. You see, a song doesn’t sell unless somebody well known sings it. And people promise to sing them, and then don’t keep their word. You can’t depend on what they say.’

‘Give me their names,’ said Beverley, ‘and I’ll go round tomorrow and shoot the whole lot.

But can't you do anything?'

'Only keep on keeping on.'

'I wish,' he said, 'that any time you're feeling blue about things you would come up and pour out the poison on me. It's no good bottling it up. Come up and tell me about it, and you'll feel ever so much better. Or let me come down. Any time things aren't going right just knock on the ceiling.'

She laughed.

'Don't rub it in,' pleaded Beverley. 'It isn't fair. There's nobody so sensitive as a reformed floor-knocker. You will come up or let me come down, won't you? Whenever I have that sad, depressed feeling, I go out and kill a policeman. But you wouldn't care for that. So the only thing for you to do is to knock on the ceiling. Then I'll come charging down and see if there's anything I can do to help.'

'You'll be sorry you ever said this.'

'I won't,' he said stoutly.

'If you really mean it, it *would* be a relief,' she admitted. 'Sometimes I'd give all the money I'm ever likely to make for someone to shriek my grievances at. I always think it must have been so nice for the people in the old novels, when they used to say: "Sit down and I will tell you the story of my life." Mustn't it have been heavenly?'

'Well,' said Beverley, rising, 'you know where I am if I'm wanted. Right up there where the knocking came from.'

'Knocking?' said Annette. 'I remember no knocking.'

'Would you mind shaking hands?' said Beverley.

A particularly maddening hour with one of her pupils drove her up the very next day. Her pupils were at once her salvation and her despair. They gave her the means of supporting life, but they made life hardly worth supporting. Some of them were learning the piano. Others thought they sang. All had solid ivory skulls. There was about a teaspoonful of grey matter distributed among the entire squad, and the pupil Annette had been teaching that afternoon had come in at the tail-end of the division.

In the studio with Beverley she found Reginald Sellers, standing in a critical attitude before the easel. She was not very fond of him. He was a long, offensive, patronizing person, with a

moustache that looked like a smear of charcoal, and a habit of addressing her as ‘Ah, little one!’

Beverley looked up.

‘Have you brought your hatchet, Miss Brougham? If you have, you’re just in time to join in the massacre of the innocents. Sellers has been smiting my child and cat hip and thigh. Look at his eye. There! Did you see it flash then? He’s on the warpath again.’

‘My dear Beverley,’ said Sellers, rather stiffly, ‘I am merely endeavouring to give you my idea of the picture’s defects. I am sorry if my criticism has to be a little harsh.’

‘Go right on,’ said Beverley, cordially. ‘Don’t mind me; it’s all for my good.’

‘Well, in a word, then, it is lifeless. Neither the child nor the cat lives.’

He stepped back a pace and made a frame of his hands.

‘The cat now,’ he said. ‘It is—how shall I put it? It has no—no—er—’

‘That kind of cat wouldn’t,’ said Beverley. ‘It isn’t that breed.’

‘I think it’s a dear cat,’ said Annette. She felt her temper, always quick, getting the better of her. She knew just how incompetent Sellers was, and it irritated her beyond endurance to see Beverley’s good-humoured acceptance of his patronage.

‘At any rate,’ said Beverley, with a grin, ‘you both seem to recognize that it is a cat. You’re solid on that point, and that’s something, seeing I’m only a beginner.’

‘I know, my dear fellow; I know,’ said Sellers, graciously. ‘You mustn’t let my criticism discourage you. Don’t think that your work lacks promise. Far from it. I am sure that in time you will do very well indeed. Quite well.’

A cold glitter might have been observed in Annette’s eyes.

‘Mr Sellers,’ she said, smoothly, ‘had to work very hard himself before he reached his present position. You know his work, of course?’

For the first time Beverley seemed somewhat confused.

‘I—er—why—’ he began.

‘Oh, but of course you do,’ she went on, sweetly. ‘It’s in all the magazines.’

Beverley looked at the great man with admiration, and saw that he had flushed uncomfortably. He put this down to the modesty of genius.

‘In the advertisement pages,’ said Annette. ‘Mr Sellers drew that picture of the Waukeesy Shoe and the Restawhile Settee and the tin of sardines in the Little Gem Sardine advertisement. He is very good at still life.’

There was a tense silence. Beverley could almost hear the voice of the referee uttering the count.

‘Miss Brougham,’ said Sellers at last, spitting out the words, ‘has confined herself to the purely commercial side of my work. There is another.’

‘Why, of course there is. You sold a landscape for five pounds only eight months ago, didn’t you? And another three months before that.’

It was enough. Sellers bowed stiffly and stalked from the room.

Beverley picked up a duster and began slowly to sweep the floor with it.

‘What are you doing?’ demanded Annette, in a choking voice.

‘The fragments of the wretched man,’ whispered Beverley. ‘They must be swept up and decently interred. You certainly have got the punch, Miss Brougham.’

He dropped the duster with a startled exclamation, for Annette had suddenly burst into a flood of tears. With her face buried in her hands she sat in her chair and sobbed desperately.

‘Good Lord!’ said Beverley, blankly.

‘I’m a cat! I’m a beast! I hate myself!’

‘Good Lord!’ said Beverley, blankly.

‘I’m a pig! I’m a fiend!’

‘Good Lord!’ said Beverley, blankly.

‘We’re all struggling and trying to get on and having hard luck, and instead of doing what I

can to help, I go and t-t-taunt him with not being able to sell his pictures! I'm not fit to live! *Oh!*'

'Good Lord!' said Beverley, blankly.

A series of gulping sobs followed, diminishing by degrees into silence. Presently she looked up and smiled, a moist and pathetic smile.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'for being so stupid. But he was so horrid and patronizing to you, I couldn't help scratching. I believe I'm the worst cat in London.'

'No, this is,' said Beverley, pointing to the canvas. 'At least, according to the late Sellers. But, I say, tell me, isn't the deceased a great artist, then? He came curveting in here with his chest out and started to slate my masterpiece, so I naturally said, "What-ho! 'Tis a genius!" Isn't he?'

'He can't sell his pictures anywhere. He lives on the little he can get from illustrating advertisements. And I t-taunt—'

'*Please!*' said Beverley, apprehensively.

She recovered herself with a gulp.

'I can't help it,' she said, miserably. 'I rubbed it in. Oh, it was hateful of me! But I was all on edge from teaching one of my awful pupils, and when he started to patronize you—'

She blinked.

'Poor devil!' said Beverley. 'I never guessed. Good Lord!'

Annette rose.

'I must go and tell him I'm sorry,' she said. 'He'll snub me horribly, but I must.'

She went out. Beverley lit a pipe and stood at the window looking thoughtfully down into the street.

It is a good rule in life never to apologize. The right sort of people do not want apologies, and the wrong sort take a mean advantage of them. Sellers belonged to the latter class. When Annette, meek, penitent, with all her claws sheathed, came to him and grovelled, he forgave her with a repulsive magnanimity which in a less subdued mood would have stung her to renewed pugnacity. As it was, she allowed herself to be forgiven, and retired with a

dismal conviction that from now on he would be more insufferable than ever.

Her surmise proved absolutely correct. His visits to the newcomer's studio began again, and Beverley's picture, now nearing completion, came in for criticism enough to have filled a volume. The good humour with which he received it amazed Annette. She had no proprietary interest in the painting beyond what she acquired from a growing regard for its parent (which disturbed her a good deal when she had time to think of it); but there were moments when only the recollection of her remorse for her previous outbreak kept her from rending the critic. Beverley, however, appeared to have no artistic sensitiveness whatsoever. When Sellers savaged the cat in a manner which should have brought the S.P.C.A. down upon him, Beverley merely beamed. His long-sufferingness was beyond Annette's comprehension.

She began to admire him for it.

To make his position as critic still more impregnable, Sellers was now able to speak as one having authority. After years of floundering, his luck seemed at last to have turned. His pictures, which for months had lain at an agent's, careened like crippled battleships, had at length begun to find a market. Within the past two weeks three landscapes and an allegorical painting had sold for good prices; and under the influence of success he expanded like an opening floweret. When Epstein, the agent, wrote to say that the allegory had been purchased by a Glasgow plutocrat of the name of Bates for one hundred and sixty guineas, Sellers' views on Philistines and their crass materialism and lack of taste underwent a marked modification. He spoke with some friendliness of the man Bates.

'To me,' said Beverley, when informed of the event by Annette, 'the matter has a deeper significance. It proves that Glasgow has at last produced a sober man. No drinker would have dared face that allegory. The whole business is very gratifying.'

Beverley himself was progressing slowly in the field of Art. He had finished the 'Child and Cat', and had taken it to Epstein together with a letter of introduction from Sellers. Sellers' habitual attitude now was that of the kindly celebrity who has arrived and wishes to give the youngsters a chance.

Since its departure Beverley had not done much in the way of actual execution. Whenever Annette came to his studio he was either sitting in a chair with his feet on the window-sill, smoking, or in the same attitude listening to Sellers' views on art. Sellers being on the upgrade, a man with many pounds to his credit in the bank, had more leisure now. He had given up his advertisement work, and was planning a great canvas—another allegorical work. This left him free to devote a good deal of time to Beverley, and he did so. Beverley sat and smoked through his harangues. He may have been listening, or he may not. Annette listened once or twice, and the experience had the effect of sending her to Beverley,

quivering with indignation.

‘Why do you *let* him patronize you like that?’ she demanded. ‘If anybody came and talked to me like that about my music, I’d—I’d—I don’t know what I’d do. Yes, even if he were really a great musician.’

‘Don’t you consider Sellers a great artist, then, even now?’

‘He seems to be able to sell his pictures, so I suppose they must be good; but nothing could give him the right to patronize you as he does.’

‘“My learned friend’s manner would be intolerable in an emperor to a black-beetle,”’ quoted Beverley. ‘Well, what are we going to do about it?’

‘If only you could sell a picture, too!’

‘Ah! Well, I’ve done my part of the contract. I’ve delivered the goods. There the thing is at Epstein’s. The public can’t blame me if it doesn’t sell. All they’ve got to do is to waltz in in their thousands and fight for it. And, by the way, talking of waltzes—’

‘Oh, it’s finished,’ said Annette, dispiritedly. ‘Published too, for that matter.’

‘Published! What’s the matter, then? Why this drooping sadness? Why aren’t you running around the square, singing like a bird?’

‘Because,’ said Annette, ‘unfortunately, I had to pay the expenses of publication. It was only five pounds, but the sales haven’t caught up with that yet. If they ever do, perhaps there’ll be a new edition.’

‘And will you have to pay for that?’

‘No. The publishers would.’

‘Who are they?’

‘Grusczinsky and Buchterkirch.’

‘Heavens, then what are you worrying about? The thing’s a cert. A man with a name like Grusczinsky could sell a dozen editions by himself. Helped and inspired by Buchterkirch, he will make the waltz the talk of the country. Infants will croon it in their cots.’

‘He didn’t seem to think so when I saw him last.’

‘Of course not. He doesn’t know his own power. Grusczinsky’s shrinking diffidence is a by-word in musical circles. He is the genuine Human Violet. You must give him time.’

‘I’ll give him anything if he’ll only sell an edition or two,’ said Annette.

The outstanding thing was that he did. There seemed no particular reason why the sale of that waltz should not have been as small and as slow as that of any other waltz by an unknown composer. But almost without warning it expanded from a trickle into a flood. Grusczinsky, beaming paternally whenever Annette entered the shop—which was often—announced two new editions in a week. Beverley, his artistic growth still under a watchful eye of Sellers, said he had never had any doubts as to the success of the thing from the moment when a single phrase in it had so carried him away that he had been compelled to stamp his applause enthusiastically on the floor. Even Sellers forgot his own triumphs long enough to allow him to offer affable congratulations. And money came rolling in, smoothing the path of life.

Those were great days. There was a hat …

Life, in short, was very full and splendid. There was, indeed, but one thing which kept it from being perfect. The usual drawback to success is that it annoys one’s friends so; but in Annette’s case this drawback was absent. Sellers’ demeanour towards her was that of an old-established inmate welcoming a novice into the Hall of Fame. Her pupils—worthy souls, though bone-headed—fawned upon her. Beverley seemed more pleased than anyone. Yet it was Beverley who prevented her paradise from being complete. Successful herself, she wanted all her friends to be successful; but Beverley, to her discomfort, remained a cheery failure, and worse, absolutely refused to snub Sellers. It was not as if Sellers’ advice and comments were disinterested. Beverley was simply the instrument on which he played his songs of triumph. It distressed Annette to such an extent that now, if she went upstairs and heard Sellers’ voice in the studio, she came down again without knocking.

One afternoon, sitting in her room, she heard the telephone-bell ring.

The telephone was on the stairs, just outside her door. She went out and took up the receiver.

‘Halloa!’ said a querulous voice. ‘Is Mr Beverley there?’

Annette remembered having heard him go out. She could always tell his footstep.

‘He is out,’ she said. ‘Is there any message?’

‘Yes,’ said the voice, emphatically. ‘Tell him that Rupert Morrison rang up to ask what he was to do with all this great stack of music that’s arrived. Does he want it forwarded on to him, or what?’ The voice was growing high and excited. Evidently Mr Morrison was in a state of nervous tension when a man does not care particularly who hears his troubles so long as he unburdens himself of them to someone.

‘Music?’ said Annette.

‘Music!’ shrilled Mr Morrison. ‘Stacks and stacks and stacks of it. Is he playing a practical joke on me, or what?’ he demanded, hysterically. Plainly he had now come to regard Annette as a legitimate confidante. She was listening. That was the main point. He wanted someone—he did not care whom—who would listen. ‘He lends me his rooms,’ wailed Mr Morrison, ‘so that I can be perfectly quiet and undisturbed while I write my novel, and, first thing I know, this music starts to arrive. How can I be quiet and undisturbed when the floor’s littered two yards high with great parcels of music, and more coming every day?’

Annette clung weakly to the telephone box. Her mind was in a whirl, but she was beginning to see many things.

‘Are you there?’ called Mr Morrison.

‘Yes. What—what firm does the music come from?’

‘What’s that?’

‘Who are the publishers who send the music?’

‘I can’t remember. Some long name. Yes, I’ve got it. Grusczinsky and someone.’

‘I’ll tell Mr Beverley,’ said Annette, quietly. A great weight seemed to have settled on her head.

‘Halloa! Halloa! Are you there?’ came Mr Morrison’s voice.

‘Yes?’

‘And tell him there are some pictures, too.’

‘Pictures?’

‘Four great beastly pictures. The size of elephants. I tell you, there isn’t room to move. And —’

Annette hung up the receiver.

Mr Beverley, returned from his walk, was racing up the stairs three at a time in his energetic way, when, as he arrived at Annette's door, it opened.

'Have you a minute to spare?' said Annette.

'Of course. What's the trouble? Have they sold another edition of the waltz?'

'I have not heard, Mr—Bates.'

For once she looked to see the cheerful composure of the man upstairs become ruffled; but he received the blow without agitation.

'You know my name?' he said.

'I know a good deal more than your name. You are a Glasgow millionaire.'

'It's true,' he admitted, 'but it's hereditary. My father was one before me.'

'And you use your money,' said Annette, bitterly, 'creating fools' paradises for your friends, which last, I suppose, until you grow tired of the amusement and destroy them. Doesn't it ever strike you, Mr Bates, that it's a little cruel? Do you think Mr Sellers will settle down again cheerfully to hack-work when you stop buying his pictures, and he finds out that—that —'

'I shan't stop,' said the young man. 'If a Glasgow millionaire mayn't buy Sellers' allegorical pictures, whose allegorical pictures may he buy? Sellers will never find out. He'll go on painting and I'll go on buying, and all will be joy and peace.'

'Indeed! And what future have you arranged for me?'

'You?' he said, reflectively. 'I want to marry you.'

Annette stiffened from head to foot. He met her blazing eyes with a look of quiet devotion.

'Marry me?'

'I know what you are thinking,' he said. 'Your mind is dwelling on the prospect of living in a house decorated throughout with Sellers' allegorical pictures. But it won't be. We'll store them in the attic.'

She began to speak, but he interrupted her.

‘Listen!’ he said. ‘Sit down and I will tell you the story of my life. We’ll skip the first twenty-eight years and three months, merely mentioning that for the greater part of that time I was looking for somebody just like you. A month and nine days ago I found you. You were crossing the Embankment. I was also on the Embankment. In a taxi. I stopped the taxi, got out, and observed you just stepping into the Charing Cross Underground. I sprang—’

‘This does not interest me,’ said Annette.

‘The plot thickens,’ he assured her. ‘We left our hero springing, I think. Just so. Well, you took the West End train and got off at Sloane Square. So did I. You crossed Sloane Square, turned up King’s Road, and finally arrived here. I followed. I saw a notice up, “Studio to Let”. I reflected that, having done a little painting in an amateur way, I could pose as an artist all right; so I took the studio. Also the name of Alan Beverley. My own is Bill Bates. I had often wondered what it would feel like to be called by some name like Alan Beverley or Cyril Trevelyan. It was simply the spin of the coin which decided me in favour of the former. Once in, the problem was how to get to know you. When I heard you playing I knew it was all right. I had only to keep knocking on the floor long enough—’

‘Do—you—mean—to—tell—me‘—Annette’s voice trembled ‘do you mean to tell me that you knocked that time simply to make me come up?’

‘That was it. Rather a scheme, don’t you think? And now, would you mind telling me how you found out that I had been buying your waltz? Those remarks of yours about fools’ paradises were not inspired solely by the affairs of Sellers. But it beats me how you did it. I swore Rozinsky, or whatever his name is, to secrecy.’

‘A Mr Morrison,’ said Annette, indifferently, ‘rang up on the telephone and asked me to tell you that he was greatly worried by the piles of music which were littering the rooms you lent him.’

The young man burst into a roar of laughter.

‘Poor old Morrison! I forgot all about him. I lent him my rooms at the Albany. He’s writing a novel, and he can’t work if the slightest thing goes wrong. It just shows—’

‘Mr Bates!’

‘Yes?’

‘Perhaps you didn’t intend to hurt me. I dare say you meant only to be kind. But—but—oh, can’t you see how you have humiliated me? You have treated me like a child, giving me a make-believe success just to—just to keep me quiet, I suppose. You—’

He was fumbling in his pocket.

‘May I read you a letter?’ he said.

‘A letter?’

‘Quite a short one. It is from Epstein, the picture-dealer. This is what he says. “Sir,” meaning me, not “Dear Bill,” mind you—just “Sir.” “I am glad to be able to inform you that I have this morning received an offer of ten guineas for your picture, ‘Child and Cat’. Kindly let me know if I am to dispose of it at this price.”’

‘Well?’ said Annette, in a small voice.

‘I have just been to Epstein’s. It seems that the purchaser is a Miss Brown. She gave an address in Bayswater. I called at the address. No Miss Brown lives there, but one of your pupils does. I asked her if she was expecting a parcel for Miss Brown, and she said that she had had your letter and quite understood and would take it in when it arrived.’

Annette was hiding her face in her hands.

‘Go away!’ she said, faintly.

Mr Bates moved a step nearer.

‘Do you remember that story of the people on the island who eked out a precarious livelihood by taking in one another’s washing?’ he asked, casually.

‘Go away!’ cried Annette.

‘I’ve always thought,’ he said, ‘that it must have drawn them very close together—made them feel rather attached to each other. Don’t you?’

‘Go away!’

‘I don’t want to go away. I want to stay and hear you say you’ll marry me.’

‘*Please* go away! I want to think.’

She heard him moving towards the door. He stopped, then went on again. The door closed quietly. Presently from the room above came the sound of footsteps—footsteps pacing monotonously to and fro like those of an animal in a cage.

Annette sat listening. There was no break in the footsteps.

Suddenly she got up. In one corner of the room was a long pole used for raising and lowering the window-sash. She took it, and for a moment stood irresolute. Then with a quick movement, she lifted it and stabbed three times at the ceiling.