

Episode (TEXT)

It was quite a small party, because our hostess liked general conversation; we never sat down to dinner more than eight, and generally only six, and after dinner when we went up to the drawing-room the chairs were so arranged that it was impossible for two persons to go into a huddle in a corner and so break things up. I was glad on arriving to find that I knew everyone. There were two nice clever women besides our hostess and two men besides myself. One was my friend Ned Preston. Our hostess made it a point never to ask wives with their husbands, because she said each cramped the other's style and if they didn't like to come separately they needn't come at all. But since her food and her wine were good and the talk almost always entertaining they generally came. People sometimes accused her of asking husbands more often than wives, but she defended herself by saying that she couldn't possibly help it because more men were husbands than women were wives.

Ned Preston was a Scot, a good-humoured, merry soul, with a gift for telling a story, sometimes too lengthily, for he was uncommonly loquacious, but with dramatic intensity. He was a bachelor with a small income which sufficed for his modest needs, and in this he was lucky since he suffered from that form of chronic tuberculosis which may last for years without killing you, but which prevents you from working for your living. Now and then he would be ill enough to stay in bed for two or three weeks, but then he would get better and be as gay, cheerful and talkative as ever. I doubt whether he had enough money to live in an expensive sanatorium and he certainly hadn't the temperament to suit himself to its life. He was worldly. When he was well he liked to go out, out to lunch, out to dinner, and he liked to sit up late into the night smoking his pipe and drinking a good deal of whisky. If he had been content to live the life of an invalid he might have been alive now, but he wasn't; and who can blame him? He died at the age of fifty-five of a hæmorrhage which he had one night after coming home from some house where, he may well have flattered himself, he was the success of the party.

He had that febrile vitality that some consumptives have, and was always looking for an occupation to satisfy his desire for activity. I don't know how he heard that at Wormwood Scrubs they were in want of prison visitors, but the idea took his fancy so he went to the Home Office and saw the official in charge of prisons to offer his services. The job is unpaid, and though a number of persons are willing to undertake it, either from compassion or curiosity, they are apt to grow tired of it, or find it takes up too much time, and the prisoners whose problems, interests and future they have been concerned with are left somewhat in the lurch. The Home Office people consequently are wary of taking on anyone who does not look as if he would persevere, and they make careful inquiries into the applicant's antecedents, character and general suitability. Then he is given a trial, is discreetly watched, and if the impression is unfavourable is politely thanked and told that his services are no longer required. But Ned Preston satisfied the dour and shrewd official who interviewed him that he was in every way reliable, and from the beginning he got on well with the governor, the warders and the prisoners. He was entirely lacking in class-consciousness, so prisoners, whatever their station in life, felt at ease with him. He neither preached nor moralised. He had never done a criminal, or even a mean, thing in his life, but he treated the crime of the

prisoners he had to deal with as though it were an illness like his own tuberculosis which was a nuisance you had to put up with, but which it did no good to talk about.

Wormwood Scrubs is a first offenders' prison and it is a building, grim and cold, of forbidding appearance. Ned took me over it once and I had goose-flesh as the gates were unlocked for us and we went in. We passed through the halls in which the men were working.

"If you see any pals of yours take no notice of them," Ned said to me. "They don't like it."

"Am I likely to see any pals of mine?" I asked dryly.

"You never can tell. I shouldn't be surprised if you had had friends who'd passed bad cheques once too often or were caught in a compromising situation in one of the parks. You'd be surprised how often I run across chaps I've met out at dinner."

One of Ned's duties was to see prisoners through the first difficult days of their confinement. They were often badly shaken by their trial and sentence; and when, after the preliminary proceedings they had to go through on entering the jail, the stripping, the bath, the medical examination and the questioning, the getting into prison clothes, they were led into a cell and locked up, they were apt to break down. Sometimes they cried hysterically; sometimes they could neither eat nor sleep. Ned's business then was to cheer them, and his breezy manner, his natural kindliness, often worked wonders. If they were anxious about their wives and children he would go to see them and if they were destitute provide them with money. He brought them news so that they might get over the awful feeling that they were shut away from the common interests of their fellow-men. He read the sporting papers to be able to tell them what horse had won an important race or whether the champion had won his fight. He would advise them about their future, and when the time approached for their release see what jobs they were fitted for and then persuade employers to give them a chance to make good.

Since everyone is interested in crime it was inevitable that sooner or later, with Ned there, the conversation should turn upon it. It was after dinner and we were sitting comfortably in the drawing-room with drinks in our hands.

"Had any interesting cases at the Scrubs lately, Ned?" I asked him.

"No, nothing much."

He had a high, rasping voice and his laugh was a raucous cackle. He broke into it now.

"I went to see an old girl to-day who was a packet of fun. Her husband's a burglar. The police have known about him for years, but they've never been able to get him till just now. Before he did a job he and his wife concocted an alibi, and though he's been arrested three or four times and sent up for trial, the police have never been able to break it and he's always got off. Well, he was arrested again a little while ago, but he wasn't upset, the alibi he and his wife had made up was perfect and he expected to be acquitted as he'd been before. His wife went into the witness-box and to his utter amazement she didn't give the alibi and he was convicted. I went to see him. He

wasn't so much worried at being in gaol as puzzled by his wife not having spoken up, and he asked me to go and see her and ask what the game was. Well I went, and d'you know what she said to me? She said: 'Well, sir, it's like this; it was such a beautiful alibi I just couldn't bear to waste it.'

Of course we all laughed. The story-teller likes an appreciative audience, and Ned Preston was never disinclined to hold the floor. He narrated two or three more anecdotes. They tended to prove a point he was fond of making, that in what till we all got democratic in England were called the lower orders there was more passion, more romance, more disregard of consequences than could ever be found in the well-to-do and presumably educated classes, whom prudence has made timid and convention inhibited.

"Because the working man doesn't read much," he said, "because he has no great gift for expressing himself, you think he has no imagination. You're wrong. He's extravagantly imaginative. Because he's a great husky brute you think he has no nerves. You're wrong again. He's a bundle of nerves."

Then he told us a story which I shall tell as best I can in my own words.

Fred Manson was a good-looking fellow, tall, well-made, with blue eyes, good features and a friendly, agreeable smile, but what made him remarkable so that people turned round in the streets to stare at him was that he had a thick head of hair, with a great wave in it, of a deep rich red. It was really a great beauty. Perhaps it was this that gave him so sensual a look. His maleness was like a heady perfume. His eyebrows were thick, only a little lighter than his hair, and he was lucky enough not to have the ugly skin that so often disfigures red-heads. His was a smooth olive. His eyes were bold, and when he smiled or laughed, which in the healthy vitality of his youth he did constantly, his expression was wonderfully alluring. He was twenty-two and he gave you the rather pleasant impression of just loving to be alive. It was inevitable that with such looks and above all with that troubling sexuality he should have success with women. He was charming, tender and passionate, but immensely promiscuous. He was not exactly callous or brazen, he had a kindly nature, but somehow or other he made it quite clear to the objects of his passing fancy that all he wanted was a little bit of fun and that it was impossible for him to remain faithful to anyone.

Fred was a postman. He worked in Brixton. It is a densely populated part of London, and has the curious reputation of harbouring more criminals than any other suburb because trams run to it from across the river all night long, so that when a man has done a job of housebreaking in the West End he can be sure of getting home without difficulty. Fred liked his job. Brixton is a district of innumerable streets lined with little houses inhabited by the people who work in the neighbourhood and also by clerks, shop-assistants, skilled workers of one sort or another whose jobs take them every day across the river. He was strong and healthy and it was a pleasure to him to walk from street to street delivering the letters. Sometimes there would be a postal packet to hand in or a registered letter that had to be signed for, and then he would have the opportunity of seeing people. He was a sociable creature. It was never long before he was well known on whatever round he was assigned to. After a time his job was changed. His duty then was to go to the red pillar-boxes into which the letters were put, empty them, and take the contents to the main post-office of the district. His bag would be pretty heavy sometimes by the time he was through, but he was proud of his strength and the weight only made him laugh.

One day he was emptying a box in one of the better streets, a street of semi-detached houses, and had just closed his bag when a girl came running along.

"Postman," she cried, "take this letter, will you. I want it to go by this post most particularly."

He gave her his good-natured smile.

"I never mind obliging a lady," he said, putting down his bag and opening it.

"I wouldn't trouble you, only it's urgent," she said as she handed him the letter she had in her hand.

"Who is it to--a feller?" he grinned.

"None of your business."

"All right, be haughty. But I tell you this, he's no good. Don't you trust him."

"You've got a nerve," she said.

"So they tell me."

He took off his cap and ran his hand through his mop of curling red hair. The sight of it made her gasp.

"Where d'you get your perm?" she asked with a giggle.

"I'll show you one of these days if you like."

He was looking down at her with his amused eyes, and there was something about him that gave her a funny little feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Well, I must be on my way," he said. "If I don't get on with the job pretty damn quick I don't know what'll happen to the country."

"I'm not detaining you," she said coolly.

"That's where you make a mistake," he answered.

He gave her a look that made her heart beat nineteen to the dozen and she felt herself blushing all over. She turned away and ran back to the house. Fred noticed it was four doors away from the pillar-box. He had to pass it and as he did so he looked up. He saw the net curtains twitch and knew she was watching. He felt pleased with himself. During the next few days he looked at the house whenever he passed it, but never caught a glimpse of the girl. One afternoon he ran across her by chance just as he was entering the street in which she lived.

"Hulloa," he said, stopping.

"Hulloa."

She blushed scarlet.

"Haven't seen you about lately."

"You haven't missed much."

"That's what you think."

She was prettier than he remembered, dark-haired, dark-eyed, rather tall, slight, with a good figure, a pale skin and very white teeth.

"What about coming to the pictures with me one evening?"

"Taking a lot for granted, aren't you?"

"It pays," he said with his impudent, charming grin.

She couldn't help laughing.

"Not with me, it doesn't."

"Oh, come on. One's only young once."

There was something so attractive in him that she couldn't bring herself to give him a saucy answer.

"I couldn't really. My people wouldn't like me going out with a fellow I don't know. You see, I'm the only one they have and they think a rare lot of me. Why, I don't even know your name."

"Well, I can tell you, can't I? Fred. Fred Manson. Can't you say you're going to the pictures with a girl friend?"

She had never felt before what she was feeling then. She didn't know if it was pain or pleasure. She was strangely breathless.

"I suppose I could do that."

They fixed the night, the time and the place. Fred was waiting for her and they went in, but when the picture started and he put his arm round her waist, without a word, her eyes fixed on the screen, she quietly took it away. He took hold of her hand, but she withdrew it. He was surprised. That wasn't the way girls usually behaved. He didn't know what one went to the pictures for if it wasn't to have a bit of a cuddle. He walked home with her after the show. She told him her name. Grace Carter. Her father had a shop of his own in the Brixton Road, he was a draper and he had four assistants.

"He must be doing well," said Fred.

"He doesn't complain."

Gracie was a student at London University. When she got her degree she was going to be a school teacher.

"What d'you want to do that for when there's a good business waiting for you?"

"Pa doesn't want me to have anything to do with the shop--not after the education he's given me. He wants me to better myself, if you know what I mean."

Her father had started life as an errand boy, then become a draper's assistant and because he was hard-working, honest and intelligent was now owner of a prosperous little business. Success had given him grand ideas for his only child. He didn't want her to have anything to do with trade. He hoped she'd marry a professional man perhaps, or at least someone in the City. Then he'd sell the business and retire, and Gracie would be quite the lady.

When they reached the corner of her street Gracie held out her hand.

"You'd better not come to the door," she said.

"Aren't you going to kiss me good-night?"

"I am not."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to."

"You'll come to the pictures again, won't you?"

"I think I'd better not."

"Oh, come on."

There was such a warm urgency in his voice that she felt as though her knees would give way.

"Will you behave if I do?" He nodded. "Promise?"

"Swop me bob."

He scratched his head when he left her. Funny girl. He'd never met anyone quite like her. Superior, there was no doubt about that. There was something in her voice that got you. It was warm and soft. He tried to think what it was like. It was like as if the words kissed you. Sounded silly, that did, but that's just what it was like.

From then on they went to the pictures once or twice a week. After a while she allowed him to put his arm round her waist and to hold her hand, but she never let him go farther than that.

"Have you ever been kissed by a fellow?" he asked her once.

"No, I haven't," she said simply. "My ma's funny, she says you've got to keep a man's respect."

"I'd give anything in the world just to kiss you, Gracie."

"Don't be so silly."

"Won't you let me just once?" She shook her head. "Why not?"

"Because I like you too much," she said hoarsely, and then walked quickly away from him.

It gave him quite a turn. He wanted her as he'd never wanted a woman before. What she'd said finished him. He'd been thinking of her a lot, and he'd looked forward to the evenings they spent together as he'd never looked forward to anything in his life. For the first time he was uncertain of himself. She was above him in every way, what with her father making money hand over fist and her education and everything, and him only a postman. They had made a date for the following Friday night and he was in a fever of anxiety lest she shouldn't come. He repeated to himself over and over again what she'd said: perhaps it meant that she'd made up her mind to drop him. When at last he saw her walking along the street he almost sobbed with relief. That evening he neither put his arm round her nor took her hand and when he walked her home he never said a word.

"You're very quiet to-night, Fred," she said at last. "What's the matter with you?"

He walked a few steps before he answered.

"I don't like to tell you."

She stopped suddenly and looked up at him. There was terror on her face.

"Tell me whatever it is," she said unsteadily.

"I'm gone, I can't help myself, I'm so stuck on you I can't see straight. I didn't know what it was to love like I love you."

"Oh, is that all? You gave me such a fright. I thought you were going to say you were going to be married."

"Me? Who d'you take me for? It's you I want to marry."

"Well, what's to prevent you, silly?"

"Gracie! D'you mean it?"

He flung his arms round her and kissed her full on the mouth. She didn't resist. She returned his kiss and he felt in her a passion as eager as his own.

They arranged that Gracie should tell her parents that she was engaged to him and that on the Sunday he should come and be introduced to them. Since the shop stayed open late on Saturday and by the time Mr. Carter got home he was tired out, it was not till after dinner on Sunday that Gracie broke her news. George Carter was a brisk, not very tall man, but sturdy, with a high colour, who with increasing prosperity had put on weight. He was more than rather bald and he had a bristle of grey moustache. Like many another employer who has risen from the working class he was a slave-driver and he got as much work out of his assistants for as little money as was possible. He had an eye for everything and he wouldn't put up with any nonsense, but he was reasonable and even kindly, so that they did not dislike him. Mrs. Carter was a quiet, nice woman, with a pleasant face and the remains of good looks. They were both in the early fifties, for they had married late after "walking out" for nearly ten years.

They were very much surprised when Gracie told them what she had to tell, but not displeased.

"You are a sly one," said her father. "Why, I never suspected for a minute you'd taken up with anyone. Well, I suppose it had to come sooner or later. What's his name?"

"Fred Manson."

"A fellow you met at college?"

"No. You must have seen him about. He clears our pillar-box. He's a postman."

"Oh, Gracie," cried Mrs. Carter, "you can't mean it. You can't marry a common postman, not after all the education we've given you."

For an instant Mr. Carter was speechless. He got redder in the face than ever.

"Your ma's right, my girl," he burst out now. "You can't throw yourself away like that. Why, it's ridiculous."

"I'm not throwing myself away. You wait till you see him."

Mrs. Carter began to cry.

"It's such a come-down. It's such a humiliation. I shall never be able to hold up my head again."

"Oh, Ma, don't talk like that. He's a nice fellow and he's got a good job."

"You don't understand," she moaned.

"How d'you get to know him?" Mr. Carter interrupted. "What sort of a family's he got?"

"His pa drives one of the post-office vans," Gracie answered defiantly.

"Working-class people."

"Well, what of it? His pa's worked twenty-four years for the post-office and they think a lot of him."

Mrs. Carter was biting the corner of her handkerchief.

"Gracie, I want to tell you something. Before your pa and me got married I was in domestic service. He wouldn't ever let me tell you because he didn't want you to be ashamed of me. That's why we was engaged all those years. The lady I was with said she'd leave me something in her will if I stayed with her till she passed away."

"It was that money that gave me my start," Mr. Carter broke in. "Except for that I'd never have been where I am to-day. And I don't mind telling you your ma's the best wife a man ever had."

"I never had a proper education," Mrs. Carter went on, "but I always was ambitious. The proudest moment of my life was when your pa said we could afford a girl to help me and he said then: 'The time'll come when you have a cook and a house-maid,' and he's been as good as his word, and now you're going back to what I come from. I'd set my heart on your marrying a gentleman."

She began crying again. Gracie loved her parents and couldn't bear to see them so distressed.

"I'm sorry, Ma, I knew it would be a disappointment to you, but I can't help it, I can't really. I love him so, I love him so terribly. I'm sure you'll like him when you see him. We're going for a walk on the Common this afternoon. Can't I bring him back to supper?"

Mrs. Carter gave her husband a harassed look. He sighed.

"I don't like it and it's no good pretending I do, but I suppose we'd better have a look at him."

Supper passed off better than might have been expected. Fred wasn't shy, and he talked to Gracie's parents as though he had known them all his life. If to be waited on by a maid, if to sup in a dining-room furnished in solid mahogany and afterwards to sit in a drawing-room that had a grand piano in it was new to him, he showed no embarrassment. After he had gone and they were alone in their bedroom Mr. and Mrs. Carter talked him over.

"He is handsome, you can't deny that," she said.

"Handsome is as handsome does. D'you think he's after her money?"

"Well, he must know that you've got a tidy little bit tucked away somewhere, but he's in love with her all right."

"Oh, what makes you think that?"

"Why, you've only got to see the way he looks at her."

"Well, that's something at all events."

In the end the Carters withdrew their opposition on the condition that the young things shouldn't marry until Gracie had taken her degree. That would give them a year, and at the back of their minds was the hope that by then she would have changed her mind. They saw a good deal of Fred after that. He spent every Sunday with them. Little by little they began quite to like him. He was so easy, so gay, so full of high spirits, and above all so obviously head over ears in love with Gracie, that Mrs. Carter soon succumbed to his charm, and after a while even Mr. Carter was prepared to admit that he didn't seem a bad fellow. Fred and Gracie were happy. She went to London every day to attend lectures and worked hard. They spent blissful evenings together. He gave her a very nice engagement ring and often took her out to dinner in the West End and to a play. On fine Sundays he drove her out into the country in a car that he said a friend had lent him. When she asked him if he could afford all the money he spent on her he laughed, and said a chap had given him a tip on an outsider and he'd made a packet. They talked interminably of the little flat they would have when they were married and the fun it would be to furnish it. They were more in love with one another than ever.

Then the blow fell. Fred was arrested for stealing money from the letters he collected. Many people, to save themselves the trouble of buying postal orders, put notes in their envelopes, and it wasn't difficult to tell that they were there. Fred went up for trial, pleaded guilty, and was sentenced to two years' hard labour. Gracie went to the trial. Up to the last moment she had hoped that he would be able to prove his innocence. It was a dreadful shock to her when he pleaded guilty. She was not allowed to see him. He went straight from the dock to the prison van. She went home and, locking herself up in her bedroom, threw herself on the bed and wept. When Mr. Carter came back from the shop Gracie's mother went up to her room.

"Gracie, you're to come downstairs," she said. "Your father wants to speak to you."

Gracie got up and went down. She did not trouble to dry her eyes.

"Seen the paper?" he said, holding out to her the *Evening News*.

She didn't answer.

"Well, that's the end of that young man," he went on harshly.

They too, Gracie's parents, had been shocked when Fred was arrested, but she was so distressed, she was so convinced that everything could be explained, that they hadn't had the heart to tell her that she must have nothing more to do with him. But now they felt it time to have things out with her.

"So that's where the money came from for those dinners and theatres. And the car. I thought it funny he should have a friend who'd lend him a car on Sundays when he'd be wanting it himself. He hired it, didn't he?"

"I suppose so," she answered miserably. "I just believed what he told me."

"You've had a lucky escape, my girl, that's all I can say."

"He only did it because he wanted to give me a good time. He didn't want me to think I couldn't have everything as nice when I was with him as what I've been used to at home."

"You're not going to make excuses for him, I hope. He's a thief, that's what he is."

"I don't care," she said sullenly.

"You don't care? What d'you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I say. I'm going to wait for him and the moment he comes out I'm going to marry him."

Mrs. Carter gave a gasp of horror.

"Gracie, you can't do a thing like that," she cried. "Think of the disgrace. And what about us? We've always held our heads high. He's a thief, and once a thief always a thief."

"Don't go on calling him a thief," Gracie shrieked, stamping her foot with rage. "What he did he did just because he loved me. I don't care if he is a thief. I love him more than ever I loved him. You don't know what love is. You waited ten years to marry Pa just so as an old woman should leave you some money. D'you call that love?"

"You leave your ma out of this," Mr. Carter shouted. Then an idea occurred to him and he gave her a piercing glance. "Have you got to marry the feller?"

Gracie blushed furiously.

"No. There's never been anything of that sort. And not through any fault of mine either. He loved me too much. He didn't want to do anything perhaps he'd regret afterwards."

Often on summer evenings in the country when they'd been lying in a field in one another's arms, mouth to mouth, her desire had been as intense as his. She knew how much he wanted her and she was ready to give him what he asked. But when things got too desperate he'd suddenly jump up and say:

"Come on, let's walk."

He'd drag her to her feet. She knew what was in his mind. He wanted to wait till they were married. His love had given him a delicacy of sentiment that he'd never known before. He couldn't make it out himself, but he had a funny sort of feeling about her, he felt that if he had her before marriage it would spoil things. Because she guessed what was in his heart she loved him all the more.

"I don't know what's come over you," moaned Mrs. Carter. "You was always such a good girl. You've never given us a day's uneasiness."

"Stop it, Ma," said Mr. Carter violently. "We've got to get this straight once and for all. You've got to give up this man, see? I've got me own position to think of and if you think I'm going to have a gaol-bird for a son-in-law you'd better think again. I've had enough of this nonsense. You've got to promise me that you'll have nothing more to do with the feller ever."

"D'you think I'm going to give him up now? How often d'you want me to tell you I'm going to marry him the moment he gets out?"

"All right, then you can get out of my house and get out pretty damn quick. And stay out."

"Pa!" cried Mrs. Carter.

"Shut up."

"I'll be glad to go," said Gracie.

"Oh, will you? And how d'you think you're going to live?"

"I can work, can't I? I can get a job at Payne & Perkins. They'll be glad to have me."

"Oh, Gracie, you couldn't go and work in a shop. You can't demean yourself like that," said Mrs. Carter.

"Will you shut up, Ma," shouted Mr. Carter, beside himself now with rage. "Work, will you? You that's never done a stroke of work in your life except that tomfoolery at the college. Bright idea it was of your ma's to give you an education. Fat lot of good it'll be to you when you've got to stand on your feet for hours and got to be civil and pleasant to a lot of old trouts who just try and give you all the trouble they can just to show how superior they are. I bet you'll like it when you're bawled out by the manageress because you're not bright and snappy. All right, marry your gaol-bird. I suppose you know you'll have to keep him too. You don't think anyone's going to give him a job, do you, not with his record. Get out, get out, get out."

He had worked himself up to such a pitch of fury that he sank panting into a chair. Mrs. Carter, frightened, poured out a glass of water and gave him some to drink. Gracie slipped out of the room.

Next day, when her father had gone to work and her mother was out shopping, she left the house with such effects as she could get into a suit-case. Payne & Perkins was a large department store in the Brixton Road, and with her good appearance and pleasant manner she found no difficulty in getting taken on. She was put in the ladies' lingerie. For a few days she stayed at the Y.W.C.A. and then arranged to share a room with one of the girls who worked with her.

Ned Preston saw Fred in the evening of the day he went to gaol. He found him shattered, but only because of Gracie. He took his thieving very lightly.

"I had to do the right thing by her, didn't I? Her people, they didn't think I was good enough for her; I wanted to show them I was just as good as they were. When we went up to the West End I couldn't give her a sandwich and half of bitter in a pub, why, she's never been in a pub in her life, I *had* to take her to a restaurant. If people are such fools as to put money in letters, well, they're just asking for it."

But he was frightened. He wasn't sure that Gracie would see it like that.

"I've got to know what she's going to do. If she chucks me now--well, it's the end of everything for me, see? I'll find some way of doing meself in, I swear to God I will."

He told Ned the whole story of his love for Gracie.

"I could have had her over and over again if I'd wanted to. And I did want to and so did she. I knew that. But I respected her, see? She's not like other girls. She's one in a thousand, I tell you."

He talked and talked. He stormed, he wept. From that confused torrent of words emerged one thing very clearly. A passionate, a frenzied love. Ned promised that he would see the girl.

"Tell her I love her, tell her that what I did I just did because I wanted her to have the best of everything, and tell her I just can't live without her."

As soon as he could find time Ned Preston went to the Carters' house, but when he asked for Gracie the maid who opened the door told him that she didn't live there any more. Then he asked to see her mother.

"I'll go and see if she's in."

He gave the maid his card, thinking the name of his club engraved in the corner would impress Mrs. Carter enough to make her willing to see him. The maid left him at the door, but in a minute or two asked him to come in. He was shown into the stiff and little-used sitting-room. Mrs. Carter kept him waiting for some time and when she came in, holding his card in the tips of her fingers, he guessed it was because she had thought fit to change her dress. The black silk she wore was evidently a dress for occasions. He told her his connection with Wormwood Scrubs and said that he had to do with a man named Frederick Manson. The moment he mentioned the name Mrs. Carter assumed a hostile attitude.

"Don't speak to me of that man," she cried. "A thief, that's what he is. The trouble he's caused us. They ought to have given him five years, they ought."

"I'm sorry he's caused you trouble," said Ned mildly. "Perhaps if you'd give me a few facts I might help to straighten things out."

Ned Preston certainly had a way with him. Perhaps Mrs. Carter was impressed because he was a gentleman. "Class he is," she probably said to herself. Anyhow it was not long before she was telling him the whole story. She grew upset as she told it and began to cry.

"And now she's gone and left us. Run away. I don't know how she could bring herself to do a thing like that. God knows, we love her. She's all we've got and we done everything in the world for her. Her pa never meant it when he told her to get out of the house. Only she was so obstinate. He got in a temper, he always was a quick-tempered man, he was just as upset as I was when we found she'd gone. And d'you know what's she's been and gone and done? Got herself a job at Payne & Perkins. Mr. Carter can't abide them. Cutting prices all the time they are. Unfair competition, he calls it. And to think of our Gracie working with a lot of shop-girls--oh, it's so humiliating."

Ned made a mental note of the store's name. He hadn't been at all sure of getting Gracie's address out of Mrs. Carter.

"Have you seen her since she left you?" he asked.

"Of course I have. I knew they'd jump at her at Payne & Perkins, a superior girl like that, and I went there, and there she was, sure enough--in the ladies' lingerie. I waited outside till closing time and then I spoke to her. I asked her to come home. I said her pa was willing to let bygones be bygones. And d'you know what she said? She said she'd come home if we never said a word against Fred and if we was prepared to have her marry him as soon as ever he got out. Of course I had to tell her pa. I never saw him in such a state, I thought he was going to have a fit, he said he'd rather see her dead at his feet than married to that gaol-bird."

Mrs. Carter again burst into tears and as soon as he could Ned Preston left her. He went to the department store, up to the ladies' lingerie, and asked for Grace Carter. She was pointed out to him and he went up to her.

"Can I speak to you for a minute? I've come from Fred Manson."

She went deathly white. For a moment it seemed that she could not utter a word.

"Follow me, please."

She took him into a passage smelling of disinfectants which seemed to lead to the lavatories. They were alone. She stared at him anxiously.

"He sends you his love. He's worried about you. He's afraid you're awfully unhappy. What he wants to know really is if you're going to chuck him."

"Me?" Her eyes filled with tears, but on her face was a look of ecstasy. "Tell him that nothing matters to me as long as he loves me. Tell him I'd wait twenty years for him if I had to. Tell him I'm counting the days till he gets out so as we can get married."

For fear of the manageress she couldn't stay away from her work for more than a minute or two. She gave Ned all the loving messages she could get into the time to give Fred Manson. Ned didn't get to the Scrubs till nearly six. The prisoners are allowed to put down their tools at five-thirty and Fred had just put his down. When Ned entered the cell he turned pale and sank on to the bed as

though his anxiety was such that he didn't trust his legs. But when Ned told him his news he gave a gasp of relief. For a while he couldn't trust himself to speak.

"I knew you'd seen her the moment you came in. I smelt her."

He sniffed as though the smell of her body were strong in his nostrils, and his face was as it were a mask of desire. His features on a sudden seemed strangely blurred.

"You know, it made me feel quite uncomfortable so that I had to look the other way," said Ned Preston when he told us this, with a cackle of his shrill laughter. "It was sex in its nakedness all right."

Fred was an exemplary prisoner. He worked well, he gave no trouble. Ned suggested books for him to read and he took them out of the library, but that was about as far as he got.

"I can't get on well with them somehow," he said. "I start reading and then I begin thinking of Gracie. You know, when she kisses you ordinary-like--oh, it's so sweet, but when she kisses you really, my God, it's lovely."

Fred was allowed to see Gracie once a month, but their meetings, with a glass screen between, under the eyes of a warder, were so painful that after several visits they agreed it would be better if she didn't come any more. A year passed. Owing to his good behaviour he could count on a remittance of his sentence and so would be free in another six months. Gracie had saved every penny she could out of her wages and now as the time approached for Fred's release she set about getting a home ready for him. She took two rooms in a house and furnished them on the hire purchase system. One room of course was to be their bedroom and the other the living-room and kitchen. There was an old-fashioned range in it and this she had taken out and replaced by a gas-stove. She wanted everything to be nice and new and clean and comfortable. She took pains to make the two little rooms bright and pretty. To do all this she had to go without all but the barest necessities of existence and she grew thin and pale. Ned suspected that she was starving herself and when he went to see her took a box of chocolates or a cake so that she should have at least something to eat. He brought the prisoner news of what Gracie was doing and she made him promise to give him accurate accounts of every article she bought. He took fond, more than fond, passionate messages from one to the other. He was convinced that Fred would go straight in future and he got him a job as commissionaire from a firm that had a chain of restaurants in London. The wages were good and by calling taxis or fetching cars he would be able to make money on the side. He was to start work as soon as he came out of gaol. Gracie took the necessary steps so that they could get married at once. The eighteen months of Fred's imprisonment were drawing to an end. Gracie was in a fever of excitement.

It happened then that Ned Preston had one of his periodical bouts of illness and was unable to go to the prison for three weeks. It bothered him, for he didn't like to abandon his prisoners, so as soon as he could get out of bed he went to the Scrubs. The chief warder told him that Manson had been asking for him.

"I think you'd better go and see him. I don't know what's the matter with him. He's been acting rather funny since you've been away."

It was just a fortnight before Fred was due to be released. Ned Preston went to his cell.

"Well, Fred, how are you?" he asked. "Sorry I haven't been able to come and see you. I've been ill, and I haven't been able to see Gracie either. She must be all of a dither by now."

"Well, I want you to go and see her."

His manner was so surly that Ned was taken aback. It was unlike him to be anything but pleasant and civil.

"Of course I will."

"I want you to tell her that I'm not going to marry her."

Ned was so astounded that for a minute he could only stare blankly at Fred Manson.

"What on earth d'you mean?"

"Exactly what I say."

"You can't let her down now. Her people have thrown her out. She's been working all this time to get a home ready for you. She's got the licence and everything."

"I don't care. I'm not going to marry her."

"But why, why, why?"

Ned was flabbergasted. Fred Manson was silent for a bit. His face was dark and sullen.

"I'll tell you. I've thought about her night and day for eighteen months and now I'm sick to death of her."

When Ned Preston reached this point of his story our hostess and our fellow guests broke into loud laughter. He was plainly taken aback. There was some little talk after that and the party broke up. Ned and I, having to go in the same direction, walked along Piccadilly together. For a time we walked in silence.

"I noticed you didn't laugh with the others," he said abruptly.

"I didn't think it funny."

"What d'you make of it?"

"Well, I can see his point, you know. Imagination's an odd thing, it dries up; I suppose, thinking of her incessantly all that time he'd exhausted every emotion she could give him, and I think it was quite literally true, he'd just got sick to death of her. He'd squeezed the lemon dry and there was nothing to do but throw away the rind."

"I didn't think it funny either. That's why I didn't tell them the rest of the story. I wouldn't accept it at first. I thought it was just hysteria or something. I went to see him two or three days running. I argued with him. I really did my damndest. I thought if he'd only see her it would be all right, but he wouldn't even do that. He said he hated the sight of her. I couldn't move him. At last I had to go and tell her."

We walked on a little longer in silence.

"I saw her in that beastly, stinking corridor. She saw at once there was something the matter and she went awfully white. She wasn't a girl to show much emotion. There was something gracious and rather noble about her face. Tranquil. Her lips quivered a bit when I told her and she didn't say anything for a minute. When she spoke it was quite calmly, as though--well, as though she'd just missed a bus and would have to wait for another. As though it was a nuisance, you know, but nothing to make a song and dance about. 'There's nothing for me to do now but put my head in the gas-oven,' she said.

"And she did."