

The Man In The Stalls

BY ALFRED SUTRO
A PLAY IN ONE ACT

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

HECTOR ALLEN
ELIZABETH ALLEN (BETTY)
WALTER COZENS

This play was produced at the Palace Theatre on October 6, 1911

THE MAN IN THE STALLS

The sitting-room of a little flat in Shaftesbury Avenue. At back is a door leading to the dining-room--it is open, and the dinner-table is in full view of the audience. To the extreme right is another door, leading to the hall.

The place is pleasantly and prettily, though quite inexpensively, furnished. To the left, at angles with the distempered wall, is a baby-grand piano; the fireplace, in which a fire is burning merrily, is on the same side, full centre. To the right of the door leading to the dining-room is a small side-table, on which there is a tray with decanter and glasses; in front of this, a card-table, open, with two packs of cards on it, and chairs on each side. Another table, a round one, is in the centre of the room--to right and to left of it are comfortable armchairs. Against the right wall is a long sofa; above it hang a few good, water-colours and engravings; on the piano and the table there are flowers. A general appearance of refinement and comfort pervades the room; no luxury, but evidence everywhere of good taste, and the countless feminine touches that make a room homelike and pleasant.

When the curtain rises, HECTOR ALLEN, a youngish man of forty, with an attractive intellectual face, is seen standing by the dining-

table in the inner room, draining his liqueur-glass, with WALTER COZENS to the right of him, lighting a cigarette. WALTER is a few years younger than his friend, moderately good-looking, with fine, curly brown hair and a splendid silky moustache. His morning-clothes are conspicuously well-cut--he is evidently something of a dandy; HECTOR wears a rather shabby dress-suit, his boots are awkward, and his tie ready-made. BETTY, a handsome woman of thirty, wearing a very pretty tea-gown, is talking to the maid at the back of the dining-room.

HECTOR puts down his glass and comes into the sitting-room, followed by WALTER. HECTOR is puffing at a short, stumpy little black cigar.

HECTOR [*Talking as he comes through, continuing the conversation--he walks to the fireplace and stands with his back to it.*] I tell you, if I'd known what it meant, I'd never have taken the job! Sounded so fine, to be reader of plays for the Duke's Theatre--adviser to the great Mr. Honeyswill! And then--when the old man said I was to go to all the first nights--why, I just chortled! "It's the first nights that show you the grip of the thing--that teach you most"--he said. Teach you! As though there were anything to learn! Oh my stars! I tell you, it's a dog's life!

WALTER. [*Sitting to left of the round table.*] I'd change places with you, sonny.

HECTOR. You would, eh? That's what they all say! Four new plays this week, my lad--one yesterday, one to-day--another to-morrow, and the night after! All day long I'm *reading* plays--and I spend my nights seeing 'em! D'you know I read about two thousand a year? Divide two thousand by three hundred and sixty five. A dog's life--that's what it is!

WALTER. Better than being a stockbroker's clerk--you believe *me!*

HECTOR. Is it? I wish *you* could have a turn at it, my bonny boy! *Your* hair'd go grey, like mine! And look here--what are the plays to-day? They're either so chock-full of intellect that they send you to

sleep--or they reek of sentiment till you yearn for the smell of a cabbage!

WALTER. Well, you've the change, at any rate.

HECTOR. [*Snorting.*] Change? By Jove, give me a Punch and Judy show on the sands--or performing dogs! Plays--I'm sick of 'em! And look here--the one I'm off to to-night. It's adapted from the French--well, we know what *that* means. Husband, wife and mistress. Or wife, husband, lover. That's what a French play means. And you make it English, and pass the Censor, by putting the lady in a mackintosh, and dumping in a curate!

BETTY. [*Coming in, and closing the door leading to the dining-room.*] You ought to be going, Hector.

[*She, stands listening for a moment, then goes through the other door into the hall.*

HECTOR. [*Disregarding her, too intent on his theme.*] And I tell you, of the two, I prefer the home-made stodge. I'm sick of the eternal triangle. They always do the same thing. Husband strikes attitudes--sometimes he strikes the lover. The lover never stands up to him--why shouldn't he? He would--in real life. [*BETTY comes back, with his overcoat and muffler--she proceeds affectionately to wrap this round his neck, and helps him on with his coat, he talking all the time.*] He'd say, look here, you go to Hell. *That's* what he'd say--well, there you'd have a situation. But not one of the playwriting chaps dares do it. Why not, I ask you? There you'd have truth, something big. But no--they're afraid--think the public won't like it. The husband's got to down the lover--like a big tom-cat with a mouse--or the author'd have to sell one of his motor-cars! That's just the fact of it!

BETTY. [*Looking at the clock on the mantelpiece.*] Twenty-five past, Hector.

HECTOR. [*Cheerily.*] All right, my lass, I'm off. By-bye, Walter--keep the old woman company for a bit. Good-bye, sweetheart. [*He kisses her.*] Don't wait up. Now for the drama. Oh, the dog's life!

[*He goes. BETTY waits till the hall door has banged, then she sits on the elbow of WALTER'S chair, and rests her head on his shoulder.*

BETTY. [*Softly.*] Poor Hector!

WALTER. [*Uncomfortably.*] ... Yes ...

BETTY. Doesn't it make you feel dreadful when he talks like that? [*She kisses him; then puts her arms round his neck, draws his face to her, and kisses him again, on the cheek.*] Doesn't it?

[*She nestles contentedly closer to him.*

WALTER. [*Trying to edge away.*] Well, it does. Yes.

BETTY. [*Dreamily.*] I--like it.

WALTER. Betty!

BETTY. Yes, I like it. I don't know why. I suppose I'm frightfully wicked. Or the danger perhaps--I don't know.

WALTER. [*Making a futile effort to get up.*] Betty--

BETTY. [*Tightening her arms around him.*] Stop there, and don't move. How smooth your chin is--*his* scrapes. Why don't husbands shave better? Or is it that the forbidden chin is always smoother? Poor old Hector! If he could see us! He hasn't a suspicion. I think it's lovely--really, I do. He leaves us here together, night after night, and imagines you're teaching me bridge.

WALTER. [*Restlessly.*] So I am. Where are the cards?

BETTY. [*Caressing him.*] Silly, have you forgotten that this is Tuesday--Maggie's night out? She's gone--I told her she needn't wait to clear away. We've arranged master's supper. Master! *You're* my master, aren't you?

WALTER. ... I don't know what I am ...

BETTY. Oh yes you do--you're my boy. Whom I love. There. [*She kisses him again, full on the lips.*] That was a nice one, wasn't it? Poor old Hector, sitting in his stall--thinks he's so wonderful, knows such a lot! Yes, Maggie's out--with *her* young man, I suppose. The world's full of women, with their young men--and husbands sitting in the stalls.... And I suppose that's how it always has been, and always will be.

WALTER. [*Shifting uneasily.*] Don't, Betty--I don't like it. I mean, he has such confidence in us.

BETTY. Of course he has. And quite rightly. Aren't you his oldest friend?

WALTER. [*With something of a groan.*] I've known him since I was seven.

BETTY. The first man he introduced me to--his best man at the wedding--do you remember coming to see us during the honeymoon? I liked you *then*.

WALTER. [*Really shocked.*] Betty!

BETTY. I did. You had a way of squeezing my hand.... And then when we came back here. You know it didn't take me long to discover--

WALTER. [*Protesting.*] I scarcely saw you the first two or three years!

BETTY. No--you were afraid. Oh I thought you so silly! [*He suddenly contrives to release himself--gets up, and moves to the card-table.*] Why, what's the matter?

WALTER. [*At the table, with his back to her.*] I hate hearing you talk like this.

BETTY. Silly boy! [*She rises, and goes to him; he has taken a cigarette out of the box on the table, and stands there, with his head bent, tapping the cigarette against his hand.*] Women only talk "like

this," as you call it, to their lovers. They talk "like that" to their husbands--and that's why the husbands never know. That's why the husbands are always sitting in the stalls, looking on. [*She puts her arms round him again.*] Looking and not seeing.

[*She approaches her lips to his--he almost fretfully unclasps her arms.*]

WALTER. Betty--I want to say a--serious word ...

BETTY. [*Looking fondly at him.*] Well, isn't what *I'm* saying serious?

WALTER. I'm thirty-eight.

BETTY. Yes. I'm only thirty. But I'm not complaining.

WALTER. Has it ever occurred to you--

[*He stops.*]

BETTY. What?

[*WALTER looks at her--tries to speak, but cannot--then he breaks away, goes across the room to the fireplace and stands for a moment looking into the fire. She has remained where she was, her eyes following him wonderingly. Suddenly he stamps his foot violently.*]

WALTER. Damn it! DAMN it!

BETTY. [*Moving towards him in alarm.*] What's the matter?

WALTER. [*With a swift turn towards her.*] I'm going to get married.

BETTY. [*Stonily, stopping by the round table.*] You ...

WALTER. [*Savagely.*] Going to get married, yes. Married, married!

[*She stands there and doesn't stir--doesn't speak or try to speak; merely stands there, and looks at him, giving no sign. Her silence irritates him; he becomes more and more violent, as though to give himself courage.*]

WALTER. You're wonderful, you women--you really are. Always contrive to make us seem brutes, or cowards! I've wanted to tell you this a dozen times--I've not had the pluck. Well, to-day I must. Must, do you hear that?... Oh, for Heaven's sake, say something.

BETTY. [*Still staring helplessly at him.*] You ...

WALTER. [*Feverishly.*] Yes, I, I! Now it's out, at least--it's spoken! I mean to get married, like other men--fooled, too, I dare say, like the others--at least I deserve it! But I'm tired, I tell you--tired--

BETTY. Of me?

WALTER. Tired of the life I lead--the beastly, empty rooms--the meals at the Club. And I'm thirty-eight--it's now or never.

BETTY. [*Slowly.*] And how about--me?

WALTER. You?

BETTY. [*Passionately.*] Yes. Me. Me!

WALTER. You didn't think this would last for ever?

BETTY. [*Nodding her head.*] I did--yes--I did. Why shouldn't it?

WALTER. [*Working himself into a fury again.*] Why? You ask that? Why? Oh yes, it's all right for *you*--you've your home and your husband--I'm there as an--annexe. To be telephoned to, when I'm wanted, at your beck and call, throw over everything, come when you whistle. And it's not only that--I tell you it makes me feel--horrid. After all, he's my--friend.

BETTY. He has been that always. You didn't feel--horrid--before.... Who is she?

WALTER. [*Shortly, as he turns back to the fire.*] That doesn't matter.

BETTY. Yes, it does. Who?

WALTER. [*Fretfully.*] Oh, why should we--

BETTY. I want to know--I'm *entitled* to know.

WALTER. [*Still with his back to her.*] Mary Gillingham.

BETTY. Mary Gillingham!

WALTER. [*Firmly, swinging round to her.*] Yes.

BETTY. That child, that chit of a girl!

WALTER. She's twenty-three.

BETTY. Whom I introduced you to--my own friend?

WALTER. [*Grumbling.*] What *has* that to do with it? And besides ... [*He suddenly changes his tone, noticing how calm she has become--he takes a step towards her, and stands by her side, at the back of the table, his voice becomes gentle and affectionate.*] But I say, really, you're taking it awfully well--pluckily. I knew you would--I knew I was an ass to be so--afraid.... And look here, we'll always be pals--the very best of pals. I'll ... never forget--never. You may be quite sure ... of that. I want to get married--I do--have a home of my own, and so forth--but you'll still be--just the one woman I really have loved--the one woman in my life--to whom I owe--everything.

BETTY. [*With a mirthless laugh.*] Do you tell all that--to Mary Gillingham?

WALTER. [*Pettishly, as he moves away.*] Do I--don't be so absurd.

BETTY. You tell *her* she is the only *girl* you have loved.

WALTER. [*Moving back to the fire, with his back to her.*] I tell her--I tell her--what does it matter what I tell her? And one girl or another--she or someone else--

BETTY. But you haven't answered my question--what's to become of me?

WALTER. [*Angrily, facing her.*] Become of you! Don't talk such nonsense. Because it is--really it is. You'll be as you were. And Hector's a splendid chap--and after all we've been frightfully wrong--treating him infernally badly--despicably. Oh yes, we have--and you know it. Lord, there've been nights when I have--but never mind that--that's all over! In future we can look him in the face without feeling guilty--we can--

BETTY. [*Quietly.*] You can.

WALTER. What do you mean?

BETTY. You can, because of this girl. Oh, I know, of course! You'll come here three or four times--then you'll drop off--you'll feel I'm not quite the woman you want your wife to know.

WALTER. [*With genuine feeling, as he impulsively steps towards her.*] Betty, Betty, what sort of cad do you take me for? What sort of cad, or bounder? Haven't I told you I'd never forget--never? And you think you'll pass out of my life--that I *want* you to? Why, good Heaven, I'll be your best friend as long as I live. Friend--yes--what I always should have been--meant to be! And Hector. Why, Betty, I tell you, merely talking to-night, as I've done, has made me feel--different--sort of--lifted--a load. Because I've always had it--somewhere deep down in me--when I've thought of--him.

BETTY. [*Calmly.*] Liar.

WALTER. [*Falling back.*] Betty!

BETTY. Liar--yes. Why these stupid, silly lies? "Always, deep down in me!" Where was it, this beautiful feeling, when you got me to go to your rooms?

WALTER. [*Harshly.*] We needn't--

BETTY. I liked you--I've said that--I liked you from the first. But I was straight enough. Liked you, of course--but I had no idea, not the slightest.... Thought it fun to play the fool, flirt just a bit. But it was you, you, *you* who--

WALTER. [*Breaking in sulkily and stamping his foot.*] Never mind about who it was.

BETTY. [*Passionately.*] Never mind! You dare!

WALTER. [*Doggedly.*] Yes--I dare. And look here--since you force me to it--that's all rot--yes, it is--just rot. Just as you like it now, hearing Hector ask me to stop with you, and kissing me the moment his back is turned--so you met me halfway, and more than halfway.

BETTY. You cur!

WALTER. That's what a woman always says, when a man speaks the truth. Because it *is* the truth--and you know it. "The way I squeezed your hand!" D'you think I *meant* to squeeze it--in a way! Why, as there's a Heaven above me, you were as sacred to me--as my own sister!

BETTY. [*Quietly, as she sits, to right of the table.*] What I'm wondering is--you see, you're the only lover I've had--what I wonder is, when a man breaks off, tells a woman he's tired of her, wants to get married--does he *always* abuse the woman--

WALTER. [*Sulkily.*] I haven't--

BETTY. Degrade, and throw mud on, the love she has had for him?

WALTER. [*With a bitter shrug.*] Love--

BETTY. [*Passionately, as she springs to her feet.*] Love, love, yes, you--cruel man! Love, what else? I adore you, don't you know that? Live for you! would give up everything in the world--everything, everything! And Walter, Walter! If it's only *that*--that you want a home--well, let's go off together. He'll divorce us--we can get married.

Don't go away, and leave me here, alone with him! I couldn't stand it--
Walter, I couldn't, I couldn't!

*[She goes eagerly to him, flings her arms round his neck, and a dry
sob bursts from her.]*

WALTER. *[Very gently.]* Betty, Betty, you've been so brave ... Betty,
dear, the horrid things I've said were only to make you angry, to make
you feel what a brute I was, how well you're rid of me. Oh, I'm not
proud of myself! But look here, we must be sensible--we must,
really.... You know, if you were divorced--if I were the co-respondent
in a divorce case--I'd lose my berth, get the sack--

BETTY. *[Clinging to him.]* We could go to Australia--anywhere--

WALTER. I've no money.

BETTY. *[With a sudden movement, raising her head and leaving
him.]* And Mary Gillingham has lots?

WALTER. It's not for her money that I--

BETTY. *[With a start.]* You love her?

WALTER. *[Dropping his head, and speaking under his breath.]* Yes.

BETTY. *[Wringing her hands.]* You do, you do?

WALTER. Yes, that's the truth--I do. Oh, Betty I'm so frightfully
sorry--

BETTY. *[With a groan.]* Then you don't love me any more ...

WALTER. It's not that. But you see--

BETTY. *[Moaning.]* You don't, you don't!

*[She stands there, crushed, overwhelmed, dry-eyed, broken moans
escaping from her; suddenly she hears a key turning in the lock of the
hall-door outside, and rushes to the card-table.]*

BETTY. Hector! Quick, quick--the cards!

[WALTER *flies to the table, and sits by her side. He seizes one pack and proceeds to shuffle it, she is dealing with the other. All this takes only a second.* HECTOR *comes in--they both spring up.*

BETTY. Hector! You're not ill?

HECTOR. [*Kissing her.*] Play postponed, my child--bit of luck! When I got to the theatre I found that the actor-manager's car had collided with a cab outside the stage-door--he was thrown through the window--there's a magnificent exit for you! and has been cut about a bit. Nothing serious. But the play's postponed for a week. Bit of luck!

WALTER. [*Sitting.*] Not for him.

HECTOR. Oh *he* has had luck enough--tons of it! I'll get into a jacket--then we'll have some bridge. See what progress you've made, Betty!

[*He hurries out, and closes the door.*

BETTY. [*Producing a little mirror from her bag, looking into it, touching her hair.*] We were only just in time.

WALTER. [*Eagerly, as he bends across the table.*] You're splendid--you are--splendid!

BETTY. Yes. All very nice and comfortable for you--isn't it? [*She puts the mirror back into the bag.*]

WALTER. [*Coaxingly.*] Betty.

BETTY. To-morrow you'll go to her--or to-night perhaps--

WALTER. To-night--ridiculous! At this hour!

BETTY. She's a deceitful little cat. I saw her last week--she never told me--

WALTER. I don't think she knew. I only proposed to-day.

BETTY. [*Flinging herself back in her chair, and opening wide eyes.*] You--proposed--to-day!

WALTER. [*Very embarrassed.*] Yes--I mean--

BETTY. You--proposed--to-day! And waited till she had accepted you--to tell *me*--

WALTER. [*Eagerly.*] Don't be so silly--come, come, he'll be back in a minute.... And, believe me, I'm not worth making a fuss about!

BETTY. [*Looking contemptuously at him.*] That's true.

WALTER. Yes, it is, worse luck! I deserve all you've said to me. And you'll be ... much better ... without me.

BETTY. Better?

WALTER. Yes, better, better--any way you choose to put it! I'm a--but never mind that!--Look here--you'd like me to stop?

BETTY. He wants to play bridge.

WALTER. Don't you think that I--

BETTY. [*Hearing HECTOR coming.*] Sh.

[*HECTOR comes in--she is idly tossing the cards about. HECTOR has put on a smoking-jacket--he comes in, very jolly, fussing around, rubbing his hands, so glad to be home. He sits, to the right of BETTY.*]

HECTOR. Now for a game!

[*He seizes a pack, and spreads out the cards.*]

BETTY. [*Leaning back.*] Not sure that I want to play.

HECTOR. Don't be disagreeable, Betty! Why?

BETTY. [*Listlessly, as she rises and moves across the room.*] No fun, being three.

HECTOR. Good practice for you. Come on.

BETTY. [*Leaning against the other table, and turning and facing them.*] Besides, *he* has something to tell you.

HECTOR. Walter?

BETTY. Yes.

HECTOR. [*Looking inquiringly at WALTER.*] To tell *me*? What is it?

BETTY. That he's engaged.

HECTOR. [*Shouting, as he leans across the table.*] Never! Walter! Engaged? You?

WALTER. [*Nervously.*] Yes.

HECTOR. [*Noisily and affectionately.*] You old scoundrel! You rascal and villain! Engaged--and you don't come and tell *me* first! Well I--am--damned!

WALTER. [*Trying to take it gaily.*] I knew you'd chaff me about it.

HECTOR. Chaff you! Silly old coon! why I'm glad! Of course we shall miss you--but marriage--it's the only thing, my boy--the only thing! Who is she? Do I know her?

WALTER. [*Mumbling, as he fingers the cards.*] A friend of Betty's--I fancy you've met her--

HECTOR. Who?

BETTY. Mary Gillingham. We're the first to know--he only proposed to-day.

HECTOR. Gillingham, Gillingham.... Oh yes, I've seen her, just seen her, but I don't remember.... I say, not the daughter of the sealing-wax man?

WALTER. Yes.

HECTOR. Then there's lots of tin! Fine! Oh you artful old dodger! Is she pretty?

WALTER. So-So.

BETTY. [*Still leaning against the table, and looking at them both.*] She's excessively pretty. She has yellow hair and blue eyes.

HECTOR. [*Chuckling.*] And she has caught old Wallie. The cynical old Wallie who sniffed at women! Though perhaps it's the money--

BETTY. No. He's in love with her.

HECTOR. That's good. I'm glad. And I congratulate you--heartily, my boy. [*He seizes WALTER'S hand, and wrings it.*] We must drink to it! [*He gets up, goes to the side-table, and pours some whiskey into a tumbler.*] Charge your glass, Walter! [*WALTER rises and goes to the side-table.*] Ladies and gentlemen. I give you the bride and bridegroom! [*He fills the glass from the syphon and passes it to WALTER, then proceeds to fill his own.*] Betty, you must join us.

BETTY. [*Quietly.*] No.

HECTOR. You can't toast him in water, of course. Has she cleared away yet? I'll get you some Hock.

[*He puts his glass down and moves to the door at back.*]

BETTY. Don't be so silly. I won't drink at all.

HECTOR. [*Amazed.*] Not to old Walter?

BETTY. [*Steadily.*] No.

HECTOR. Why?

BETTY. [*Almost jeeringly.*] Because--old Walter--has been my lover.

HECTOR. [*Stopping, and staring at her.*] What?

BETTY. [*Calmly, looking full at him.*] My lover ... these last two years.

HECTOR. [*Staring stupidly at her.*] He has been--

BETTY. [*Impatiently, as she taps the floor with her foot.*] Yes, yes. How often must I tell you? My lover--don't you know what that means? Why do you stare at me with those fat goggle-eyes of yours? He has been my lover--and now he has fallen in love with this girl and means to marry her. That's all.

HECTOR. [*Turning towards WALTER, who hasn't stirred from the side-table.*] What? You?

[*WALTER remains motionless and silent.*]

HECTOR. [*In muffled tones, scarcely able to speak.*] You! It's true what this woman says?

BETTY. [*Contemptuously.*] This woman! Don't be so melodramatic! Have you forgotten my name?

HECTOR. [*Turning fiercely to her, roaring madly.*] Silence, Jezebel! [*She shrinks back, in alarm, towards the fire.*] Your name! Wait a bit, I'll tell you! [*He takes a step towards her--she crouches in terror against the wall.*] You shall hear what your name is! Just now I'm dealing with *him*. [*He swings round to WALTER.*] You there, you skunk and thief! You, you lying hound! I was your best friend. So you've taken my wife, have you? And now mean to go off and marry this girl. That's it? Oh, it's so simple! Here--come here--sit down. Sit down, I tell you. Here, in this chair. Shall I have to drag you to it? I want to keep my hands off you. Here. [*WALTER has moved slowly towards him. HECTOR has banged down a chair behind the centre*

table, WALTER sits in it--HECTOR speaks over his shoulder to BETTY.] And you--fetch pen and ink and paper--

BETTY. [*In abject panic.*] Hector--

HECTOR. [*Turning fiercely and scowling at her.*] If you speak to me I'll brain you too. Just you go in there and fetch the things. D'you hear? Go. [*She moves into the other room. HECTOR swings round to WALTER.*] As for you, you're a scoundrel. A rogue, a thief, a liar, a traitor. Of the very worst kind, the blackest. Not an ordinary case of a husband and wife--I trusted you--you were my best friend. You spawn, you thing of the gutter, you foul-hearted, damnable slug!

[*BETTY comes back, dragging her feet, carrying paper and envelopes and a stylograph--she puts them on the table.*

HECTOR. Not that stylograph--that's mine--his dirty hands shan't touch it--I could never use it again. Fetch *your* pen--yours--you belong to him, don't you? Go in and fetch it. D'you hear?

[*BETTY goes into the inner room again.*

HECTOR. My wife. And you the man I've done more for than for any one else in the world. The man I cared for, you low dog. Used my house--came here because it was dull at the Club--and took my wife? I don't know why I don't kill you. I've the right. But I won't. You shall pay for it, my fine fellow--you are going to pay--now.

[*BETTY brings a pen and an inkstand; she places them on the table; HECTOR seizes them and pushes them in front of WALTER. BETTY slinks to the other side of the room, and stands by the sofa.*

HECTOR. [*To WALTER.*] Now you write. You hear? You write what I dictate. Word for word. What's the old brute's name?

WALTER. Whose?

HECTOR. Whose! Her father, the sealing-wax man, old Gillingham?

WALTER. [*Staring.*] Gillingham?

HECTOR. Gillingham. Yes. What is it?

WALTER. You want me to write to him?

HECTOR. [*Nodding.*] To him. Who else? A confession? I've had that. His name?

WALTER. [*Dropping the pen and half rising.*] I won't--

HECTOR. [*Springing upon him in a mad fury, and forcing him back into the chair.*] You won't, you dog! You dare say that--to me! By Heaven, you will! You'll lick the dust off this floor, if I tell you! You'll go on your hands and knees, and crawl! Sit down, you! Sit down and take up your filthy pen. So. [*Thoroughly cowed, WALTER has taken up the pen again.*] And now--his name. Don't make me ask you again, I tell you, don't. What is it?

WALTER. Richard.

HECTOR. Very well, Richard. So write that down. To Richard Gillingham. I have to-day proposed to your daughter, and she has accepted me. Got that? She has accepted me. But I can't marry her--can't marry her--because I have seduced the wife of my friend Hector Allen--

WALTER. [*Appealingly, dropping his pen.*] Hector!

HECTOR. [*Frantically gripping WALTER by the throat, till he takes up his pen again.*] The wife of my friend Hector Allen--write it--and plainly, you hound, plainly--so--and because I am taking the woman away with me to-night.

BETTY. [*With a loud cry.*] Hector!

HECTOR. [*Over his shoulder, watching WALTER write.*] Silence, over there, you! Hold your tongue! Go into your room and put on your things--we've done with you here! Take what you want--I don't care--you don't show your face here again. And you--*[he taps his clenched hand against WALTER'S arm]* write. What are you stopping for?

How far have you got? [*He peers over WALTER'S shoulder.*] Because--I--am--taking-- the--woman--away--with--me--to-night.

BETTY. [*Beside herself, wringing her hands.*] Hector, Hector--

HECTOR. [*Savagely, as he makes a half-turn towards her.*] You still there? Wait a bit. I'll come to you, when I've finished with him. If you haven't gone and put on your things, you shall go off without them. Into the street. You'll find other women there like you. [*He turns back to WALTER.*] Here, you, have you written? [*He looks over WALTER'S shoulder.*] Go on--I'm getting impatient. Go on, I tell you. I--am--taking--the--

[*WALTER is slowly writing down the words, HECTOR standing over him; BETTY suddenly bursts into a peal of wild, uproarious laughter, and lets herself fall into a chair to the left of the card-table.*]

HECTOR. [*Madly.*] You!

[*He leaves WALTER, and almost springs at her.*]

BETTY. [*Brimming with merriment.*] Oh, you old donkey! *How* we have pulled your leg!

HECTOR. [*Staring at her, stopping dead short.*] You--

BETTY. [*Through her laughter, choking.*] Hector, Hector! Conventional situations! The usual stodge! The lover and husband! You goose, you wonderful old goose!

[*WALTER, with a mighty effort, has pulled himself together, and roars with laughter too. He jumps up. HECTOR is standing there blinking, paralysed.*]

WALTER. [*Merrily, to BETTY.*] Oh really, you shouldn't. You've given it away too soon!

BETTY. Too soon! He'd have strangled us. Did you ever see such a tiger?

WALTER. [*Chuckling hugely.*] He didn't give the lover much chance to stand up to him, did he?

BETTY. And *wasn't* he original! Dog, hound, villain, traitor!

WALTER. To say nothing of Jezebel! Though, between ourselves, I think he meant Messalina!

BETTY. And I was to go into the street. But he did let me fill my bag!

WALTER. I think the playwrights come out on top, I do indeed. [*He goes to HECTOR, and stands to left of him.*] Hector, old chap, here's the letter!

BETTY. [*Going to the other side of HECTOR, and dropping a low curtsey.*] And please, Mr. Husband, was it to be a big bag, or a small bag, and might I have taken the silver teapot?

[*HECTOR has been standing there stupid, dazed, dumbfounded, too bewildered for his mind to act or thoughts to come to him; he suddenly bursts into a roar of Titanic, overwhelming laughter. He laughs, and laughs, staggers to the sofa, falls on it, rocks and roars till the tears roll down his cheeks. He sways from side to side, unable to control himself--his laughter is so colossal that the infection catches the others; theirs becomes genuine too.*

BETTY. [*With difficulty, trying to control herself.*] The letter! Old Gillingham! "His name, scoundrel, his name!"

WALTER. [*Gurgling.*] With his hand at my throat! Sit there, villain, and write!

BETTY. "I'll deal with *you* presently! Wait till I've finished with *him!*"

WALTER. "Into the street!" At least, they *do* usually say "into the night!"

HECTOR. [*Rubbing his eyes and panting for breath.*] Oh, you pair of blackguards! Too bad--no, really too bad! It was! I fell in, I did! Oh,

Lord, oh, Lord, what a nightmare! But it wasn't right, really it wasn't--no really! My Lord, how I floundered--head and shoulders--swallowed it all! Comes of reading that muck every day--never stopped to think! I didn't! Walter, old chap! [*He holds out his hand.*] Betty! My poor Betty! [*He draws her towards him.*] The things I said to you!

BETTY. [*Carelessly eluding the caress.*] At least admit that you're rather hard on the playwriting people!

HECTOR. [*Getting up and shaking himself.*] Oh, they be blowed! Well, you *have* had a game with me! [*He shakes himself again.*] Brrrrr! Oh, my Lord! What I went through!

BETTY. It *was* a lark! you should have seen yourself! Your eyes starting out of your head! You looked like a murderer!

HECTOR. By Jove, and I felt it! For two pins I'd have--

BETTY. And Mary Gillingham! *That's* the funniest part! That you could have thought *he* was engaged--to *her*!

[*Involuntarily the smile dies away on WALTER'S face; he turns and stares at her; she goes on calmly.*]

BETTY. When she happens to be the one girl in this world he can't stand!

WALTER. [*With a movement that he can't control.*] Betty!

BETTY. [*Turning smilingly to him.*] No harm in my telling Hector--he scarcely knows her! [*She swings round to HECTOR again.*] Why, Walter simply *loathes* the poor girl! That's what made it so funny! [*At the mere thought of it she bursts out laughing again, and goes on speaking through her laughter.*] And I tell you--if you ever hear he's engaged to *her*--why, you can believe the rest of the story too!

HECTOR. [*Laughing heartily as he pats WALTER on the shoulder.*] Poor old Walter! And, d'you know, I was quite pleased at the thought of his getting married! I was! [*He turns to him.*] But it's better, old

chap, for us--we'd have missed you--terribly! [*With another pat on WALTER'S shoulder, he goes to the fire, and drops in the letter.*] Mustn't leave *that* lying about! [*He turns.*] Well, by Jove, if any one had told me.... And drinking to him, and all!

BETTY. If you'll fetch me that glass of Hock now, I *will* drink to him, Hector. To Walter, the Bachelor!

HECTOR. [*Beaming.*] So we will! Good. I'll get it.

[*He bustles into the dining-room.*]

BETTY. [*Moving swiftly to WALTER.*] Well, now's your time. One thing or the other.

WALTER. [*Savagely.*] You fiend!

BETTY. I'll go and see her to-morrow--see her constantly--

WALTER. Why are you doing this?

BETTY. You've ruined my life and his. At least, *you* shan't be happy.

WALTER. And you imagine I'll come back to *you*--that we'll go on, you and I?

BETTY. [*Scornfully.*] No--don't be afraid! You've shown yourself to me to-day. That's all done with--finished. *His* friend now--with the load off you--but never *her* husband. Never!

[HECTOR *comes bustling back, with the bottle of Hock, and a wine-glass that he gives to BETTY--she holds it, and he fills it from the bottle.*]

HECTOR. Here you are, my girl--and now, where's my whiskey? [*He trots round to the side table, finds his glass, and WALTER'S--hands one to WALTER.*] Here, Wallie--yours must be the one that's begun--I didn't have time to touch mine! Here. [*WALTER takes it.*] And forgive me, old man, for thinking, even one minute--[*He wrings him*

by the hand.] Here's to you, old friend. And Betty, to you! Oh, Lord, I just want this drink!

BETTY. [*In cold, clear tones, as she holds up her glass.*] To Walter, the Bachelor!

[*She drains her glass; WALTER has his moment's hesitation; he drinks, and with tremendous effort succeeds in composing his face.*

HECTOR. [*Gaily.*] To Walter, the Bachelor! [*He drinks his glass to the dregs and puts it down.*] And now--for a game.

WALTER. I think I--

HECTOR. [*Coaxingly.*] Sit down, laddie--just one rubber. It's quite early. Do. There's a good chap. [*They all sit: HECTOR at back, BETTY to the left of him, WALTER to the right--he spreads out the cards--they draw for partners.*] As we are--you and Betty--I've got the dummy. [*He shuffles the cards--BETTY cuts--he begins to deal.*] That's how I like it--one on each side of me. Also I like having dummy. Now, Betty, play up. Oh, Lord, how good it is, how good! A nightmare, I tell you--terrible! And really you must forgive me for being such an ass. But the way you played up, both of you! My little Betty--a Duse, that's what she is--a real Duse! [*He gathers up his cards.*] And the gods are kind to me--I've got a hand, I tell you! I call NO TRUMPS!

[*He beams at them--they are placidly sorting their cards. He puts his hand down and proceeds to look at his dummy, as the curtain falls.*

CURTAIN