



Bodleian Libraries

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

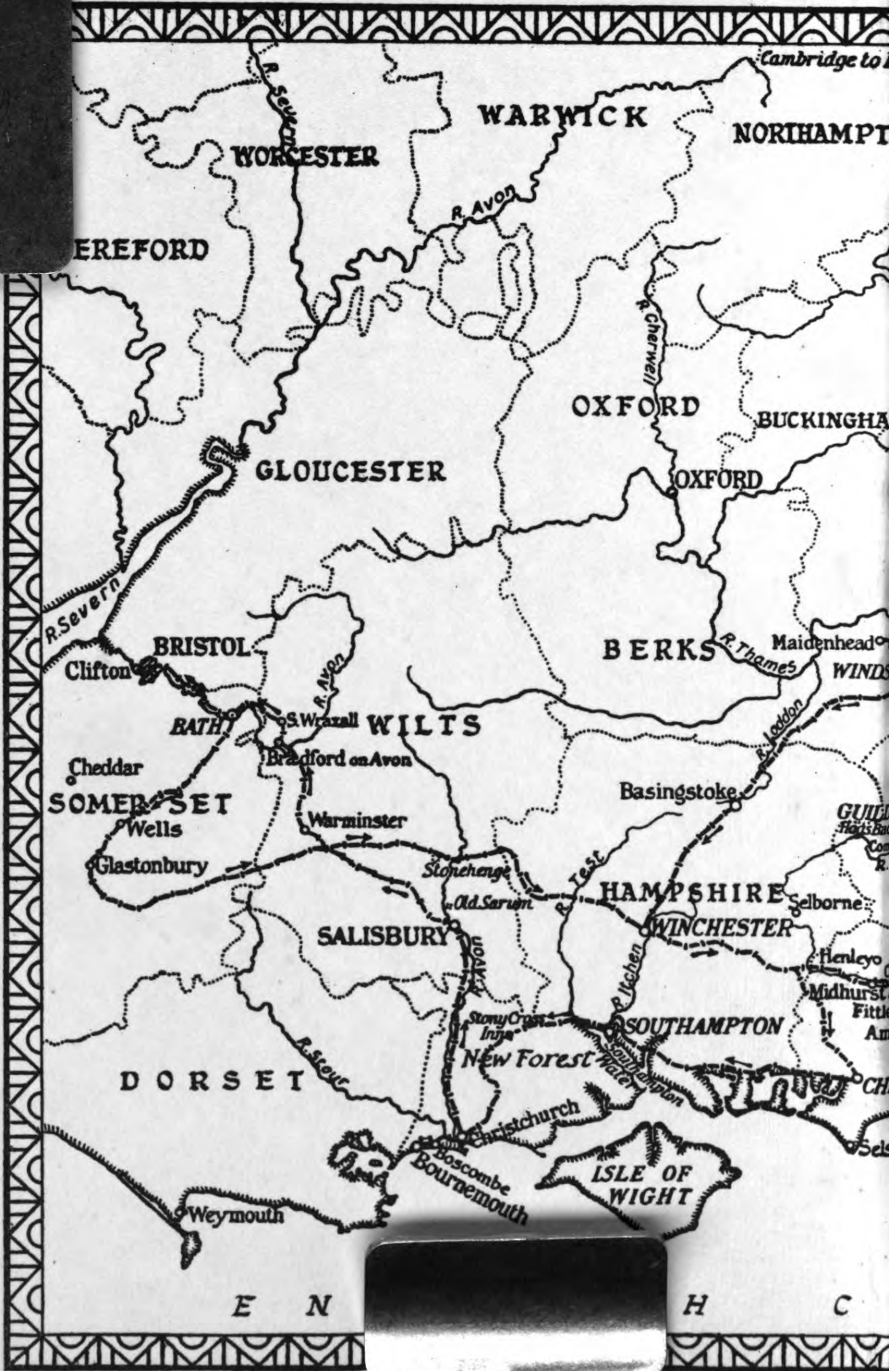
This book is part of the collection held by the Bodleian Libraries and scanned by Google, Inc. for the Google Books Library Project.

For more information see:

<http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/dbooks>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 UK: England & Wales (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) licence.





Scale of Miles
 0 5 10 15 20 25 30
 Route of Tour. - - - - -

T A N N E L

25613 e. 4121

**THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR
COMES BACK**

Books by the same author

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR

THE CAR OF DESTINY

BLACK SLEEVES

CHILDREN OF THE ZODIAC

FROZEN SLIPPERS

HONEYMOON HATE

THE GOLDEN CARPET

BEWITCHED

ETC.

THE INKY WAY (*Memoirs*)

THE
LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR
COMES BACK

BY
ALICE WILLIAMSON
(MRS. C. N. WILLIAMSON)



CHAPMAN & HALL, LTD.
LONDON

CHAPMAN & HALL LTD
11 Henrietta St., London, W.C.2
Printed by Northumberland Press
Ltd., Newcastle-on-Tyne. Bound by
A. W. Bain & Co. Ltd., London

First published 1933



REMEMBERING ONE NOVEMBER NIGHT
THIS BOOK
IS
DEDICATED
TO
ALL TRUE ROTARIANS, WHO ARE
DOING SO MUCH TO BRING PROSPERITY
BACK TO THE WORLD

*Alice Williamson
Molly Brighthelmstone
Jack Brighthelmstone
Spat Randolph
Bill Ragford*

1933

FOREWORD

ONCE upon a time in France Jack Winston came to the rescue of Molly Randolph, with his own car, which was so good for those days that she named her amateur chauffeur "The Lightning Conductor."

Though the American girl, travelling through Europe with her prim old aunt, realized that the man seemed to be well bred, she did not learn for a long time that he was not "Brown," but the Honourable John Winston, son of Lord Brighthelmstone (pronounced, of course, Brighton).

After the tour of France and Italy, they married. Then came the war. Jack was wounded, and out of active service. He went to America on a mission, and he and Molly took another trip, about which they wrote certain letters, turned into a second book.

Now their home is a charming old house at Hampton Court, which they both adore, though they are as fond as ever of travelling, and as much in love with each other as in their first "Lightning Conductor" days.

FOREWORD

That same book of travel-letters, called "The Lightning Conductor," sold over a million copies in many countries.



THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

*Letter from Lord Brighthelmstone to
Sir Robert Reading at*

THE PLAYWRIGHTS' CLUB,
ST. JAMES'S, LONDON.

March 30th.

DEAR BOB,

I send you this from St. Roland's, Hampton Court. Molly and I are back from the U.S.A., as you know, and so near you that I could run in and have a talk. But you say you are too seedy for talks, even with me. Poor chap! What is phlebitis? It sounds almost pre-historic, as if it went with pterodactyls and the like, instead of busy men about town. But perhaps you have been too busy? Anyhow, your production is still going strong and, according to the papers, is a "wow," as my American wife would put it.

My dear fellow, you give me a ghastly task, ordering me to write you immense screeds, setting forth our adventures, my opinions of human beings and other scenic effects, all over England. But, as you say you're longing for a trip yourself, and that my rough island story will do you more good than the doctors do, so be

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

it. Your blood is on your own head! Or has the phlebitis corked it up in your leg?

Thank goodness I shan't have to begin as far back as following Molly to her native Virginia, and hauling her home from there. I did write you a long ship letter, and I remember mentioning that I felt a guide-bookish urge, an urge so feverish I feared I might come out in boils if I didn't yield to it. There were all those spinsters on board in the best deck-chairs, reading repulsive volumes on how to "do" England and Europe.

The suggestion in itself was bad enough. Could a writer or other person of imagination talk of "doing" a country? But when its owner was absent, eating or bridging, I glanced at one of these atrocities, left open on her rug. It was so dry, it might have turned America wet with a mad thirst before the abolishing of prohibition came along.

That was when I planned our tour. Yes, there and then. I deliberately meant to use it for a book of my own, remembering old days and how Monty, now so high a personage, gave me away by publishing certain letters of Molly's and mine. I thought how I'd made much of France and Italy at that time, leaving out England. Caddish of me! But, to do myself justice, I just happened to be in France with my car, and Molly needed us both. She needed us badly.

It occurred to me, as I put "Doing England" back where it belonged, that my native land has a lot of strong points, none of which have weakened with the centuries, many of which have strengthened.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Hotels and roads, for instance; yes, things have actually been moving with the times; a symptom which, in my early youth, was not looked upon with favour. In fact, it simply wasn't done. There you were. There you stayed. What was good enough for your father was good enough for you. Now, it's different. I suppose the change began with the war, though we were too busy then to notice.

As I say, I determined to write a book of sorts, hoping that at worst dryness wouldn't be a feature.

Now you command me to write the book for you to read while you are laid up, and for others to read if you find it worthy. Heaven knows, you ought to be a judge! You've read more plays than most men have read newspapers. Though it doesn't encourage me much that you've ruthlessly turned down at least two-thirds of the lot.

I showed your letter to Molly and said, " Shall we start out again on a pilgrimage? . . . Or are we too old? "

That got her! *Too old!*

You happen to know, or I wouldn't remind you, that Molly Randolph was eighteen in the dear but never dead days when she named me her " Lightning Conductor," and that she's thirty-eight now. But I heard you telling her before she sailed for America that she looked twenty-five, and must be careful to keep out of mischief, travelling without me. I'm sure you were right, for she certainly didn't keep out of mischief, didn't try, and was the prettiest woman on the ship when I brought her home.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

She was having so much fun in Richmond, and in New York, where we paid a short visit, that it was all I could do to show the fair female where duty lay. I did it by threatening to go alone to Hollywood and have a fling among the glamorous ones. Next morning I had our passports visa'd.

Now we are at home. St. Roland's, the garden, the lawn, the river, looked so divine to me at first sight in early spring that I was on the point of weakening until Molly reminded me that spring is not for beauty alone. It is for the cleaning out of houses.

That tore it! I said, "Let's go!" And we will go. You shall have the letters you want, each one as long as an act of (maybe) a third-rate play. Not as full of action, perhaps. Though who knows? Anyhow, they're bound to have better scenic effects, because they'll be real.

Yours,
JACK.

*Ship's radio message from Miss Susan Randolph of
Elmville, Virginia, to Lady Brighthelmstone at
St. Roland's, Hampton Court*

Darling, am on board the *Gigantic*. Have practically run away. Couldn't stick it at home. Please may I come to you? If not, I don't know what will become of me, but probably something bad.

Your loving SPAT.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Letter from Lord Brighthelmstone to Robert Reading

ST. ROLAND'S,
HAMPTON COURT.

April 1st.

DEAR BOB,

A bolt from the blue!

The bolt is an American flapper. The blue is the Atlantic. Also my state of mind.

I don't like flappers. I'm afraid of them, especially American flappers. This one is a cousin of Molly's, and I had hardly posted my letter to you when a radio message arrived—a shilling a word, it must have cost—about forty words, I should say, most of them superfluous. All right for a wireless love-letter. I've often done it myself. But this was to cadge an invitation to stay with us. Cheek! I've never seen the girl, though I've often heard Molly speak of her, and M. paid a week-end visit to Elmville while she was in Virginia. Small but smart place, it seems, full of F.F.V.s (First Families of Virginia!). M. might have stopped longer, she explains now, because she's fond of this Spat, and of the father, who is a remarkably handsome man and even more remarkably rich. Being of the dangerous age—forty-five-ish—he married his platinum-blond manicurist, as millionaires do in magazine stories. Only the magazine manicurists are the heroines, therefore divinely lovely in disposition as well as figure and face, whereas the new Mrs. Randolph's beauty is but skin deep or, according to her step-daughter, cosmetic deep.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Susan, now nineteen (nicknamed Spat because when really young she had the habit of slapping people she disliked; spat! spat! spat!), found herself in a mood to commit suicide, or marriage with a local boy friend; anything to escape the Platinum One who, she hopes, may be moth-eaten in a year or so. Then she thought of Molly, and sailed without waiting to write. I take it she must be one of those young persons who imagines herself welcome everywhere: "Little Spatty Wandolph what eveybody loves" sort of thing.

Molly says it's perfectly all right, and we'll take her touring with us. That means a second man, say I, for though I love nothing better than looking after Molly, I refuse to be pack mule for two women. When apart, I find that the creatures have little or none of that sex loyalty which we possess almost to excess. But when together, they stand for each other in a way too burdensome for one man to support.

I smoked a couple of pipes (I mean their contents) before my wandering intelligence could fix upon the most suitable victim. Finally inspiration came. I hope you will have no objection to my choice when I tell you. It's your own particular playwright, Bill Ragford, *alias* "Rags." "Rags" and "Spat"! They do seem to call to each other across seas and other wide spaces, don't they? Can't you see a future announcement: "Spat, wife of Rags, of a Raglet." Besides, there's Rags being what Molly's American enough to call a "lord."

Not so much of a lord, to be sure. What's a viscount? I passed through the stage myself, before

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

my brother died and I came into my father's title. Nobody thought anything of me at all, except hotel servants who expected lordly tips. What makes Rags worth while is his quaint talent for writing. "Bats in the Belfry" is one of the most cynically funny books of the last dozen years, in my opinion. No wonder it was a best seller, if only for the rich new variety of slang it invented. People had to buy it, to learn the smart way to talk. A happy accident for Rags. He needed it.

By the way, *is* he a playwright? Or did you or someone else dramatize "Bats"? I, being in America at the time, am not sure, but Molly says he did write the play, and that he is now at work on another, which you're going to produce if the present masterpiece ever fails to attract. She ought to know, because Rags poses as an adorer of hers, and they correspond, more or less, when Molly has nothing better to do.

I say he "poses," because Rags knows I'd jolly well knock his block off if he dared do more than pose. When he and I get together, we generally become slightly acid towards the end of a conversation, because to me Winchester doesn't rank with Eton, and it's vice versa with him. However, common memories of Cambridge reconcile us until I happen to drop a hint that King's is superior to Corpus Christi (sounds profane, but isn't), and that anyhow the place was better in my day.

If Rags is really in the middle of writing a play for you, and you need him on the spot, I'll think up someone else, though he's Molly's choice as a fourth for

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

the trip. Wire me, will you, just yes or no? I hope you can spare him, because at least he's not on the dole, thanks to "Bats in the Belfry," book and play. Molly explains that American girls are still interested in "lords." They like to write home about them, and jot down their titles in the journals they keep while abroad. Besides, Rags is good-looking in his dark, slim-waisted way (don't you think?) and has quite decent taste in clothes. Besides, he is about the right age, between twenty-seven and twenty-eight, though Molly insists he's thirty, that being the extreme limit of years which she's willing to acknowledge for herself.

Did you know that Rags has inherited a beautiful old house in Yorkshire, Flowers Abbey? Even on the strength of "Bats" success, he can't afford to keep it up, so lends it to an aunt, the widow of some rich, impossible person. "Aunt Dora," she is, but according to Molly's second-hand description, peculiarly unlike our well-known, well-hated D.O.R.A. Nobody would own *her* as an aunt!

I dare say you've been to Rags's little old cottage at Strand-on-the-Green? I've never been invited, but Molly has. She's of opinion that it's a great mistake to invite husbands and wives together. Each one knows the other's best jokes and foibles too well. A man daren't "Brill" before his wife. Danger of repetition.

Don't forget that wire. If it isn't to be Rags, I'll have to rout out some chap not under the rank of baron, or over thirty-four. I'm quoting Molly.

Yours ever,

JACK.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Lord Ragford (Rags) to Sir Robert Reading

Undated.

DEAR SIR ROBERT,

You told me not to come and see you because you are in a beastly temper, and can't bear to be civil to any creature less agreeable than a dog.

Well, I know I'm less agreeable than most dogs, especially your big, yellow Irish terrier with a face like a flattered sponge. I hope letters don't worry you as much as visits do? I'm writing from Strand-on-the-Green, which was never more green and never more absurdly exquisite than now in the waking of spring. But there's an old friend of mine trying to lure me away. I don't mean old, really. Only that our friendship is old. You know him well, I think: Jack Brighthelmstone. His father died, then brother, and the title gets on his nerves because nobody pronounces it as it should be pronounced.

I remember you said one night, when they were in a box, that his wife was the prettiest woman you'd ever seen. They've just come back from months in America. They want me to take a motor tour with them. In case you won't be needing me, I'd like nothing better than to accept, if we were to be a party of three. I find three good company when there are two men and one woman. The woman is always at her best, driving tandem. But I fear I'm invited because of an American girl who is on the way here from her old Kentucky home, or it may be Virginia

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

or something like that. I'll be expected to make love to her, which I'd much rather do to Lady Brighthelmstone—Molly. Nobody else can be as pretty, not even a cousin.

Our own girls are sophisticated enough, God knows, but I hear that American girls of the last few years' vintage can give them points. You see, I'm so damned tired of having to live up to my own books, and be more sophisticated than the devil, or else disappointing hostesses and having a whispering campaign run round: "Poor Rags is going off; too *boring*, my dear! I only asked him because 'Bats' was so naughty. He's really *nothing*, when you meet him." I can't afford that. Your theatre would suffer. You wouldn't put on my new play, and my next book wouldn't run into twenty-five editions. So I must live up to my artificial self. To exchange wisecracks at the rate of three on the spur of each moment with a slick American flapper will just about send me to a nursing or mental home after two or three weeks. I don't know if I can bear it. However, as you're only too well aware, sir, I didn't take your sage advice in the matter of Liddy Lallers. I was rather too winning, or was it my beastly title, or the money you're helping me rake in? I did what I did only to warm her up for the part of Minette, when you said you didn't think, with all her beauty, she could play it. Now she keeps 'phoning, or appearing suddenly to lunch, a most unsuitable figure for Strand-on-the-Green. So I thought seriously of asking you if you'd mind my running off to Yorkshire—my place, you know, which my wonderful aunt pays for,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

and provides perfumed bath-salts because she has added six bathrooms at her own expense.

In a way, it would be a good idea to travel with Jack and Molly, plus the unknown quantity, *alias* flapper, because I'd see to it that we got to the north eventually; and while motoring it's difficult for people you want to shed to keep in touch with you. You understand what I mean. It's an awful puzzle what to do. But I'll take your advice. And if it's yes, for the love of Mike have a telegram ready to recall me at a moment's notice if I wire "Girl on the brain," or something desperate of that sort.

Not that I'm conceited, or dream for a moment that a friend of Molly's would throw herself at my unworthy bean. But any more sophistication added to my own forced, unnatural brilliance, would honestly be the death of me. I'm going "Bats" myself. S O S, Sir Robert, S O S.

Yours,
RAGFORD.

*Telegram—Sir Robert Reading to
Lord Brighthelmstone*

Take him with my blessing.

BOB.

Telegram—Sir Robert Reading to Lord Ragford

Would try it in your place. A change may do you good. Can't do you harm. Four weeks' leave at

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
most. Count on me at the last ditch. I and Flattered
Sponge send regards and yelps.

R. R.

Lord Brighthelmstone to Sir Robert Reading

ST. ROLAND'S.

April 2nd.

MY DEAR BOB,

Thanks for the loan of Rags. I'm not sure yet whether he'll come. But I think he will because I can threaten neatly to blackmail him with all the admiring dames of Mayfair. I can broadcast his hideous secret, which you've probably learned for yourself: that he's a simple soul, in truth, and that all this nineteen-thirty-two-ishness is a brittle shell. I believe that he is even sentimental and would like to write sweet romance—live it, too, if he hadn't saddled himself with the obligation to out-Noel Noel Coward. But the poor brat is so beastly young. Of course he doesn't realize this. Imagines himself equal to Molly, but no doubt looks on me, at forty-two, as in my dotage. God pity all such! But they *can* write books and plays; which I can't. And they have the independence to split their infinitives when they choose. To me, a split infinitive is a minor murder. Shows how old-fashioned I am, though I don't feel it, just as Rags doesn't feel his youth.

In a few days we shall be starting, and I'll begin to

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

unfold the scenic and historic panorama—on hotel stationery—for which you're rash enough to ask. First, the girl has to arrive, and Molly thinks we ought to allow her at least a couple of days at St. Roland's before starting, to appreciate the house. If I do say so myself, it's worth appreciating. And she must have a look round Hampton Court Palace. Molly can take care of that part. She knows most of the magnificent dowagers who have had Anne Boleyn's, Catherine Parr's, and other ladies' apartments and ghosts graciously granted them by the King. I myself may try to test Miss Randolph's intelligence in the Maze. If she gets through that on her own, I'll respect her. And I may show her the King's grapes, because I always enjoy seeing an American of whatever age or sex look impressed. It's a rare treat.

Now and again in autumn we have presented to us a bunch of those grapes (each grape about the size of a young billiard ball), and we send out invitations to a dinner-party on the strength of the gift.

Well, thanks again for Rags, and may you be better soon. If you are, you'll probably wish to stop my geographical letters.

Yours ever,
JACK.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

*Miss Susan Randolph to her friend, Hatty Belle
Haynes, at Elmville, Virginia*

On board S.S. *Gigantic*.

PRECIOUS POBBLES,

I'm just terribly glad I took your advice. I feel almost like a talkie heroine, being here on my own in a whole state-room with a bath, and nobody can drag me back now!

I sold the pearls to do the thing in decent style and got quite a lot over, enough to last me awhile without borrowing off my cousin Molly, or anything sloppy like that. While I was bargaining in a Jewish jeweller's back room, I had a qualm, because my father gave the pearls to me as my seventeenth birthday present. You notice I don't call him 'Dad' now. Can you guess why? You wouldn't guess right, darling, so I'll tell you. That Platinum Creature has nicknamed him "Daddy"! Well, *Sugar Daddy* would be right. He certainly is one to her.

If I'd stayed at home another week, I'm afraid I'd have boxed the woman's ears. Can't you imagine her running to Da—— I mean Father, bawling and throwing herself into his arms for protection from me?

Isn't it funny? A girl doesn't think of her father being like other men till he goes and does something idiotic which he can't see will spoil his life—anyhow till divorce doth them part. I *admired* him so much. And I thought he was quite satisfied, going places with me. We *did* make a nice-looking couple, and he

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

dances divinely. But never more for me, my child, quoth the raven, never more!

Of course *you* know there were two or three men I could have married in Elmville. Not all at once, I don't mean. You must have a pretty good idea who they are. But I couldn't live in Elmville, not in my own home town. Home! I haven't *got* a home, from now on.

That leads up to what I really want to tell you about a man on board this ship. Don't be shocked. He's a South American. Not the gigolo type like all the South American men in novels or talkies. He's quite different. Exactly the opposite, because he's a millionaire, much more of a millionaire than Father or me. (Should I say "I"?) He's in the "multi" class.

If he'd told me this himself I wouldn't have believed him, but he's at the captain's table where I am, and the captain knows all about him. He is Señor Ramon Dorando, but I can't take the Señor part seriously. I began by calling him "Mr. Dorando" when the captain introduced us. I forgot to say his place at the table is next to mine. I stuck to the Mister for two days—*almost*. But when a man won't leave you alone for five minutes unless you shut your state-room door in his face, and sends you lovely soft woolly dogs that are really bags and split down the back, and huge boxes of chocolates, and books, and dozens of orchids, your heart rather melts, especially if you're a little lonely at the time.

He says that to everybody who likes him he is "Ramon." It's a romantic-sounding name, isn't it?

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

I never thought to know a real Ramon off the screen, but now I do, and he has asked me to marry him. I answered that it was impossible, but he turns a deaf ear to that reply. Isn't there some wisecrack about "when a lady says 'no,' she means 'perhaps'?"

He has told me the most fascinating stories of his home at Buenos Aires. Or is it Rio de Janeiro? I get those places *so* mixed. It *would* be exciting to live in South America, covered with Inca sort of jewels and swept into revolutions every few months. Ramon owns gold mines, horses, cattle, coffee, and I *think* diamonds. Anyhow, everything South American millionaires can own. And he's simply tragically handsome. I mean his eyes are. You know the kind—smouldering. The only real flaw is that he's not tall, like the ideal man. Our ideal men are always tall, aren't they? Did you ever know a girl whose ideal was short, in spite of Napoleon and Lord Nelson and maybe Aaron Burr, though I can't remember Aaron's measurements? And perhaps Ramon is a *little* on the dark side. He has that olive skin which turns a weary green when the ship rolls, though he vows he's a grand sailor. I do notice, though, that when the weather is really rough, he retires to his state-room to write important letters or get off wireless messages on business.

I explained to him that I sent an important wireless message myself, to my cousin Molly. You met her, Lady Brighthelmstone, you know, when she spent a weekend in Elmville last January. I asked if I might visit her, and said I was on the way anyhow, as I'd left

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

home for good. I showed Ramon her answer, too. She was a pet to send it so promptly. She could hardly have waited even to ask her husband. You know, English wives actually *do* have to ask their husbands' permission about things. I'm not making a joke, though it seems quite quaint.

It sounded lovely about a motor trip, and taking me with them, but it wouldn't be much good to Ramon, I thought, as Molly said a man to make a fourth was practically selected: a Lord Thingmi-bob whose name the wireless operator must have got wrong.

Well, what do you think Ramon's reaction was to that? No, I *won't* use the horrid word "reaction." It sounds like taking pills. I mean, what do you think he said, quick as a flash, and I did admire his presence of mind:

"Very well, I will buy a Suprema Luisa the day I land and follow the expedition," were his very words. He uses quite long ones sometimes, as foreigners do. It comes from studying dictionaries.

I wonder if Molly and her husband will mind? I've never met Jack, but she had a big photo of him with her at Elmville, in a marvellous frame such as you'd never buy unless you absolutely adored a man. And he looked *thrilling*. Sort of Ronald Colman, though with a slight shrapnel scar on his forehead he got in the war.

Of course poor Ramon wasn't in the war, though he's over thirty. I don't know much about modern South American history, it seems to wobble so. But I

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
believe it was like the bat in the fable, neither bird nor
beast, so wasn't allowed to fight on either side.

I wonder if I *could* marry a South American. I
don't know why not. So good-looking! Such eyes!
Such lashes! On a girl you'd think them fakes. Still,
I can't see myself feeling all matey and cosy with a
Latin man, can you? However, I've got to do *some-*
thing. I can't go home. And it would be fun to
have the something I do thoroughly original, so original
and rich that Father's Platinum Blonde would envy me
and wish she'd met It first.

They have gorgeous square diamond rings for sale
in the jewellery shop on this boat, but one thing I will
not do: arrive in England engaged. You said your-
self, speaking to me about Ted van Eden in New
York, "Why not wait till you've got there, and looked
around to see what there is?"

I'll write soon again, and besides, I shall send you a
kind of picture-diary of the trip. I think it might
amuse you, as you've never been abroad. Large lumps
of love.

SPAT.

Lord Brighthelmstone to Sir Robert Reading

ST. ROLAND'S,
HAMPTON COURT.
April 4th.

MY DEAR BOB,

It's all right about Bill Ragford. We won't keep
him away too long.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

If Molly and I had been jaunting alone, we might have made up our minds to a long run, as nearly from Pole to Pole as can be managed in England. But the flapper may be an impossible fellow-traveller. I've encountered some flappers who are, both English and American. If she were Chinese, Japanese, or even Javanese, it would be different. Worth studying. Flappers of Latin countries, too, know how to be seen and not heard, like the good little child of the Victorian era. You hardly meet them to talk to. So much the better. American and English flappers you must talk to continuously, in order to prevent them from talking to you.

It occurred to me that a *short* trip with Molly's flapper might be wise, and at the end of it, she having fallen in love with England, if not with Rags, we could dispose of the body without murder.

I have a distant cousin who is a depressed duchess, or, rather, her circumstances are depressed to the extent that she's glad to chaperon beautiful American girls of good birth, whose fathers have not lost their shirts in the slump. All girls from Virginia are beautiful and well born.

Though Molly points out that this Spat has run away from home, I don't see a noble Virginian parent letting his daughter down financially, when it's the question of a duchess. Spat's father, it seems, has been a conscientious Bear on the Market for these three lean years. Sounds as bad to me as the Conscientious Objectors in the war, but he has retained his shirt; could, in fact, buy every shirt advertised in our English

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
newspapers and the American *Saturday Evening Post*,
without feeling the strain.

You ask in your note whether I've bought a new car. I have, but it's the same make—a Sunbeam. I've been loyal to Sunbeams since the jolly old war, when they earned the best record of all, as you may remember. My latest would knock you in the eye. Black and gold, saloon, 24 h.p. and can do more than most other cars of higher power. A peach, she is, as Molly says. Runs like satin on velvet. Nothing ever seems to happen to her except what one wants to happen. A very different story from the "Lightning Conductor" in our hectic past!

Talking of the past, it ought to make me feel a bit ancient, oughtn't it? So it does when I'm with boys, and am occasionally addressed as "Sir." That seems like the beginning of the end, and it's even harder to endure with a grin when some specimen of vealhood politely tells me he learned to read on the "Lightning Conductor" book which old Monty compiled. The one comfort is, as you must know from your own experience, females of the veal age find that we older men appeal to them. We are the strong, silent ones, we of the war generation. Yes, that's a comfort on principle, but not always personally; which is why I want to take a brief trip, and then find a happy home as a paying guest for our flapper specimen.

I am now, by the way, starting out to meet her. She has made friends on board ship and I need go only as far as Waterloo Station, a matter of half an hour from us. I shall take train, of course, as no doubt

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Miss Randolph will travel with as many trunks as her cousin does.

Molly says she is beautiful, and quite capable of trying, between London and Hampton Court, to wean me from my Number One wife. She is supposed to have "fallen" for my photograph.

We shall probably start our tour three days from now, so you may prepare for the tomes of description and family back-chat you ask for. I hope the date we select will be, according to the astrologist of the *Sunday Express*, "good for travel." Otherwise Molly will probably develop symptoms lasting till a more favourable day, as she pins her faith to Mr. Naylor.

Yours ever,

JACK.

Lord Brighthelmstone to Sir Robert Reading

ST. ROLAND'S.

The Next Day.

DEAR BOB,

I date this letter as you date the scenes in the three acts of your plays. Seems to have a fine, suspensive effect on audiences when read in programmes. And really, this begins rather like a play.

In the first act, the juvenile lead and *ingénue* have clicked.

Not to be wondered at, either, because, save for his high-born expression of world-weary gloom, Bill Rag-

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

ford is a very pleasant fellow when he forgets that he's an author and playwright. As for the girl Spat, she turns out to be devastating. I might have foreseen this, in a relative of Molly's, instead of worrying about her personality. Next to Molly herself, she's the prettiest thing I've ever laid eyes on. That's saying something. No need for the depressed duchess!

Rags's first criticism of her to me was: "She has the effect of a Jane Austen heroine come to life in 1933."

This description hits the nail on the head, and you'd think, to judge Rags from his books, that such a type would attract him about as much as an antimacassar on a horse-hair sofa. But the amusing part is, as *we* know, the real Rags can't be judged as a best seller. Strangers would say the young sophisticate would have no use for Hebe unless she carried a tray of cocktails instead of mead or nectar. We understand him better, but won't give him away lest he lose his public.

I'll stretch my descriptive powers to make you see Miss Randolph as we see her. Then you can follow her adventures, if any, on the back seat of our Sunbeam, sitting beside Rags. For you can bet she *will* be sitting beside him, wreathed in masses of small luggage. In driving I've always had Molly close to me. I won't break "Lightning Conductor" rules.

Miss Susan, *alias* Spat, Randolph is about Molly's height, five feet four or thereabouts, except in shoes (of which I venture to disapprove) with preposterous heels. In these Spat reaches just above Rags's ear, and you'll remember Rags is a thin six-footer. She allows herself a few girlish curves in the right places, and, having

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

now seen her in evening dress, I can say that she has a pair of adorable shoulders.

Her hair would be yellow if it weren't brown, and vice versa. She wears it parted in the middle and brushed away from rather a low, square forehead. Strange to say the creature has evidently had strength of mind to refrain from a bob or even a Garbo, for there are such massed thick braids wound round her small head, it can't be a recent growth. Molly says that when unbraided, the stuff falls below the girl's knees. This self-restraint in the matter of shearing (even at a time when little children didn't know what uncropped hair was made of, in their rare glimpses of it) betokens good sense. Brows are ten shades darker than hair, and arched in a slightly surprised way over a pair of innocent grey eyes, set wide apart: lashes equally dark, and long on lower lids as on upper.

This peculiarity gives a very special expression and attraction.

As for the mouth—well, you can't have forgotten Molly's. Spat's resembles hers in what, in 1933, is a deliciously old-fashioned way: a rosebud.

Most women nowadays have wide, red gashes across their white faces, and from what I see, though don't know, of course, from personal experience, said gashes are not warranted kiss-proof.

What I feel about women's kisses for each other is, it's a mere exchange of lipstick. As for what happens to a man, you must know all too well. Woe betide the lover who forgets his handkerchief. And even if he doesn't . . .

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Speaking as an amateur, I should say that Spat doesn't resort to lipstick, her mouth is of such a youthful and healthy pink. Still, one never knows! I once thought that about Molly, whose excuse is the somewhat lewd remark that "any *nice* woman who respects herself feels absolutely naked without powder and lipstick."

Spat is hardly a woman yet, however.

You won't be surprised to learn that Rags began calling her Spat practically at the moment of introduction, as men and girls do in these days. She, however, was too Jane Austen to accept the liberty, and he—author of "Bats in the Belfry," which was all but banned—loves her primness. She is "Miss Susan" to him now. "Hideous" won't be a passionate enough adjective, unless they fall in love. But she has confided to Molly that she admires his supreme sophistication. (If she only knew his secret!)

Molly has broken to me, however, that Spat, too, has one, equally ghastly, though of an opposite nature.

It seems that the latest American stunt among the utterly sophisticated is to be unsophisticated. That is, if you are a girl, you part your hair in the middle, drink nothing but barley water and orange juice, shudder at cocktails, and use no slang, cigarettes or profanity, save in the privacy of bedroom or bath.

Spat knows all that there is to know about being ultra-modern, and it is for this reason, according to Molly, that she has assumed the Jane Austen pose.

When those two find each other out, there may be some fun for spectators. I now look forward with amusement to the trip, piecing together these facts of

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
life connected with our two thoroughly deceitful Bright
Young Things. If anyone can persuade Rags to forget
his more or less fatal passion for Molly, Spat can. But
it's a toss-up.

Yours ever,
JACK.

P.S.—I forgot to say that Rags was invited to dinner
and came, very agreeable and nice, using none of his
invented slang upon us, thank the Lord!

THE WHITE HART HOTEL,
WINDSOR.

April 6th.

DEAR BOB,

We are off, you see, but not far off. We might as
well have used St. Roland's as a centre, but Molly says
you don't feel you're travelling unless you stop at hotels.
Besides, there's that house-cleaning racket. House-
cleaning may be a necessary evil, but it makes the best-
natured humans vicious. All humans—if you can
imagine the lovely Molly vicious!

The way our trip began was rather funny. Rags,
though he lives, as you know, mostly at his flat in
Jermyn Street (as black and silver, as scarlet, as sophisti-
cated and modernistic as he pretends to be himself) has
bought that queer old cottage at Strand-on-the-Green.
It must be a good place to write in, to be alone in, and
to think. Nothing is newer than Queen Anne, and to

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

look at the little old hovel outside and in you'd hardly know that Queen Anne was dead.

If you haven't seen it, there's just a narrow path and a strip of green between the river and the house, which is built high with steps leading up to the blue front door, so that the more or less drawing-room or study mayn't be flooded oftener than once in every three or four years.

I find it an attractive miniature interior, walled with books. It was a compliment to Spat that Rags should want her to see his Strand-on-the-Green hidey-hole. He scarcely asks anyone there; the simple chintzes, samplers, engravings and antique furniture being part of his hideous secret. I suppose, however, he imagined that an American girl wouldn't suspect the truth, but would think it swish or posh for a young man to have a cottage on the edge of Nowhere, as well as a flat in the heart of Everywhere.

Spat, who's distinctly definite in her opinions—like Molly—has concentrated her ideas of England largely upon the Thames. If *she* could choose a portion of the tour, said she, it would be ringed round by the river, with a few long flashes beyond to the sea, a cathedral, etc., now and then, as a diamond in a platinum setting throws its rays to a distance.

You can't help liking to please the chit, and the river is so much our own pitch that we enjoy showing it off. One of the flashes beyond the river-ring is to be the Pilgrims' Way. The creature Spat has read up the Pilgrims' Way.

Last year we took a couple of French girls, pals of

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Molly's from Paris, for a run, and all through the most delectable country they chatted of the new waistline or whether or not it were nobler on the breast of woman to fasten a brassière. I don't think they saw a thing, and I should have revelled in drowning the pair as country folk do superfluous kittens.

It won't be like that, however, with Miss Susan Randolph. She has been born with an eye, two lovely grey eyes, which drink in every beauty. Maybe that gives them their surprised look. She is enraptured with St. Roland's and its three-hundred-year-old panelling.

She wanted to accept Rags's invitation when I arranged to pick him up at Strand-on-the-Green. Of course Rags invited Molly, too, but she had an excuse. I wondered at it, but I don't wonder now. She said, "No; but Spat's so mad about the river. And she won't see just that part twice." Accordingly, I got up with the birds, though not the earliest ones who catch the worm. I roused the reluctant household and, after breakfast, ran the Sunbeam to Rags's cottage, Spat and I alone in the car.

Molly has the noble intention of handing Rags over, title and all, to Spat. Yes, she has that intention, I'm as sure as you ever can be about a woman's intentions. All the same, at thirty-eight beauty can be more shattering at eleven o'clock than at nine-thirty, after scrambling out of bed at seven. And it's human nature that Molly should want to look prettier than Sweet Nineteen in the sight of our Human Sacrifice.

You know your London well, but if you haven't seen

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Strand-on-the-Green, you'd hardly believe in it, unless you still imagine that toy villages are made to be lived in.

Spat was very satisfactory there, to Rags and me. "To think it's part of *London*!" she said. "Oh, and your own private willow tree, and the lilac bushes pushing into your funny little windows! If I made a miss-step on the lawn I'd be in the river."

"Don't make one," urged Rags. "If you did I'd be obliged to save you. I don't keep many suits of clothes here."

"Pooh! I bet I can out-swim you," Spat boasted, with that American independence of the male sex I've tried to subdue in Molly.

None of us are taking much luggage: a good-sized suit-case each, which can be piled on the back of the Sunbeam; but Rags's pigskin affair is so magnificently English that Spat gazed wistfully at the thing being strapped into place.

Her own and Molly's fashionable Louis Vuitton pieces are covered with labels, but Rags's property is virgin, in its masculine way. He thinks labels obvious and touristy, and always has them washed off by some strong-armed servant.

"My friend Ramon Dorando has a pigskin bag like yours," Miss Randolph remarked, evidently wishing to interest us. "Only it's larger. He bought it where he lives, but I'm sure now it came originally from London."

"Mine is quite large enough, perhaps too large, but I mean to make the party run up with me to my real

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
home in Yorkshire," announced Rags. I think he resented the suggestion that a South American should have a pigskin bag bigger and better than his. I judged by the mention of Yorkshire that Miss Spat didn't bore him. He knows he will have to sit by her throughout the tour, yearn as he may for Molly.

"Have you broken the Yorkshire idea to my wife yet?" I asked.

"Oh, more or less. Just cracked it gently, like an egg, in a letter," Rags confessed.

"I should hate an egg cracked in any letter of mine," said Spat. "Isn't Yorkshire *very* far off? It sounds so northern."

"Not at all," Rags squashed her. "Most Americans think nothing is far from anything else in England. And they're right, if you really want to see a place. Also, if you have a good car."

"I have a good car," I remarked. "But that pretty 'ring of the Thames' suggestion . . ."

"Why, Yorkshire'll be the longest flash of the diamond," Rags smiled at Spat. Can the chap have an ulterior motive for spinning out the trip which we planned to be short?

I left the subject there; it may decide itself. And Spat was chatting purposefully again about this Argentine boy friend. He is in England. Came on her ship. Wonder if they met on board, and she won't confess to a pick-up?

A gigolo, he sounds like. I thought vaguely that all Argentine men who left home were gigolos. But this fellow, according to Spat, is a millionaire two or

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
three times over. He strikes me as a complication in Molly's marriage plan for her cousin. I hope I haven't wasted time and trouble in collecting Rags!

But, to return to Strand-on-the-Green for a minute. Before London swallowed up surrounding villages, like a benevolent anaconda, Strand-on-the-Green was an important fishing hamlet, Rags says—a rival to Billingsgate. To look at its sweet placidness, however, you feel it could not use the same brand of—well, let's call it "langwidge." "Peace, blessed peace" might be its motto now; largely thanks to the painting people and a few writing folk who have taken over the neighbourhood.

Zoffany the famous artist's house isn't far from Rags's cottage. Kew Bridge is near, of course, but you don't need to look at it if you don't want to. A long time ago boats had to pay toll as they went "down" to London, according to their tonnage. Thank goodness it's not so with motor-cars.

Zoffany's big masterpiece hangs in St. George's Church, I'm told, though it's supposed to lurk at Kew. I was afraid that Spat would be energetic and want to see it, dark though London grime has coloured the canvas.

Miss Susan didn't make herself a nuisance in this manner, however, I'm glad to say, which is a good omen for the tour. It looks hopeful that she may develop a trait which is only too natural in Molly and me. We always know that along our chosen route lie villages possessing ancient Norman and other churches, each one well worth a reverent visit, each one possessing

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

a special feature, a tomb, an altar-piece, a font, a brass, or what not.

Well, let's say that in such cases our car is going sweetly. We gape at the church from outside, breathe a hypocritical sigh of admiration, and a groan for what we're about to miss. We then shoot on to the next village, where is an almost precisely similar church, or perhaps better. Our consciences prick, yet we console ourselves with the knowledge that, if we entered all these beautiful old churches of wayside England, we should soon get them mixed in our minds, and should also often get colds in our heads.

Of course, with the famous churches, minsters, abbeys and cathedrals it's not the same. You want conscientiously to see them. And of late years they're actually warmed. Not a sneeze in a British cathedral!

What Spat did wish to pause for while we were near (and no excuse could be made by me, the chauffeur, to avoid it), was Chelsea Bridge and Cheyne Walk; Chelsea Embankment, too, with its plane trees that look always as if moonlight had permanently dappled their trunks. The young person had read about these features of the London landscape, and various houses had to be pointed out to her: Carlyle's, so pathetic a little museum these days; Turner's house where, as a dying old man, he could still gaze upon the flaming sunsets he'd immortalized on canvas. Ruskin, Spat considered "smug"; but she thrilled to hear that the ghost of Sir Thomas Moore walks headless through Chelsea on nights of winter fog. Of course, if you must walk in fog, you'd be better off without a head.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Our Chelsea wanderings, before the trip is fairly begun, may sound in the telling like no trip at all. But seeing London is a "trip" to Spat; and sophisticated to the extent of profanity as Molly has described her to me, she either feigns or feels an interest in our history.

Such an interest goes well with the girl's appearance; whereas Rags, while looking disdainful, with raised eyebrows, and bored nostrils like those of an aristocratic hobby-horse, secretly enjoys each thrill which this snip may merely pretend.

Anyhow, having promised Spat that, with our start where the river dreams quietly of the past, we'd finish at the tour's end where the tide turns the Thames to a lion, we wended towards Hampton Court and Molly.

I had the Young Things behind me in the Sunbeam, but I've acquired by experience the art of throwing words over my shoulder, and hearing answers through the back of my head.

"I suppose," I thus flung at Spat, "that to an American counties have no special interest on a map, or in travelling?"

"Well, *you* ought to know," was the response, which she leaned forward to give, thus coming near enough to convey from herself to me a sweet and subtle perfume. "You married one. An American girl, I mean, not a county."

"Oh, but Molly's different," I said. "Besides, since I picked her up years ago with her alarming Aunt Mary, I've given her a *soul* for counties. She thought in States before."

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

“ Too bad, but I think in States, too,” confessed Spat. “ Though I know when you’re in New York there’s talk about Dutchess County. I’m afraid we spell it with a T, which you leave out of your duchesses, don’t you? ”

“ Tea is the last thing any duchess or other English-woman would leave out of herself by choice,” I returned. “ But if you imagine that there’s only one county in America, you’re mistaken. The surface of the U.S.A. is smeared with them, as France’s is with *communes*. Still, I feel that our counties of England are more distinctive, more personal, than anywhere else. When I’m out of England, I picture the island as covered with a beautifully made, very old, yet fresh-looking patch-work quilt. Each county’s a patch of a different colour and material.”

“ That’s a pretty idea,” Spat praised me. “ But in what a funny way you speak of England! ”

“ What do you mean, ‘ funny ’? ” I almost lost my hold on the wheel, as if the girl had accused me of lacking patriotism.

“ Why, Englishmen who come over to our side quote whoever it was, and say our ‘ right little, tight little island.’ You haven’t said that yet. As for Lord Ragford, he’s said less than any person I’ve ever known, even in this reserved country.”

“ He’s afraid of shocking you,” I told her, guessing that Rags didn’t know what line was best to take with this Jane Austen looking girl, but was anxious to find out. “ As for a ‘ right little, tight little island,’ no land has been right since the war, and ours is no longer

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
tight since aeroplanes and submarines came into fashion
for foreigners.”

“ Oh, tight *that* way! ” exclaimed Spat. “ I—er
—didn’t understand. In America when we say
‘ tight ’ we mean something very different.”

“ Yes, I know too well,” I soothed her. “ You
mean something you’ve never been yourself, and never
could be. So why should you understand? ”

(Molly had mentioned that before this up-to-the-
minute wench got beyond the alcoholic stage and took
to barley water, Spat could toss down six cocktails
without turning a permanently waved hair!)

By this time I’d diverged to Putney Bridge, and
overheard Rags telling Spat about a man he knew
who believed in ghosts haunting the Georgian houses
of Hammersmith. “ Of course, it’s the river gur-
gling under the cellars or somewhere,” he explained.
“ In reality, Hammersmith is too smug to attract a
ghost.”

“ Doesn’t sound smug: Hammersmith! ” said Spat.
“ You think of an anvil—a famous blacksmith,
perhaps.”

“ Let her keep on thinking that way,” I tossed over
my shoulder again. “ She’s probably right. Why
not believe all the romantic bits of history or legend to
be true? They’re as likely to be, as the dull versions
you iconoclasts dote on.”

“ You call me an iconoclast? ” Rags caught me up,
considering it a compliment.

I let this pass, saying, “ All you chaps who were too
young for the war are iconoclasts. You are ‘ genera-

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
tion-conscious,' as old-fashioned folk used to be class-conscious."

We bowled over the common, and if there's anything more beautiful than that chain of common and park with its giant trees and straying deer, in spring, I don't know it: unless it's the same common purple with heather in autumn.

"Commonland!" I said. "Sweet word. Sweet place. In common for us all, while England stands above the sea. We're in Surrey now, one of the green beauty spots of England, as you know if you've read those boring guides. Trees. Woods. Narrow lanes walled with golden earth patterned with bluebells. Or maybe they're harebells! I don't know the difference, except that harebells are bigger. You'll see some, please God, before we leave Surrey for good, though heaven knows those lanes were made for flowers and ferns, not for motor-cars. They were hollowed out through the ages by flowing water and big-wheeled carts. London was Middlesex. And at home—Hampton Court—we'll run into Middlesex again."

"Sounds almost improper!" muttered Spat, risking her Jane Austen innocence. But Rags laughed. He's at least amused by the girl; but his penchant for Molly, a married woman, Lady Brighthelmstone (still called "one of the leaders of the younger set") is more distinguished for a twenty-seven-year-old author of almost-banned books. It will take something big to make him cast it aside for a mere maiden.

You are such a busy Londoner that you seldom play about on the fringes of Town. When we want to see

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

you, which is often, you invite us to some smart hotel or restaurant, and only death or paralysis will ever prevent our accepting. But you ought to run out in your car or ours to see us when you're fit again. It would pay you, unless your chauffeur is one of those callous brutes who choose the shortest way at the cost of beauty. He could manage getting to Hampton Court by avoiding parks and commonlands, sticking to tram-lines and little houses. If you saw Richmond Park in the sweet of the year, while new leaves on age-old trees are still a gilded haze of green, while wintry grass gives place to the emerald velvet of April, and the coats of the roaming deer have that satin gloss which comes mysteriously in spring, you'd make visiting us a habit.

By the by, speaking of things that gleam or glitter, did you know that the name of Richmond was once "Sheen," from the Saxon word "bright"? So many nice words we've inherited from the Saxons, just taking them for granted.

I read this up lately, after believing for years that our neighbour, Richmond Hill, had been called Richmond in testimony to its "rich delights" in ancient palace days. But no, even the palace where Queen Elizabeth died was the Palace of Sheen rebuilt by Henry the Seventh, Duke of Richmond in Yorkshire at that time.

"Oh, I'd like to *live* here! And I suppose Molly's birthplace was named for it," exclaimed Spat as we drew into Richmond town, and I pointed out the shop still celebrated for its "Maids of Honour," those little cakes which the Queen's maids loved to buy, as their high heels tripped along the charming terrace.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Memories of Richmond aren't all gay, though! There was a Monastery of Friars Observant (don't you think we might find a club with that quick-witted name?) started by Henry the Seventh. But for Henry the Eighth the Friars were a bit *too* observant. They saw why he wanted to divorce Catherine of Aragon, and opposed him. Naturally, the king being what he was, Father Rich, the warden, and plenty of others, were executed in the Tower, such a busy prison in fat Henry's time and that of Mary and Elizabeth, his daughters. Papa Henry had the monastery destroyed, and only the most learned men to-day, of whom I'm not one, know where it stood. By the river, I suppose, since monks loved to fish; so they hadn't the glorious view from the Hill which sends motorists to Richmond.

There are two parks, you know: Richmond Old Park, north of the town, and Richmond New Park, as new as Charles the First. Poor old Edward the Third, whom nobody liked, died in his Palace of Sheen without a soul to mourn him, as long ago as 1377. But somehow, at Richmond, nothing seems long ago. You feel the past. You know the deer have as ancient an ancestry as kings. And the scorn with which those animals look at you, if they look at all! A girl like Spat is the same to them as any crone.

"You won't yearn to live here when you've seen my Yorkshire," remarked Rags condescendingly to his seat mate.

"Oh, how you harp on Yorkshire," said Spat. "I thought we . . ."

"Yes, I remember your 'river-ring,'" broke in

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Rags. "So American! But don't worry. You'll flash back. You'll have to, I suppose, with Jack and Molly. All the same, Yorkshire will *get* you."

I wondered what he meant, and so, evidently, did Spat. In fact, she asked him.

"Why, true Americans of pilgrim (or do you call it *Mayflower*?) blood want to see Yorkshire, because their best Americanisms come from there. Words that we English people think typically American, like 'I guess,' 'pitcher,' and lots of others are old Yorkshire words that have died out in England and lived on in America."

Sitting in front, I can't be sure that Spat snorted slightly, but I think she did, as much as a lovely girl with a delicately tilted, fashionable nose can snort. I suppose she preferred to believe that America has invented its own language, and by gad, it practically has.

I drowsed in beauty as I drove—a beauty very English; pale, clear blue sky of spring, with moonstone tints; far vistas more deeply blue, behind the gilded trees, some of them so old that they can whisper to each other the whole history of their own county since the Romans came, and Julius Cæsar chose hill-tops for his camps in Surrey. "There's no bridge like Richmond Bridge," I quoted to myself, and remembered a verse I taught Molly when I first brought her as my fiancée to England:

"Then, 'twas before my time, the Roman
At yonder heaving hill would stare.
The blood that warms an English yeoman
The thoughts that hurt him, they were *there*."

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Then, like the wind through trees in riot,
Through him the gale of life blew high;
The tree of man was never quiet;
Then 'twas the Roman; now 'tis I."

This same sweet curve of the Thames, Roman soldiers saw with admiration, or perhaps they compared the stream unfavourably with the Tiber.

I didn't blame Spat for wishing to settle in Richmond, or even Kingston—"King's Stone." Perhaps she's a reincarnation of some maid of honour, even some princess. The Lebanon cedars etched darkly against the sky behind mellow brick walls, the bewitching bridge, and the alluring glimpses of little, old, side-streets may be familiar to her soul.

But I gave her no time to linger, not even to take a single snapshot. Along the Petersham Road to Kingston I drove. Past tempting tea-gardens (luckily it wasn't tea-time) and pathetic, fat-stomached new houses trying to be pretty, where you picture young husbands bringing home fish of an evening, and the baby's smelly pram standing in the narrow front hall; Ham Common, better than its name sounds; Kingston Bridge; Bushey Park; brick walls the colour of fading potpourri; past the impressive gates of Hampton Court Palace, where Spat has roamed already with Molly; and to our own front door, so deceptive-looking, since the back of St. Roland's is really the front, with our lovely lawn kissed by the river's glassy lips.

To my surprise a magnificent car of gargantuan, unnecessary horse-power, complete with liveried

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

chauffeur, was parked before the house. Whose, I asked myself? And did its presence account for Molly's determination to await us at home? What had the woman been up to?

"Oh, that'll be Ramon's car!" said Spat, with suspicious lightness. "I sort of *felt* he might turn up. It will be so wonderful for him to travel along with us—more or less."

"More or *less*," I echoed. "But Molly hasn't met him, has she?"

"I wrote him a letter to the Savoy Hotel, introducing him to Molly in case he happened to—to come when I wasn't in," explained Miss Randolph.

In an instant I saw the trick. It had been planned to a nicety. At least I *thought* I saw it. I guessed that Spat had asked Molly to stay at home while we two went to fetch Rags, and so give the South American gent time to call at St. Roland's. Doubtless, like most men of Southern climes, morning is the middle of the night to him, and he has to be granted some indulgence.

This was my idea till later, when I discovered that, after all these years, I didn't thoroughly know my Molly.

But does any man ever know any woman?

He does not. And, irritating as the fact may be, it's doubtless part of the charm.

We walked into the house, all three, and you must admit, Bob, it's one of the prettiest places on the river. I never enter the hall, with its old dark panelling, and its bright, small-paned windows that seem almost

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

to hang over the river as if the house were a boat, without that joy of possession which should come to a man owning an historic mansion.

There, before one of those windows, stood Molly in great beauty, with a good-looking dark man about thirty-three or four years of age. Not so much darker than Rags he was (and is), but Rags has the Yorkshire darkness which, though it may owe something to the wreck of the Armada four centuries ago, is now utterly English. This older, shorter, but handsomer man's darkness is Latin of the Latins. He was well-dressed, too; so well-dressed that you thought about his clothes.

"Señor Ramon Dorando, Jack," said Molly. "My husband, Señor; and Lord Ragford, whom I've just been telling you about."

The millionaire gigolo (I mustn't call him that) bowed.

"Lord Brighthelmstone," he acknowledged me, pronouncing my old-fashioned title properly, as few foreigners do. "Lord Ragford! . . . We have your 'Bats' book translated in our country. It's a great success. But I will read it in English."

Rags was resignedly polite, but looked as if he were going to be sick. As our house isn't a ship in a full gale, with plenty of stewards, he didn't take the liberty. But you know he hates to be talked to about his work by strangers, though he likes making money from their buying it.

Dorando and Spat shook hands like long-lost friends.

"Please, I do not wish to be called 'Señor' here

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

in England,” said the boy friend from Buenos Aires. “Miss Spat calls me ‘Ramon.’ So kind if you would all do that! And Lady Brighthelmstone says you won’t mind if I and my car keep near you for this journey? I have such a forlornness in a strange country when I tour alone.”

“What my wife says goes,” I answered, realizing that it was decided anyhow, and his car probably brand new, bought on purpose. “Only you may prefer some other route,” I added. “There’s lots to see on this small island, and we’ve chosen only a few places to show Molly’s cousin.”

“I’ve told him,” said Molly, “where we’re going: along the Thames for a while, then into Hampshire, for Winchester and its Cathedral—oh, and its *school*, of course, too, dear Rags! Then into Sussex, Rudyard Kipling’s country, you know; perhaps back to Winchester, where we may make our headquarters for a day or two——”

“And the New Forest. You’ve promised me that, and the incredible wild ponies, which I won’t believe in till I see them,” cut in Spat.

“Of course. And a rush into Somerset, because Spat *must* see Bath, and Wells with its Cathedral and adorable clock——”

“And Glastonbury ruins, about the most gorgeous thing of its kind in England,” I reminded her.

“Yes. And to Salisbury, so Spat can go along the old Pilgrims’ Way to Canterbury. We can’t leave out Stonehenge. We’ll make lovely detours into Surrey, and other counties, too, after Sussex and before

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
Canterbury. Then back to London by way of
Rochester and the Cathedral——”

“ Rags wants us to go north with him to Flowers
Abbey,” I said. “ He’d told me he’d mentioned the
plan to you, Molly.”

“ Oh, he did,” she defended him. “ I thought we
might spend a day or two in London first, though,
after Rochester and showing Spat the Thames where
it’s big and tidal, the docks, and the Tower Bridge,
which she’ll love, if traffic will ever let us get there!
The cathedrals she’ll have seen will lead up to West-
minster Abbey. She’ll want to lay a few roses on the
Unknown Warrior’s grave——”

“ She shall lay orchids,” exclaimed Ramon. “ I
will offer them to her.”

“ No, *not* orchids,” muttered Rags. “ I couldn’t
live through orchids.”

“ He means,” Molly excused him, “ that according
to our ideas orchids are more for a film star’s wedding
than a soldier’s grave.”

“ I do not see why,” persisted Ramon, “ orchids
should be less worthy than roses. They cost more.”

“ Roses are English,” Molly explained. “ Tudor,
you know.”

“ I do not yet know,” apologized Ramon. “ But if
you let me travel with you in my poor car, I shall learn
that and many other things.”

We all, save Rags, made polite noises. Bouillon
was served, with tiny biscuits which Spat calls
“ crackers.” And off we shot on our short journey
to Windsor, where our rooms were already engaged.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

We'd planned to make the place a centre for several excursions, so as not to rush things. This seemed to surprise Ramon, whose conception of motoring is evidently to rush, nothing else but! He intimated, without being asked, however, that he would, if allowed, suit his pace to ours. It would be a great privilege, said he. And hardly had we left St. Roland's (where house-cleaning would start on the instant) when Molly whispered to me those details concerning Ramon which hadn't been clear to my dense masculine mind.

You shall hear about them to-morrow, with some of our further adventures along the "diamond-set ring" of the Thames.

Yours too everlastingly,
I fear,
JACK.

*Letter from Lady Brighthelmstone to Sir Robert
Reading*

(Of course undated.)

DEAR SIR BOB,

Oh, yes, I know, you've told me a dozen times if you've told me once to drop the "Sir," and I would, only there's something so picturesque and original about "Sir Bob." I invented it, didn't I? Anyhow, say that I did, please. It sounds like a good title for a story or a play.

This is to be just the shortest note! I do want to

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

be sure you don't think I have ulterior motives about inviting Rags to go on this trip. Very likely Jack has explained, but I never read his letters and he never reads mine. Perhaps I have been just a little extra nice to Rags now and then, but simply for fun and to keep my hand in. If he is being sacrificed to make a Roman holiday, it isn't *my* Roman holiday. He's to be exposed in the show-case on sale for my pretty little cousin, Susan Randolph. Probably they'll loathe each other. People generally do when they're thrown together for a purpose.

I intend to be absolutely and utterly wifely. That's no hardship, with a man like Jack! I *love* being wifely, but somehow I don't like having anyone expect me to be it, and take it for granted that I will be.

I really do wish with all my heart, for my own sake, that you were to be with us instead of Rags, fond as I am of him. You're much more dangerous—to me, at all events. Unmarried men like you oughtn't to be left lying about! Still, I can't help being glad that you're *not* married and never have been married. You did once mention to me *why*. Not that I believed a word you said. But I do want you to believe me when I tell you again that I hope to dispose of Rags finally, once and for ever. I don't remember being a match-maker before. It ought to be rather amusing, if it comes off; though if the two concerned are obstinate, I shall be wild to knock their heads together hard, like a couple of eggs.

Yours, dear Sir Bob,
MOLLY B.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

THE WHITE HART HOTEL,
WINDSOR.

April 7th.

DEAR BOB,

You can't help liking this girl Spat, but I wonder if I should like her as well if she didn't love our river?

When she came to stay those few days before we started, she fell in love with the flowery house-boats lined up under the trees at the water's edge. She'd never seen any house-boats, poor benighted child! She could hardly believe in the swans floating past with egotistical dignity, as if the world were theirs. You know those big willow trees on our lawn that trail green scarves into the water? The girl made friends with them; said she had listened to the river whispering to their drowned leaves like a lover, and overheard them sigh in return: "Willow, willow, willow!"

Part of the Jane Austen pose; yet I think she has the right feeling.

Spat would love, she announced, to lie in a hammock under our spreading tulip tree and be proposed to by some romantic man. Only there'd be an awful danger of saying "Yes," hypnotized by the tree and the water lights that jewel each branch with a string of emeralds.

Thought I: "Spat jolly well won't be at St. Roland's long enough to be proposed to. You'll have a solid duchess to arrange your love affairs, at a good percentage on each." That was before I knew her.

Now, however, I'm beginning to understand why

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Molly was pleased to receive Miss Spat, and I'll give you Molly's explanation of welcoming Dorando so sweetly. "Sooner or later," she said, "Rags is bound to discover that Spat's no Jane Austen girl, so before he's disillusioned he'd better fall in love. I do believe they'd quite suit each other. Besides, it would be nice for Rags to marry a big fortune, and for Spat to be a 'ladyship,' if only to spite her absolutely septic step-mother. The quickest way to get a man in love is to make him jealous, I've always found."

Molly then informed me that, by the seasick expression of Rags's face as he met Ramon and heard mention of orchids, she could see that the jealousy germ had been planted.

"Not a bit," I rebuffed her. "It was merely that Rags doesn't like what in your U.S.A. you call 'Wops.' To him a Dorando on a river's brim is a Wop and nothing more."

"All right, have it your own way, darling," replied Molly, waspishly for her.

We dropped the subject, and I let myself enjoy being followed humbly by the most expensive foreign car in the market. I could imagine the feelings of Ramon's chauffeur; but you see, we have to show the way, and though my Sunbeam can do an easy seventy-five an hour in the right place, a gentle, tree-lined river road in England isn't the right place, especially when you're out to show the scenery.

We were making for Windsor and beyond, but suddenly Spat yelped from the back seat, "Oh, Molly, wasn't it somewhere near here where you bought that

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

first funny car of yours and sort of led up to meeting the Lightning Conductor? ”

“ Jack, we *might* run through Cobham and let her gaze at the ‘ White Lion,’ ” Molly said.

So through Cobham, which doesn’t look to have changed much since those dear days. There was the “ White Lion.” There was the village green. There were the stately old houses and little old cottages. There were the grand old trees.

“ We’ve got more time than anything else,” remarked Molly. “ That’s the way I always begin to feel, the minute we start on a trip. No telephoning. No telegraphing. No invitations. Heavenly! ”

Ramon, not having to drive, and being unable to converse with Miss Randolph unless both cars stopped, had been studying a map as big as a lap-robe. Is he going to turn out one of those people who brood over maps and stick their noses into guide-books while they pass, perhaps for ever, the loveliest spots on earth? If so, I shall be tempted to do him or his big car a mischief some day.

He owns horses at home and is interested in the race-courses of England; so, as Molly had announced that we’d all the time in the world, I ignored any desire the party might feel for early luncheon. I displayed Sandown to our super-gigolo. This gave us an excuse for running into Esher, seeing the ruin of Cardinal Wolsey’s palace; some of those dark, tall pines which give character to Surrey; and of smelling the scent of hawthorn hedges in spring blossom.

There’s a grand new hotel in Esher now, said to be

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

one of the best in England, and Dorando had read of it in his guide-book. He wanted to lunch there, all of us at his expense, but we'd sent word to Windsor that something special must be ready, even if we were late. Not one of our smallest plans is going to be upset by any dashed millionaire from the Argentine, even if his middle name be Romeo, and we've got his desired Juliet tucked away in our Sunbeam, seated beside another man. I did, however, grant the gentleman glimpses of Hurst Park and Kempton. It seems that Ramon's stable at home is famous. But who cares—except himself?

Windsor Castle absolutely burst upon Spat, like a splendid bomb. She greeted it with a suppressed shriek.

"*Too* wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Why, in America we've got the highest buildings in the world, that look all gold or silver and black at night, with indirect lighting. But I see now that height doesn't count. I should think your King and Queen and all the Princes would want to live here every minute. The *majesty* of it! . . . And the way it stands up. I didn't know that grey stone could be so beautiful, and seem to mean so much history."

"It means plenty," I heard Rags agree. "But kings and queens can't subsist and carry on their lives upon majesty and history. They've other things to do. Now you do understand why Jack—or was it Molly?—decided to stop at Windsor, and use the place as a centre."

"It was Molly," I confessed. "If it had been left

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

to me I'd have used St. Roland's as a centre. But Molly doesn't feel that travelling begins unless she's in some hotel."

"By this time your study at St. Roland's is getting its spring bath, beloved," murmured Milady, who has a certain hardness in her disposition where house-wifeliness is concerned. I suppose she gets it from her (undeservedly) sainted Aunt Mary, who used to dislike me so much, and suspect me of being a murderer in disguise.

The oaks with their first golden leaves were giant crowns flung at the castle's foot. I have never tried to count the many towers of Windsor. One might make a game of it. But it is that one immense bulk of the ancient stronghold (second greatest long ago in Britain) whose picture is painted on the brain. It looms above the river, and is magically reflected. It looms even as one sits at a window of the White Hart. And don't I remember how it used to loom farther on, at Eton? But I fear I didn't then get the thrill out of Thames Street I do now, thinking of Anne Boleyn's brilliant procession, and many others, sad or gay.

There were the old shops that I knew in my boyhood, some smartened almost out of recollection. I was glad to greet them, as I always am if I drive through Windsor and Eton.

We were so hungry when we arrived at the hotel that, as Spat said, we could each form a hollow square of our own around some good food. So we ate, staring up at the Castle, before going to the rooms which had been kept for us. *Not* for Dorando! He had to

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

engage his own quarters on the spot, and seemed amazed that an English inn outside London could offer him a private bath. Even I was a little surprised (thinking over past days of motoring) how up-to-date most of the country hostelries have made themselves. What a menu, for instance, at the White Hart! Even our millionaire from Buenos Aires found no fault with it.

I was in a half dream as I sipped my ale, fronting the well-remembered majesty of Windsor Castle, and watching many a boy such as I had been, passing by in pairs and groups. The tall hats, the white turnover collars! even the faces seemed the same that I had known. Here and there a "blood" to be hero-worshipped! Which was the dream, Molly and our ideal marriage, or boyhood and Eton days? I glanced at Molly with joyous relief. Awful to fear I had dreamed her! . . . She happened to have her mouth rather full of chicken at the moment, but in spite of a lump which put the dimple out of working order, she was, as always, the prettiest thing I've ever seen.

Out in the street was a kaleidoscopic procession of boys—boys—boys—none noticing the castle, probably all thinking of the tuck-shops. Big boys, small boys, middle-sized boys. Part of the dream. Was I out there among them—or here?

It was Molly who waked me by saying: "I'm sure you were never as pink-faced as *those!*"

No, I don't think that even as a boy at Eton I was ever pink-faced, no matter what my other faults may have been.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

It was good to feel that we had time before us. I wanted both Molly and Spat to see Windsor and Eton as thoroughly as could be, in our reprehensible motorist time. We had the hotel and our nice rooms to come back to; so, the day being as perfect as though we never received depressions from Iceland (Iceland considers it "better to give than to receive"), I suggested a run through Burnham Beeches after lunch, with a glimpse of Clevedon. If it should rain next day we could spend some hours exploring Windsor Castle, as much of it as is shown to strangers, and perhaps a little more, as I have a bit of a "pull" in the right direction.

Rags pretended to scorn Eton which, according to him, isn't a patch on Winchester. He even sniffed at the idea of historic battles having been "won on the playing-fields." I didn't contradict him when he claimed wars for Winchester. He's still too young to have been in any himself. But Dorando, looking alert at this statement, which he vainly hoped might count Rags out of a sight-seeing party at Eton, grinned pleasantly enough to justify his presence.

We started with the light at its loveliest, and as there'd been a slight shower while we lunched, the road glittered with green reflections from the budding trees. I thought it looked like a black glass floor above the cellar of a synthetic emerald factory.

Meaning to "do" Eton later (as those detested books would have put it) we dashed through my old home-from-home with all its charms, and found little side ways off the main track winding towards Slough. Young poplars shot up like pale gold flames, and

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

willows mourned with sentimental sweetness along the valley of the Thames.

Do you know that place in Slough where they train young yews to look like peacocks and harps, tiny temples, or corkscrews and other tree-disguises fashionable since the time of Henry the Eighth? Well, *we* know it; and Molly has bought a number of these fantastic freaks for our river lawn at St. Roland's.

We had trouble in getting the right view of Cleveden from any road or by-path, for that noble forest-hill above the river ought to be seen from the river itself. At last, however, we snatched a glimpse which did the place some sort of justice in Spat's eyes. We even saw "Cleveden Mansion," as I believe the big castle of a house is called, and Spat's American blood warmed at the thought of her countrywoman, Lady Astor, queening it there. Talking of blood, Miss Spat, with true Randolph impudence (I judge from Molly), accused me of having "chauffeur blood" in my veins.

"You *must* have, Jack," she argued, "because you do all the regular chauffeur things. You rush past the right road without stopping to look, and you'd rather go five miles out of your way than ask anyone. That's just typical, isn't it, Molly?"

Instead of defending me, my treacherous *frau* laughed. I forgave her, though, for we were all happy in our Sunbeam. We needed every minute for sight-seeing, but our mood of frivolity forced us to stop in front of famous Skindle's at sweet Maidenhead, for tall glasses of different drinks. They had to be soft drinks at that hour, because of the hated D.O.R.A. (so unlike

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Rags's aunt), but ginger ale can taste fairly good served at the most charming hostelry of any known cross-road.

I have a boyhood memory connected with Maidenhead, just one of those small things you never forget. Measles drove me from Eton for a few weeks, and I passed a contagious convalescence at a lodging-house kept by an old Nanny of mine. At night you'd hear odd noises, indicating that the place was haunted; but the ghost was a clever and canny water-rat. He found entrance through the cellar, helped himself, one by one, to potatoes from a sack at the top of the stairs, and rolled them, bumpety-bump, down the steps to his family lair. I always had a sneaking kindness for rats till I went to the war. We didn't get water-rats there, did we? I *don't* think!

Burnham Beeches was our goal, and I could almost swear that never before had the witch trees shone in such magic beauty in the sunlight that poured through. Young yellow leaves kept a perpetual spotlight on themselves, their edges brightly gilded against darker backgrounds. Here and there bunches of gorse (which are never out of blossom, as you know, since "kissing's never out of favour") were like gold-headed pins stuck into a dull green cushion.

The sun pointed at our slowly moving car, and followed her with a long, gilded finger, as if saying, "Hello, namesake!"

Is there anything so uplifting to the spirit as the light among forest trees? There's surely nothing that so sets off the beauty of a woman. Molly and Spat were almost unearthly lovely seen in the sheen and

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
shade of Burnham Beeches, and the likeness between the cousins became noticeable. I suppose that was partly the expression of their faces, which was exactly the same. They were either looking for elves, or thinking of Shakespeare, who said one of his unforgettable things about Burnham Beeches. He must often have come there, when he was so near—near even for the days when you used horses or your own legs instead of motors. You know he was staying at our White Hart Hotel when he wrote the “Merry Wives of Windsor.” Of course he would know the neighbourhood intimately.

Spat and Molly could hardly bear to leave the forest. They made me drive the car again and again among the beeches.

Then they ordained to get out and walk, just for the joy of it. Mercifully, I stuck to the Sunbeam, smoking cigarettes and thinking thoughts, so that our handsome Argentine millionaire and our sharply attractive British best-seller might accompany the girls.

I imagine that Dorando’s chauffeur, also at rest at the side of an unfrequented road, wondered at me. Like his master, he is a man of Latin race, so could scarcely understand my sitting supine while my delicious wife in her russet brown, Spat in her silver grey, wandered off shoulder to shoulder, each with a man. Spat had Rags with her at first, but—the shift probably contrived by Molly—soon they changed partners.

I could almost hear the thoughts of the professional chauffeur about me, the amateur.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

“These Englishmen! Is it that they are cold, or lazy, or do they not know how fascinating to women are men of our Latin blood? These steel-eyed fellows! Have they never learned that every glance we throw at a pretty woman makes love?”

Molly has had plenty of these glances, and she isn't above giving them back in modified form. Rags has sent her a few; and I would have bet that Dorando wasn't wasting his time when she annexed him, throwing Spat—not exactly to the lions, but to Rags. However, conceited as it may sound, she has never given me a real scare with her flirtations, and I don't expect to be troubled with heart-burnings on this trip.

All the same, now I come to think of it, perhaps my confidence in letting her travel to America alone may have irritated as well as pleased the lady. This Dorando business . . . but naturally, I take her word for what are her motives.

When the four came back, they had collected an assortment of primroses, small wild violets, half a dozen bluebells and pink-edged “daisies pied.”

“Savage creatures!” I accused Molly and Spat. “Men would have left the little things with their families. But females must collect scalps, if only in the form of forest flowers.”

“Lord Rags and Ramon picked them for us,” Spat gravely excused herself.

“That's right,” I said, “throw the blame on men when they sin only to please.”

“What about Adam?” Spat struck back. “Didn't he throw the blame on Eve, without even mention-

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
ing to God that she took the old apple entirely to satisfy her husband's greed? "

" Men told the truth in those days. They hadn't had time to learn the art of paying compliments," Rags reminded the girl. But he and Ramon each had little homesick violets trailing from their buttonholes; and I couldn't refuse the best of the bunch, when I was decorated by Molly.

" I'd give anything to see this place by moonlight," exclaimed Spat.

" Well you can without any such extravagance," I told her. " Provided we choose the right hour, we can run out again and plunge into forest pools of moonshine."

" Could we really come back to-night? " she asked.

" Why not? Unless Molly knows some reason," I answered.

And Molly knew no reason.

" Jack, you're an angel and a lamb! " Spat blessed me, which somehow made me feel rather middle-aged and out of it. So much so, I determined that in a moonlight return to the Beeches, Spat could have her Argentine as well as Rags. I was going to have Molly. I don't know exactly why, but moonlight is different!

We swept back to Windsor, bathed and dressed for dinner out of sheer swank, since to do so, as we were going out, had no sense in it.

Never mind, my boy. What's an Englishman without his swank? And we had to teach Señor Ramon the " Right Thing " if he didn't know it.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

It seems he did know, and looked rather gorgeous in evening armour of white and black. Rags and I were commonplace beside him, I'm afraid, though taller.

To be still more impressive, he had gone to an antique shop in town, which he must have noticed as we came in, and had bought gifts for Molly and Spat. He'd found two old silver spoons, supposed to be of the Tudor period. At least they looked it, and would have been too big for the mouth of any one of Henry's queens, unless that of poor Anne of Cleves, who never has been praised as a beauty.

The girls were enchanted. A hundred pounds' worth of orchids apiece, such as film stars receive, wouldn't have pleased them half as much. Their delight caused Ramon to beam.

Beaming is not an act that becomes the faces of Englishmen, but it adds charm to the mug of a good-looking Latin; and the evening, so far as dinner was concerned, belonged to Dorando.

I ordered cocktails, and would have consulted the ladies about further drinks, but before I could do so, our Argentine friend commanded the best champagne possessed by the White Hart.

"A magnum!" he said.

If you will believe me, I'd almost forgotten magnums.

What's the use of being a millionaire unless you do things which show off what you are—even to head waiters? The dining-room staff and all the guests were visibly impressed. I should think few had even

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

heard the word "magnum" since the war. As for Ramon, he must have learned it from a dictionary or a gramophone.

The monstrous bottle came in ice, and by that time my Lord Ragford, in spite of two dry Martinis, was iced too. He refused champagne, but Molly threw him an awful look which said: "You haven't been invited on this trip to be disagreeable. And *you* didn't buy us any Tudor spoons."

The poor brute gave in (who wouldn't?) and followed my example in accepting champagne. Spat had no doubt wished to remain Jane Austenish and prefer barley water, though probably craving strong drink like any pre-1933 flapper. But after the Tudor spoon, she couldn't stick to her principles. She and Molly took champagne, and soon were drinking to the health of Shakespeare, who in this house grew merry on English brew of some sort. Could it have been mead? Why can't someone reinvent mead?

How girls carry countless articles of wearing apparel in tiny suit-case-wardrobe trunks, Venus only knows. Anyhow, the lovely females of our tour were not only equipped with evening gowns of latest, slimmest cut, but had brought forth from their luggage little coats of what they called "summer ermine" for our moonlight trip. No hats. Their pretty heads were clothed only in permanent waves of thick, glossy hair. Molly wore a silver dress, Spat a white sequined one; so you can imagine their effect upon us men, after several glasses of champagne each. Having arrived once more at the car-leaving spot in Burnham Beeches,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
the girls were super-women in their wraith-like beauty.

As I said, moonlight is different. Not only is it different from sunshine in its effect upon the minds of mice, men and women, it's incredibly different upon trees.

Ramon's well-fed chauffeur was told to look after both cars, and when we got out to walk, I slipped my arm through Molly's. The determined air with which I did this gave Ramon as well as Rags to Spat.

The gay, gilded woods had been turned to mysterious cloisters of white marble and black. Far above our heads stars blossomed like water-lilies in a blue lake of vast immensity. Here and there a white-thorn tossed its pearl fountain against a wall of darkness.

The moon made black shores of shadow for silver pools in which we dipped our feet. Sleeping shapes waked under our eyes and seemed to move towards us, though there was no wind to sway a branch. Where the light touched them, the satin-grey trunks of beeches became silver, or mother-o'-pearl. Secret, shining stars of dreams lit a branch now and then, as if dropped from that blue lake above.

Molly and I didn't talk much. We don't talk as a rule when things of beauty rise beyond speech level, because to do so is to gush. But we overheard a paragraph or two from Ramon, who, like most Latins not of the Dante type, can always spout romance.

"Stars are the flowers of the sky. Flowers are the stars of earth," we heard him say.

I sniffed, knowing what the effect on Rags of such

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

eloquence would be. But Molly whispered: "That's rather beautiful. The man seems to be something of a poet. I found out this afternoon that he's really got something in him."

"He's got a lot of his own champagne in him," I damped her enthusiasm.

"Well, maybe," she admitted. "But champagne makes some men silly and others just dumb."

That was one in the eye for me. It had made me "just dumb"—or something had. Beauty, perhaps. I couldn't explain, however, and Molly went on to say she adored her Tudor spoon.

"I quite think Spat's Ramon is very attractive," she told me.

"Are you so sure he's still *Spat's* Ramon?" I snapped.

"She may end by liking him better than Rags," went on Molly. "Rags is so cynical in his manner since we started; so what we in America call 'snooty.' And, of course, Ramon could buy and sell the poor boy when it comes to money."

"Do you mean he could buy Spat?" I asked. "I thought she was by way of being a millionairess herself."

"Oh, her father's very rich, and her own mother left her a hundred thousand dollars," Molly explained. "But the platinum stepmother is sure to *spawn* babies, if only out of spite. Spat's fortune will be nothing beside this South American's, and if he——"

"Goes on buying spoons," I suggested.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

“ Yes, exactly. Figuratively, I mean. Well, we must wait and see. Anyhow, this trip is fun.”

On that note I'll leave you in peace for to-night.

Yours ever,
JACK.

*Letter from Sir Robert Reading to
Lady Brighthelmstone*

THE GLOOMS.

MY DEAR AND BEAUTIFUL LADYSHIP,

You and Jack are right not to open or read each other's letters. I should think that must be one secret of a happy marriage.

Though even if you opened letters, and, yes, nagged and bossed, the two most disagreeable things a woman can do, I should still think Jack the luckiest of men.

Of course you know perfectly well why I have never married. If I can't have what I want I won't have anything. I've always been that way from early childhood, which has tended to make life hard for myself and those around me. You could ask the employees in my theatre.

Bless you.

Yours,
BOB.

P.S.—Who said: “ The sweetest kisses are those a man can never have ”? He may be right. But still. . . .

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

THE RED LION HOTEL,
BASINGSTOKE,
HAMPSHIRE.

April 12th.

MY DEAR BOB,

Almost anything would have been an anti-climax after the two experiences, gold and silver, in Burnham Beeches. Almost anything, but not Windsor Castle!

Our own Hampton Court Palace, Windsor Castle and the Tower hold a spell for me—each a different spell. I rather wish I hadn't talked in picturesque style to Spat about the Tower, and the doomed queens rowed along the Thames to imprisonment and death, for now, whatever happens, I'll have to take the girl there. The Tower's a grand old place when you're not a spy or any other sort of traitor, but I've escorted too many eager strangers. Still, no one save a fool could be bored; and I can imagine Spat mentally putting herself in the place of Anne Boleyn, or Katherine Howard, a much more lovable character: "Rose without a Thorn"; whereas Spat at heart . . .

When you see that play you almost pity Henry, though no man deserved less pity. I'm sure of that, at Windsor.

Did you ever read Harrison Ainsworth's "Windsor Castle"?

But of course you did. All boys of our generation had a sneaking love for a good exciting Ainsworth. Rags is too young to have had time for him. Dorando, poor foreign wretch, never heard of Ainsworth. But Molly and Spat have each invested in a two-shilling

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

edition, sure to hurt their optic nerves and injure their dispositions.

I must say, however, that I've dipped into Molly's copy, to remind myself of facts which my love of tuck-shops at Eton helped me to forget. You know my theory, that you'd best believe all which appeals to you in history, or even legend (the parent of history), since romance may well be truth. Same in our day, thank heaven! Therefore I'm ready to swallow the tale that Merlin, architect and magician, created for King Arthur a fortress on the height where Windsor stands: the "Wyndleshore" of the Saxon kings who followed.

Nice old name, "Wyndleshore," for the windings of the river. But I can only hope that some villa owner won't think of so christening his repulsive abode.

Edward the Confessor did as many magic tricks in his day as Merlin, though his were in the cause of religion. If Merlin were religious, good King Arthur and his Round Table Knights never seemed to note the fact.

William the Conqueror fancied Windsor, and beguiled poor Abbot Edward of the Westminster Monkhooood to give it to him without a row, in exchange for inferior property in Essex. Of course he'd have got it, anyhow, as Molly says about the deer in Richmond and Bushey Parks, which you feed when you have a picnic. If you didn't the sandwiches would be snapped out of your hands. Kings of old, and present-day stags and river swans share the same proclivities.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

So grew the might and majesty of Windsor Castle, from its beginning as a mere snapped-up sandwich, so to speak. Henry the First did know a bit about building, and after a few reigns the place ranked in importance with the Tower as a fortress.

Our bloodthirsty Spat likes the story of King John and Baron William de Braose. Somehow jolly John imprisoned William, and then tried persuading his wife to hand over their only son as hostage. The lady knew John too well to trust him, this being in pre-Magna Charta days. (By the by, of course Runnymede is on the way to Windsor, after passing through Staines. I forgot to mention that fact, if it interests you. Or do you remember? But only the imagination can show the eye very much.) William's wife sent a viperish message to the king, with a knock in it about his own nephew; and that was her undoing. He had her and her son walled up in some convenient recess of his castle, and the ghosts can be heard shrieking to this day. Not that I suppose their present Majesties and Household ever miss a meal on account of them. There are such a glut of ghosts at Windsor that even royal memories couldn't keep count of them and their activities.

Henry the Seventh really was great on roof architecture, wasn't he? Think of Westminster. Think of King's College Chapel at Cambridge, and St. George's Chapel at Windsor. The beauty of arching forests is in them, turned by men's minds and hands to stone, so that the loveliness of high, intertwined branches may live for ever.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Poor Charles the First loved the castle, little dreaming that he'd be held a prisoner there before his execution. Cromwell was supposed to meet the king's headless ghost, as he walked in moody power on the great terrace. But Charles the Second brought back beauty and laughter. That was part of his game, wasn't it? And if he'd met Cromwell's head, he would, without a qualm, have used it for a football. I hardly blame him.

As I told you, I have a slight "pull," so not only did we see what tourists for their shillings may see; you know, the Lower Ward, with the Henry the Third Wardroom; the Curfew Tower which you look up at from the half-timbered Horseshoe Cloister; the lovely St. George's Chapel; and that quaint row of buildings where the Military Knights of Windsor live (sounds well to be a Military Knight, but I fear that it would turn out disappointing to such as you and me!); the Middle Ward with the Round Tower, which has been "featured," as the film advertisers say, ever since Windsor was a castle; the North Terrace; the Elizabethan Buildings where the queens used to live, through Queen Anne's day; the East Terrace with its four towers named Prince of Wales, Clarence, Chester and Victoria; the State Apartments. But we were shown other sights as well.

"How the Royalties can go away I *don't* see," Spat repeated almost indignantly. "My life couldn't be long enough, spent here, drinking in beauty and history."

"A few spots of blood, too," suggested Rags.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

“ I *like* blood when it’s historic,” said the ferocious girl.

“ We’ve our own spots of history and blood at Flowers Abbey,” boasted Bill, whereupon Ramon, not to be outdone, began praising his ancestral dwelling in Buenos Aires.

“ I suppose the chap must have had as many as two or three ancestors,” Rags remarked, *sotto voce*, to me. Perhaps he really is growing jealous?

The outside effect which Spat liked best was Anne Boleyn’s window. Inside, it was not the Grand Corridor, the State Apartments, the Waterloo Chamber, or even the Guard Room with glass-protected armour from all the battlefields which have made England what it is. Her choice lay in a crystal case which holds priceless oddments of miniatures, lockets, etc., a lustrous curl of young-looking, gold-brown hair, much the colour of Spat’s own. It was twisted round in a quaint, immense locket, and it had been cut from the head of Mary Queen of Scots before she became prematurely old and grey.

“ How marvellous for a family to inherit such things and have a right to them! ” cried Spat. “ I never thought of envying a *man* before, but I *would* like to be one of your princes. Do you suppose they get a kick out of it? ”

We all laughed, except Ramon. Perhaps he’d never heard the expression before, and couldn’t therefore see anything unsuitable to the Royal Family of Great Britain.

As for me, in one smallish room (I forget which) I

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

noticed on a door the portrait of Queen Alexandra as a bride. If she were like that, and no doubt she was, not a fairy princess of all the fairy-tales ever written could have been a patch on her.

“I hope,” Spat went on, “that I’m a loyal American. And we’ve got some nice old things ourselves. But I never realized what it is to have Royalty with an endless line of kings and queens and the ghosts of both behind you, to say nothing of castles and palaces.”

“Give me the Roman wall!” said Rags.

“You can have it,” generously answered Spat.

“Maybe you’ll want it yourself, when you go north,” he hinted.

North he is determined that the girl shall go, largely, perhaps, because Ramon is for ever praising the beauties of the South—the far-off South where his possessions lie, that is, all his possessions beyond the grand motor-car, which doesn’t always behave as well as our Sun-beam, though that may be the chauffeur’s fault.

Molly happened to mention that Stoke Poges was close by, and quoted a few words of Gray’s immortal “Elegy.” Both Spat and Ramon looked blank, betraying the vile fact that they’d never heard of Gray. But when I added that the quaintest tombstones and the most darkly appealing trees in England were there, I had to turn Sunny Boy’s nose in that direction. If I’d refused there’d have been the devil to pay, because the glories of Windsor had worn out Molly and Spat. Both were ready to scream if thwarted; and, anyhow, I love Stoke Poges.

Miss Randolph was not disappointed, after a short

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

repose of nerves and muscles. "Heavenly church! Heavenly churchyard!" she breathed, having gazed closely at three or four tombstones at most. "Can people be buried here nowadays? If they can, do promise me, Molly, that by hook or by crook I shall be. I'll choose my tree to-day. I mean, my tree to lie under."

"By hook or by crook it would have to be," I said. "Molly and I ought to be dead ourselves before you are. Even Molly is—er—several years your elder. Besides, you'll marry, and your husband will have some rights in the disposal of your . . ."

"Don't say 'remains,'" groaned Spat.

"I wasn't going to. The words 'lovely body' were on my lips. If the gentleman's American he'll favour cremation."

Spat shuddered. "I'd divorce him before I felt death coming on."

"*South* Americans are too religious to accept cremation," Ramon drew favourable attention to himself.

"And we Englishmen of old families have even better places to bury our wives than at Stoke Poges," added Rags. "Flowers Abbey . . ."

"Was Bluebeard an Englishman by any chance?" Spat inquired.

"Henry the Eighth came pretty near it," said Molly. "But I wouldn't mind lying beneath one of the trees at St. Roland's, which Charles the Second planted for Nell Gwynn. The tulip tree you want to be proposed to under, would do."

Thoughts of death interfered in no way with a

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

spiffing tea, which was our good-bye meal at Windsor. Then, with luggage in place and spirits fortified with toasted scones, we proceeded to inspect Eton. We'd merely rushed through before.

"This," announced Rags, "is the institution where Jack and generations of top-hatted children have worked up brawn enough to fight for Merrie England."

"Brawn?" asked Spat. "I thought brawn was something disgusting you eat. Or *do* you?"

"Muscle, my good babe," I informed her. "And such as I have I did develop at Eton. It's historic to do so. Even a dozen jam tarts or custard pies a day don't interfere with the good work."

"Lord Ragford calls the boys 'children,'" said Spat. "I think lots of them look awfully old, grown up, and rather gloomy."

"Indigestion," replied Rags. "We hadn't as many tuck-shops at Winchester. And *no* top hats, thank heaven! How many times must I remind you to call me 'Rags' or 'Bill,' and not Lord Ragford? Perhaps Winchester will pound it into your head. My gown used often to express the word 'Rags' in slow motion."

He and I were both destined for Cambridge after schooldays. I got there. He didn't "choose to run" after a year at Corpus Christi. Still, neither of us has lost family tradition, or we should have rushed those girls through Reading and taken them to noble old Oxford, not so far away. Instead, we felt no such duty, and I was able to linger a bit in Eton.

The creatures had hardly listened, as we crossed the bridge from Windsor, while I tried to make it seem

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

important that we were again going from county to county: Berkshire into Buckingham. I have what in America they call a "yen" on counties. But they did deign to say, "Oh, yeah! You told us yesterday: 'This is the High Street, and very famous, isn't it?' Did Henry the Sixth build it? But no! It was the College he built. What were we thinking of?"

"Old William of Wykeham planned the College," I said. "And when you use the word 'College' at Eton, my dears, please speak as if it began with a capital letter! You'll hear more about William of Wykeham at Winchester from Rags. I'll bet you fifty pounds on that, if he'll take me up. So I'll let the boy alone here. And we'll just look."

"Look at what?" Spat wanted to know.

"Did you ever read Collette's *Dialogues de Chattes*?" I inquired. "The question was asked of a lady cat, what she was looking at. 'I do not look at anything,' the cat answered. 'I—look!' Well, you can do as the cat did, here, and still see something to remember."

We left the car, which was parked, as often before, in care of Ramon's chauffeur, who answers to the name of Jaimé when correctly pronounced. I hurried my little lot along the quadrangle, which seems to be united by that fine old clock tower that told off so many of my young hours.

Up the slope we went to the Chapel, and Spat could hardly believe that the steps were put there because of Thames floods. "When you get to Cambridge," I said, "you'll see how like this is to King's College Chapel. Outside and in they're alike. So you can

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

imagine I felt at home when I went from Eton to King's."

"I can't imagine you bothering much about Chapels, unless you were made to," remarked Spat. "But—well, *yes*, just for beauty, of course, and music."

I pointed out how the Chapel is the only part of the old Eton College buildings not made of bricks—but I am afraid Molly and Spat admired the brick more than stone—the mellowness of it, the mingling of colours, unlike American brick, even the best "tapestry" varieties. I had to grant the bricks' beauty. What lover of Eton and the quadrangle (which seems dear now, if it didn't in my boyhood) wouldn't do as much?

I took the party through the Upper School, built by Wren, who is responsible for part of our St. Roland's; and after having displayed the inevitable door which shows the name of Gladstone, I meekly pointed out on the dark oak my own humble initials, with the date.

"Oh, Jack, I wouldn't have believed you're so *old*," sighed Spat. And Rags preened himself. Perhaps Ramon did the same, for even he is in his early thirties, at worst. Cock-sparrows!

"Now, if it were the Fourth of June, Eton's great day," I said, "you'd think more of me. I could show you a lot of things that Rags couldn't."

"The Fourth of June?" exclaimed Spat. "Quite a coincidence that *our* great day should be the Fourth of July."

Still, the upstart consented to admire Eton, though she has to miss the festivities when Eton's youths are **THE** men of the world to their female belongings.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

By the time we'd finished sight-seeing, the spring day was no longer young, though still beautiful. I dared not tell Spat of all the lovely river places we were letting her miss. Anyhow, she had a glimpse of Henley. And we'd have to flash out of the "river-ring" if we were ever to get anywhere beyond.

It was growing dusk, a pale, opal dusk, as we neared Basingstoke, which we intended to pass through. I suppose that was subconsciously our intention, because we'd never heard much about Basingstoke except that it produced buns, very special buns; and we had seen the town before only from a train. But, just as Molly alluded to those buns, wondering if it were worth while to stop and buy some, a cry of anguish greeted us from behind the Sunbeam. Ramon's car was in trouble.

I halted to ask what was the matter, and Ramon jumped out.

"You won't leave me, will you?" he begged. "I myself am no mechanic; my mind is on a different level; but Jaimé says a serious thing has happened. It is the engine. I don't think he buys the right oil and gas. Anyhow, heaven has provided a garage. You see it? Jaimé may have hours of work."

I saw also that heaven had provided an hotel.

We couldn't desert the blighter, though he has more or less fastened himself on us. And we couldn't squeeze him with his magnificent, exaggerated pigskin luggage into our Sunbeam, even if we left his car to follow later.

While I composed a polite answer, Molly snatched it from my mouth. "Why don't we stay here to-night,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

and find out if there's something to see, besides buns, in the morning? Jack, you know that hotels called lions have always brought us luck, whatever their colour, white or red. You never hear of a Lion Hotel by any other colour, do you? . . . This one's red. What about it?"

So the Red Lion, Basingstoke, in the County of Hampshire, became our home for the night.

Ramon groaned as he saw the quaint, old-fashioned entrance. "No private baths! I could swear to that!" he exclaimed.

Spat glared at him like a vengeful child. "What of it?" she said. "It looks a darling place, and it's your fault we're here, anyhow."

Whereupon appeared the landlord, a delightful person, who promised baths and showed us a menu fit for kings.

The crushed Ramon apologized for his ill-temper. "It is that I have happened now and then to stay in an hotel where one must take the bath used by others. Oh, I know those *others*! They may look very, very nice in the *salon*. Even, they can put on the air of being great people, maybe of title. But in the bathroom, they might be, yes, bloodhounds. They are at heart bloodhounds, and in their habits. No chambermaid can clean enough after them. It is as if they rubbed shoe blacking on the part of the body where they sit."

We all burst out laughing, and for the first time I began to like Spat's (and Molly's) millionaire. He has an unconscious sense of humour. For some reason we

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

English don't expect humour from South Americans. Probably they feel the same about us, and often they may be right.

Nothing could have been more old-fashioned than our rooms, or more comfortable. Each of us claimed to be occupying the room used, and haunted, by Oliver Cromwell, and Molly was enthralled by the story that he had, in his time, even as she in hers, eaten Basingstoke buns.

"They're good," she said, "though filling. Nobody who wants a figure like a Hollywood star would eat more than one. But I hope Oliver made himself a beast on the buns, and that they gave him an indigestion. He may have been righteous according to his lights, but he was a Gloom. I hate the man. So there!" Spat can't take up the smallest book about English history without finding that Cromwell went and ruined the very thing she most wants to see.

"Ruins are often more picturesque than the palaces, castles or abbeys would have been unruined," I tried to comfort Spat. But she wouldn't be consoled.

"I can't forgive Oliver the old stained glass his nasty soldiers smashed," she said. "Old stained glass is my passion."

"Have you seen any?" I asked.

"No," she confessed. "And Oliver Cromwell has practically prevented me from seeing any, ever."

"Not quite," remarked Rags. "I've mentioned to you a few times that York Minster has the best, anyhow the most, thirteenth-century glass in England."

"I believe you *have* said it a few dozen times,"

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

replied Miss Randolph, in a sweet little voice which could offend no one. "But I've said the same number of times, maybe, that Yorkshire seems awfully far north to me, a southern girl."

"Me, too, I am a southerner," added Ramon, "I love the south best."

"You'd better go to Devonshire," suggested Rags, aware that, on this trip, the Sunbeam party won't see Devon. Somerset will be our nearest to it. And that's west, though to me it feels south.

Morning brought more rage against Oliver Cromwell. What he had done to Basingstoke did seem rather an abuse of hospitality, I must say, considering that he lived at the Red Lion Hotel.

The town was a choice resting-place for the grim fellow, situated between the big basin of the Thames and that of the Rivers Test and Itchen. Men of power, long before Cromwell's day, appreciated the "strategic position," and in the twelfth century, when travel first became popular, Basingstoke had its fortress tower. By the fourteenth, there was a fair-sized town nestling at the tower's foot. A pretty town it must have been, built as the modern one is, on a slope of Lodden Valley. The Lodden is another river, threaded round Basingstoke, which goes with the Test to Southampton Water. Don't you like the music of that name: "Southampton Water"?

Naturally, Oliver smashed the tower, and the Holy Ghost Chapel, which does sound like the unforgivable sin. It's a lovely ruin, though, and what Cromwell left of the castle is good.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

There's a street, too—old Basing Street—which even without the rest ought to bring artists to the town: a perfect little picture, with its thatched cottages, their small windows peering out like surprised eyes from under low, furred foreheads.

Part of this letter I wrote last night, part this morning, for Ramon's chauffeur is either a bit stupid or unlucky; and you can't tell him anything. For the Sunbeam I always buy Shell, or B.P., and for oil XL. Heaven may know, but not care, what he uses.

We should have cared, however, if Ramon hadn't soothed the girls by finding souvenirs more substantial and lasting than Basingstoke buns. He hurried from the hotel while we waited after sight-seeing; discovered an antique shop and bought two sets of paste cuff-links, said to be one hundred and fifty years old. They look it! and to my eyes are not beautiful; but Molly and Spat were charmed. As the fellow gives presents alike, or of equal value, I can't be a churl and object where Molly's concerned.

That I use the word "churl" shows how permeated I am with history. Let Rags be the modern one of the party—or seem to be, while he can keep his poise and temper. They'll probably break like a raw egg before long. It's a bit too much for him that the "Wop" has won both Molly and Spat.

"Why doesn't *he* go and buy us some little thing, if it costs only tuppence?" Molly wanted to know, as she packed her latest treasures. "Why does he let Ramon be the hero of the hour?"

"Oh, is that Dorando's part in this piece?" I asked.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

“I thought he was originally cast as the villain. However, I liked his outburst over bathroom bloodhounds.”

“Spat and I like his outbursts in souvenirs,” returned Molly.

“Rags would consider it disgustingly obvious to follow an example set by Ramon. And so it would be,” I protested. “Otherwise he would also take to buying you things in each stopping-place.”

“I wonder if he would?” sniffed Molly. “I’m fond of Rags; I mean, I really am. And I don’t *detest* you, even when you pinch the last of my toothpaste as you did this morning. But for some reason Englishmen just *don’t* think of these little things. They leave American men, and even South American men, to do it.”

“Come now!” I defended my race. “Wouldn’t I buy you flowers every day, if you didn’t tell me you prefer them from our own garden or greenhouses? And some Englishmen must lavish their few remaining pounds on presents, or the Bond Street shops wouldn’t look so flourishing. You’ve always vowed you hated orchids—said they were more animals than flowers, quite cannibalistic—yet you talk now as if I were stingy, or forgot your birthdays.”

“I *like* you to forget my birthdays. You can remember the other days instead,” said Molly. “I’m speaking in generalities, so don’t get stuffy. It is that I quite want Rags to *succeed* with Spat. Anyhow, in the end.”

“We must think of some other way for him to do it,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

then," I warned her. "He's too obstinate, after Ramon's lead, to say it in flowers or antiques."

"I wonder if I haven't thought of a way already?" exclaimed Molly.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I must develop the plan further before I let you in on it," she answered. "It came into my mind only last night for the first time. It's a bit melodramatic, and it would be wasted if Rags isn't interested in Spat."

"Oh, he's interested all right," I ventured, to see how she would take that.

"You seem very sure," she said; and looked more offended than pleased, after I'd done my best.

Women are the limit! Still, they're all we have, and we must endure them.

Yours ever,

JACK.

P.S.—What can the little devil have got up her sleeve for Rags and Dorando? It's a crossword puzzle to me, and I was never much good at solving one.

Sir Robert Reading to Lord Ragford

April 12th.

MY DEAR RAGFORD,

I hope I'm not an interfering ass, but I have an instinct that you are in for trouble. So look out!

I haven't yet been fit to go to the theatre. I sit on a sofa, with my bad leg stretched out, and I read plays

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

while I wish to kill most playwrights—saving you and a few others, whom I would preserve from the general slaughter as Jehovah preserved Noah and his family. My secretary spends an hour or so there every evening, however. He has a look round and comes back to report. He's good at his job but, as you know, slightly of the drooping lily type and dotes on gossip.

Last night, with half an hour's warning to her understudy, Miss Lallers had a strange seizure of some sort and was unable to play. Her tame doctor fears that it's 'flu and she may have to keep to her bed for a couple of days or more. I wonder?

That's the official version. But my secretary says that he was walking past her flat in Kensington Court, after a tea-party with friends of his, when he recognized the boss of a well-known private detective agency coming out of the house. That's only circumstantial evidence, of course. The man may have been in some other flat than Liddy Lallers'. On top of this tale, however, the infuriated understudy, Miss Maynard, told Jennings at the theatre that Liddy was no more ill than she was—not as much so, in fact. Carol Maynard happens to have a genuine cold in her nose, not likely to decorate an impromptu performance. She vowed she'd seen Liddy driving out in her Rolls Royce that afternoon, the picture of health—"as much as you could tell through the make-up!" Miow—miow!

Putting together car, healthy appearance, detective, tame doctor (who'll say anything to please Liddy), my instinct whispers that Miss Lallers has heard talk

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

about your trip. She thinks the best way to find out the truth is to surprise you somewhere, by making a personal appearance. I'm afraid, my boy, you were a little indiscreet with her, considering the fair Liddy's emotional nature and hopes of becoming a Ladyship. You are rather a desirable *parti* from an actress's point of view, you know. You can give her a title and you can write plays for her. So keep your weather eye open—if you have ideas in any other direction. I suppose you haven't heard the footfall of a detective lately in a country lane by moonlight, when you were not alone? Or don't you get time enough off from motoring to sample moonlit lanes? What about the New Forest which you wrote you intended to visit?

Frankly, I don't like Liddy Lallers as a woman. She's a d——d cat, and then some, as our American friends say. As an actress, however, in the part of Minette, she's almost priceless, thanks to your coaching. Poor Maynard was dying for a chance, but badly needed a rehearsal, and was wild because she had hardly time to dress, much less rehearse. The voice of the prompter was heard in the land last night. Yet, after all, the play's the thing. An unrehearsed understudy can't kill "Bats."

Yours sincerely,
R.R.

P.S.—I'm writing a few lines by this post to Jack.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

*Miss Susan Randolph to Miss Hatty Belle Haynes, at
Elmville, Virginia*

ROYAL HOTEL, WINCHESTER.

April 14th.

DEAREST WOODLES,

I really am having adventures. They're as mixed up with scenery as raisins in a pudding!

Lord Ragford is much nicer than I thought he was when I wrote you about him the first day after we met. He isn't really stuck-up or snooty, except with poor darling Ramon: and I suppose the way he looks at R., down his sort of Duke of Wellington nose, may be a compliment to me. I call him "Rags" and "Bill" now, which ought to please him; but he seems to feel he has a perquisite of Christian names; Ramon none. I sometimes see a slight shudder pass through him, as if a caterpillar were crawling slowly through his spine, when both men are with me and I murmur, "Raymon." I do it in a soft, fluty voice, because the name deserves it, and, besides, it's fun to be annoying, don't you think?

Lord Ragford is really quite celebrated, so he has a right to be conceited, if he is. But I don't thoroughly understand Englishmen yet. The girls in Bill's book, "Bats in the Belfry," are perfect terrors. Even I, at my worst, when I was seventeen and thought it *chic* to be wicked, never equalled them in my conversation. I haven't seen the play yet, but Molly says lots of elderly people are shocked and two prominent clergymen preached against it, which of course helped the sinful

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

thing to succeed more than ever, and simply packed the theatre.

I wonder often if Bill would like me better if I let myself go as I used to do, when it was smart at home. I just can't be sure. As it is, he and Ramon both imagine I am as innocent as the primroses (the *sweetest* things, my dear) which shine like tiny stars along every English wayside.

Nobody knows better than you, angel child, that I always draw the line at a certain amount of petting and necking. Still I have read a few books, and we all did have *SOME* talks about life in school. But these men have a kind of idealizing manner, as if I were just out of the rose-garden, and believed that babies came from there. It makes me feel quite guilty, as if I ought to drink a few cocktails and enlighten them. Molly says, however, to stay as I am. Jack looks at me humorously sometimes. She must have told him things.

Rags makes Ramon seem rather wopsy by contrast. But Ramon is kinder, never sarcastic, and buys Molly and me the duckiest presents every town we're in. Besides, he's far richer, and would take me everywhere if I married him. I'm not sure Rags would. He seems insular, if that's the word, and mad about his place in Yorkshire, which he wouldn't have money to keep up if it weren't for an aunt lurking in the background of his life.

Besides, I'm not sure he's in love with me. It may be Molly who is the attraction. Some men always fall for beautiful married women. It's so safe, in a way, and especially safe with Molly because she's in love

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

with Jack and he with her. Rags could never get further with Molly than a sad, sweet romance. But perhaps that's what a writer would like best. It would give him experience and delicious pain. If he thinks he's going to get experience with me, though, he can think again. As for a delicious pain, I'll be the one to have it. Just a pain in the neck. So I'm trying not to let myself be too much intrigued with him—not too much for comfort. Though he *is* attractive! That cynical touch! You don't know where you are with him.

It would be *much* wiser and better for me to like Ramon, who apparently adores me, though they say that South Americans are never faithful long after marriage. It would be grand making Blondie jealous, because I marry a man about sixteen times richer than Father. Of course she roped poor Dad in for his money. Not that he isn't splendid looking—but she's about twenty-three, you know, twenty-two years younger than he is, and I used to see her going about with the most *septic* boy friends of her own class. Too revolting!

I'm not sure whether I'd care much if Ramon were faithful or not. You don't seem to have quite the same *thrilled* feeling about people who are a trifle fat and beginning to round out in front. Whereas if I were Lady Ragford I'd be wild with anguish and fury if Bill liked another girl better than me.

Feelings are *quaint*, aren't they? Because I'm not in love with Rags, of course—so why bother? You'll probably get a cable from me before long saying:

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

“Engaged to Ramon.” And that will be that. Then I’ll wire Father to send over dear Mother’s wedding-veil, which is of point lace, and came down through generations: also her wedding-dress, that grandmother wore, too—quite lovely, cut off the shoulders with a deep bertha of the same lace. Then I really *will* look Jane Austen, whose type Molly says Rags considers me to be. I mean the type of her heroines. I’d prefer Charlotte in “Pride and Prejudice,” if any. But it will be too late for Rags to regret me then.

We’re at Winchester now, where there’s a tablet to Jane Austen in the Cathedral. Such a wonderful cathedral, my dear! I make Jack lecture me about it, and all the things we see. It saves me reading guide-books, and is heaps more amusing. Jack has a sense of humour, which no guide-book seems to have, or if it tries to have one it’s very lumbering; like the movie talkers in travelogues, whom you don’t see, and don’t want to see.

The hotel we’re in, with a garden and a big loggia, such as we have on our seashore hotels, was once a Benedictine nunnery. Pre-Cromwell, of course. Most of the best things I’ve seen so far in England are, although dozens of old houses all round Winchester seem to have sheltered Charles the Second, when he was a refugee in Cromwell’s day, in secret rooms, which still exist. What a waste to do nothing with them nowadays! But I can’t see any of the present Royal Family being refugees in secret rooms. They’re too popular!

We came here by the most lovely way, from a place named Basingstoke. I don’t know why it’s named

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

that, but there's sure to be a reason. There is one for the name of every town and small village in England. I'm getting to be quite intelligent about them. I mean, I really am; and the signs over old inns. . . . Jack is *nuts* on them! We're always passing a "King's Head," and it does seem a pity there should never be a "Queen's Arms" just opposite.

The most swish of all is in this very town, Winchester, which bristles with Tudor things. Molly and I said we couldn't live unless we stopped and had lunch in the place I'm going to tell you about. This caused the men a little trouble in parking the two cars, as the inn is in the busiest middle of the High Street. But what are men *for*, I ask you? And do you wonder at our wishing to stop when the name was "Ye Olde Hostel of Godbegot"! It does truly look almost old enough to have been made by the hand of God; but the lunch was thoroughly up-to-date. Adorable apple tart! I suppose in old days it would have been peacock pie. After lunch we tottered upstairs and looked at nice bedrooms named after Saxon queens. A compliment, I suppose, to Queen Emma, who owned the land and was the wife of King Ethelred. Too adenoidic for me to pronounce!

We couldn't stay at Godbegot, though, because Jack had engaged our rooms at the Royal, where he and Molly once stopped long ago. Jack and Rags continually throw each other's rival schools at each other: Eton and Winchester. Not in a physical way, but with quite a snap. I don't know which I admire more myself, but if you *could* see the City Cross at

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Winchester! It would turn an Atheist Christian. And the streets are too good to be true. I feel as if I'd walked into an old, old engraving, and couldn't get out. Not that I'd want to get out. Though it would be frightening to live for ever in an ancient engraving, all alone. If it were an engraving of Winchester, I might keep Rags as a companion. He thinks the place is above all; except his Yorkshire, which I don't know whether I shall ever see or not.

In one of the Tudorest bookshops, I bought a gift for Jack: a book called "The History of Signboards, from the Earliest Times to the Present Day." *That* "present day" was 1866, about the date my great-grandmother was being married in the wedding-veil I intend to wear quite soon, myself. Jack will love it! Not the wedding-veil—the book. Already I've learned something from one page. It tells about a sign, "The Bunch of Grapes," which we've passed several times. It belonged to Winchester first, the book says: "Without, there hangs a noble sign, where golden grapes in image shine."

"Wine at Winchester" was the old slogan. London could keep its ships! That was in the days of the Romans. My lamb, what *was* Elmville doing then?

Oh, and what do you think of "The Bull and Mouth" for a sign? A whole bull standing up, straddling his legs between a pair of huge laughing lips? Wouldn't you bet they had good beef there?

At Windsor I wrote you from the "White Hart," and we're going to another at Salisbury. That was the favourite badge of King Richard the Second: a sweet

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

white hart, with a golden collar, a magic beast which Julius Cæsar caught in some forest. Too bad they've died out! But they would simply *wither* at the sight of the motor-cars now, so it's just as well.

It's terrible the names you have to pronounce here. And didn't you, when you studied history, spell the name of St. Swithin with an i in the second syllable? Well, you mustn't. Men who were Winchester boys, like Rags, crumple with sickly scorn if you do. Swithun it has to be! Yet English people always accuse us of pronouncing Paris "*Parus*," etc. Well, there's one thing: whatever way you pronounce a name in England, it's sure to be wrong, so it doesn't matter what you do. I was feeling clever chatting to Rags about Nell Gwynn in Winchester, according to Samuel Pepys. I said it like this: "Pep-pis," and Rags looked about to expire. "Peeps," he corrected me. That's only a *sample*!

Thank goodness, even he, Smart Alec that he is, can't tell me how to pronounce the name of King Cynegils or his son, Prince Cenwalh—which is a shame upon him, as they were converted to be Christians from whatever they were, at Winchester, in 634. They hurried up and built a church, so people would remember them. And not many years after, along floated St. Swithun. I know my head will ache trying to remember who built which, who burnt it down, and who built it up again, till the first thing you knew there was this glorious Cathedral. Isn't it horrid how, through all the centuries, people have destroyed each other's cities? Except with us. They'd

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

have to take quite a hefty chop at some of our current skyscrapers.

I never thought much about King Alfred, except that he burnt a cake, but he was awfully active at Winchester, keeping Danes at bay till they were tired out, went home with nervous prostration and left him to reign in peace. That is, more or less. His subjects had plague, but apparently to the ancients plague meant little more than a thorough epidemic of mumps would mean to us. Do you remember when I had mumps at school—or, maybe, mump in the singular, for it was only on one side, and on the left I was the image of a clock face?

By the way, I seem to be considered very *beauteous* by the three men of this party. Maybe it's because I look like Molly in the eyes of Jack and Rags. But I do believe all Ramon's thoughts are for me. I would go around with him more, only he's not intelligent about English history, whereas Rags and Jack both are.

It really *is* nice wandering here and there with Rags in "Winceaster," which he has informed me was its early name. He was most agreeable of all at the College, which was his school, as he's dinned into our ears a hundred times since we started.

Old William of Wykeham (whom Jack warned me at Eton we'd bump up against at Winchester) founded it for "seventy poor and needy scholars and clerks." They did things well in those days, if only for a few men, for they had lots of time and must have known things about beauty which their descendants slowly forgot. You can't think how

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

perfect the quadrangles are, and the great gateway! . . . The present time melted away from me. I saw no man less than a king or a bishop. Then, suddenly, there were Jack and Rags and Ramon, their clothes looking terribly out of place, especially Ramon's, which hit me in the eye. But I couldn't help thinking that Molly and I were fairly all right for any century.

I don't believe Bloody Mary had a thing on us in the way of clothes, though she must have brought all her best ones when she married that fox, Philip of Spain, at Winchester Cathedral.

It *was* a favourite place for kings and queens to be married! I suppose partly for the reason that Winchester practically was England in old days. Henry the Fifth said his prayers here, before he started to fight at Agincourt. He was always a hero of mine since I began sort of studying history with Shakespeare. And I can quite imagine his nose and Lord Ragford's being the same shape: thoroughly English, somehow, and a bit warlike.

It wasn't only Rags's nose, however, which had a warlike look when we were in the Cathedral. For a bit I was with him and Jack, while Molly pointed out things and flirted with Ramon. (She can't help flirting. Her eyes are that shape and set that way in her head. Heavens! If I can be as good-looking as she, at her age!) Rags was talking intelligently about the wonderful "transition periods," more marked than almost anywhere else, when Jack interrupted to show me the six coffins of the Saxon kings. I instantly adored them because they looked so short and

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

pathetic, though so tremendously old, and Jack adored them, too. He explained that they could quite well be short because only the ashes were preserved there, not full-length kingly skeletons—when Rags, with scorn, remarked that no Winchester man believed there was even a spot of Saxon king in one of those coffins. I was *so* annoyed, because I hate people who spoil your illusions, and I said so. That was when his nose looked like Henry the Fifth's, and I left him to argue it out with Jack. I just walked away, over to Ramon and Molly; but presently there was no Molly there.

Ramon and I strolled about, examining tombs, and there was one in the stone pavement which I loved—a Forde, of 1681, and very likely an ancestor of our Henry Ford. I hope Henry knows about him.

I could say anything I chose to Ramon, and he thought it perfect. He kept laughing with me, not *at* me, and I grew almost fond of him. I can even dare to tell him that I *like* the gaudy, bright gas stations, which they call "petrol," and Rags shudders at, as ruining the landscape, when we travel. I mean I do *really* like them. They make me feel so at home whenever we pass one.

"Carbuncles on the face of Nature," Rags said one day. I dare say he'll put it in a book. But, after all, a carbuncle of one kind is a jewel, if it isn't on the back of your neck.

Out of spite, I got lost with Ramon in the crypt, which was horribly cold, and he wished to put his arm round me to keep me warm. I said to myself:

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

“Well, now, Miss Spat, why not let him propose again, here and now? You just say ‘yes’ and get it over. You needn’t bother living *up* to him, anyhow. You can simply live.” But then I remembered that a crypt is terribly tomblike and would be a bad omen. So I put him off and made excuses. He let me go when I sneezed, and only took my arm. I kindly allowed him to look at Wykeham’s Chantry with me, because Rags had been wanting to show it, and had talked a lot about the eleventh century iron grille which protects St. Swithun’s shrine. Ramon didn’t even glance at the grille. He kept gazing at me, to see if I had taken cold. But I did look, as it happens to be one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen. I wouldn’t confess that to Rags, though. I was in a mood not to wish him to think me even intelligent.

Well, my dear, we got back to the hotel, and you’d never guess what happened there. Something absolutely unsuitable to a place like Winchester of all others. Standing near the door, as if ready to spring, was the prettiest little cat of a girl. Truly, she was more of the cat type on the outside than most of us care to show, though all women have a wee bit of the cat in them, I do think. And it’s useful at times.

She was the white Persian kitten to perfection. I read in a funny English newspaper at a hotel the other day, among advertisements for sale and to buy: “White Persian Kitten. Lovely face. Only wants seeing. Five shillings.” Well, this might have been *it*, though *far* more expensive.

Immense blue eyes, quite round, and the flat blue

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

colour of new turquoises. Pale golden hair (*not* platinum) in sweet little curls, sticking out on each side of, and underneath, a white beret. Eyebrows made by hand in a perfect arch (kittens often have that, you know), Hollywood eyelashes, nearly an inch long, curling up; a teeny-weeny nose, and a Cupid's bow mouth also made by hand to match the eyebrows; a pretty slender throat, and a pretty chin with a dimple in it, whether made by hand or not I couldn't say, though I hear the beauty specialists do them. Dressed in white, too: cloth, with white fur at the neck, round the coatee and edging the skirt. Might have been kitten fur!

I thought: "Gosh! What's this?" But hardly had the question popped into my head when the vision did the spring she'd been poised for. It was aimed at Lord Ragford. She threw her arms around him, and I saw the tiniest, most *disarming* baby hands, with lots of rings on them, go as far up towards Rags's neck as Puss-Puss could reach, standing on tip-toe.

"Oh, Bill dear!" she cried. "I was afraid I had missed you!"

Bill looked as if he wished to God she had, though you never can tell with a man.

"Hello, Liddy!" he hailed her, in a loud, British voice, which proclaimed to all the world his innocence. "How on earth did you come here? Why aren't you in town, filling the box-office for 'Bats'?"

"Now don't say you didn't know I was ill, and Maynard playing?" she asked.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

“How should I know?” (I thought he was evading her.) “You don’t look ill.”

“I’m only just alive,” she answered.

Of course by this time I realized that she must be Minette, the leading woman’s part in Rags’s play. She was absolutely born for it in looks. A *feline* flapper, my dear, if you read the book, “Bats in the Belfry,” though I should have imagined this girl too *dumb* to act Minette as she ought to be acted. But perhaps, seeing her looks were so wonderful, Rags coached her himself till she couldn’t help being what was wanted. You’d say there weren’t two girl cats in England so perfectly cut out in appearance for “Minette.”

As soon as Rags made that answer, which wasn’t an answer but a getting out of one, I guessed that he had known this Liddy what’s-her-name had eloped from the theatre. That would account for his being sort of absent-minded and cranky all day, which he really had been.

Liddy Thingumbob took no more notice of the rest of us than if we were extras: and it didn’t occur to Rags to introduce us to each other. She had the air of being engaged to him, or even *married*! But that didn’t entirely convince me. What hugging there was, so far, had been all on her side, though Rags stood up to her, this being an affair of real life, not a farce comedy, where the hero can back into the wall or fall through a trap-door.

“I’m sorry,” said Rags, which remark might have been taken in two ways. Was he sorry she was only *just* alive, or sorry that she was alive at all?

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

"You know what I told you," said the Liddy person, and tears rose to her eyes. Not the kind that make your nose red. You and I used to do the trick at school and get forgiven for things by Miss Abbott, simply by swallowing the end of our tongues.

"You told me a good many things," replied Rags.

At last he turned a face of repressed gentlemanly fury to us, and I knew then for sure that Liddy wasn't an agreeable surprise: though very likely he deserved all he'd got.

"Lady Brighthelmstone, may I introduce Miss Lallers, my leading lady?" he asked Molly, and went on to polish off Jack and Ramon and me in the same conventional way.

"I recognized Miss Lallers at once, of course," said Molly nicely.

"And I," added Jack.

It wasn't necessary for me to do more than give a cheerful grin, which I gave, though I noticed, strange to relate, that it was *me* she looked at, when she could turn those turquoises away from Rags.

"What a coincidence that you should be here!" Molly went on, when Miss Lallers didn't speak.

That opened her lips. (I do wonder what sort of lipstick she uses—I must say it's good, and would suit me, though of course I wouldn't have a Cupid's bow taking up most of the space between my nose and chin. Poor Jack is so innocent he thought I didn't use any, till he saw the way I taught Molly to keep from getting dry-lipped while motoring. Too *price-*

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
less, my dear! I invented it. Foundation of Pond's cold cream from a tiny tube in bag, nice red lipstick on top.) But back to Miss Lallers.

"It isn't a coincidence," she said. "I happened to hear from a friend that Lord Ragford—Bill—would be in Winchester for a couple of days."

"We've been here since yesterday," Rags remarked. "This is our second day. I believe we're going on, aren't we, Jack, to-morrow morning? I'm Lord and Lady Brighthelmstone's guest, you see."

"Oh!" exclaimed Miss Lallers.

Then Ramon was as catty a cat as ever lived, and you know when a man is catty he goes far beyond us. "If you'll permit me," he said, in the slightly stilted way he has, having learned only long, classical sort of words in English, "I shall be delighted to offer you the hospitality of my car, if you can accept it."

I saw that Rags could have killed him; and suddenly the most divine idea sort of swam into my head, as it might into a guardian angel's. But I had to keep it there till I'd heard a little more, to be sure I didn't take the wrong turning.

"You're awfully kind," answered Miss Lallers. "It sounds lovely, but I must consult with Bill." She turned to him again. "You do know what you told me, though you pretend to forget, because you let me down so." Then to Molly, the way one conveniently uses a third person in a quarrel. "Lord Ragford thought I was the type for 'Minette' in his play, and he must have been right, for I've got gorgeous notices and practically *millions* of fan letters. But, you see,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

I hadn't much confidence in myself, as I'd been mostly on the screen, and the technique is awfully different. I was scared out of my wits the first night, and Bill was sweet to me. He took both my hands and promised to stick by me whatever happened. I told him I should never have the courage if he went away while the run was on, where I couldn't call him up if I wanted to change the least word or bit of stage business. He promised faithfully he'd stand by, and I believed him. It's the most *trying* part—you can't conceive, unless you played it. I was feeling frightfully depressed the other night, what with Sir Robert Reading being away ill and all. I called Bill up, both in Jermyn Street and at Strand-on-the-Green. When I got no answer at the flat, and his man at the cottage said he was out of town indefinitely, I thought I should die. I *knew* I couldn't go through with the part, so I had to turn it over to my understudy. . . . Bill, you *promised* not to go away."

"My dear girl, when I said that, it was on the first night, and you were hysterical. A man will say anything," Rags excused himself. "Besides, how was I to know the damn play would keep running for ever? I can't tie myself to town month in and month out. Who told you I was in Winchester? "

"Sir Robert, of course," answered back Miss Lallers, very quick and pat. But her eyes looked *too* deceitful, and, glancing at Rags, I knew he didn't believe it: perhaps he'd good reason not to believe. "Sir Robert knows there's an absolute jinx on me, and I cannot do 'Minette' as she ought to be done when I can't

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

get at you for the advice and help you promised. It would spoil my career if I let down on 'Minette,' to say nothing of what it does to the box-office. The public has been so darling to me, and though Maynard may be as good, or a better actress than I am, people don't seem to feel she's 'Minette.' Oh, Bill, I'm in a frightful state of nerves. I had to come and see you. I simply *can't* do 'Minette' till you're in London again. Maynard will have to get along the best she can. I have a doctor's certificate, and you know there isn't a film company in England that doesn't want me. Besides, I had a cable from R.K.O. in Hollywood since you left. That upset me just a little more, if there *could* be more."

This was the moment for my divine idea to be used, for what it might be worth.

"Oh, Miss Lallers!" I exclaimed, in a little-girl manner, almost like her own, "how marvellous to get an offer from R.K.O. Hollywood is such fun! I was there with Father two years ago and we saw all the studios. The climate is marvellous for nerves. If you do have to stop being 'Minette'—such a pity, because you must be too perfect!—Lord Ragford was thinking he might let me try the part on tour and, maybe, in New York when I go back. Perhaps he'd trust me with it in London, if it would be a *great* relief to you. I've had lots of experience as an amateur. Honestly, I'm quite good, and 'Minette' is supposed to be an American, anyhow, isn't she?"

My dear, if you could have seen the effect!

Jack and Molly turned away, not to burst out laugh-

ing. Ramon's enormous black eyes popped the way I imagine a criminal's eyes popping, while he gets electrocuted in one of our home-town prisons. As to Rags, I believe he could have kissed me, which I really wouldn't have minded much. What's a kiss among friends?

Miss Lallers glared at me as if I were something the cat had brought home and then turned down. Yet at the same time I felt she was judging my type, and wondering if I might make a big hit in 'Minette, amateur though I am. After a long stare—or it seemed long—she switched to Rags. "Bill," she said, in a low, shaken voice, "would you really trust an amateur to do 'Minette,' just because she's a friend of your friends?"

"No, not because of that," Rags spoke up; "but you see for yourself, Miss Randolph's exactly the type, and with her American accent. . . ."

"Oh, *Bill!*" exclaimed his leading lady.

"If you throw the part over, Liddy, we couldn't keep Miss Maynard on in it. No sex appeal whatever," said Rags.

"But aren't you coming home quite soon—almost at once?" she begged.

"Not unless I have to coach a new 'Minette.'"

"I hate men who break their promises," she almost sobbed.

"I thought," said Rags, "that 'Bats in the Belfry' would run two or three months at most. It's nearly a year now. I can't tie myself to London for ever, as I just told you."

“ Then why should I? ” she squeaked.

“ No reason, if you want to get out of your contract. I do think Miss Randolph would please audiences, if she'd accept the part.”

Would you believe it? That girl simply turned and walked out of the door, without another word. Or, rather, she slammed out.

Then it seemed that she'd engaged a bedroom and bath, with a sitting-room for that night at the Royal. She had a car in the garage, too, and a chauffeur somewhere. So a clerk pranced out and reminded her to pay. It isn't far from Winchester to London, motor-ing. She could even get back in time to act “ Minette ” that night, if she hurried.

We all felt at the minute as if we should faint. And it was fearfully late for tea, but we had it, and I never realized before what a pick-me-up tea can be. I thought it was just an English fad.

Rags hadn't rushed after Miss Lallers, you see, as she must have expected him to do. He simply stood *planté là!* By this time Molly and Jack had walked away with Ramon a few steps, not to embarrass him, so there was I alone with the wreck of the Hesperus.

It would have been bad taste for Rags to laugh. I felt that. But he wasn't just keeping a laugh back. His eyes looked rather unhappy, and those straight black brows he has were drawn together. I thought I had been so wonderful, saving the situation; but suddenly I wasn't so sure.

“ Are you cross with me? ” I asked.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

“Cross!” he burst out. “Rather not! I’d like to thank you. But I feel as if I’d be a cad to say any more on the subject at all.”

So that was when we had tea. We talked about Winchester and history and what we’d seen and what we’d see to-morrow. Not a word about the Lallers female. We didn’t stay together so very long, however. Molly remarked that she felt as if she’d got policeman’s feet, standing for hours, and I said the same. But what I really felt like was a flat tyre. We two went upstairs, Molly to her room, I to mine, though I knew she was dying for a gossip. At my door, as I was unlocking it, appeared Ramon. I hadn’t seen him coming.

“Just a little souvenir,” he said.

“My goodness! Another?” I gasped.

“I was going to keep it till to-morrow,” he explained, “but I was afraid you were not pleased with me for offering that young lady to take her in my car.”

“Well, I thought it was a little unkind of you, when you must have seen she was chasing Lord Ragford and he didn’t want her,” I told him. “Besides, you hadn’t a right to add someone else to the party. Jack and Molly welcomed you for my sake, and I expect they like you now. I know Molly does, quite. But . . .”

“I did not stop to argue out that in my head,” Ramon confessed, as if I’d been his priest. “I *wanted* her to be with us.”

“Oh, if that was it,” I cut him off with a snap, the

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

way you bite a thread. "Of course she's frightfully pretty and I expect celebrated, too."

"You don't think I wanted her for *myself*?" The poor wretch begged, as if he were going to cry. "It was only that, if she has any claim on Lord Ragford, why should he be playing around as a free man?"

"Is it our business?" I asked.

"Lord Ragford does not like me," said Ramon, "and I have no reason to like him."

"He's very polite to you, isn't he?" I reminded him gently.

"Oh, polite! An Englishman can insult a man of another nation by being too polite. Don't I *know* it?"

"You're too sensitive," I said; but I did feel a little sorry for him. He had such a lost and homesick look, as if he were wishing for his own country, heaven knows how many thousands of miles away. Being rich can't help you one bit when you feel like that. So I let him give me the souvenir, which was in a box, beautifully done up. And he hurried off before I could open it, because he was afraid I might return it, I suppose.

No wonder he was afraid! I realized that when I opened the box. It was a jeweller's box, and inside lay the most adorable copy in gold of Winchester City Cross. You can't think how lovely it is. And it's made so it can be worn as a pendant. There are some jewels on it, too, small but real, of course. It would break Ramon's heart if I didn't accept it. But somehow I don't feel as if Molly were going to have a

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
present just like this one. So far, we've had dupli-
cates.

What do you think, darling? Did I make a fool of
myself, trying to rid Rags of a brazen-faced cat, or
was I God's gift to a stricken young man? Not that
cats do have brazen faces. Only the human ones do.
And then the brass is hidden under the make-up.

Good-bye, lamb, till next time.



Love,
SPAT.

Lord Brighthelmstone to Sir Robert Reading

THE WHITE HART,
SALISBURY, WILTSHIRE.

April 15th.

MY DEAR BOB,

Yes, the lady did indeed turn up at Winchester,
looking as pretty as a white Persian cat, and full of
evil intentions. Even if I'd got your letter sooner, I
couldn't have done much for Rags. It was the sort of
scene which outsiders, especially of our sex, can't
interrupt. If anybody did anything to help the un-
fortunate young man, it was our friend Miss Randolph,
who flung herself into the fray by offering to under-
take the part of "Minette" herself if Miss Lallers kept
her threat of leaving it flat.

The Randolph clan is quick on the uptake, I will say
for it, and this member routed the enemy, to all
appearances. The lovely Liddy slammed the door in
our faces, and I'd be willing to bet, snapped the part

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
out of her understudy's mouth at the last minute that
same night. I'm watching the papers for a paragraph
on the subject.

Rags, however, was left deflated. Later on I found
out why. He thinks that Miss Lallers is capable of
sueing him for breach of promise unless he toes the line
which she's mapped out for him. That, of course, he
has no intention of doing. He denies that he was ever
the least in love with his "Minette," or that he made
real love to her. I hope he speaks the truth, for the
sake of his intelligence if nothing more highly moral.
Liddy, outside her part in "Bats," is the perfect dumb-
bell which "Minette" is supposed to be. A beautiful
dumb-bell, yes, and she's even more so on the screen
than on the stage. But married to that girl, an
enraged husband who cracked her egg-shell skull ought
not to be tried for anything more serious than doll-
slaughter.

I asked Rags if Miss Lallers had any compromising
letters from him, and he said, "No—o," nothing that
a jury with brains would consider compromising.
Query: Can you count on juries to use their brains?
He wrote a few soft nothings to Liddy, accompanied
by flowers, when he wanted her to refuse a film-
contract and sign on the dotted line with you. He's
forgotten just exactly what was in the notes now.
That's the trouble. So he's worried. He's the sort
who would loathe the publicity of a scandal.

Well, let's be optimistic. Let's hope for the best
and look on the bright side of things, which is easier
to do, as there's all the brightness one could pray for

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

in the weather, and nature is doing what she can for us on this trip to heal any hidden wounds.

The funny thing is, that each one of us seems to have a hidden wound of some sort, unless I am the exception. Even Molly is worrying. She isn't sure whether, after all, she did the right thing in encouraging Dorando to join our expedition for the sake of waking up Rags to the charms of Spat by force of competition. She begins to think now that the competition may prove too strong.

She actually asked me if I'd object to her distracting Ramon's attention, if possible. I'm afraid I answered, "Well, I'll be damned!" although, as I've hinted to you all along, I've noticed a tendency to make herself generally alluring. I never quite knew which one of the two men she favoured for the star part in her piece, though, Rags or Ramon.

Now she says that only Spat can save Rags from destruction. And by "destruction" she means Miss Lallers. Nonsense, of course! Rags is no mouse that puss is sure to snap up. Still, it's a pity he can't remember what was in those notes. And there's a curious coincidence with this entanglement to the plot (can you call it a plot?) of "Bats in the Belfry." To save himself from a breach of promise case, the alleged hero of the book and play prefers to marry the plaintiff with the firm intention of forcing a divorce afterwards—divorce not figuring as scandal in the modern youth's curriculum, whereas breach of promise isn't cricket.

After my brief outburst of profanity, Molly confided

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

in me her secret plan for showing Spat where happiness lies. Perhaps you'll recall that I mentioned it to you in a letter? Molly had to "develop the plot further" before explaining it to me. Those were her words. Now, however, she was suddenly obliged to justify herself in my eyes, proving what a public-spirited, guardian angel sort of person she really is at heart.

It would be an anticlimax if I revealed the conspiracy to you so far ahead, I think. And conspiracy it has become, for I've agreed to join her when the right hour is at hand. I assure you that if it ever *is* at hand, you have more than a prosaic travelogue to look forward to, my boy.

Needless to say, Madam having come out into the open and begged my advice concerning her conduct, I've forbidden her to flirt any more than she can possibly help with the gentleman from Buenos Aires. He might prove to be more dangerous in his way than Miss Liddy Lallers is in hers.

Since the affair at the Royal Hotel, Winchester, and Molly's and my little private flare-up, you'd say, to hear us, that butter wouldn't melt in any of our mouths. We are all so smug, so smoothly impersonal.

Spat inquires what, please, is "early perp?" She couldn't somehow associate it with architecture. Apparently it has a premature, still-born mongrel and doggish sound to her ears. She and Molly discuss a gigantic St. Christopher, nearly obliterated, which they discovered on a wall at Winchester Cathedral; "pre-motor-car mascot," remarks Spat.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

And then the road between Winchester and Salisbury affords plenty of food for conversations. Hampshire is one of my three favourite counties in England, and I determined that our party should linger within its borders and do it justice. In fact, I felt that Hampshire was God's gift on that particular day to troubled hearts. I meant to make the most of its blessings. Luckily, few counties are as big as they look on maps, or we could never have done what we did in a day and have got where we are now. Sussex is an exception, in size, and when we are ready for a jaunt through Sussex, with Clarence Winchester, your friends and ours for a special guide, we shall take two days. However, Sussex is not yet for us. We are not even thinking ahead to it.

I remember seeing all of Thomas Hardy displayed on your library shelves, and if you've read him thoroughly (which I doubt, there being dust on a volume I pulled out), perhaps you think of Dorsetshire as Wessex. Well, it wasn't. Dorset was just outside true Wessex, which, thanks to its warlike princes, gobbled up Surrey, Sussex, Kent and Essex, while those same princes fought the Danes and became Kings of England. But how little the soft sweetness of Hampshire landscape suggests the fierce battles which raged over child-England's heart!

Do we, when we go to Southampton, *en route* for America, or do Americans landing there, give a thought to its ferocious history? We do not. They do not.

I was determined to pound a little knowledge into

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Spat's lovely bean, however, to say nothing of other head vegetables belonging to our party.

In spite of the evening's excitement at Winchester, I had my little lot all routed out at an ungodly hour, prepared for a long day. And Selborne—Gilbert White's Selborne—was too convenient to neglect.

I enclose you a post-card of the Wakes, the charming house where White was born, and you'll get a glimpse of the sundial in the garden. Such a place must have given inspiration to the dreamy, yet not unscientific naturalist he was; a wonderful fellow, in his shrewd simplicity, who is surely surprised in Heaven if he knows that each year a pilgrimage is attracted to his earthly home. We left our car for a time, of course. Ramon, slightly green from early rising, but almost oilily amiable, strolled about, and finally sat under the noble old yew in the churchyard, which all Gilbert White's lovers know so well.

It was damp under the yew, but even I am not old enough yet to be afraid of rheumatism, and Spat encouraged quite a lecture from me on the subject of Gilbert White. The girl looks upon "cousin Jack" (oh, lord!) as a walking library, and now and then her rapturous admiration of our British beauty spots repays and thrills me. Then again she gives me a frightful knock, whether on purpose or for fun I'm not sharp enough to be sure. For instance, she will show an extraordinary flair for the right thing. You can't fool her with the best modern imitation of Tudor.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Then, suddenly, she will break out with joyous greeting of a Woolworth shop set between two gems of ancient architecture. It makes her feel so much at *home*! She has a certain grotesque resemblance to the celebrated flea of the Irishman: "When you put your hand on her, she isn't there."

From Selborne, avoiding the church (badly restored), by devious and very delightful ways, I drove to Chichester. I couldn't bear to let even the unworthy Ramon miss the Market Cross which has hardly a rival in England, the Cathedral which has such charm, despite its new spire, and above all, St. Mary's Hospital. I wasn't certain of getting back to that part of Sussex again, you see.

"How would you like to dwell with me peacefully in the quaintest old almshouse on earth when we've lost the few pennies we have left and are forced to leave St. Roland's in a snowstorm, with a spotlight on our rags?" I asked Molly.

"Oh, I've always secretly felt how restful it would be in an almshouse," said she. "No servants to worry about, or parties to give. But I *won't* wash floors. If I'm supposed to do that, they can just go dirty till my death."

"I wish you felt that way about St. Roland's!" I reproached her. But she was up and alert in a second. "Why, Jack, do you regret *now* that you came on this trip to escape spring-cleaning?"

I couldn't honestly say that I did. I'm revelling even in our troubles. The open road for me, always! I never tire of it. Neither does Molly. That's one of

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

the reasons why even our worst rows are joyous. We love the same things, on the whole, and we have the same sense of humour.

Chichester owns the most engaging trees I can remember in any town of England, a long avenue of them; and delightful old houses where you picture nice, innocent elderly ladies, mostly maiden, drinking tea every afternoon, world without end. Yet, of course, the place has an ancient dignity which it is rather a crime to associate with prim spinsters. It was middle-aged when the Romans came. But Stane Street is a great credit to Roman straight thinking. How I like the names of those Roman ways! Stane Street, Friday Street, and so on!

I hadn't told the crowd exactly my programme for the day. In fact, I hadn't been certain of it myself, for it had to depend a bit on the weather. Lunching early at Chichester, however, I broke it to the family that we were bound for Southampton.

"But," said Molly, "Spat's seen Southampton, and I've been there millions of times."

"Have you ever really *seen* it?" I asked severely.

On reflection, the two had to confess that their memories of Southampton comprised the railway station and docks. The custom-house men were quite sweet and rather pets. There was also, of course, the water. But then you saw so much more water between there and New York you didn't notice a whole lot of difference.

"There's a good deal more to see and to think of in Southampton than railway stations, sweet custom-house

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
men and docks," I promised; "also close by is the New Forest."

Those two last words brought Spat to life. "The wild ponies!" she exclaimed. "Not that I really believe in them. Oh, do let's skip out Southampton and make for the New Forest at once. I can't wait."

I invented a tale that afternoons, fairly late afternoons, were more favourable for wild ponies. They would then slip out, imagining themselves well camouflaged among the lengthening lights and shadows.

That settled it, and there were no more complaints about Southampton. Only one little quip came in a whisper from Molly. "You *are* funny, Jack," she said. "Do you remember how glad you were not having to meet Spat at Southampton? You were so pleased about only having to pick her up at Waterloo and bring her to St. Roland's."

"Don't nag, woman," I ordered. "I hadn't seen Spat then."

She didn't beam as brightly as she should have done. But if by any chance my angel wife thinks to rouse my jealousy over Ramon or Rags (I wouldn't put it past her, among other motives!), why shouldn't I use Spat now and then as a buffer? The girl is older than Molly was when we first met, and she's almost always nicer to me than she is to the two R.'s.

I laid myself out to paint a picture of the past for Miss Susan Randolph, when she had seen Southampton of to-day as few tourists see it. After glimpses of the City Wall with its ancient round tower and the three

gateways through which ghosts of old must pass at night, it was easier to make the picture visible. There, too, was the twelfth-century house, supposedly the earliest left in England, known as "King John's Castle," and while building up that frame, so to speak, the canvas of the past was easily slipped in.

As for Rags, he is patient with my lectures, despite his air of knowing nothing, of wishing to know nothing because there's nothing to know; as a matter of fact, I happen to be aware that he went in fairly fiercely for history as a lad. He's as well up in our rough island story as I am, if not better. But I dare say that Spat's rapt attention amuses him, especially if I make a mistake, as I dare say I often do. And Molly's joy in me as a prize historian must give him an inward spasm of the chuckles now and then, to say nothing of Dorando's almost bovine expression of countenance when absorbing facts and dates.

You say you are interested, so I repeat in these letters most of what I pour forth upon Spat and the others who pretend to listen. But were I in your place, instead of being laid up with one clot in my blood, I believe such epistles would clot the whole fluid to the consistency of Devonshire cream. Still, I'm acting on your orders, so you, too, are invited to look at my haphazard panorama of old Southampton bowmen marching through the streets where you buy a last packet, nowadays, of your favourite English tobacco before your ship sails for New York! Spat's and my favourite hero, Henry the Fifth, gathering his stout army for France and the battle of Agincourt; the three

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

pale traitors, Richard Plantagenet, Lord Scroop and Sir Thomas Grey, dying for their plot to betray him. . . . Philip the Second of Spain landing in glory to wed that unhappy, bigoted old maid whom he helped to her nickname of "Bloody Mary." . . . Long after those days, the brave little English ships ready in harbour to dash out and fight Napoleon.

On the whole, we saw the picture thoroughly, with a blank here and there due to my ignorance, or the fact that I guessed the interest of the audience wandering, and imagined Spat fearing herself too late for the wild ponies.

In good time, though, we set off for the New Forest, Spat sure that it could not be as beautiful as Burnham Beeches. Of course, she soon found it even more beautiful; besides, there can hardly be a comparison, as there must be at least a hundred miles of the New Forest, whereas Burnham Beeches is a mere patch of loveliness on the landscape. And what a variety of tree landscape in the Forest! Not only the ever-moonlit mystery of beeches, with their suggestion of half-hidden dryads of mythology, but dainty processions of white birches like veiled maidens trooping to their first Communion; manly, noble oaks, which may have seen the Romans pass, priestly groups of pines or firs; brave, dark yews, which escaped the axe of ancient bowmen, and historic ash trees so fine in shape and form that they don't need to boast "*We are England.*"

This soft spring afternoon, shadows lay on the golden road like torn trails of thick, black Spanish lace. Young bracken springing up in grassy lawns under

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

the oaks and beeches were tiny, fierce green arms with clenched baby fists that shook themselves at each light breeze. Here and there were pink carpets of bog pimpernel. The long, straight rides had gold-knobbed walls of gorse. The beech leaves were so small that they were millions of yellow butterflies alighting on the grey branches; yet birds managed to hide their brand-new nests, and unmindful of us sang the love songs which have made the Forest musical for a thousand springs and summers.

“Now,” almost whispered Spat, “I can believe in the wild ponies. I’ll believe in them even if the mal-fay that haunts the place is too jealous to let me see them.”

Almost at that moment, the mal-fay relented, and let her gaze upon the rightful owners of the New Forest. For a few seconds, silence followed the girl’s words; that silence of a wood which is pricked with tiny sounds. And driving slowly, we had time to breathe aromatic scents which are packed sweetly in secret places, as perfume is packed in sachet-bags stuffed full of spices.

Suddenly a whole drove of the elfin ponies raced across the lawns and road in front of us. All were pygmies, but among them were three or four spring babies about the size of spaniels, though mounted unsteadily on long sticks of leg. They might have been animal dolls, like those absurd, jointless French creations which women love to fling on to their sofa cushions.

It was amusing to see how the ponies spurned us. We didn’t exist for them. They were the only creatures of importance in the world. What a lesson!

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Presently we came to Stony Cross, where we had tea, and luckily there was the Rufus Stone to take Spat's mind from the ponies. She'd become almost tiresome on the subject of them. How did they begin? Where did they come from? and all that. As if I knew!

What an old, old New Forest that Rufus memorial makes the place seem! To think that the son of William the Conqueror died there under a great oak, his red hair stained with his own blood.

"And the little wild ponies, were they here then?" I heard Spat ask.

To tell the truth I wasn't at all sure, though it seemed likely, so I waxed poetic. "Always the ponies were here," I said. "Through thousands of springs, sweet as this one, thousands of dreamy green summers, copper-tinted autumns, and winters sculptured white with snow."

"But there must have been two ponies at least to begin with," the girl murmured. "And how . . ."

"Spat, don't be biological; it doesn't suit you," said Molly, and saved me explanations I couldn't make.

Dorando was anxious to buy a pair of the ponies for Miss Randolph, and even when she announced that she'd no home to have them sent to, the fellow seemed ready to build an Aladdin palace, with stables attached, in any situation suggested by the lady. He feels that he is not at his best with her since Winchester, and is anxious to regain lost ground. I imagine it was that little break of his with Miss Lallers that did the mischief. But at Bournemouth, he atoned with so magnificent a clockwork Mickey Mouse for Spat, and a box of choco-

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

lates as big as a young trunk for Molly, that if the two had hearts they might have softened. In my experience, however, no rock can be harder than a woman's heart against some wretched man for whom she bears a grudge, though she might shed tears if you stepped on the toes of a cross-eyed kitten.

Before Bournemouth, however, came Christchurch, a most lovable place I wouldn't have been content to pass. It did distress me slightly, however, that Spat should squeal with joy over a few house-boats in the little harbour before she became even conscious of the Priory. When she did become conscious of it, I fear it was more the magic mirroring of the church in clear water than the church itself that impressed her. And she annoyingly wanted to know why it was a priory, not a cathedral, since it was quite big enough. "It ought to be a cathedral," the girl insisted, "so we could think of it always as the cathedral under the sea." For heaven's sake write me why a priory or an abbey can't be a cathedral! I suppose it's something to do with bishops? But I hate to be ignorant, especially as it's my business on this trip to be Mr. Know-All.

You're a Shelley lover, so I dare say you needn't be told that his memorial gleams white and ghost-like at the west end of the nave. There's no particular reason for it being at Christchurch, except that his son lived not far off, at Boscombe Manor.

While at Christchurch we took a walk, as sweet almost as anything in England. It had the effect of being a secret expedition, for Christchurch is half hidden in an angle between the Avon and the Stour,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

where both rivers flow into a short inlet of the sea. The walk I speak of might be made for lovers; a narrow, raised path with a bright ribbon of water below on either side. Trees lean down to caress with their leaves the floating swans, and there is hardly a sound save the ripple made by those ship-like, feathered white bosoms.

Spat was sad because we had nothing to feed the haughty birds.

“Not even a piece of chewing-gum?” cruelly asked Rags, whose disposition has suffered from Miss Lallers. And Spat for once became pathetic.

“I don’t use it any more,” she sighed, “since you said Americans are all getting square-jawed from munching it for generations. And I do miss it awfully!”

We had meant to spend the night at Bournemouth at an hotel so big it hadn’t seemed necessary to engage rooms beforehand. But Molly changed her mind. “We’re none of us fit to be dinner companions to-night,” she whispered. “Let’s dash straight on through to Salisbury, and then it will be time to go to bed.”

This seemed rather a pity, for I like Bournemouth. It strikes me as one of our least obvious watering-places, with its unspoiled beach, its high cliff of gold, its scent of seaweed, and its wilderness of pine trees. But I thought possibly Molly was right about the mood of three among us at least.

“Salisbury it shall be!” I said, and we took the road that would lead us out of Hampshire to Wiltshire and its great cathedral town.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

We hadn't been long on the way, when the setting sun, like a judge about to pronounce sentence, put on a fearsome black cap. Its red light was blotted out and we switched on our lamps. The sky that had been a vast inverted cup of blue clouded with sullen purple, and out of it suddenly tumbled a flood of waters such as I've seldom seen. It was like a solid mass of crystal breaking as it fell, so that in the white sheen of our lamps it seemed that a million pearls and diamonds poured across the road.

Oh, the necklaces for mermaids, if mermaids hadn't gone out of fashion and retired to the bottom of the sea!

With that lament I'll leave you in peace.

Yours ever,
JACK.

*Señor Ramon Dorando to Miss Liddy Lallers at the
Princess Elizabeth Theatre, London*

DEAR MISS LALLERS,

I would have written to you before this, but I felt obliged to think over a plan in my mind to help you. I have not yet been out of my room in this new place where we have arrived, and I am now a little confused by seeing so many towns. But I believe we are in Salisbury, not that it matters to me where we are. I am thinking of you at your theatre, and I am very tired

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
of cathedrals, which should not be called cathedrals
because they have long ceased to be Catholic.

It is early in the morning, the time when English
people pour into their stomachs a cup of strong tea. I
know not why, as in any but English insides it would
not be a good foundation for breakfast. I have drunk
it, however, as a man waked me with a loud knocking
at the door, and as the hotel is not on fire (my first
natural thought), I will seize the opportunity to write
this letter.

I must mention it has been in my head since you
popped so unexpectedly upon us all at Winchester.
And my sympathy as well as admiration has been with
you since you banged the door very hard to show Lord
Ragford your state of mind.

Perhaps I ought to apologize for not writing a better
letter. Theoretically, my English is good, if I do say
so, but those little words which make a language
intimate I do not know in their right place. Occasion-
ally, I use one in much the wrong sense, which gives
me a warning, as more than once I have shocked my
hearers, in entire innocence, which I should indeed
regret doing to you, Miss Lallers. I will therefore be
confined in dictionary language, if you will pardon
me.

Now to explain the reason of my writing so quickly
in the morning on an empty stomach, if I do not count
the tea. In my country it would be the best of coffee
or thick chocolate, which I should like to show you,
with a spoon.

The night at Winchester, some hours after you had,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

with that good bang, departed, I smoked in the garden, and by the chance of accident, heard some part of a conversation between the Lords Brighthelmstone and Ragford. The talk concerned you, and my great admiration for your beauty and courage was pained by the tendency of their paragraphs, or should I say, sentences?

It was light as day (I do not mean an English day) to my intelligence that Lord Ragford had been at your feet as a lover. His hintings that all was for a purpose, the purpose to make you act well in his piece, I do not believe. To such a young lady as yourself men do not need purposes to make the love. It makes itself. His story to Lord Brighthelmstone was unconvicting in the extreme, but nevertheless it remains that he has fear of your no doubt justified revenge. He wrote you some letters. He has the terror that you may use these against him and occasion trouble. "Bad publicity" were the words I remember from him, or the other lord, but he was to an extent consoled by his friend, who argued that the breaches of promise make a costly case, calling for the best lawyers in England.

Lord Brighthelmstone's opinion was that it would take too much money. Even the high salary of an actress, full of success and popularity, is often, according to his word, "quickly blewed." Perhaps you will understand the meaning? He thought you would sink down like the toy balloons when you learned of the prices.

This speech roused up my chivalry, dear Miss Lallers. If you would wish to have a case against

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Lord Ragford, then it must be best for you to have it, and I would ask the great privilege to help.

Englishmen do not take the foreigners to their hearts. I have learned this, though I must say I have suffered no impolitenesses. I hope it is different with the ladies in their feelings for us. But perhaps, from your name, dear Miss Lallers, you are not English by birth? That would bring us more together.

As it happens I have very much money, more than I need in ordinary walks of life. But this is no ordinary walk. If you would like to make Lord Ragford pay large damage, if not marry you, nothing would be of more pleasure to me than to assist. You will not have to use one coin of your own money. All shall be mine. But that will be a secret between us. It would not be well to come out.

I do not hide from you, Miss Lallers, that I have no affection for Lord Ragford. He has the air of thinking other men not himself, dirt beneath his shoes. I am not used to that. I am a high man in my own country. I came away to see the scenery of the world, and possibly to learn something about the disposition of a young lady. But the last thing I expected was to be flattened out, as if I was of no importance, by the manners of an Englishman younger than myself, whom I could buy and sell many times over again without hurting my bank-roll, even if he has written a book or two books and a play.

In the Argentine we do not value so much those who work for the theatre. They exist only for pleasing us. Of course, I allude to writers, not to

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
the lovely actresses like yourself, whom we adore, and there are few, if any ones, as lovely. I would gladly have Lord Ragford in my country. I would show him many things other than scenery. So the sooner you begin work upon him, dear Miss Lallers, the more happy I will be. You may call on me for all sums necessary; yes, if it should need up to thirty or forty thousand English pounds. I could afford them well, especially in the present rate of exchange.

Will you telegraph to me at the Empire Hotel, Bath? I understand it is the next stopping-place. It has a nice clean name, Bath, is it not? I shall read up other details in order to discuss with intelligence, as I am in the habit of doing, at all places, though often it causes me a sleepless night, the books I must read.

This I will send by express, and it will be at your theatre to-night with all my compliments and service.

Yours in every sense,

RAMON DORANDO.

And I hope much to be invited to your wedding with Lord Ragford, wasteful as it is to give him so much beauty.

Lord Brighthelmstone to Sir Robert Reading

THE WHITE HART,

SALISBURY, WILTSHIRE.

April 17th. Night.

MY DEAR BOB,

Who wrote these words: "The sky, that unattainable blue flower?"

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Good: when you're not in a commonplace mood, and ask yourself why should you be fool enough to try to attain it? When it's not blue, but grey, it comes pelting down and attains you.

It has been blue to-day, and I have rather thrown it up to Molly that we missed romantic Romsey by tearing through the night to Salisbury. There's really quite a good story about the ruins of Romsey and the day when there was a Benedictine convent there. The sort of story which shows that women don't change much in a mere thousand years or so.

Edward Atheling had a sister who was a lovely young girl about the year 1088. May have been something like Liddy Lallers. I shouldn't wonder. Ed. forced Christine to give up a noble lord whose name wasn't, I hope, Ragford. He thrust her into the nunnery, and as years went on she became Abbess, but, alas, a nasty, embittered Abbess with all the sweetness of youth gone from face and nature. She had a niece, Maud, whom I picture as resembling Spat, so naturally King Henry First, passing along one day, fell madly in love at first sight. This infuriated Christine, who had had no luck of her own, and she forced Lady Maud to take the vows, thinking that Religion with a capital R would tear the child and Henry apart for ever. Henry, however, wasn't that kind of a young man. After a terrific struggle he rescued his sweetheart from the convent and made her his queen. I don't think that the censors of to-day would sanction that as a talkie, do you?

But when Molly and Spat heard the story from me,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

they regretted not seeing the fine Norman Abbey, which is almost as cleverly secreted from the world's eyes, in these times of motor-cars, as the Bower of the Fair Rosamund.

That comes of making haste when we might have stopped at Bournemouth, and driven along in the morning, slowly and sweetly, viewing the changes from Hampshire to Wiltshire, and being stopped here and there by a drove of smoky-nosed sheep, or a bunch of clover-breathing cows.

However, here we are in Salisbury, where we have had a very good day; and this, our second White Hart on the journey, is one of the most famous old inns of Wiltshire. Hotel, I ought to call it now, for it has modernized itself in many ways, while keeping its souvenirs of the past: Sheffield plate and silver which many a travelling American millionaire must covet; and quaint engravings that are treasures. I like, too, the peculiar Wiltshire dignity of the porticoed front, which makes an ordinary traveller almost afraid to ask for rooms.

The first thing that happened in Salisbury was Spat's remembering she'd left her favourite pyjamas at the Royal in Winchester. As we are now, by her own wish, on the Pilgrims' Way, we shall pass through Winchester again, and I soothingly suggested that we'd pick up the garment (or should it be in the plural?) without fail. Surely few touring young ladies have such ornate belongings to lose, so Spat could count on recovering her property.

But no, you would have thought the girl had

mislaid the Koh-i-noor. She was determined to telegraph before putting her nose out of the hotel for a look at the cathedral, etc., and insisted upon telephoning as well. Then, said she, there could be no possible mistake.

I argued no more, only thankful that the two female confederates didn't insist on racing back a few hundred miles. When we men forget any possession such as a valued shaving-brush or a pipe worth (to us) its weight in gold, we are callously advised "not to mind." We can buy another just as good at the next town. When Molly or Spat leaves a trifle such as a nighty behind, however, you would think it was their immortal soul. It must be retrieved at any cost, or there's no hope of heaven.

Perhaps my face may have betrayed my utter indifference to Miss Randolph's pyjamas, for Molly at once spoke up in their defence. "The most *divine* things, darling. You'd understand how Spat feels if you'd seen them."

"Do you wish I had?" I asked. "Because if you do——"

"Don't be Edwardian, Jack," Molly snapped. "Of course, such pyjamas are made to be seen."

"I didn't know," said I meekly. "If a sweet young maiden sleeps in such marvels, with her door locked—why——"

"She sees them *herself*, idiot," Molly rebuked me. "Do men really think we dress for them?"

"We were talking of undress," I reminded her. "But no matter."

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

You'll be wondering why I harp thus tediously upon the pyjamas of Mr. Randolph's daughter, but more hangs upon them than, from the description, their fragile weight is meant to bear. The telephone message brought the news, while we were at breakfast, that the pyjamas had been found, and a gentleman would bring them to our next stopping-place.

"A gentleman!" exclaimed Spat. "Now who can that be?"

"The name wasn't mentioned, Miss," replied the waiter who had been at the 'phone. "But he's wanting to know if you'd care to give an address."

By this time Rags and Ramon were both deeply interested in Miss Susan's night garments, and eager for a chance of inspecting them.

"Didn't you say the Empire Hotel, Bath, Lady Brighthelmstone?" inquired the fatuous Dorando.

"Well, yes," answered Molly. "But——"

"The gentleman is a friend of the ladies," ventured the waiter.

"How extraordinary!" exclaimed Molly. "A friend! He must have turned up after we left, and seen our names in the visitors' book."

"Better decide quickly whether you want to be bothered with him at Bath, on the chance of his coming out a bore," said I, "or you'll be cut off on the 'phone. In your place I'd wait——"

"Oh, no," argued Molly. "We'd die of curiosity wondering who on earth he could be."

The order was accordingly given to the waiter, who

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

dashed off like a startled rabbit before the girls could say, "Insist on the name."

So he didn't insist on the name. And what with the combination of lost pyjamas and unknown man due to turn up at Bath, Molly and Spat have been absent-minded all day. One would almost imagine they had some ghastly secret which they feared might be dangling over their heads, like Damocles' well-known sword.

Salisbury gives me the impression Spat had of Winchester—that you have lost yourself in a medieval picture; but a very different medieval picture, for Salisbury has a character entirely its own. Of course there are a few Victorian improvements. There would be! But they can't spoil the charm of ancient days which catches and holds you from the first.

I suppose you remember reading as a boy that the site of "New Sarum" was fixed by the shooting of an arrow from the windy, bleak hill of "Old Sarum." If you didn't read it then, you never read it at all. For alas, one is apt to skip these details unless one is quickened to interest by being on the spot. Well, anyhow, so it was with Sarum. And the bishop who put up the first altar excused the move by saying it had really been ordered in a dream by the Blessed Virgin. A far more comfortable spot was picked out at all events.

So clean and fair-looking is the great Cathedral that Dorando blandly asked: "Is it a copy of the old one?" He couldn't believe that so white a building had been begun in foggy England so long ago as

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
the thirteenth century when Henry the Third was king.

“Perhaps they wash its face often,” suggested Spat. “They could with big hoses.”

“Only the winds and rains of England have washed Salisbury Cathedral’s face during the past six or seven hundred years,” I informed the girl, with a sense that I had snubbed her with noble-sounding words.

Spat is not easily snubbed, however.

“Oh, *well!*” she said. “It never rains but it pours in England, does it? And what with an average of at least *two* rains every other day for nearly a thousand years—I wouldn’t like to do it in a sum. My brain wouldn’t run to it.”

Even American-born Molly rose in defence of England then. “You haven’t been much troubled by rain since you came, my dear,” she remarked. “And have you never heard that Charles the Second said England had the best and most healthful all-round climate in the world?”

“The poor dear hadn’t really *been* many places,” replied Spat, “when you come to think of it, and so much of his early life was spent hiding in mousey secret rooms. Any climate must have seemed pretty good after them: full of sneezes and beetles at best.”

“He had France to remember. And he came to Salisbury especially on account of its fine, fresh climate,” I told her. “In fact, he took refuge here from the Plague. I don’t think Nell Gwynn was with him then. But she paid a visit later on, and made herself popular by giving one hundred guineas for a

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

pair of scissors turned out by the famous cutlery guild. I expect those were gay days for Salisbury—and Salisbury needed them—for whenever there was a gloomy, bloodthirsty war, the great gates of the wall here failed to keep them out. The enemy burst in and ravaged the streets which had the same names that they keep now.”

I had given my four their first sight of the Cathedral by way of St. Anne’s Gate, which is *the* way, in case you ever lose your London laziness and come to Salisbury. Indeed, why do you ask me for all these descriptions if they are not to tempt you? . . . Or is it that you mean to be satisfied for ever with the descriptions themselves? I wish I knew! I must ask Molly’s opinion. Sometimes I think she understands you better than I do.

But back to St. Anne’s Gate. If I were only a little more eloquent you couldn’t resist it. There’s the sudden sight of the two perfect transepts and the matchless tower against a sky such as only cathedral towns ever seem to be given for a background, and the lovely view of the Close, perhaps the most beautiful cathedral close in all England. The words “peace” and “nobility” might have been coined for it. There isn’t a tree which couldn’t tell five hundred years of history. And from the “King’s House” down to the humblest, where none are really humble, there’s not one in which a man might not be content to spend his life. Not that one of us would be so content in these days. I use only the word “might,” and I could add another word, “ought.”

Even I, restless soul that I am, loving to travel, never wishing to do what the old people call “settle down,”

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

yes, even I can understand how, in a city like Salisbury, the cathedral influence would slowly, gently, sweetly, inevitably *get* you.

Probably it "gets" women more surely and entirely than men. Old maids cease to regret broken love stories, in embroidering altar cloths for the Cathedral, and in offering flowers. One of the most usefully devoted women of long ago was a certain Alice de Bruere, who gave for the building all the stone that could be quarried and cut in twelve years.

When we went in, there were visible dozens of the most religious-looking ladies I ever saw, placing floral decorations and doing this and that in saintly silence. Some anniversary was doubtless to be celebrated, and the ladies' pale faces had the expression of those who had been at work since dawn, eating little or nothing, praying much.

Spat said that their hats were all worn at the wrong angle: but do the saints stop to think how they put on their halos? I have seen halos upon stained-glass windows, apparently jammed on anyhow. Besides, in English cathedral towns it is shocking bad form to be smartly dressed. Only in Catholic countries may the Blessed Virgin and her followers be decked in jewels, velvets and laces.

In Salisbury Cathedral, however, there is great grandeur in tombs as well as architecture. Spat fell in love with some knight sleeping with a lion at his feet, throughout the centuries.

"Oh, the perfectness of his precious nose!" she murmured. And I caught her giving a quick, sly

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

glance at the same feature which adorns Ragford's aristocratic, dark face. They were singularly alike, and this looks hopeful for Rags, if anything could look hopeful for him after the episode at Winchester. Since then, he has had the air of suffering from severe indigestion. That, however, hasn't harmed the shape of his nose, unless it has sharpened it slightly.

Dorando's nose, on the contrary, begins at the forehead by being purely Greek in straightness, then ends with a disappointing nostrilous effect. In spite of that, though, he would pass as an extremely handsome man: just a bit too much of him everywhere, maybe; cheeks, chin, throat and, well, not stomach as yet, but I wouldn't be surprised if he'd already adopted an elastic band.

I admired him sincerely at first sight, but somehow as the days go on I become more critical, I don't know why. Certainly not because he is of the Argentine. I've been reading a book about the country, which Molly bought in a Windsor bookshop, and it appears that the men are fine, masculine chaps, fond of fighting as well as making love and money. It's just something in himself, and I'm quite looking forward to the arranging of Molly's plot. It will take a good bit of arranging. If not, last night would have been an ideal time to carry it out.

We are staying to-night also at the White Hart, otherwise you would not be pestered with this long letter. We had a dinner fit for some of the many kings and queens who have passed through Salisbury, and our appetite was affected not at all by the blood-

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
curdling tales told for our benefit by an elderly, erudite
and sympathetic waiter.

His favourite stories were of martyrdoms and executions. "Off with his head! So much for Buckingham!" he quoted. And, would you believe it, the old boy knew that the words were not from Shakespeare, but Colley Cibber.

He was truly anxious lest we had neglected some of the sights. But we hadn't. At least, none of those he happened to mention.

We'd admired the grand old glass at St. Thomas's Church, which a good many people miss, and the painting of Dawn there, which I would not have let that earnest man know excited Spat to ribald mirth. We had gazed long at the splendid Poultry Cross and the once famed inn, "Haunch of Venison," just opposite. We hadn't forgotten that other inn, the "King's Arms," well known in the Civil War; and, above all, we had honoured with much attention the bow-windowed, timbered "George" where Pepys stayed and scrawled a little in his diary. (I don't think that Spat has yet quite forgiven Rags and me for correcting her on the pronunciation of his name.)

"In this very room, gentlemen and ladies," pronounced our waiter, "lodged King Henry the Seventh. And that great man, Sir Walter Raleigh, ate a meal here on his way to London and the Tower. Bread, beef, cheese and beer, he had, according to the records, which shows the brave stuff he was made of, knowing the fate before him."

England would be much less colourful, I think, were

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

it not for these fine old waiters who know as much about the history of a place as they know about wines, but would never take the liberty of haranguing you unless you gave them strong encouragement.

Well, good night, my boy. I am like the waiter. I would not harangue you if you hadn't given me encouragement. But I must refuse a tip, which he did not.

Yours,
JACK.

*Telegram from Liddy Lallers to Señor Ramon
Dorando, Empire Hotel, Bath, Somerset*

How wonderful of you! I do value such marvellous kindness and sympathy. I accept and will write if you wire your route. Or could you get away one night and come to town so we could talk? Please do. Telegraph when. A million thanks.

L.L.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

*Miss Susan Randolph to Miss Hattie Belle Haynes,
Elmville, Virginia*

EMPIRE HOTEL,
BATH, IN SOMERSET.

*A most divine county
where every prospect
pleases and only one
man is vile.*

ANGEL BABY LAMB,

The most ghastly thing has happened. And to think it should have happened here, among such loveliness! I feel *wrecked*. So does Molly. Absolutely scattered. Oh, and Jane Austen knew Bath. I meant to have been so *like* her in it. But all that is over now.

I was so happy, too, on the way. Being sorry for Rags and trying to help him had brought us together. It was a lovely smooth road from Salisbury (we didn't come straight to Bath, but made a heavenly detour, little dreaming what was in store for us!), and every time there came the least bump I let myself slide against Rags as I felt sure Jane Austen's girls mostly would.

He was miserable after Winchester, all through that gorgeous Salisbury, quite ill-looking and broody, so I enjoyed doing what I could in a quiet way. Now it's *I* who am—well, if not miserable, desperate.

Don't, though, say I'm changeable about Rags and Ramon. There was that affair of Liddy. Ramon should not have invited her. He has been grovelling since, and sometimes I soften towards him, what with chocolates and other things. But Molly has told cards

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

and tea-leaves against him. However, they don't matter now. *Nothing* matters. I'm wondering even if I should sail back for New York. What would become of me there alone, I don't know. But rather go to the bad than to a home infested with Platinum Blondes. That is, only one as *yet*, but she might as well come by the dozen.

All this, my dear, in consequence of losing a pair of pyjamas and telephoning for them to a hotel where we had been. Damn the pyjamas! Damn them! Damn them! I might as well let myself go now, since my supposed sweetness has squashed, busted, like a soft-boiled egg, all over the place. And isn't it funny, darling, or rather isn't it utterly pathetic, I was really beginning to *feel* sweet, right through to my soul? I was turning into the lovely old-fashioned maiden that Lord Rags supposed me to be. I was enjoying it. I hadn't a damn left in me, or any other of the words which you and I used to coin out of devilry. I was becoming all sweetness and light—quite a change for a girl of my age in 1933.

Before reaching the point of this letter, sharp as an ugly nail, I think I will work up to the horror of Molly's and my present situation by describing the divineness of everything earthly when we started, only this morning, though it might be twenty years ago, a year before I was born.

Thatched cottages, my love: farm-houses with lichened roofs so golden you could use them for jewellery. Rounded hills which any girl would love to think resembled her bosom, though of a quite

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
different colour, and trees of almost every description
bursting into bud. As for pines, whenever you passed
any you could hear them snapping their little nails in
the spring sunlight.

Hedges would have been a credit to beauty shops as
a sort of mass advertisement, all pink and white like
the ideal complexion for those who don't prefer sun-
burn. (I'm one of them, as you know. I think
sunburned girls with brown striped backs and black
freckles on their bronze noses and breasts too repulsive.)
Birds were almost indecent about their love-making,
and when the gentlemen ones weren't telling their
ladies lies about faithfulness, they were skimming
through the blue air, imitating Puss Moth 'planes.

We'd started early and by and by we came to a very
dignified-looking old place called Warminster. It had
a fourteenth-century church perfectly grand to see on
the outside, but we all made excuses not to desert the
car and go into it. Just then came along the most
enlivening thing, and too unsuitable to Warminster,
though crowds of very un-fourteenth-century-looking
boys collected round it instantly.

You'd never guess, so I might as well tell you. It
was a Fun City, with "Whoopie" painted in huge red
letters on the best of the wagons. I felt right at home
at once. You can't think how it warmed my heart,
just like the Woolworths in thousand-year-old towns,
and, darling, those bright gas stations along the road,
only more so. I suppose on the whole I was too happy.
That generally comes, like pride, before a fall. And
you know how awfully well you always feel before you

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

give your first sneeze with grippe ('flu, they call it here, which sounds so much gentler, but it's always killing people in droves according to the sensational newspapers).

To make the world even more adorable, Jack took us by way of a place called Bradford-on-Avon. (I suppose it can't be Shakespeare's Avon? I hated to ask because I'm the only ignorant one of the party except Ramon, and you can't expect him to know things, all the way from Buenos Aires. I meant to steal a look at a map, but now it doesn't seem to matter if there are twenty Avons pouring over the whole of England.)

It did matter then, though, while I was still loved by all, and pure as the driven snow. For this Bradford on that Avon might have been the city of a persecuted princess in fairyland, with the prince on his way to rescue her. He would have come in silver armour on a white palfrey, trotting across the most *dinky* ancient bridge, with the town piled up on a steep, difficult slope above it.

Jack murmured something about the bridge being Norman, but in my imagination it was far earlier, because the Normans must have chased away the fairy princesses, even if they hadn't ceased to bloom before then.

Oh, it was a bridge beyond all other bridges, with a chapel growing on it, and I couldn't believe Rags when he said two even better ones existed in his everlasting Yorkshire. It was just his way of trying to lure us there: though by now I suppose I'm the kind of girl

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
he wouldn't tolerate in Flowers Abbey if she'd pay her board.

However, lots of historic women have been notorious, and got away with it. *I'll* be historic some day myself, and so will Molly, if the world doesn't blow up or have an ice age too soon. There was a very naughty historic lady fond of coming to Bradford-on-Avon, and I don't blame her, though probably she used it as a rest cure. She was the Duchess of Kingston, because somehow the Dukes of her family had grabbed a most gorgeous old Hall called "The Duke's House," the great show-place of Bradford to this day if you don't count the huge Tithe Barn. If you want to know what "Tithe Barn" means, don't ask me. But it's grand, rather like the best and biggest Spanish missions in California. Oh, Hattie Belle, weren't we just *babies* when we were there? In California, I mean. Though we didn't think so, and we used to toss up for each other's beaux. Do you remember? It was Gary Cooper's first year in Hollywood and we were too dead in love with him to care much for anyone else. I can hear you saying to me: "You can *have* George Temple: I can't stand him. I prefer pep to passion." Didn't we think we were as old as Serpents of the Nile?

After Bradford there was an ancient manor house a few miles away on our road to Bath. South Wraxall Manor is the name, and, my gracious goodness, if some of our movie men could see it, they'd be swarming round it like wasps!

I wanted to go to Cheddar and the Gorges, which I'd heard Jack and Rags mention in connection with

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

cheese, but Molly, evidently with a presentiment upon her, said she was tired, so we gave up the Gorges and made for Bath, where anyhow we could eat the cheese. There was also something else fine that Molly made us miss: Dunster, which it seems is too perfect, with a market cross beyond anything in England. But I'm getting a bit mixed on crosses now: which is a city cross and which a market, or why. And I have that lovely gold thing which Ramon gave me in Winchester, before he showed the cloven hoof. Even if he turns out to be impossible, I wonder if I could decently forget to give that back? His flowers have faded, his chocolates have been eaten, and some of the other presents have got so lost in my luggage I'd have to unpack everything to bring them to light. But that gold cross—well, there's no use thinking of it now. I have other crosses to bear, heaven knows. Unfortunately, I can't get *them* mixed up!

Well, we arrived in Bath, and it was even more charming than I'd expected it to be from the eighteenth-century novels I've read. Terraces and crescents, all ornamented and made to a sort of pattern, each one complete in itself, yet harmonizing with the rest. I think there were two architects, father and son, named Wood, who made the whole town up out of their own heads. Not that there wasn't a town, lots of it, Tudor, I dare say, but rather messy and moth-eaten in their day, when everything had to be up-to-date for the beaux and belles who wanted to come in coaches from London to drink the waters, or float in the Roman baths which were as good as ever. A dreadful king,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

named Bladud, all covered with spots, discovered the waters, so he's celebrated in spite of his skin trouble.

There's a Pump Room Hotel to this day, very aristocratic and said to be full of earls, dukes and duchesses; rheumatic ones, I suppose, for the food is marvellous and the hotel is so close to the baths that you don't need to go out of the doors. You just take lifts, in becoming dressing-gowns. But Jack had chosen the Empire because it has a glorious view, with rings of hills and mountains, the quaintest Sham Castle on one, like a giant child's toy; our windows overlooking the Avon, and a weir that makes music like a violin. I opened my window and, stepping out on a balcony, I could see a bridge which might have been copied from pictures I've seen of Florence. That, I tell you, was practically my last happy moment.

Of course, there was lunch, rather late, and coffee in the most dignified green brocade hall you ever saw, with the portrait of a long-ago Marquis of Chandos in tight white breeches you'd fall in love with if he hadn't side-whiskers.

Then, while we were saying should we go out and see the abbey (which is called "The Lantern of England" because of its windows), the blow fell.

Molly and I had sort of forgotten that a person we were supposed to know was bringing my pyjamas. One knows such crowds of creatures!

But, my angel, you can imagine how we felt when a porter or someone came and said, "There's a Mr. Pomphreys from New York inquiring for Lady Brighthelmstone and Miss Randolph."

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

You *do* remember my telling you about that Pomphreys person who is the "Co." of our publisher in New York? Bald-looking eyes, dim teeth, when is a chin not a chin, and queer hair in layers like a paper of pins. Too appalling! We foolishly invited him to lunch secretly in Elmville when the book was being arranged for, and although we were both nearly seasick on sight we were fearfully nice to him. It seemed thrilling to have our book published, and we were terrified that if we snubbed even a sort of assistant he'd nip the whole business in the bud, out of spite.

Would, now, that he had nipped it, as things have turned out!

Even in Elmville we realized that the Pomphreys hadn't as much tact as a toad, which would never ask you first, please might it hop on to your lap. But we only laughed at him, and never dreamed that he could be of importance in our young lives.

Everything seemed settled, with his head boss, the man with whom we had our real dealings by letter. Pomphreys understood that the book was to be anonymous. If it should by some wild chance happen to succeed, and any questions were asked, he was to say that he didn't even know himself who the authors were; that he'd got the novel through an attorney. Probably the boss would have had the brains to keep his word, but *this* poor fish!

Before Molly and I had time to glare, or suppress him in some way, the murder was out.

The idiot, not being married because nothing female would touch him with a ten-foot pole, didn't realize

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

that a woman's husband is the last man she'd tell her secrets to. So he supposed that Jack would be in the know about our naughty, naughty book we had such wild fun writing while Molly was in America before Jack came over. It took us only three weeks, with me visiting her in Richmond. I think I told you when you read it, and you were such a little beast, you said, "Oh, did it take you as long as *that* to write? I'd never have thought it!"

Well, the story did sort of write itself after I got the first idea of the plot from you, the horrid adventure you were nearly landed in, getting the wrong compartment in the twentieth century on the way to Chicago. It just grew and grew, while we laughed and laughed. And how *you* laughed when you read the proofs! But you said, "It's a hair-raising, best-selling, *awful* book."

Molly and I hardly realized that it *was* so awful, because it had been such fun, till they rushed it out into print. I had a copy on the ship and she got hers about the same time. Even though there are false names for the authors, Mara O'Bean and Sally Rendall, Molly was scared to have her husband see the jacket, and the jacket wasn't our fault at all. We would never have let them use it. I'm not easily shocked, but I can be easily disgusted, and I was. But of course it was too late. You've sent me the newspaper clippings twice, or I wouldn't have known how to get them. I do think it's a disgrace to the public that such a book should sell like hot cakes.

Molly and I have felt like criminals about it, though truly we didn't mean a *thing*, and the plot almost

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

happened to you—you, a Southern girl, good as gold. We had the consolation, though, that nobody would ever find us out. The body was buried, and no bloodhound could discover it.

That was one reason why I was so interested to meet Lord Ragford. He'd written "Bats in the Belfry," which was all but banned, so it *must* be worse than ours. As for the play—well, I wrote you about that: simply sizzling, I'm told. In a way, though I was sure he would never know, the books made a kind of bond between us; his "Bats" and Molly's and my "Elsa Inside and Out."

Molly and I had gradually become quite calm, though on shipboard, after seeing the jacket, and the greedy faces of disgusting passengers reading "Elsa," I had to take ten grains of aspirin every night.

If only I could have dreamed what would happen, I'd rather have bought up pyjamas by the ream and thrown them into devouring flames!

Just this day, too, when everything had been so exquisite, so perfumed with the spring, and me getting a quite sweet thrill from bouncing against Rags now and then in the car because I'd been useful to him and he was silently grateful. You can hardly appreciate what it's like when such a callous, cynical-seeming young man with an historically-shaped nose is grateful.

Then like an earthquake and a waterspout comes this Pomphreys!

We tried to shunt him off, but you could as easily shunt a feather bed. He was all over us, congratulating Molly and me on "Elsa Inside and Out" as a big

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

best-seller. Before we could stop him, unless by cutting his throat, and you don't get knives with coffee after lunch, he gushed right on, pouring out the information that he'd been sent to England especially to see us. He'd gone straight to St. Roland's, an address which the real boss held as a sacred secret, and had been following us like a retriever. A mongrel one, my dear.

Jack was perfectly marvellous. He didn't give us away that he hadn't been in our confidence all along, though, horrible to relate, he had found one of Molly's copies, noted the authorship and read it. "I believe," said he, "your people published the American edition of Lord Ragford's novel."

"Yes," gasped the little worm, "we were the only ones who *dared* to publish 'Bats in the Belfry,' the same as with 'Elsa Inside and Out.' You see, over here if a book is banned a publisher makes a lot of money from it on the Continent, whereas we have nowhere to . . ."

"Well," interrupted Jack, probably seeing our brows wet, "you'll be interested to meet Lord Ragford. This is he. Let me introduce you."

The Pomphreys worm simply wriggled. So utterly un-American to wriggle! I'm sure he must have blood mixed up with all sorts of nasty nations.

"Delighted to meet you," he said. "Not only on account of 'Bats,' which has been running neck and neck with 'Elsa' as a best-seller since 'Elsa' came out, but because of your very beautiful anonymous novel, 'Key to a Soul,' which your agent allowed us to have.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

We produced it the week after 'Bats' last year. Never were two works by the same author more different, yet never were two books more successful."

"What!" exclaimed Molly. "Did *you* write 'Key to a Soul,' Rags? Why, I *cried* over it. I felt as if I must strive from the day I finished it to be a better woman."

"I quite understand your ladyship's point of view," purred the putrid Pomphreys. "So sweet. So uplifting."

"O God!" I heard Rags mutter. But it was a thousand times worse to have a man who could write *that* book know about Molly and me and "Elsa" than the more-than-sophisticated author of "Bats." I was so absolutely confused about him and life in general that I felt as if—well, like a doll whose stuffing has tumbled out.

A rich old maid cousin of mine, with no one to think of but herself, lately got falling of the stomach, a word which they never speak aloud in England, and had to lie with her feet up for ages at a private hospital at the price of two hundred dollars a week. I know now just what her internal sensations must have been, though I was unable to do anything about my poor feet.

Molly tried to say something, I don't know what, so Mr. Pomphreys turned to her and explained thoroughly why he needed to consult us in England. The publishing firm in New York had just bought an interest in a London one, and the big idea was to produce "Elsa" with Molly's title attached to it, as well as my insignificant name, to be bait for the snobbish public.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Molly looked as if she could faint, with even the best rouge showing on her pale cheeks the way sunset looks on the Alps. But Jack stepped in again and saved her the effort of speaking. "No," said he. "My wife and I are rather by way of liking to blush unseen: modest violet sort of thing, you know. 'Elsa's' outsides and insides were a bit too mixed up for our Victorian friends over here, and we still have some to conciliate. I admit that the novel is the perfect bed book, no doubt showing clearly how different a sweet young girl of the present time is outside from in. Outside, a lovely envelope. Inside, heaven knows how many yards of . . ."

"Oh, Jack, *don't!*" begged Molly. "The story never mentioned *them*."

"What sordid thoughts you have, dear," said Jack. "Neither was I going to mention them. A mere poetical allusion from which you draw your own conclusion. Marvellous description and dialogue. But, Mr. Pomphreys, 'Elsa' must remain anonymous in this country as in all others. I have to put my foot down there, even if my wife's pride of authorship . . ."

You ought to have seen how Molly looked at him when he paused. A torturer of the Inquisition would have pitied her, and Jack did. But I have an idea that Molly has been bossing him a wee bit lately about house-cleaning and so on. She won't do any bossing, I bet, on the rest of this trip! A door-mat will be a Matterhorn compared with her.

"Have you read 'Elsa,' Lord Ragford?" asked the

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

irrepressible Pomphreys, and I mentally murdered him with considerable bloodshed.

"Not yet. But I certainly shall now," Rags answered up, and looked at me with an absolutely unreadable expression in his eyes.

"No, Rags, you won't. Not on this trip. It's not highbrow enough for you," said Jack; and I worshipped him.

Still, the mischief is done. If I was becoming an ideal, I am shattered, unmendable. Oh, Hattie Belle, I do feel sad! How one's sins go poking around till they've found one out. Though I never thought of "Elsa" being worse than an indiscretion till to-day. Even as it was, I might have held up my head if Rags hadn't shown how different *his* inside is from his out, by writing that adorable, sad, heart-searching book, "Key to a Soul." And, *anonymously*, as we wrote "Elsa." *Can* he be ashamed of it? What did that look of his mean? I shall never, never understand Englishmen, and I shall never be happy again, all the rest of my life. I'd like to drown myself in my bath. I have an immense one. Just a little courage and—but it would rather cloud the trip for the others, wouldn't it? What the *hell*, anyhow? So there!

Your miserable, mystified

SPAT.

P.S.—Well, the plot was yours, my dear. If it hadn't been for you, we wouldn't have thought of it. Not that I'm blaming you, darling. I'm only unloading my conscience.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

*Señor Ramon Dorando to Liddy Lallers, Princess
Elizabeth Theatre, London*

EMPIRE HOTEL,
BATH, SOMERSETSHIRE.

April 20th.

MY DEAR MISS LALLERS,

I thank you very much for your telegram. Indeed, you have no need to be grateful. I am giving myself a pleasure. And I will very happily run into Town to see you. After we have finished with Somersetshire, we are to make for Winchester again, and pick up a Mr. Clarence Winchester, doubtless named for that place. He is a well-known London editor, as well as author, I am told, and a great authority on Sussex, so it seems to me that I am likely to receive no attention whatever during the gentleman's presence with us. He will be Everybody, and I am not quite accustomed to that, though I have had some slight disagreeable experiences since arriving in England. From Winchester my maps tell me it is a short and easy run to London, and I remember Lady Brighthelmstone or her husband observing on the night of your visit that you would reach the theatre in time to act your part if you felt inclined.

I plan therefore to desert the party for a night when Mr. Winchester joins it. I shall stay at the Savoy Hotel in London, and would be delighted if, after your play is over, you would have supper with me there or at any place agreeable to you. I have not myself made a thorough acquaintance with London as yet. If you

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

receive a few dozen orchids on arriving at your theatre, they will be with my compliments, in case there should be any mistake and my visiting-card mislaid. Please ask your dressing-maid to telephone me at the Savoy. I will be in and awaiting a call.

When together in person we will discuss the matter of your lawyers. Meantime, I hope you will have inquired from well-informed persons who are the best in London. Remember that costs are practically no object to me. You must win your case and have this treacherous young man at your mercy. As he is only a writer of plays and novels, and not rich enough to live in his own country house I hear from credible sources, he will probably prefer to marry you rather than pay, or drag out his years in a debtors' prison, if they have such institutions in England.

Though to me he seems an unattractive person with sneering manners and many other imperfections, I judge from your actions the other night that he has induced you to give him your love; therefore you will wish to take him for your husband. He is most unworthy of this great happiness, I am sure; and if I had had the joy of meeting you before encountering Miss Susan Randolph on the ship, the very thought of your becoming his would have convulsed me beyond description. I wish you to know this, because every young lady of beauty has her self-respect, and naturally expects all men to be in love with her. I should have shared the passion with most of those whom you know had I not practically vowed myself to Miss Randolph before you dazzled us with your lovely charm in such

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

surprise at a Winchester hotel. It is with no disrespect to you that I hold myself promised to another lady, and it is because of my admiration for you I help in the fight to win you the husband you desire.

As for Miss Randolph, Lord Ragford will be better out of the way. She surely much prefers me to him, but like some Americans, who are very young and inexperienced, a title has a certain influence upon her outlook. I can give my wife immeasurably more than this Ragford can. His wretched earnings would be a small crumb in the full, golden dish of my great possessions. It is only his conceit which is large, and to fail in a costly fight before all the newspaper eyes of England will take him down where he deserves to lie. Of course, though, dear Miss Lallers, the minute he finds himself really under obligation to marry you or go bankrupt, the immense privilege he will enjoy must become gloriously dear to him. I should envy him beyond all men living if my duty were not stretched out in front of me in another direction.

Looking forward with all myself to our meeting,

Yours faithfully,

RAMON DORANDO.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Lord Brighthelmstone to Sir Robert Reading

BURLINGTON HOTEL,

EASTBOURNE, SUSSEX.

April 19th.

DEAR BOB,

Yes, we've skidded off the Pilgrims' Way again, but we couldn't leave out the best of Sussex, heart of England, especially when we could get Clarence Winchester to guide us. There isn't a nook or corner of the county he doesn't know.

I smiled at your last letter or, rather, note, which came to me at Bath. So now I understand why you want these travelogue screeds from me! You actually mean to take a tour yourself, for your health's sake, when you get well, and you intend, if my descriptions attract you, to use our route as your itinerary. That puts me on my mettle.

I smiled still more at your confession and warning, though both came too late, as Pomphreys had already appeared to play an impromptu part upon our stage. Not that it mattered. I think I put the fear of God into him in a discreet way, so that he won't dare go round announcing the true authorship of "Elsa." In escorting him politely to the front door of the Empire Hotel, I gently hinted that breaches of confidence were actionable in law here, and that English prisons are notably damp and bad for the health. (Probably this is not true.) He is careful of his miserable body. He won't drink coffee because it keeps him awake,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

won't drink tea as tannin is injurious to delicate stomachs, and won't smoke because cigarettes go straight to his nerves. I envied the tobacco, for if he hadn't so frail and badly put together a chassis, I should have loved letting my fist go straight for what God granted him in place of a chin.

Not that the little degenerate meant deliberately to give the girls away to Rags and me, and the staring Dorando. He supposed that "Elsa" was a family secret, not a skeleton in Molly's and Spat's closet, so he gushed over the book freely.

I dare say it will amuse you to have a finger in the publishing pie, as a side line, and Neshton brings out such startling stories, that you may get a little fun looking over manuscripts. At least, it will be a change from plays, plays, nothing but plays.

Your assurance that you'll allow "Elsa" to have no publicity other than anonymous, is only what I'd expect of you, my dear chap. I must say, however, that I got an inward laugh at the coming out of the secret. I found and glanced through the American edition of the book, by an odd coincidence, the day I met Spat at Waterloo. Odd I didn't recognize a single favourite expression of Molly's! I'm not sure which wrote most of the story. Neither will give the other away. And it's only childishly bad. Nothing rotten about the stuff, really, and as nobody is to guess at the authorship, I can't object to the book being brought out in England.

I imagine that, subconsciously, you decided to join a firm of publishers, so that you could get a stranglehold

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
on Rags's next novel and suggest a form for its dramatization. Who can tell, however, what the book to come may be like? You never know. People have so many selves, and one complex breaks down another. For all you can tell, Rags might hand in a manuscript, pure gush, for instance, like that much cried-over "Key to a Soul." Now I wonder who wrote that, don't you? Or do you know? I remember it upset Molly so much that after finishing the story she went to bed directly after tea, as a refuge from the cruel world. We can hardly hope for Rags to suffer such a sea-change, however, can we?

The two girls of our party have been mild as newborn tiger-cats since the discovery of why Molly had so much fun in America and why she was so enchanted to receive Spat as a guest.

If I suggest sight-seeing in some direction different from that selected by themselves, they are almost fulsome in accepting my wish as law. I wonder how long this creaminess of disposition will last? How long do baby tigresses remain gentle? Well, anyhow, I can't throw a book in a lady's face, can I?

Since writing you, we have done some very lovely things, lovely enough to raise crushed spirits. We had two nights in Bath. I think that Molly and Spat would have liked to leave next morning to get the taste of Pomphreys out of their mouths, but I wouldn't hear of it.

Molly said the Abbey chimes had kept her awake playing tunes, but this must have been her imagination, for I believe that the chimes don't waste them-

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

selves at night; and even if they do, they play only once every hour—pathetic little melodies of long ago, such as “Poor Tom Bowling,” which appeals to me intensely.

We went everywhere and saw everything. I didn't spare the victims a single house with an interesting memorial tablet on it, which is saying a lot when you speak of Bath. Most of the great men of England's older days lived there, and a good many died where they lived, in those noble old Georgian mansions, with perfumed magnolias growing up their fronts. As for the antique shops, no persuasion had to be used, and I was considerably out of pocket before we finished with Old Bond, Milsom, George Street, and a few others.

Poor Spat was rather pathetic. “It's no good my buying anything bigger than my hand, because I haven't any longer a home to put things in. I expect Father's new wife has made a marble swimming-pool out of my own dear sitting-room by this time,” she wailed.

Dorando looked at the girl as if he would buy her a skyscraper as soon as breathe. But I don't see Spat settling happily down in a skyscraper. For all her impishness, she's born to be a home creature, I think. Even Rags seemed touched by her sadness, accentuated by eyelashes. I wondered if he were thinking of Flowers Abbey, and how Miss Randolph would suit it as a permanent ornament.

We had a look through Bath Abbey, of course, which is worth seeing; and we should have seen it the day before but for Pomphreys. The most delightful

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
feature of the building, though, is not inside but out. Jacob's Ladder, carved many a century ago when people dared to perpetuate their quaint ideas in stone; an object to make you hug yourself with joy if you have a sense of humour. Angels swarming both up and down, apparently taking no notice of each other. The upside-down angels are the priceless ones.

It was too late for Wells and Glastonbury when we had done a little justice to the town and called on Horace Annesley Vachell, who, with his artist brother, owns about the prettiest small manor-house in England, with a church attached.

Next morning (that's yesterday), we started off early and saw the jewel of Bristol, St. Mary Redcliffe, which even Dorando admired, though I can see he is getting fed up with Protestant churches, abbeys and cathedrals. We ran through Clifton, for the sake of the Downs (which, to my mind, are extraordinarily beautiful), and the Suspension Bridge, which is called one of the wonders of England, isn't it? I don't suppose for a minute you've ever seen it. Then on we bowled to Wells, and by now we were racing against time. You would have thought by our faces that each life depended on hearing the famous old clock strike twelve.

I knew we could do it, however, without scorching; for to scorch is a sin in such scenery as Somerset, especially in spring. On cross-roads here and there were tempting notices: "Fork right for Exeter," "Fork left for Weymouth," but these I hurried past, lest Spat and Molly should be too much interested in

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

the idea of these so easy-seeming detours. We raced straight on, as fast as need be, put up both cars in the garage of the good old "Swan," meaning to return to that hotel for lunch. But, to our horror, my wrist-watch, to which we'd trusted, was slow.

To be in time for the clock we had just five minutes, and without a word I grasped Molly's arm to sprint across the Close. Rags seized Spat, and they all but beat us to it, which left a bewildered, disgusted Dorando alone. He must have been too proud to run, or too short of breath, for he didn't follow us to our destination until the best of the centuries-old show was over.

Meanwhile, our eyes being free to move heavenward, as our feet bounded across greensward, we saw the two tall grey towers which, with the whole Cathedral front, reminds me of an immense, ornate silver organ, only to be played upon by the hands of angels.

I can hardly conceive that anyone beyond the age of twelve has ever run in the stately town of Wells before; and the few people we met stared at us with contempt and horror. Still, little did we care, if only we were not too late; and luck was with us.

Panting, we dashed up the long and dignified aisle of the nave, and flung ourselves like sacks of potatoes on a broad seat just opposite the great clock.

Nothing had happened yet. We had half a minute to spare. Then, as we regained our breath, that big, funny fellow seated on the wall at the right of the clock began to kick his heels. His first kick was the

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

signal, and instantly there emerged from shadowed depths behind the fine old clock-face a procession of mounted knights, all jousting and tilting with each other as noisily, as angrily, as if they hadn't been doing the same thing every hour of every day for hundreds of years on end. Round and round they rode, while the clock slowly struck its twelve bass notes, swords and armour clanking. They had just disappeared for an hour's well-earned rest, when Señor Dorando joined us, wondering why we had all gone mad. It's not likely now that he will ever know!

Fifteen minutes later. My dear boy, I had Glastonbury, Stonehenge and a good bit of Sussex to add to this letter before finishing, though for your sake I meant to cut the story short, when Molly came bouncing into the sitting-room we have here, with an express letter which had just arrived for her from—of all people!—*you*.

She was undressing for bed, I think, for she was in a glorified sort of wrapper arrangement such as she designs for herself with brilliant success. In one hand was a cold cream pot, in the other your letter which had been brought to her room. On her face was much of the contents of the pot; but Molly is one of those very exceptional women who look as lovely when smeared with cold cream as when dressed and painted as a beauteous leader of the younger married set. In fact, in these circumstances she rather resembles a glossy, marble statue by some celebrated sculptor.

Of course you know what was in the letter; but I'll relate our conversation about it.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

She hadn't told me that she'd written you an account of the Liddy Lallers loud explosion in quiet Winchester, but I'm glad she had, as it was sure to be more interesting and graphic than mine.

"Jack," said she, "Sir Bob thinks that Liddy is up to something very, very subtle indeed. She is putting on the airs of a reigning queen, snubbing everyone, and throwing out dark hints that she may give up the stage and screen for something a great deal better. Do you think she really means to sue Rags?"

I told her that Liddy Lallers wouldn't have a chance in ten thousand of winning a case, if Rags's description to me of his letters and conduct was anything like accurate. Besides, I said, the girl, even if she had the brains and self-control to invest a few thousand, would find her savings melt like ice in midsummer when she came to lawyers' fees. She wouldn't be able to get the best men to act for her, and even if she did, through supreme influence of sex appeal over the hard-boiledness of solicitors and barristers, the damages she might get from Rags would be bird-seed for her.

"I suppose she couldn't force him to marry her, could she?" asked our law-innocent Molly.

"Not on your life," I reassured her. "Rags would empty an automatic into her hollow little noddle sooner."

"But that wouldn't be very nice for him," Molly remarked. "He'd be more the kind to shoot himself, and that would be a real loss to the world, to say nothing of us."

"In your own good Americanese, I should worry!"

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

said I. "I don't see Rags getting into any hard trouble through Liddy Lallers, no matter how vicious she may turn out to be."

"She looked at Spat as if she could kill her," Molly remembered.

"Spat would be hard to kill, in any manner the Lallers could command," I consoled her. "As for a breach of promise suit, I don't imagine Spat is Jane Austen enough to be put off Rags by a thing like that, especially now that I know who wrote 'Elsa.'"

"Never, never speak of 'Elsa' again," begged Molly. "That may have put Rags off her; broken his ideal, sort of, though I've tried to take as much of the blame as possible on myself. Rags has seemed so gloomy since that wretched Pomphreys came."

"He's bothered about several things," I said. "About Liddy a bit: and maybe he has lost one ideal of Spat, but he can easily build up another of an entirely different sort and better. I know I could if I liked a lovely girl, and her imaginary wings suddenly shed their feathers. I'd say to myself that, after all, modern clothes fitted her more neatly without wings than with. If you ask me, I think Rags is more upset in being found out as an idealist, a sentimentalist, the anonymous author of 'Key to a Soul' which has flooded England and America with salt water, than by anything else that has happened."

"Do you honestly think that?" Molly asked.

"I do. Doesn't the idea appeal to your intelligence, knowing Rags as you do? The cynical pose of 'Bats' was wearing him down so, that he had to take an

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
outlet, and did take it. But being discovered so brutally would be to him what it would be to a soldier if his colonel saw him having hysterics. Honestly now, do you believe he's the same glamorous figure to Spat that he was before she knew the inner truth about him? "

Molly thought for a moment, carefully, and then said she had explained to Spat Rags's two personalities. He was at least as much of a devil as he was a white-souled saint, as you could see from looking at him, especially his nose. "And, funnily enough," Molly went on, "the mention of Rags's nose seemed to help Spat. I mean, about understanding his ruthless side. Of course we admire good young men bursting with high ideals, but we like our *own* men to be slightly ruthless."

"I'll remember that," I said.

"You don't need to remember it," retorted Molly. "You know it only too well."

Then she went back to the mystery of Miss Lallers. Why was she behaving like a queen, and saying that screen and stage were really beneath her true ambitions? Why, unless she had some fiendish scheme for marrying Rags against his will?

"In that case, let Spat fight for him. I'll bet on her," I said.

"If she really wants him. She's so let down over 'Elsa'; and then Rags becomes as taciturn as if he had jaundice, so the poor child doesn't want anyone or anything. She has nothing left to cling to. But I tell you, Jack, I'm really and truly anxious about the Lallers

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
girl. Instinct warns me she's up to something special
which we could never guess in time to stop."

I did my best to be soothing, and Molly has now
gone back to finish the cold cream act. That's more
than I can do with my letter, at least, in the geo-
graphical manner I'd planned.

I suppose you wrote Molly, more as an answer to her
letter, than to give a warning signal. But you might
let me have the low-down, if there is one, for Rags's
sake.

I'll do my best later to give you a deferred version of
our adventures after Wells.

Yours ever,
JACK.

*Miss Susan Randolph to Miss Hatty Belle Haynes, at
Elmville, Virginia*

BURLINGTON HOTEL,
EASTBOURNE.

DARLINGEST,

Your perfectly slick letter was forwarded me here
from Jack and Molly's place, St. Roland's.

In spite of all my troubles, I could stand on my head
with joy to hear that Elmville isn't taking to the
Platinum Blonde socially. If she can't make Father
go with her to New York to live, I wouldn't be sur-
prised if she divorced him for extreme mental cruelty
in a few months. She'd be a big success at Reno,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
unless they're tired of platinum blondes there
already.

I feel quite cheered up, what with your news, and Lord Rags being reduced, as you might say, to our own level. That is, I secretly think (I haven't even told Molly, it's so subtle) that the discovery of his true goodness of soul has hurt him as much as the bringing out of my badness has me. That's one small comfort.

And life is very interesting with us as we travel along in this nice Sunbeam car. I have been slightly horrid to Ramon since he ratted on Rags, but he has showered the most scrumptious things on Molly and me both, especially me. He's a human Christmas tree, my dear, and though I have a feeling he's a sort of sneak, too, or anyhow not a person who always "plays cricket" (that's Rags's and Jack's expression for anyone with a faint primrose streak) I can't help liking him rather. He's pathetic in some ways: so foreign; and he's really quite *mad* about me, darling. Heaven alone knows why, of course. I'm not so mad about myself, though I have my points. Eyelashes, for instance. Can you call eyelashes points? And my hair does seem to make a sort of hit with everyone. They all wonder what it looks like when it's down.

Oh, yes, life is interesting, and Rags's nose encourages me a lot. I sort of cling to it. Not the nose itself, I don't mean, but the idea of his character it gives. And the likeness to that warrior-knight on the tomb at Salisbury, with the ducky little crumbling lion at his feet.

Isn't it quaint, when you think of it? I'm a wee,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

wee bit disappointed because of Rags's good side, and he's disappointed because of my bad side. Isn't it like Jack Sprat and his wife? Or is it?

By the way, I hated those lovely pyjamas so much, for bringing me bad luck, that I gave them to my chambermaid at Bath. My child, she almost passed out! I hope they won't drive her to the bad! I'm so much happier than I ever thought I could be that night after Pomphreys, though, darling, that I'll do what you ask and for once write of impersonal things, telling you a little about our travels after Bath.

I adored Wells, and the clock with the knights that ride round and round while it strikes, and the lovely little street with towers and gates at both ends which they call the Vicars' Close. Too revolting that they've copied it in New York, somewhere in the West Nineties, I think. I *felt* at Wells that it looked familiar. I went in New York with a girl who wanted to rent an angelic-looking little house there. But it was about as thick as paper, and a lady with greenish canary-coloured hair opened the door. I won't pollute this page by saying what profession I'm sure she belonged to. Not that it was the fault of the street, except for being too attractive. And in Wells only the most good people can live in the real Vicars' Close. I don't believe even one's passport and birth certificate would be enough if one wanted to take lodgings there. And the most fascinating sort of *grey* smell!

Perhaps the Bishop's Palace was the best, though, after the Cathedral itself, which has old, old glass in some windows. No, I mean the garden of the Bishop's

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Palace was best, because we didn't get to know the Bishop, so we weren't asked in. Wells is named Wells because streams simply pour down from the hills, and the best of them seem to have fallen into a great moat, under oriel windows of the lovely brick Palace. You won't believe me when I say there are swans there, who have trained themselves through hundreds of generations, by race memory, and they calmly pull a bell fastened to the wall when they want something to eat. I don't know what happens then. Probably food just arrives, like manna. And I never saw swans with such haughty, clerical profiles. No wonder. Intellectual, I call them.

We had lunch at a dear old hotel, hundreds of years of age, but perfectly up-to-date in every way, because I looked to see if they had bathrooms, in case I should ever want to come on one of my honeymoons. And delicious things to eat. By that time it was very late, so we were almost *snarling* with hunger.

From Wells it was no distance—about six miles—to Glastonbury, which I'd only vaguely heard of; but Molly and Jack told me all about it, practically talking at once over their shoulders at risk of our lives before we came within view of the ruins. (Rags was too low in his mind to say a word, except "damn" when a wasp nearly stung him.)

Well, precious, it seems that Joseph of Arimathea came to Glastonbury; I don't know why, for it's such a long way. But it's lucky for the place that he did, for he jabbed his rod into the ground to show that Aaron wasn't the only rod-wizard, and as it was made

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

of thorn, when it took root, naturally a thorn tree, if anything, would grow up. It did and, of course, became sacred. Ever since then it, or some thorn produced by it, blossoms every Christmas. I mean, it really *does*. So King Arthur thought this would be a good region to live in, and he, or someone, had true inspiration about a name: the Isle of Avalon. Could anything be better? I used to think Tennyson had made it up.

In a way, it *is* like an island because you see how water can form almost into rivers. And even when they don't, people go places in boots (or else they did, a few ages ago), because there's oodles of mud, very bad for your pet shoes. Mine were almost ruined.

St. Joseph did another thing which attracted King Arthur, and no wonder, because people do love to dig for buried things. He hid the Holy Grail quite deep in the ground at the foot of Glastonbury Tor, which gave Tennyson a lot to write about, and I suppose helped Wagner, too.

There can't be such great and gorgeous ruins as this Abbey anywhere else in the world. Jack and I walked together, so I could learn about Glastonbury being the Cradle of Christianity, and all that. He told me about arriving once alone at sunset, waiting for the moon to come out. On most English nights you might wait for *ever*; but this one was kind, and Jack was quite eloquent, as he loves to be in some moods, having written a book or two, quite different from "Elsa," and probably having new ones gathering now like clouds in his mind.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

“ Rich tragedy of ruin,” he said about the cloisters, “ rising against sky fires, red as any that Cromwell ever kindled.”

Not so bad; and I shall use the expression in intellectual circles of Elmville if Father gets divorced, D.V., and I do hope D. will V.

“ Gradually,” said Jack, with appropriate gestures, as we were getting our feet soaked under the cloisters themselves, “ gradually the moon painted the rugged edges of age-old broken stone with silver. Sleeping ghosts out of the past waked and moved in procession, so that Glastonbury lived in all its lost beauty of form.” I almost saw them myself as he talked, only he pictured priests and abbots and bishops, whereas I prefer ladies in high, pointed head-dresses and long veils, who have to be rescued by shining knights with warlike, well-cut noses, from evil dragons with forked tails, and steaming breath which badly needs Listerine.

We didn't stay long, for two reasons. Partly because it suddenly pelted rain and we raced for a tiny, but thrilling museum with part of a Phœnician boat in it found in mud, once a lake, and the most absurd but interesting rouge used by Phœnician ladies. No wonder with that colour they couldn't keep their husbands, who were unfaithful with anything female they found on the spot. Partly because of the rain, we went on quickly, and partly because we had simply to *fly* if we wanted to see Stonehenge, which is in Wiltshire, Jack would wish me to mention; he loves counties! I, at least, wanted to see it, and *how*! I have always imagined Druids sacrificing lovely blondes with less on

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

than the Follies girls: old, *old* Druids, because I can't imagine them ever young, can you? Druids with white beards, knit-one-and-purl-one effect, you know, falling on breasts where they would use woad as under-shirts beneath their flowing robes.

I expected to be disappointed; but, my dear, *far* from that! The mystery of Stonehenge, especially late under the stormy sky, absolutely *got* me. I almost felt as if I were about to be sacrificed myself, and I would have caught Rags by the arm for protection, and been coy, if he hadn't kept on being such an utter Grump—walking with his hands sort of knotted behind him, too, as Englishmen love doing, with their necks stretched forward, or in their pockets. Not their necks, but their hands.

I forgot to tell you that Cromwell ruined Glastonbury Abbey. He *would*! But nobody ever ruined Stonehenge, except Time, slightly. And that happens to all of us, alas!

Well, Stonehenge just *can't* be true! Why should it be, when it's Megalithic, if you know what that means? When I go to sleep, I know it isn't there: all those huge stones, which didn't belong to that part of the country at all, and nobody really knows how they were brought, or set in place. Of course, people have theories. But what are theories? I could have theories myself and nobody would pay attention to any of them. In fact, they don't.

Think of the poor, wretched men who were forced by the Druids, and other terrific creatures, to bring the stones, and then were probably sacrificed as

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

a reward. And think of the processions and the wailings and the holy mistletoe, holy for quite other reasons from what it is now! How nasty people have been to each other, down the ages, and still are, more or less, though they don't cut you open on sacrificial stones, or hang you up for stealing a mangy sheep. I can imagine Lord Ragford's ancestors having been blood-thirsty till it went entirely out of fashion, up to the last minutes. And even then . . .

He was so plasticine-mouthed that when we left Glastonbury I asked if I should sit on the front seat with Jack for a change.

What do you suppose he said, when Jack was too polite to turn me down?

"We're not going to have the best roads from now on, and I should bounce like a rubber ball without you."

What about that for a knock in the eye, and I'm only a hundred and eight pounds! Molly weighs at least *ten* pounds more than I do, though she looks so slim. She calculates in stones, which sound heavier. What in French books they call *fausse maigre*, she is; if that's the way to spell it.

It was a long, long way to Stonehenge from Glastonbury, and by the time Jack drove us into Winchester to meet Mr. Clarence of that same name, a celebrated editor, it was almost dark.

I haven't told you about Mr. Winchester, because I didn't hear about him myself till the day before we met. It seems he knows more about Sussex than almost any man who doesn't live there, which he can't do as he is an editor, and has to be in London working

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

night and day. He's lots more than an editor, too, for he was a flyer in the war, and writes poetry and stories himself, so he really understands whether to refuse or accept people's stuff for his magazines.

We didn't spend the night in Winchester, because Sussex is such a large county to see, and he could afford only a night and one day with us. There was a sweet little town with a famous inn some distance off, where he thought it would be fun for us to stay, so we picked him up with a suit-case, and he sat between Rags and me. Such a relief, like being separated from a wet blanket!

Mr. Winchester and I talked of poetry, and he says he will publish a poem by me, at the bottom of a page when some story is just a bit short, if I don't write more than one verse or two at most.

I wonder, my dear, if that's a compliment or an insult? If there's ever any choice between them, I always take an insult from a man as a compliment, don't you?

Such a surprising thing happened at Winchester!

Ramon hadn't breathed a word about it before, but it seemed that he was suddenly obliged to leave us, on the most important business, to go to London. He said he'd be away while we were travelling through Sussex, but would join us again here, at Eastbourne; which he has done, with a sort of breastplate of orchids for Molly, and the same, though a different colour, for me. Hers are reddish-lilac, or "mauve," as they say in England, and mine are white, with silvery spots on them. But no explanation of what took him away.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Not that any of us care. He has a right to do as he chooses. But I must say he seems as much in love as ever, so he can't have been bored with our party—unless with Rags.

Darling, I *must* tell you a little about Sussex. It's a county, you know, and somehow it's different from every other one we've been through so far. It has as much character of its own as a man can have, and in a manly sort of way, too. Nothing feminine about it. We were in it before at Chichester, but these parts we've just seen are stronger, quainter.

You can easily understand why Rudyard Kipling chose Sussex to live in. Do you remember how we adored "Puck o' Pook's Hill" when we were quite small? Well, I adore it more than ever now, because I believe every word of it.

The sign of Sussex (every county in England has a sign) is "The pig who wunt be druv." I do so sympathize with him! And Mr. Winchester says that Sussex men of the country, not towns, are *very* special. They look innocent and they put on simple airs, which are far from being the truth. Then, if you're inclined that way, you try to do them down. They let you think for a little while you've succeeded; then you find, to your sorrow, that they've done *you* down instead.

He himself had a Sussex ancestor. I do like the story, so I'll tell it to you. The man's name was Squire Fuller of Brightling. I don't know why Squire or what you have to do to be one, but it sounds just too important, next to being a lord; and, anyhow, rarer than all our colonels in the South.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

The Squire lived in George the Third's day; you know, the silly old king who made us throw the tea into the ocean and have the Revolution afterwards. But there's still a "pub" named after the Squire. A "pub," my pet, is a sort of little inn that isn't an inn, only you drink in it. Not that the Squire Fuller pub exists alone, but there's a pyramid which he had piled over him for a gravestone. Too irrevocable it sounds, if you believe in a Judgment Day, and trying to scramble up and hurry at the sound of the trump. The door is sealed, too, so perhaps he thought on the whole it would be better just to stay in when Gabriel called. No wonder about this, perhaps, when you know he was a terrific gambler. He was so impish, he put up quite a quaint temple in his backyard or somewhere, on purpose to gamble in. While he was gambling, he absorbed enormous quantities of port. His house was too sacred for this kind of fun, so he had to enjoy himself outside it. Makes you wonder what his wife was like, if any!

All over the hillsides near by, the Squire built queer monuments. They weren't *his* hillsides, but people liked him so much they didn't care. And he owned a huge, port-minded horse who could guide him home from anywhere—from hell itself, it was said, no matter how drunk. I suppose that's one reason why Mr. Clarence Winchester loathes port and doesn't even like cocktails.

Of course, I'm not telling you about Brightling, where Squire Fuller lived, because we did so many other Sussex places in a day, we had to miss it out. But it has a Cade Street, named because Jack Cade was

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

killed there with an arrow shot by the Sheriff of Kent. Ought he to have come nosy-Parkering into Sussex out of his own county, I wonder? A sheriff of these times wouldn't dare; not in our South, anyhow. But this was as long ago as 1450. Mr. Winchester says that Americans love Jack Cade. Do you?

I wish we could have gone to Brightling, because from the Beacon there you get the best view there is of the Western Weald. My dear, how sheep-faced it makes me feel that *we* have no wealds in America, or if so I never heard of them. But then we haven't a Rudyard Kipling or a Hardy to make wealds famous. Not that I have read all Hardy. Still, we have him on our shelves, unless the Platinum Blonde has thrown him away to make room for Ethel M. Dell.

It was Amberley where at last we stopped the night instead of dining early at Winchester, and going over in our minds the scene with Liddy Lallers. The more I think of it, darling, the more I feel that Rags ought to have showed far greater gratitude for what I did that night and have kept on showing it. He was wonderful for one day, or rather, part of it, till the awful Pomphreys came and burst up Molly's and my character with his bomb. But since—I just can't understand Rags at all, though his eyes look sometimes as if he still had a guilty weakness for yours truly.

Oh, there, ducky, I was going to write you heaps more about Sussex, but I find it's terribly late, and Molly says we must be up early to-morrow on account of Beachy Head, and so on.

I don't know what Beachy Head is, but it rather

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
expresses the way mine feels after this long whirl
through the most fairy-like places in Sussex, places even
Jack wouldn't have known of, without Mr. Winchester.

Alas, *he* has gone, and I must try to do that poem
for the bottom of his page before the memory of me
sinks to the bottom of his mind.

Now, darling, if you were a man instead of a rather
unusually girlish girl, you'd tell me that no one could
ever forget me; which is what I hope myself.

Your affectionate though much puzzled
BEACHY-HEADED SPAT.

Lord Brighthelmstone to Sir Robert Reading

STILL THE BURLINGTON HOTEL,
EASTBOURNE.

April 23rd.

MY DEAR BOB,

We are staying in Eastbourne to-night, as well as last
night, because we hadn't seen nearly all we wanted to
see of Sussex, and also because Molly strained (not
sprained, thank goodness!) one of her tiny ankles,
prancing up Beachy Head. I have often wondered
that she can walk properly at all with such absurd
ankles and feet, especially with the heels which she says
are not high but almost flat. These American beauties!

In old days, when we stopped anywhere longer than
we expected, it was the fault of the car. The Sunbeam,
however, has perfect manners and a perfect disposition.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

I've never had a fault to find with my late one of the same make, nor have I with this new acquisition.

I'll tell you about the ankle strain as I come to it, but it's nothing to worry about, and I'm quite pleased to have Molly to myself for once. The other three (Clarence Winchester having hurled himself back by train to his London office and Dorando just returned) have gone to a talkie to see one of Spat's favourite movie stars, George Raft. I can imagine Rags on one side of her, Dorando on the other, each trying to think in what way, if any, he resembles this new Rudolf Valentino. Dorando might have the advantage over Rags, but for his bulk. If he forges ahead in the race for Miss Randolph, it will be the survival of the fittest. He looks, by the way, extremely sleek and well-kept since he returned to us from his short, unexplained dash to London, and his expression is rather like that of the cat which seems to say, "I have *not* eaten the canary." If he weren't so evidently head over heels in love with Spat and hoping to do Rags in, as a rival, in some safe, expert way, I should imagine that he'd fallen for Miss Lallers and rushed off to Town for a sight of her. I can't see, logically, however, how that could be.

We have been zigzagging from county to county rather unnecessarily of late, as you'll understand from my last letter, the short one I sent you off from here after being interrupted to advise and console a cold-creamy Molly. But it has made a delightful trip, without a suspicion of monotony in it, and I can confidently recommend it to you, in case you really do want

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
a short, refreshing run out of London one of these weeks.

I only wish that your cherubic countenance, with those contradictorily wise eyes of yours, attached to your equally cherubic, but Savile Row clad, body had a place in our Sunbeam. We could always make room for you, you may be sure of that. Perhaps Spat might upset our calculations by falling in love with you, Bob, as you still have that uncanny attraction for women possessed by so-called "non-marrying men." I often wonder why I'm not jealous of you with Molly. She loves you in her way.

I wrote you all I know, and possibly a little more, about Glastonbury and Stonehenge in my second letter. I mentioned picking up Clarence Winchester, and his wish to make Amberley our Sussex starting-point for his day with us. For one thing, he loves the place. Behold the first lines of his verse in praise of Amberley :

" Here would I dream a thousand years away
Beneath some gold-thatched roof in Amberley."

And there's a little inn of which he is fond, though somehow I think a busy editor exaggerates when he asks for a thousand years even in the most charming of Sussex villages. Wisely, his idea was that, beginning at Amberley and having already seen Chichester, we should get a fine run and a grand idea of Sussex before landing up at Eastbourne at the end of a perfect day.

When Clarence Winchester is at a big town, no suite in the best hotel is good enough for him. But he loves these village inns, and certainly they have as many

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
fascinations as they have few baths. However, didn't Florence Nightingale say that, if necessary, you could get as clean with a pint of water as in a swimming-pool, or words to that effect?

Of course, the Castle is the great attraction of Amberley to tourists. Naturally, *we* don't count ourselves tourists. Did you ever hear of anyone who did? And we pottered about early in the morning finding other things besides the Castle, which almost thrust itself upon us like a spoiled, elderly beauty, reminding you that it was granted to the Bishops of Selsey long before the Conquest. Now, it's all we can do to remember the date of the Conquest, let alone the Bishops of Selsey. The Castle has inside it a grand sixteenth-century house with mullioned windows like a sort of permanent Jonah in the whale—if you can fancy Jonah with a mullioned complexion. Sounds pretty indigestible, but is beautiful at Amberley.

The church is Norman, hanging on to its original nave; but as soon as we heard talk about Norman windows and a round chancel arch which no one should miss, we hastily remembered all the other things we had to see while Winchy was with us. Besides, we were extremely ill-tempered from having got up at six-forty-five in order to be in time for everything, or almost everything, and Dorando's razor had rather gone back on him.

“Aha!” thought I. “Now Miss Spat will get a slight inkling of what is before her, if she marries Ramon in order to be richer than Papa's Platinum Blonde.”

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

It seems that the same idea had seeped into her own not too maidenly mind.

“*Mon Dieu! My hat!*” she whispered to me, having returned to expletives since “Elsa” was unearthed. “If Ramon shaved every three hours it wouldn’t be too often. And if he grew a beard would it be as blue as his chin looks to-day? Oh, Fatima! Oh, Sister Anne!”

I secretly smoothed my own chin anxiously at the appalling thought. Dorando, Rags and I are all dark men.

“That’s just one comfort in being a woman. You don’t have to shave,” I said.

“No,” admitted Spat. “It must be awful to wake in the morning and feel fur and fuzz coming on. And there’s one more comfort in being a woman. You don’t have to *marry* a woman. A man has to do that—and shave too. It’s almost too much. I don’t know how our Red Indians at home manage to keep perfectly smooth without shaving. Perhaps they perform incantations and their beards strike in.”

“Don’t you like manly men?” I asked. “You wouldn’t fancy a Pomphreys, for instance?”

“Lord, no!” cried Spat. “But if I marry I don’t want to see my manly man shave himself.”

I laughed. “Molly says I look ‘quite cute’ covered with lather.”

Spat shuddered. “With a face like a Christmas cake! No, not for mine!”

I think Rags heard her. He shaves morning and night. But there’d be plenty of dressing-rooms at

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Flowers Abbey if Rags married a girl rich enough to chase out the aunt.

Winchy cares more about aeroplanes than motor-cars; and roads and distances are nothing to him. He expects a Sunbeam to be a magic carpet—and so it practically is.

With decent good luck you can always find a by-way to the place you wish to see, if there isn't a conventional road connection. So, whatever our friend suggested, we obediently did.

Until the tenth century, I believe Sussex was celebrated for the worst roads in England—not much credit, in fact, to the Saxons. But now the Sussex roads are among the best; and whichever turning you take you hit upon some enchanting old Tudor house, perhaps a farm, or a lost-looking, lovely church weighted down with the gold of its lichen roof.

Spat, apropos of lichen, wanted to know how best to cultivate it in case she should ever develop a roof of her own.

“Do you get a lichen germ?” she asked, “or must you have two and mate them?”

I told her that the most important thing to get, in the lichen line, was three or four hundred years at least. This discouraged the girl, because she prays not to live beyond fifty at most. “I want to die while I can still keep a real *face*,” she explained, “and not have it look like candles that have dripped. All out of shape, and cataracts of chins, you know, the way old ladies have who live in hotels. So I must want for my lichen to germ nicely in my next incarnation.”

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

“There’s lots of lichen on the roof of Flowers Abbey, already,” murmured Rags. “You may have a germ or two, if you show you deserve them.”

From Amberley, where Clarence Winchester thinks he’d like to spend a thousand years, we drove to a place which no self-respecting traveller in Sussex could possibly let himself miss—Petworth. But no, we didn’t drive there now I come to think of it. We stopped on the way to Petworth, at Fittleworth.

Fittleworth is one of those tiny Sussex gems you wouldn’t believe in without seeing it. Not that the actual scenery of Sussex is as picturesque as that of several other counties; yet it is so strongly individualized, it’s unforgettable. Its villages are so secret, so hidden, such suddenly found jewels. And then there is the bright, beautiful Weald, which was once all forest and fairies. But we were not near the Weald, of course, in the direction of Fittleworth, Petworth, and Midhurst, near which we were to be taken on account of Cowdray Park. We meandered on, almost anyhow, in country that smelt of hawthorn and apple-blossom, with birds who evidently imagined themselves to be aeroplanes, zooming over our heads.

Sussex, it seems, has been the greatest county for birds since bird history began—and that was long before ours. Apparently these creatures had, and have, the sense of counties and know which one is most favourably disposed to them.

I have that county sense too, as I’ve told you, and Spat is trying to acquire it. I think she’s succeeding to a certain extent, though she complains that the only signs

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

marking county frontiers in England are "Hovis Bread, Teas, Ginger Ale," etc. I'm afraid she's partly right about this. But the thing is, to know *without* signs.

You own a couple of charming Constables, for which you paid good prices. So how must you feel when I tell you that at Fittleworth a delightful little inn possesses four pictures of his, painted on the wall, in settlement of a bill—a pitifully small bill—which he was unable to pay in money. There they are, in all their gentle landscape and atmospheric glory; but to get them you'd have to buy the whole inn. As the house is famous for its wall-Constables; a few other pictures by impecunious artists; ancient beams—two rooms at least that are historic—and the best food to be got in Sussex, the price would be a bit high, even for you. Some American millionaire may try to transplant the inn one of these days, however, if any American millionaires looking for foreign luxuries are left extant after the slump. Fittleworth is near the Little Rother, and I hear that it is from some farther, wider stretch of this river that Lord Rothermere took his title.

Had it been winter instead of spring, we could have eaten, in place of apple tart and cream, the celebrated Sussex mince-pie. They *would* have a legend about their mince-pie, of course, being Sussex—which is invisibly packed with fairy stories. In old days all good Sussex wives were supposed to make the mince-pie for their good Sussex men. It had to be shaped in a long oval and was to be eaten from Christmas, any day on till Twelfth Night. And to eat it then was the right thing. If you refused you were suspected of

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

being a Jew. The oval shape represented the cradle of Christ, and the fruits and spices in the mincemeat figured as the gifts to Him of the Magi. There were many rich ingredients, but apples there had to be, because apples were, and are, almost sacred in Sussex. There used to be a great "wassailing" of all Sussex fruit trees to bring them luck for the year. Music was sung and played to the trees to coax them to bear much fruit, and Spat became quite ribald when I told her that the singers were called howlers.

"Too appropriate, I'm sure!" she said.

But, as a matter of fact, though the music was doleful and long-drawn-out, it was in a soft minor key. I wonder if the Sussex howlers were any less weird than some of the favourite crooners to-day? If they were, heaven help them! And, by the way, I wonder if Sussex women took the first recipe for mince-pies to America?

At Fittleworth we were in a close neighbourhood of vitally interesting places. All we had to do was to breathe slowly a few times before our cars got us to one after the other. Petworth, with its narrow, old-world streets, its buildings of the same ancient day, and its memories of the great Percy family. Molly and Spat were both thrilled to hear that Hotspur's widow met her second husband here, though they argued that no wife of a Hotspur should ever have married again. As a great favour, we were allowed to look at some of the pictures in Petworth House, the finest collection in all England, which used to be shown to the public on certain days of every week.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

I liked best, for historic reasons, the Duchess of Somerset, who had been a Percy girl and brought the whole estate to the Seymours by her marriage. Cardinal Medici, when young, looking comparatively innocent—if you can imagine any Medici as innocent; and a Vandyke portrait or two of the Percys.

There are world-famous ones for which I didn't care as much, but for the first time in my life I experienced envy. It was at sight of the "carved room"—Grinling Gibbons. Had I owned Aladdin's lamp, I fear I should have rubbed it hard and transported that room intact to St. Roland's.

We saw Cowdray Park, and Castle too, a gaunt and glorious ruin in its green park. There was, alas, a curse upon one of the seven viscounts who owned the place, after the Catholic Montagues died. A monk of Battle Abbey, which was despoiled by the Montagues, cursed the lot of them up, down and sideways; with drownings and fires, etc. The curse carried through generations. If it hadn't been for that vindictive monk, Cowdray Castle never would have burned—or so the Sussex people say.

Midhurst itself will always be a joyous memory to us because of its Spreddeagle Hotel, if nothing else. Tudor, or it wouldn't have appealed so intensely to Spat, who must be a reincarnation of some queen's naughty maid of honour in that period. King Edward liked the hotel, and Spat kept us waiting I don't know how long photographing his room. I could slap her sometimes if she weren't so infernally pretty, with those innocent eyes and long lashes. I think Rags could,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

too, which may be a sign that he's falling in love; that is, if he has any sadistic streak in him. I suppose we all have a little. We like to torture the thing we love, for the pleasure of consoling it again, I suppose.

After wandering in this pleasant north-western part of Sussex, we made for the great romance of all the county, Chanctonbury Ring. We went by way of Pulborough; Storrington, for its history; a side excursion to Washington because of Rudyard Kipling's loveliest short story, "They," and on to Steyning, which is the classic point of starting for the Ring. There were some timber-built houses which we could scarcely bear to pass, though no better than several others of Sussex in which Spat had announced that she really *must* pass the rest of her days (luckily they were not for sale, or Dorando would surely have bought them for her in a chain); and the nicest old clock tower which I ever met so nearly face to face. It's in the main street, and you seem to know it socially at first sight.

We were starving, and lunched at Steyning. While we ate, a storm came up which turned the sky to a big, dull ebony bowl, pouring water. There was a wind, too, and looking up at the immense hill of Chanctonbury, one of the highest on the downs, I tossed a penny on the table.

"What are you doing?" asked Molly.

"Well," said I, "there ought to be a Walpurgis sort of view, if any, from the top, and going up in a car will be a real adventure. We might blow off the road. The question is, to go or not to go."

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Both the girls decided to "go," which was the green signal light for us men. Besides, we wanted to go; anyhow, I did, and Rags. Dorando looked slightly dubious, although his huge car stood in less danger from tempests than ours. I think he would have liked to wait for the storm to clear, explaining that this was wholly because of his tender chauffeur; but Spat, on her part, argued that the storm was half the fun.

You don't need to be told that we were on our way in another ten minutes, and, my dear fellow, it was an awe-inspiring experience. It had been in joke when I suggested that we might blow off the road, but I swear it was nip and tuck whether we blew off or stayed on. I've seldom been in such a gale. For once the girls were silent. Molly shuddered a little closer to me, and I would bet something that Spat went through the same act with Rags. Anyhow, later she related to Molly an exciting tale that he had put his arm round her waist; only for a minute or two, but there it *was*.

The effect from the top of Chanctonbury Ring was magnificent. Up there is a sort of circular entrenchment planted with the dark, "I know everything since the world began" looking trees, indigenous to Sussex. We were under the shadow of the black cloud bowl; the place might have been the grave of Wotan. Suddenly the bowl cracked, showing a gold streak, and the solid sheet of rain separated into rods of shining crystal, breaking as they fell crookedly in the turn of the wind. Down below we seemed to see (though, of course, we didn't) all Sussex; shoulders and giant shoulders of it; green plains, too, lit with fire by the

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
sun-burst, and little streams like shattered mirrors shooting out light. Oh, yes, it was well worth any risk we'd run: a sight not to forget and perhaps never to be seen again.

We had been so long in straining up, and vast views we saw so tempted us to linger, that I suggested staying the night at Brighton. Not for Winchy, though! Brighton was too obvious for him.

I wouldn't argue that the place meant something rather special to me, far behind all its gay Georgian memories. When Brighton was a little fishing village called Brighthelmstone, there was born our family title, which people so seldom know how to pronounce. I like the seaweed smell of Brighton, its grand old Georgian crescents, its very much up-to-date and expensive shops. Sometimes Molly and I spend a week-end there at a big, amusing hotel where week-enders are never supposed to be husband and wife, especially when the lady is as beautiful as mine.

I didn't even plead for a belated and much needed tea at that hotel where Molly and I so enjoy seeming wicked while we know we're good. We let ourselves be taken to Tudor Close, which is a favourite resort of Winchy's when he wants to be alone and think up new ideas for his magazines; but it's a charming place; new Tudor, yet so well done, it's deceiving even to an experienced eye, and just the hotel for a honeymoon.

Now that Spat has been found out in her inward iniquity, she has become almost ribald at times, as un-Jane Austen as possible. She talks about the honeymoons she intends to have, as if she looked forward to

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

at least six, a fair Hollywood allowance; and she has resolved to return to Tudor Close for one of these. "He must be a quiet, studious young man, with light brown hair, dreamy blue eyes and an English army moustache," she announced. Rags and Ramon both glared.

As for me, I was still thinking of Brighthelmstone, mentioned in the Domesday Book, and harried often by the French. Its principal romance, however, was the escape of Charles the Second, and it was because an ancestor of mine helped him get away that we received our title.

Rottingdean we saw when we saw Tudor Close, and had to see because Kipling lived there once, and because of Burne Jones. By this time, however, we had to run fast for Eastbourne if we would get there even for a very late dinner, which we did by taking the shortest way. A pretty way it was, though, with even more than the usual spring adornments of blossom and perfume seen and smelt in romantic twilight which heightens such charms. We had to drive fast, and trees along the road had a strange effect, pouring past us like smoke.

As you know, we came at last to the Burlington Hotel, which has given us every luxury, not the least of which is a perfect sea view over the grass and flowers of a formal garden.

If you take a look at Sussex on the gigantic globe of the world, which you have given to me in your will (it's the only reason why I could resign myself to your passing on before me), you'll see that we had left ourselves still a good slice of the county to explore.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

We knew that we should miss Winchy's knowledge, but he'd put into our spirits a feeling about Sussex which would march on with us, like his story of the Long Man of Cuckley who gets up benevolently from a world-without-end sleep, to carry children away with him in dreams.

Yes, among those rounded, ruddy hills of Sussex, which you expect to see turn and show the other breast, we had plenty to choose from. The sad part was what we had to leave out.

By the way, Molly had remembered a few lines that had hovered just beyond her brain-power yesterday. They were about Chanctonbury, and she repeated them to me as she and I had breakfast together in our sitting-room (not too early), before our second bout of Sussex sight-seeing.

“ The King was making for the shore,
But here he paused, and turned his head,
And looked across the weald and said,
' It *is* a land worth fighting for.' ”

He was probably on his way to escape from our little old BRIGHTHELMSTONE at the time, though the poet doesn't deign to mention that.

Well, we tore ourselves from our windows, which showed the calm sea, pale blue, with white lines drawn across, as if to hold its surface more even and flat, like a satin quilt. We picked up our party from their separate dug-outs (jolly nice dug-outs), and Pevensy was our first choice because of Kipling's "Puck," who haunts all Sussex, but maybe Pevensy most.

Of course we had a copy of "Puck o' Pook's Hill "

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

with us, tremendously quotable, though what reading does to your eyes, travelling at fair speed in a motor, is nobody's business unless an oculist's. Of course Pevensey has a castle. Dorando is getting almost beyond digesting all our British castles as well as our best cathedrals; but this is a very special castle, surrounded by a wall still more special. Once it enclosed the almost fabulous town of Andirida (which wouldn't make a bad name for a girl, would it?). In those days, when our history was a-borning, Andirida was close to the sea, romantic, wonderful, surrounded by the vast forest of trees which held the secrets of the world's dawn.

I wonder if Kipling was in the midst of an incarnation when William the Conqueror landed at Pevensey —“*venit ad Pevensey*,” according to the worshipful Bayeux tapestry? I think he must have been. Otherwise, how does he know so much more of Sussex than anyone else knows?

How he loves those old Saxon names that have remained as if they had been branded into the county's earth! I love them, too, and the look of the Level, with its elevations, or “Eyes,” showing that they were once islands sticking out of the sea. What do you think of Horse Eye Level, Northeye and Chilleye, for instance?

I've wondered sometimes how Burwash got its name, and why Kipling is proud of it, but now I've learned. When the Romans came into Pevensey Bay they had with them a dog called Bur, evidently a ship's mascot, for when he almost buried himself in wet Sussex clay,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

they stopped everything not only to dig him out, but to give him a good wash. Thereafter was the place known as Bur-wash. At home we have a retriever expecting a blessed event—which Walter Winchell of New York hasn't chronicled yet, by the by. Molly has made up her mind to christen the first-born "Bur," no matter what its sex.

From Pevensey we took in Bexhill, St. Leonards and Hastings, because they were near, easy to see and worth seeing; especially Hastings, because it dates back so far in Saxon history. Its castle dated back, too, so old Willie the Conqueror had to rebuild it. Dear Anthony Trollope lived at St. Leonards and tranquilly wrote there; but there was nothing tranquil about us, in feeling or in action, as we ran through. We had too many places to go for tranquillity of mind. And go we did. The Rother kept bubbling up unexpectedly everywhere. *Must* be Lord Rothermere's Rother!

Rye and Winchelsea were among the most repaying sights of the trip, though, as usual, we avoided interesting churches there and on the way. These citadels (I like to call them so) take you back at least a thousand years. You can't believe that you're only twelve miles from a big, fashionable watering-place when you see the red roofs and town of Rye slanting upwards to your eyes, in pyramid shape. All the knights from the clock at Wells could come clanking down on you, jousting, and you wouldn't be as much surprised as by the sight of a talkie theatre. We took everyone we met for an artist, and no doubt the travellers had the same suspicions of us.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

The French did nasty things to Winchelsea up to the year 1449, which hardly seems long ago in a place with such an aspect as this.

Molly and Spat both declared that if they lived at Winchelsea, out of sheer spite they'd never own a Chanel or any other French dress; but I have an idea that, if it came to the pinch, they'd let bygones be bygones, especially if there were a sale of Paris models.

We took Battle Abbey, with all its great picturesqueness of beauty, history and legend, in at a bite, so to speak, because Winchy had said that whatever else we did, we mustn't leave out Lewes. Molly and I had passed the place, motoring, often before, but generally at night, and so we had practically seen nothing.

It's the county town of Sussex, and in my ancestor's day letters used to be addressed "Brighthelmstone, near Lewes." I don't know exactly how letters were sent there, or if they ever got there at all.

Simon de Montfort defeated Henry the Third in Lewes, in 1264, and Molly thinks it a pity, as it would be interesting to know what would have happened if he hadn't. That's always an interesting speculation in your own past or other people's, isn't it? The market-place would have looked to me like a lot of other market-places if I hadn't known that a number of most respectable people, far worthier than myself, were martyred there, as a great public show, in 1555, and a couple of years later; some of Bloody Mary's martyrs, I suppose. I'm glad she wasn't a beauty like that eternal siren, Mary Queen of Scots. If she had been, it would be hard to hate her as most of us do.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Think of there having been two mints in Lewes! Now it makes your mouth water to think even of one, anywhere. There's a perfectly break-neck street, to this day, going down to the railway station; and George the Fourth, when he'd had just one too many, drove a coach and four to the bottom for a wager. If you like ruins, which I know you do, except in your own box-office, at Lewes you have a priory as well as a castle. But it's on the leads of the latter that you get a view which makes you appreciate Lewes as nothing else could. We made the girls wait for us below while Rags and I bravely mounted and Dorando "followed after," at a considerable difference after. Even a handsome South American isn't romantic when he puffs.

What do you think the girls were discussing when we rejoined them? If you know women as well as you ought to from back-stage to front, you'll guess in one. Slimming. All women talk of slimming when you leave them alone for ten minutes. Heaven knows, too, that Molly and Spat don't need it. They both have the most perfect stream-line. But to diet or not to diet; which is nobler in the mind of woman was their subject.

Cromwell made one of his best destruction jobs at Lewes Priory. The great church was so completely smashed that it was only when the Brighton railway was being constructed in the eighteen-forties that some workers discovered lead coffins of the two founders, Earl Warenne and Gundrada, whom Queen Matilda disproved so coolly as offspring of hers. I fear

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Gundrada must have been a mere love-child of William the Conqueror. Spat says that at Hollywood such gossip would be called "dishing dirt." But no harm now. It's a long time ago, whatever happened.

Churches, fine at Lewes. Given a miss by our ruthless party in favour of food, as we had to choose between.

Molly had set her heart on getting back to Eastbourne and climbing Beachy Head (as much climbing as she might feel inclined for) to see all Sussex spread under her eyes at sunset.

This you can practically do, from the edge of the precipice by the coastguard station. Also, you can gaze upon the sea, a great, great deal of sea. Green and gracious it was, like far-stretching, uncharted meadowland, with white flower-beds of foam. The Beachy Head foot-and-mouth excursion would have been one of our best successes had Molly not turned an ankle, already so elegantly turned by God at birth.

"All's well that ends well," however. She wasn't much hurt, just enough to put her into a clinging mood and to give me a quiet evening with her for once. We had what in America they call a "chicken dinner," because Sussex is proud of her chickens. The county goes so far as to believe that these animals enjoy being forcibly fed. Ugh!

Speaking of that reminds me of the mood in which those of us who went to a talkie came back. The second picture, not the George Raft one, was about ancient Rome, and all the lions of Hollywood and California's celebrated lion farm were employed,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Sussex chicken-like, to be forcibly fed with martyrs. Fortunately their appetite failed just in time to save the hero and heroine. I remember being terribly sorry, as a child, for one neglected lion in an engraving who hadn't got a martyr; but my later wisdom has shown me that the poor brute may have reached the stage of "Steward, basin please!" when the artist thought of him.

For fear you reach the same stage, having been fed with most of Sussex, I'll say a late good night.

Yours through many more counties,

JACK.

P.S.—Forgot to tell you something really important about Lewes, which ought to send you there, but in November, not April. To this day the town has a Society of Bonfire Boys for the celebration of Guy Fawkes' Day, and it's on a big scale; so big that houses and shops had, at one time, to shut their windows, and so many complaints were made that the B. Boys were banished from the streets to the hills surrounding the place. Let's go together next Fifth, to the hills.

*Miss Liddy Lallers to Señor Ramon Dorando, The
County Hotel, Canterbury, Kent*

DEAR, DEAR SEÑOR RAMON,

I know you won't have arrived at this town yet, but if I don't send my letter there it may be too late and miss you. My telegram wasn't nearly enough to express my feelings. I couldn't bear to leave it at that, for I just can't wait to say how grateful I am for that

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

perfectly huge cheque. Honestly, it's the biggest one I ever had in my life. It hasn't been a long life yet, for I'm still very, very young and ignorant, I'm afraid. Of course, I pull down a large salary, but you know what we actresses are. We can't save the way we ought to for the future.

Lots of men have given me beautiful things; of course, the kind of men I felt I could *trust*, or I wouldn't have taken their presents, no matter how grand. But sometimes they disappointed me afterwards, and I got awful shocks about their character. People gossip about me—the jealous ones do, I mean, though those who know me best know I'm what is called a "good girl." I truly am. I shouldn't wonder if I were better in my morals than many a flapper who has never had any of the temptations of the stage, especially American flappers. I ought to understand *them*, as I've had to make a great study of their characters in order to act "Minette" in Lord Ragford's play. But, as I was beginning to explain to you, never, never before have I accepted cash or cheques from a man, except in business. Gracious! I hardly realized there was so much money in the world as this: and you say it "seems nothing to you." Why, you must be one of the few *really* rich men left on earth. Rich in a big way. No wonder you told me you could buy and sell poor Lord Ragford.

But why do I call him "poor," or pity him when he has treated me so badly? I almost hate him now. I suppose that's because of the contrast between him and you—you who are so wonderful, so chivalrous.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Do, do write me as soon as you get this letter and tell me you felt just a little tiny bit of the pleasure I felt the night you came to London to see me. I shall never forget our supper together after the theatre and—and *that one kiss*. You apologized for it, though I'm afraid I rather *asked* for it, you know! Not in words. But you understand, being such a masculine sort of man who has *real* emotions and isn't ashamed of them the way Englishmen and Americans mostly are. If you hadn't kissed me when we parted, I should have said to myself, "Liddy, what is the matter with you? Have you lost all your sex appeal—and for the very man you'd want most to have it for?" I mean, in gratitude, of course. To give you a tiny reward for your goodness.

Yours,
LIDDY.

*Ramon Dorando to Miss Liddy Lallers, Princess
Elizabeth Theatre, London*

ANGEL HOTEL,
GUILDFORD.

MY DEAR MISS LALLERS—

Or "Liddy," as you have asked me to call you—I must thank you for your telegram, which just caught me in time at Eastbourne; and I thank you for promising a letter to follow so soon.

I had a very happy experience with you, dear Miss

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Liddy, so different from all the scenery we have been going through in this motor-car journey. Of course, as I told you, I never would have endured so much country, except for the sake of being near Miss Randolph and protecting her from a fortune-hunter, which I have no doubt Lord Ragford is. It springs to the eyes, as one says. With me there can be no such suspicion, I having all to give.

You are a most sweet and beautiful girl, if you allow me to say so, and though my affections are engaged as well as my pride in another direction, I look forward to seeing you soon again, with perhaps one more little kiss!

My friends—if I can use that word, which is hardly appropriate to the men of the party—plan for us to return to civilization quite soon for a few days. They will not go to St. Roland's, where Lord and Lady Brighthelmstone live, because the house, from what I hear, is in the hands of vacuum-cleaners. We are all to stay at the newest luxury hotel of London, Dorchester House, and Miss Randolph is to see certain things of the big town.

There was a plan in the beginning of the trip to keep mostly to the Thames river, but either there was not enough of the river or it ran in the wrong direction. In any case, we have not been near it for many days, in our cars. There was, besides, an idea to go along a route called "The Pilgrims' Way," and I thought we had deserted that, too, for some reasons; but I am now told that, though skidding off in this direction and that, we have really been more or less on the

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Pilgrims' Way since my well-remembered first sight of you, in Winchester. Only sometimes we have gone to places where Pilgrims started from, instead of where they were destined to reach for their holy purpose. What that purpose was, I am not clear from my book readings. Many of the people seemed out for what nowadays we call a good time, such as the Merry Wives of Bath.

Judging from Shakespeare, I thought the Merry Wives were all of Windsor, but no: England had more, even in those times, and I fear they joined the pilgrimage largely for what fun could be got out of it. No doubt there were plenty of Merry Gentlemen too.

We are now in a county named Surrey, which seems to have a great many trees, and we came especially here to please Miss Randolph, as she has heard or read that it is particularly beautiful and overgrown with heather, like a purple carpet. Unfortunately, this is not the right time of year for heather, which does not get its colour enough to be noticed till late in the summer.

We are quite close to London, but *I* do not arrange this tour, alas! I think it was started to please Lady Brighthelmstone, but in the present every whim of Miss Randolph's is studied, and if I were in the lady's place I should be jealous of the younger girl. Not that Lady B. is not as beautiful as Miss R. But youth is youth. The two cousins look somewhat alike; it is more to be noticed at times, Miss R. being younger. We are to go through Surrey to please her, or so it appears, then back on our tracks to a place called

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
Tunbridge Wells; on from there to Canterbury where
I gave you my address.

We are lunching in this hotel, but I have taken the time to dash you off a letter while the others walk around the town. Myself, I am not so fond of walking. Why walk when you have an automobile which cost ten thousand American dollars? A waste of good material, and you spoil your chauffeur, too. However, I must now close, as there is an antique shop near by which is supposed to be famous, and I have got in the habit of picking up little things for my lady friends. If I see something which might interest you, I will buy it to present to you in London. My heart tells me it should be in some form of jewellery, to please you best and be most suited.

Your devoted friend,
RAMON DORANDO.

*Miss Susan Randolph to Miss Hattie Belle Haynes,
Elmville, Virginia*

THE CALVERLEY HOTEL,
TUNBRIDGE WELLS.



Such a lovely place, which used to be both in Sussex and Kent; but the authorities met and gave it all to Kent. Poor Sussex!

BLESSED LITTLE BLIGHTER,

("Blighter" is a term of affection in this country, though I don't know why, or what it means.)

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

This is the most heavenly old hotel we have been in yet; but first I must tell you about Surrey, because you say you have a heavy suitor from there, with a monocle, and you want to know his background.

What they say is, that Surrey nowadays is simply stuffed with stockbrokers, but I haven't seen any so far as I know. And your young man can't be one because you say he writes novels and is studying America for his next. Especially Elmville. No stockbroker would have the proper type of brain to write books, or the time; they are too busy losing other people's cash. And if Surrey is really so jammed with them, they must bounce out of bed at dawn, bolt an egg (with bacon, being England, or it wouldn't be considered breakfast), sprint for their train, and disappear into London till after dark.

The reason why Surrey is supposed to be overrun with stockbrokers is that it's such a beautiful county and so easy to get at from London. Well, I know now that it's beautiful, but as for London—I've almost forgotten there is such a place. We'll soon be there, however, just after Canterbury and Rochester. Going that way will give me a different idea of the Thames. Jack doesn't think I ought to go away with the impression of a river all houseboats and swans, with lawns leading down to the water, as at St. Roland's and Maidenhead and Henley, so I'm to be shown where the big ships are; and I *do* want to see the Tower. I can't help thinking about those queens who were so happy and proud, covered with jewels and caresses; then, for just one or two little sins, such as husbands hardly

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

bother about nowadays, if their wives don't nag—Presto, off with your head! It had to happen in the Tower, where you were in prison for a while first, all your things to eat quite cold before they got to you, and not any such device as a bath.

No, Jack doesn't want me to go away with the swanny-lawny impression only. But—*go away!* My dear, where am I to go? I keep my chin up, not being a naughty queen with headsmen sort of measuring my neck with their eyes; yet inside I'm wondering about the future.

Father has written to me, very nicely, saying that "Carrie wishes me to come home and be happy" almost as much as he does. Nothing would tempt me to go near Carrie. She only wants to gloat. My one comfort about her is, that her hair's nearly out of fashion already, and next year she can just give it away to the moths.

I shall *have* to marry, or be an old maid, and, darling, it takes a girl so long to get to be an old maid. Such years and years! So I fear it must be marriage for me. I should like to marry for love, and it would be *so* easy if the right man loved me as much as the wrong one does.

Not that Ramon is exactly *wrong*. You can't be if you are very good-looking and have all the money on earth. But I just don't feel at *home* with him, and I do with Rags, if he'd open the door, let me come in, and say, "Well, here you are and here am I. What are you *really* like? I'll tell you what I'm like, if you'll tell me. And we'll both be surprised."

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

I wish I knew whether Rags loves me or not. It's so simple to know about poor Ramon, though even he has lately developed airs of mystery. But Rags! You said in one letter, "Why are you too proud to use your sex appeal?" Too *proud*, my dear! You little knew me, knowing only my Elmville or Richmond side, where I could afford to be nose-in-the-air because I could get *anybody*—that is, anybody, of course, whom *you* didn't want. And luckily our styles are different. I've used my sex appeal on Rags, I tell you, till it's so worn to threads I'm not sure whether it's any kind of appeal at all. Molly and I both scatter the sex appeal freely in daily life even on waiters in hotels, and clerks and people like that. It's so *useful*. They'll do anything for you, and do it Now. Of course, we wouldn't dare tell Jack about this habit of ours, but Rags probably knows. I so often catch him watching me in his strange way that I can't make out what is in his mind.

He was too adorable after Liddy Lallers, but Pomphreys blew along too soon, before I'd knitted him to me with hooks of steel. That Pomphreys business did me in from Rags's old standpoint, and I was so peeved that, as I wrote you, I said to myself, "What the *hell*?" and showed myself at my worst, a lot worse than I really am, out of spite. But you never know what bravado does to you in the line of cocktails and slang if you're out to shock a man like Rags.

Well, I longed to melt back into the Jane Austen niche again, as soon as the first fires of rage against Pomphreys and Fate had died down, though Lady Macbeth could as soon wash out the damned spot as

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

I could make Rags forget, I fear. Natural, too, I suppose, for a type who could write that heart-wringing anonymous book, "Key to a Soul." Such a person would probably want a wife to wear petticoats, and knickers with elastic round the knees. He would also expect her to have twins, maybe, once a year.

I wish, anyhow, I didn't keep thinking and wondering about Rags all the time! Yet I wish I could flatter myself that he did the same about me. There we are, sitting together on the same seat of the car, and he might be in Kamchatka. It *is* freezing cold there, isn't it?

Perhaps he still likes Molly better than me. I know he did at first, or thought it was swell to be infatuated with a beautiful married woman, but I had high hopes for a while that he'd got over that. Oh, well, it will probably end, as I wrote you before, in my becoming a *richissime* South American, with interests in beef, coffee, etc., though I *trust* not in white slaves.

But all this, on the surface, has little to do with Surrey, hasn't it? Underneath, it has a lot; for the more beautiful places you are in with the man who won't love you, or is hovering on a brink, the more you long for him to fall off the brink, in your direction.

I used to think that husbands were only a remote and dreadful contingency; that they were no good anyhow, judging from one's friends' marriages, which are so much like badly licked stamps that soon come unstuck. But, darling, I now dream of myself settling down, being a real wife and loving to be bossed by an Englishman just as Molly seems to feel. Though, of course,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

no elastic-banded knickers and no twins. (Not that Molly would!) But you can just judge how I suffer and am torn between two what-you-may-call-'ems when I tell you that at a moving picture in Eastbourne where there were tortures and lions, Rags didn't even make a move to hold my hand. I had it all ready, but nothing doing on that side of me at all. So, out of spite, I didn't pull my fingers away from Ramon on the other side. He had just come back from London, where he motored on business and saw Rags's play, "Bats in the Belfry." If he went behind scenes to remind Miss Lallers of his existence, mum's the word from him, though he did mention that to his idea she practically made the success of "Bats." My dear, that girl *may* have Clara Bow hair, but *I* find she has an aspidistra temperament, so can't really do "Minette" justice.

To return to Surrey, which is difficult when my nice soft pencil gets running upon these two men! You will think, if I'm not careful, that what I need is a permanent brain-wave.

I pleased Jack, if I didn't please anyone else, by guessing almost at once when we were out of Sussex and into Surrey. It's really true. Those two counties are as different as me from you; also equally attractive, just as we are.

This was all along the Pilgrims' Way, but if the Pilgrims, poor dears, were as fearfully upset in their minds as I am almost every minute, I pity them. They might as well, or better, have stayed in their peaceful homes.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

I am no good at telling you much of anyone's history except my own, but there was any amount of it in Surrey, and haunted houses to this day; Cæsar's camps, and earthworks, to say nothing of prehistoric implements long before the Romans thought of England.

Mustn't people have been rather stupid then? They could have made all the things we have now if they'd had the wits; radio, too, because there were the sounds to get, if they'd used their heads and known what to do. Yes, even thousands of years ago, they might have had music on all sorts of wave-lengths.

We'd passed through a bit of Surrey before, on our first day out, so that I could see Cobham where Molly bought her first car; an awful one, but it led to her love story. And Esher, we saw then, with Wolsey's Tower. This part I'm going to write about was some distance away from that, both in time and space. The flowers have been able to do much sprouting since our start and, my love, the whole of Surrey might be a lake of bluebells. That's the flora; so what do I care whether or no the fauna consists of stockbrokers? Jack says they've spoiled lots of beauty spots; all the same, the whole county looks like one big beauty spot to me.

There's heaps about smuggling in Surrey, too. I like that thought. Do you remember Kipling's "While the Gentlemen Ride By"? But Surrey is a county you ought to walk through, not motor; a hiking honeymoon with the man you love, or think you love, would be ideal. There are so many divine field-paths and by-ways which you keep shooting past in a car; it's really a shame. There are oceans of pines, sort of forest

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

cloisters, that look almost sacred, so dark and secret: the most heavenly ferns which they will call "bracken" (a word which scratches your throat), and everywhere the distances are blue, blue! Not sky, you know, but ethereal, pale sapphire mists that float between the trees like walls of flowers—flowers that have died and gone to heaven, yet left their azure ghosts on earth.

I must, by the way, try to invent a few new adjectives as I can see that Jack and Rags are getting bored with the American ones which come tumbling out if you grow too enthusiastic and don't stop to think. Still, I must say, the girls in Rags's book, "Bats," talk just like that, and more so. I chaffed him about his females, and he said he had to pattern them on those of their kind whom he met at Ciro's and the Embassy Club, etc.

We passed through a place called Cranleigh, having avoided Horsham—I don't know why. Anyhow, Cranleigh was so sweet, I wanted it all for mine. Some of it was for sale, but, my dear, the most *unimaginative* advertisements! If I were in the real estate business, wouldn't I make things hum if I had an old Tudor or Jacobean house to sell! I'd tell the world.

What we would call brooks, they often call rivers here; little, bright blue streaks threading the grass like ribbons. There's one called the Wey, really important, though often so narrow you could grab the shore on each side if you were in a boat, and push yourself along instead of worrying to row. There was a wide bit near Guildford, the most charming old town you can imagine, complete with castle and all, though *not* without its dear Woolworth.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

We had lunch there at a very ancient hostelry called "The Angel." It *would* be! And ought to be. It has beams and oak panelling, and lovely old pewter and brass; the quaintest stairway, too, where you expect to meet Pilgrims coming up or going down. . . .

Jack teased me and said we should have edible snails to eat; large, fat ones, because the Norman-French Pilgrims brought them over as a great delicacy and spilt masses in Surrey. Even these loathly beasts being called Roman snails didn't keep me from getting a spasm in the belt-line at the bare suggestion; and I knew Ramon had a pang in the same place because, if you'll believe it, he has to eat carefully or feel *sea-sick* in his motor-car!

It was a fib about eating the snails nowadays, as I might have known. There wasn't one on the horizon, and we had Surrey capon, which is famous. It comes with peas; but the Surrey out-of-door peas aren't quite born yet, whereas their capons, like the poor, they have always with them.

The French Pilgrims particularly loved Surrey, and I don't blame them, though there were practically no decent roads then, and you caught your skirt on brambles when you camped, and your best young man set you free while he sneaked a look at your legs. Legs were a treat in those days. They're far from that now, except in the evenings when we put on long gowns; but men can't have forgotten what we're shaped like by then.

When I spell Pilgrim with a capital P, it's to distinguish them from us. We were all over their celebrated Way in Hampshire. I made notes of that,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

but when I wrote you I was too taken up with Liddy Lallers to say much, if anything, about Pilgrims, I fear. Thank goodness we haven't lost track of them yet. At Guildford they crossed a ferry known as St. Katherine's, and they were a merry crowd though supposed to be out for religion's sake, and coming from everywhere, even Genoa, and Limoges. (Is it china or cheese they make there? I think china; not that I care, unless I ever go to the place.)

Well, "The Angel" was just too lovable, and so was the whole of Guildford High Street, with its big clock. Jack said the Pilgrims named the inn, but often I'm not sure if he's joking, to make me open my eyes wide. Do you know I believe if he'd never met Molly, he'd fall for your Spat, but of course he's mad about her, so all is well. Still, he flirts with me a little, just to keep his hand in and feel that he's not outgrowing the art. I don't know if Molly likes it, but she's always a lamb, even to her own husband, especially since that dreadful day of Pomphreys and "Elsa."

I do think that the English have given the most ugly names to some of their most beautiful things, but so long ago, nothing can be done about it now. For instance, the Hog's Back. Darling, it's the most perfect hill or ridge you ever saw, very high, overlooking all Surrey on both sides, or nearly all, and a road white as mashed pearls, because it's made of chalk. Chalk is bad for the digestion in water it seems, but lovely on roads or downs or cliffs. Good for trees, but fatal for the liver! It wouldn't suit Ramon for long,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

he's sallow enough already. The Pilgrims went along the southern slopes, talking every kind of language, like a moving Tower of Babel. When we were on top of this heavenly hill, we could see where they'd been. They stopped long enough as they journeyed to plant lots of yews, which were considered sacred, and I love their strange, tortured shapes. They always look to me as if in the night they hold out their hands and tear off pieces of the dark, which they never let go. Nice of the Surrey birds to have carried yew seeds here and there! What we'd pay the birds to do that in our country! It would make their fortune.

We gazed down on slope after slope of mystery, wrapped in soft cloaks of mist. But I did see one or two rather stockbrokery houses, I must admit, though luckily in the distance. *Hog's Back*, indeed! At worst it should have been christened *Gazelle's Spine*.

The *Hog's Back* was a detour for us, because Jack wouldn't miss it himself or let the rest of us miss it. There are so many things we have had to miss, Jack says, that we must make the best of what we can do. And he won't even mention the beautiful places he has left out in each county, for fear I should think him the worst guide and most cold-blooded villain in England. However, I can always find out by maps, which I like, because they excite me, and guide-books, which bore me to tears. They seem simply haunted by Early Perps.

Jack and Molly are dears about not dragging us into even really famous country churches, but fortunately

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

they have a complex against them themselves, and if they resist it, one or other almost invariably gets a cold in the head.

We did go into a church though, at a sweet little place called Compton, because it's unique in England, or nearly. It has a double chancel, though what good *that* would do I can't see unless for two clergymen to be yelling each other down, each preaching a sermon on a different subject at the same time. Like hearing two radios going at once, you know, with programmes from rival stations. But much better, there's a balustrade, which is the only bit of woodwork made by the Normans left in the whole of Great Britain. I wouldn't have put it past Ramon to offer to buy the thing if I'd said out aloud how much I truly did admire it. That's one *real* attraction about Ramon. He'd do anything for you at any cost, except maybe diet. You have to hand it to him for that!

We drove along towards Dorking, and saw more of the River Wey with the haughtiest, most well-connected looking swans just letting themselves float without an effort. Pilgrims fed their ancestors, and then were caddish enough to make some of the fattest into swan pie. Nasty it must be, though Henry the Eighth loved it. That may partly account for the bay window he had where his waist should have been, which even artists couldn't entirely conceal.

Well, after a fashion, I envy the Pilgrims. They were never in a hurry, and their maps couldn't blow away because they hadn't any. What they were out for really wasn't religion at all. It was Adventure

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

with a capital A. And when you come to think of it, so, I suppose, are we! They had love affairs all over the place, and it won't be my fault if I don't have at least one!

I believe the Surrey roads were the prettiest we'd been on yet, especially going through Chilworth to Albury on to Shere (you have a map, my child, and can track us down!) There was the Silent Pool where a maiden committed suicide, being too pure to let herself be loved by King John; and in moonlight her ghost floats just below the surface for young men and women not so pure as all that, to look at on holiday outings. Oh, it's no use my telling you about these Surrey villages and little towns so famous for their beauty! But aren't some of their names alone worth the money? Gomshall; Shere; Abinger Hatch! Too fascinating. Quite a contrast to their choosing Hog's Back. We had tea at Dorking, though still almost bursting with the Angel's capon and plum tart. Jack felt we mustn't pass Dorking by, it was too sweet, and very Pilgrimish.

By and by it was twilight; and till you've been in England you hardly know what twilight is. Ours at home is a bit sudden, as if the stage curtain had dropped out of somebody's hands. But here it's very slow, blue turning to dove-grey before you know what's happened to the sky, and a clear, pale golden light in the west with little feathers of pink floating—grouping together—separating again. And, if it doesn't come on to pour, just one star like a solitaire diamond flashing on a hidden hand. Makes you absolutely lyrical, my lamb!

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

All the time Jack had been stealthily steering for Tunbridge Wells, not saying too much about what was on his mind. So his marvellous hotel—the Calverley—burst upon us as a real surprise.

We were supposed to rest that night, and see the beauties and historic bits next morning before starting for Canterbury. And I'm thankful to say we *did* have the joy of poking all about, into quaint sitting-rooms, where Queen Victoria was a child, staying there with her mother, the Duchess of Kent; everything left, you'd say to look at it, just as it was then: engravings on the wall which she saw, and a death mask of Shakespeare; yet in spite of the stately oldness, modern baths with lots of the rooms. I had one which must have been an old powder closet, a place, you know, where people powdered their hair so it shouldn't fly over everything. The powder, I mean, not the hair. And such a dinner, with ripe fresh raspberries when it's hardly yet May! We had eaten them with cream (an expert in the *Daily Mail* says cream *isn't* fattening) when a blow had to fall, as it always seems to do on us in the nicest places we come to. At least, it did in Bath. And this new blow was connected with the same person. I'm not sure if you can exactly *read* a blow in a newspaper, yet that's what we did. Pomphreys, my dear, up to his tricks! But I'm too exhausted to write you about him to-night. I feel *scattered*, on top of the raspberries and all, and I have to get up early in the morning. If I don't go to bed I'll *fall* on it, and I've never yet slept without brushing my hair and my teeth, thank God.

I'll just keep this and write a postscript. Molly is in

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
even a worse state than I am. As for Jack, I know he sees *red*. He has that look in his eyes—a sort of ruby glint, such as you'll catch for half a second sometimes in the eye of an angry dog. Rags is as much concerned in the Blow as any of us, but you wouldn't know it to look at him. You'd never know *anything*, to look at him, it would seem!

With love,
Your nearly dead,
SPAT.

Lady Brighthelmstone to Sir Robert Reading

THE COUNTY HOTEL,
CANTERBURY.
*April something, I don't care
what. Or is it May?*

Oh, *darling* Sir Bob, isn't it awful? . . . I can write to you as to no one else, because Jack has told me that you've bought in with these publishers. He wasn't going to tell at first, but afterwards he did.

I know it wasn't in the least your fault about the Pomphreys caterpillar. He must have been vamped by a lot of reporters and made drunk, or he wouldn't have dared break his word. But *can* you deny and lie for us? Would you *please* lie for me? Or, if not, what can be done about it—if anything?

I feel frightfully for Jack's sake even more than my own. As for my cousin "Spat," it doesn't really matter so much for her. And it will probably do

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Rags's sales and the box-office good, rather than harm, to have the truth known to his public about "Key to a Soul."

Perhaps even you hadn't heard about his noble book yourself? I have an idea Jack explained to me that Rags begged him to keep his mouth shut on the subject. No saint would like to be laid bare as a sinner, and I suppose it works the other way round, too, with the modern young man. Rags would sooner be called bad than good. But his secret is out now with a vengeance!

I'll tell you how we heard, or rather read.

We were at the most fascinating hotel at Tunbridge Wells, with lavender-bags in the wardrobes, and all our surroundings so sweet it seemed that only nice things could happen. But the London newspapers arrived, and Jack bought several. You would have thought by the splash some of them made over the interview Pomphreys had given, that "Elsa" was as important as a new edition of the "Encyclopædia Britannica." And much more exciting. A picture newspaper had a snapshot of me taken at Ascot as long ago as last summer, *too* ghastly, with one of those awful Y winds blowing—you know, the east, west, north, south ones that show just how your legs join on to your body—and me walking towards the camera with one foot up, looking twice the size of the other, as if I had gout.

Would that we had killed Pomphreys at Bath when he came to see us there, trailing clouds of glory in the shape of Spat's pyjamas, forgotten by her and picked up by him at Winchester. We hated him enough for murder, but instead we were so feeble-minded as to

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

nourish him with tea and toasted Bath buns. We let him live, and see how he has repaid us!

Jack would chase him up and (as he expresses it) knock his block off (block, *indeed!*) only for this reason. It would make a first-class scandal out of a second-class one; besides, the creature has sailed for New York this very morning, if he acted according to plan.

Do, dear, darling Sir Bob, save Spat and me. I put Spat first only out of politeness, but what I care for mostly is myself and Jack. I can see all our beastly friends reading "Elsa" and saying when they meet me, "Why, Molly"—or Lady Brighthelmstone, as the case may be—"who would have *dreamed* it of you?" Oh, I could have a convulsion even thinking of it, if a convulsion, and even turning blue, would help.

As it is, there's nothing for us to do at the moment till we know what *you* will do. Pretending to be brave, and to ignore the facts of life, next day after a *sleepless* night we strutted out to promenade along the Pantiles and do everything we'd come to Tunbridge Wells to do, just as if no Pomphreys had ever existed and betrayed us.

The place was so delightful, it simply made my heart ache: a raised, tiled platform, you know, with a portico on one side and shops on the other; but the great beauty being in the trees—a border of lime trees, all in blossom. If we hadn't been so upset, the delicious perfume would have gone to our heads like some wine brewed by fairies. Or don't you *brew* wine? Poor Jack had Macaulay under his arm, too Spartan of him.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

As for me, I couldn't bear the sight of *any* book. But you know Macaulay tells all about Queen Henrietta Maria coming to Tunbridge Wells for the waters, and having to camp on Bishop's Down, a long way off, because there were no houses. It's a brilliant description of how things were, too, after the Restoration: jewellers and smart dressmakers and everyone pouring into the place from London; pimply young men with their livers gone wrong from too good eating, giving the glad eye to pretty country girls of Kent who sold butter and cream and cherries. People did get so spotty in old days; Doctor Johnson, for instance, from not taking enough baths at home, so they rushed to these spas. But I could hardly listen to Jack reading or telling us things. It cheered me up a little to go into a shop and buy Tunbridge ware, which is really wood with pretty colours matched together, and an awfully old industry. It's always nice to buy things, as a kind of anodyne; but it doesn't help for long.

We went and saw parks and views, and then in the car began sailing through the Kentish landscape. Lots of hops, with a bitter-sweet smell; a wilderness of apple-blossom, like a white perfumed mist as we flew past, and oast houses with large stick-up noses; Lebanon cedars, too, and you know how I adore them. You gave me a present of a little one for St. Roland's lawn four years ago. Do you remember? Alas, I shall be old or dead when it's big enough to have tea under.

Any other day we should have been as gay as the larks we saw rising from mysterious nests and pouring down jewels of song. I don't mean that we would

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

have poured down jewels of song, for none of us can really sing, though Jack *does*, in his bath. But to-day we just didn't *want* to be comforted, I suppose, if the truth were known. We wouldn't talk of Pomphreys or "Elsa," but we got on the most melancholy subjects almost mechanically, again and again.

Spat was holding forth on the sad fate of being a girl, even a popular girl. (And she only nineteen.) She complained how hard she and her friend Hattie Belle Haynes had worked, ever since they were sixteen, keeping up the pace, doing all they could to have the most men in love with them, boys cutting in on their dances, so that no one ever had you for more than a whole minute at most: worse than being a Hollywood star, the competition was so keen. The girls talked at night, Spat said, or rather in the early morning after balls, about whether there'd be someone new next season better looking than they; and how they had to pretend to have fun wherever they went, whether they really had it or not, and scream the sub-debs down. She little guesses what the strain is, to pass on from nineteen to twenty-nine, and so forth, I won't mention *how* much, keeping your weight *down* and being sure you have the right cold cream, or watching for your first grey hair or wrinkle. I didn't bring up that argument, though. Better to let sleeping wrinkles lie. I just let Spat talk on about *herself*, while I thought of *myself*. Then, suddenly, the idea came to me in the midst of this dismal chat, about writing to you of my worries.

Jack can help only if you back him up, because you

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

are the publisher, and if you call in reporters to tell them Pomphreys lied, why Jack and I can say the same. I shall send this letter express. By to-morrow you can be *saving* us—if you will. I almost know you will!

Our plan has been, after Canterbury and Rochester, to go to London for a few days, Jack trotting Spat about here and there. I'd like to keep to the plan, but *only* if you put the reporters off our track. We have our rooms engaged at Dorchester House for the day after to-morrow for as long as we like to stop before setting forth again. The idea is to start out, and soon, for Jack wants us to see Cambridge, and Rags is still determined to show us his Flowers Abbey, to say nothing of the aunt who inhabits the house—and pays, and pays.

But can we safely parade about at the Dorchester? Had we better hide where no reporters would ever think of looking for us? Perhaps a *temperance* hotel in Bloomsbury. What do you think, and what will you do?

I can hardly wait to hear from you. Do wire when you've read this, and write afterwards. If *you* express a letter, too, I might get it here.

Yours ever,
MOLLY B.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Telegram from Sir Robert Reading to Lady Brighthelmstone at the County Hotel, Canterbury

Yours received. Will abandon publication if you prefer. Have sent out hurry call to reporters on every known and unknown paper. There was no truth in Mr. Pomphreys' statement that certain ladies wrote a certain book. Case of mistaken identity. I am the publisher in England and I know who are the real authors who may have pulled Pomphreys' leg. Am writing you express to Canterbury. Always yours and Jack's,

R.R.

Lord Brighthelmstone to Sir Robert Reading

THE COUNTY HOTEL,
CANTERBURY.

April 27th.

MY DEAR BOB,

You are a brick, a priceless brick. Molly told me about her letter to you and has shown me your telegram. There will be denials in the newspapers. Pomphreys is foiled—anyhow in this country.

We shall turn up in London to-morrow or the day after, and I'll see you as soon as you can have me. I'm afraid that this minor Judas business has rather spoiled the last two days for the girls, and Rags has hated to come out in the open as the noble-hearted author of "Key to a Soul." I have cheered them all up a bit,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

however, and we have vowed not to refer again to the subject of Pomphreys or reporters until we get to London. As for Dorando, I don't think he quite understands what all the fuss is about, and he is a good deal taken up with his own affairs, whatever they may be.

In spite of everything, Canterbury is being its own splendid self. I've heard people call it the most interesting city in the kingdom, and they're not far wrong. If we can be interested in it now, it must be good.

After Maidstone, we had a pretty road from Tunbridge Wells, where our newspaper depression struck us, and we should have been in the mood for one of the great sights of England. I think that the drooping girls did get a slight kick out of the fact that Roman Watling Street traverses the town, and that the place was old even when Cæsar came. Why, Canterbury is said to have been a kind of prehistoric Venice, at least such a Venice as first rose on piles out of the Lagoon. Canterbury rose on piles out of the River Stour, which was a bigger, I won't say better, stream then than it is now. Such a number of old English rivers have had a way of shrinking. There were marshes for the pile dwellers in those days, too: fish to feed them, and dense forests to hide them from their enemies. It seems odd to picture Kent—county of fruit blossoms and hops—as a dark forest; but so it was even in the time of the Pilgrims, though probably the Pilgrims knew less about the long-gone pile-dwellers than we know at present.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

How do you like the name of Cantivarabyrig? Well, that was Canterbury's first name after the long occupation by the Romans was over. And it meant City of the Men of Kent; the Newly Settled Capital.

I glory in these old walled towns of ours. The walls that stand seem to hold and contain history, as a Roman oil jar, dug up sometimes, is found to hold traces of oil, even to this day. I wish that the name "Burgate" might be traced to the Roman dog who was given his bath at Burwash; but I should only have to ask an archæologist to learn that there was no such romantic hope. It's the chief gate of the borough, at all events. But there's another name of a gate, without much gate attached to it, which is still more entertaining; "Queeningate," the way through which the fair Queen Bertha used to pass to her daily devotions. But that brings us to the Cathedral, because it lies near and east of it. And, good heavens, how religious Canterbury was in every direction, in that long-ago past!

There was Ethelbert, the first Christian King of Kent, and mighty proud of his kingship, though eventually he became unselfish enough (if we like to put it that way) to give his palace to St. Augustine. From then on there were monasteries and churches all over the place, so closely clustered you had no excuse for passing one.

You really have to visit St. Martin, in our time, because that's where Queen Bertha went, and much of the church is the same as when St. Augustine came to Canterbury. It's the oldest church in England.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

except maybe the tiny Saxon one, almost out of sight, discovered not too many years ago at Bradford-on-Avon. But at Bradford, if part of the ceremonial had been to swing a cat, it couldn't have been done—not with the cat intact.

At Canterbury people hardly stopped to build themselves houses, they were so eager to set up a church to some saint's glory and maybe their own. They were brave fellows, though, those men of Kent, and upon the ramparts defended their town against a fearful attack by revengeful Danes. For twenty days they stood fast. Then a Judas named Alman (I've had a very good tailor who may be descended from him) traitorously let in the enemy. The Cathedral was burned, in sight of the soldiers. Archbishop Alphege and seven thousand Canterburians were slaughtered. The poor old Archbishop was dragged round in chains for months afterwards because he wouldn't ask to be ransomed. Rather fine, that! At last he was murdered at Greenwich, so you see he'd gone a long way; only, however, to come back in triumph as a sainted corpse years afterwards and be buried beside St. Dunstan.

Tremendous, the way men of the past built up their cathedrals as soon as they were destroyed! But I believe the same spirit is in us still. We won't let our ideals perish, whether they be of stone or of the soul.

You have produced "Becket" at one of your theatres, so you doubtless know more than I do about the most celebrated martyr of the twelfth century.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Even now, in Conrad's choir, you feel the thrill of that murderous scene; you can picture the strange aurora borealis which lit the sky that night like a red miracle, as the monks watched the dead body of their bishop, his scattered brains and blood on the stone floor beneath their knees.

You can see King Henry stealing in barefoot, years later, to do penance, and to kneel beside the tomb in the crypt while the rods of bishops, abbots and monks whipped him, at his own request. There's drama for you, and no anti-climax!

At last our little Spat acknowledges the real "why" of the Great Pilgrimage. She has been a bit frivolous about it now and then, though it was by her own wish we have seen so much of the Pilgrims' Way. After Canterbury she won't be frivolous again; not on *that* subject. There are plenty of others left, however, for the joint author of "Elsa."

Although I've such a weakness for Winchester and its coffins of Saxon kings (?), I must admit that Canterbury Cathedral, while bearing a family resemblance to my favourite, is nobler, lighter, more soaringly graceful.

The tombs are magnificent. It was worth dying for to leave such monuments. Nowadays we go into jars or pots! As for the streets of Canterbury, they strike me as more continental in appearance than English, even old English. Of course, the Cathedral is the centre to which everything leads. It looms up strangely new and clean after all its centuries and tragedies.

I like the County Hotel. It has dignity, and they

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

have made it comfortable, modernizing where they could without spoiling its effect of being *really* "county"—county for hundreds of years.

We've had tea in a room where Queen Elizabeth entertained guests. All the fine oak beams you could possibly expect, and a memorable ceiling with the Tudor roses. Blazoned coats of arms, and tea such as the Queen couldn't have known. French wine and beer were her drinks, weren't they?

To-day we have devoted to Sandwich and Deal. Ah, the fine sea smell of them! And even you must know the golf-course. It's almost as celebrated as the Pilgrims and their Way. That was a good run, and the air being like wine, the girls (temporarily) forgot their worries.

Now, old chap, I've done the duty you prescribed for me. I've given you a short chatty travelogue about Canterbury and its environs. So—as there's no use in talking of Chaucer and Canterbury Tales to you, owing to the fine editions you possess—I'll come to personal matters again. When we meet, you shall hear all about that dark plot of Molly's and mine, which has been exciting your curiosity. Meanwhile, before I get to London, please put on your thinking cap for me. You must know of plenty, and more than plenty of unemployed actors. I don't mean stars. I want six outsize ones, the sort you'd hire for regular roughnecks, to play small parts if you were producing a gangster play. They'd have to be reliable sort of chaps, as plug-ugly to look at as possible. Also, another type of chap with a face and get-up like a motor-cop. Now, can

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

you get hold of a set like that at short notice? If you can, would you be willing to let me meet them at your own place after I've explained to you what I want the lot to do? All the better if they're pals, though that's not of importance. Just tell the men that I'll pay them twenty-five pounds each for a short act. They'll have to go into the country, but they shall have a car and a motor-bicycle at my expense. So two must have chauffeur licences. I have to confess there may be a bit of a rough house, though good, stout fellows will have nothing serious to fear. If any, however, should be slightly damaged, as happens sometimes at Hollywood in doing stunts, there shall be good compensation. You know me well enough to be sure that that part of the business will be all right.

I had just finished that sentence when a man I know, and met after years, when we drove over to Deal, has 'phoned me to have a game with him at the Royal Cinque Ports Golf Club. The temptation is too great. I'm going. He lives at Sandwich in a house mentioned in the Domesday Book. So Rags and I (he's asked also) are away in the Sunbeam for the old Cinque Ports town. A newish development in England, these smart golf colonies.

P.S.—I'm back. Had quite a talk with Rags on the way. He became confidential, after I'd taken no end of pains to draw him out tactfully. He has fallen hard for Spat, and is most characteristic in describing the condition of his mind. He says, "I *love* the girl, but I don't know if I *like* her." I understand exactly what he means. She strains herself to annoy him at times

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

because, unconsciously, I think, he has irritated or made her feel small. And her way with Dorando is often enough to drive an Englishman who wants her to drugs and drink. I replied, "Well, I, on the contrary, like Spat immensely, though I don't love her. I should, I dare say, if I hadn't met Molly first. They're cut on the same pattern." Rags could hardly see this resemblance, at least in character, but I reminded him behind my poor wife's back that he hadn't known Molly when she was Spat's age. I had. She was as modern and bumptious for those days as Spat is for these. I assured him that Spat, if she were *not* allowed to marry a South American millionaire and live in Buenos Aires, hung with pearls and diamonds, would slowly mellow into another Molly.

This helped, but apparently the fact that he loved and didn't thoroughly like the girl hadn't prevented him from a firm attempt to keep her off the South American map, at all events. He imagines that she looks down on him from the heights of her flapperhood for having a "Key to a Soul" side to his nature. And, honestly, my dear chap, I couldn't swear to him that it *hasn't* changed her outlook, learning he isn't all "Bats."

I promised him we'd go up to Yorkshire. In fact, we've intended to do this for some time, anyhow since the day in Winchester when Molly was inspired with her Gunpowder Plot. Rags was glad of the promise; but it came out that Miss Lallers has been threatening the poor chap by post, telegram and 'phone. If she hears of his engagement to another girl, she vows she'll give to the *Sunday Flashlight* the story of her love-life.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Rags's letters to her will be featured. She has already written the stuff, or got someone to write it for her, and has guaranteed it to *The Flashlight* if she gives it to anyone.

This leaves a loophole for Rags. He fancies in his foolishness that Spat would throw him over on the eve of marriage if she found out what a priceless idiot he'd been with Liddy. And, of course, these things do sound worse in cold, printed newspapers, especially Sunday ones.

He little knows Spat, however. She'd recall her emotion over that film seen at Eastbourne or somewhere, and regard Rags as a martyr to be snatched by her from the teeth of the Lallers lioness.

How Miss Lallers has learned our precise route since Winchester, so that she is able to wire and 'phone as well as write to every stopping-place, is a puzzler, as Rags has given her no information. She may have put a detective on to him. I shouldn't be surprised. Well, as Molly and Spat would say, "I'll be seeing you!" You'll hear the rest then.

Yours ever,
JACK.

Lady Brighthelmstone to Sir Robert Reading

THE COUNTY HOTEL,
CANTERBURY.

BLESSED MAN,

A thousand thanks for the telegram and a thousand more for the express letter.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

I *knew* I could count on you! But Spat and I have decided that, so long as our names are suppressed, we want you to publish the book. It will be fun watching to see if it develops into a best-seller here, as well as in America. And it's the most heavenly consolation that you and Jack think "Elsa" no worse than "impish." I should have hated to lose *both* your loves at one fell swoop.

Jack wants me to be with him if we call on you to tell of our Dark Designs and get your help. We shan't be long in London; just long enough to hurl Spat from place to place for a day or two of sight-seeing, because what's to become of the poor child after this trip is over, I'm not sure.

She may write her friend, Hattie Belle Haynes, all the secrets of her heart, but she keeps a few of the fruitiest from me, I fear. She might prove capable of marrying Ramon Dorando to spite Rags for being slow and decidedly grumpy. Of course, she'd regret her rashness, and he being Catholic, it might be difficult to get a divorce. Besides, Buenos Aires is such a long way off, one feels as if anything could happen there.

Never mind, Jack and I are doing our best. Still, even with your help, our great plot may fail. There's now only one time when it can be carried out: between Cambridge and York. We shall arrange, if all's well, to travel at night. But you know about the plans of mice and men . . . !

If worst comes to worst, and Spat is left on our hands, I shall invite her to stay with us indefinitely at

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
St. Roland's. But, fond as I am of her, I have special
reasons for not wanting to do that.

My love to you,
MOLLY B.

*Miss Liddy Lallers to Señor Ramon Dorando, County
Hotel, Canterbury*

DEAR, WONDERFUL VALENTINO,

Yes, I think of you as that. Though Valentino, I'm
sure, was never so kind to any woman. I love your
telegrams, letting me know where you will be each
day. And you can't think how I look forward to
seeing you in London again. I have such heaps of
advice to ask, partly about the story I've written of my
life and may publish or may not. I will show it to
you at my flat.

I think my maid is almost as anxious to see you
as I am. She admires you so much. What woman
wouldn't? She is going to make you something
utterly South American to eat when you have supper
with me at home after the theatre, as you *will*, you
must, or break our two hearts. She has read the
recipe in some newspaper, and has been practising
it. You'll love it.

Yours ever and ever,
LIDDY.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

*Señor Ramon Dorando to Miss Liddy Lallers, Princess
Elizabeth Theatre, London*

Of course I will come, most beautiful girl. Nothing could keep me away. But it must be a secret. No more now, for I shall see you so soon.

YOUR VALENTINO.

*Miss Susan Randolph to Miss Hattie Belle Haynes,
Elmville, Virginia*

PRECIOUS,

I am writing you from the York Station Hotel, and I have so much to tell you that I hardly know where to begin. I think I'll commence quietly about our sight-seeing and things like that. *Pianissimo!* Then I'll work up to the big events. *Crescendo!*

The last time I wrote you was at Canterbury, and I was still feeling so shattered after the newspaper blow at Tunbridge Wells that I didn't say much. I just stuffed a big envelope with postcards of Kent in general (I loved that one of Aylesford, and the fourteenth-century bridge we saw by making a tiny detour from Maidstone on the way to Canterbury, as the Pilgrims went), and those of Canterbury Cathedral in particular. The cards could do the places far more justice than I could, in the mood that was on me then: "Elsa" turning "Inside Out" and "In" again I was!

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

But now my feelings at that time seem too *childish*, after all we have passed through.

I told you how Jack promised Rochester, and so to London, where the Thames is (his word) "formidable." We left wonderful Canterbury behind us, after seeing dear old Deal and Sandwich, too; perfectly priceless in their way, so restful and good-smelling.

We passed through Chatham, going to Rochester, and it seems that this is a terribly important place for the army. There's still a dock; and I was looking out for docks, you know. But this wasn't the Thames. It was the Medway. And a great dockyard which Queen Elizabeth, or some pet of hers, founded is just an ordnance wharf now. I'm not quite sure what that means. You know how Arnold Bennett wrote about "The Five Towns"? Well, here there are three, Chatham, Stroud and Rochester. They're big and imposing, the way they stand balancing themselves on an elbow of the wide river. I was disappointed to find we hadn't come to the Thames, but I got over it, admiring Rochester Castle and Cathedral. They are both too grand for words. I mean, words of mine. Pilgrims, those with a capital P, swarmed at Rochester, arriving both ways, to visit the shrine of St. Thomas at Canterbury. But several important ones grew jealous of each other, or bored, and tried to set up as new saints on their own hook in the midst of the journey. Naturally they were murdered, and became martyrs as well as saints.

I couldn't help liking the great Keep of the Castle almost better than the Cathedral, because we've seen

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

such lots of cathedrals now, but never such a keep as this. Don't you think "keep" a very appropriate name? It just *does* keep, and keeps on keeping for hundreds and hundreds of years. I suppose if I come back when I'm old, it will be keeping just the same as now, which I shan't be, alas!

Anyhow, thank goodness, in the Cathedral no one said a word about that everlasting Early Perp. The early bit is Norman, and the Perp for once is Late. Both are remarkably remarkable for whatever they are. But, my dear, for some reason I have got morbidly fond of tombs. I mean the figures on them. I've told you about the Knight with the Nose. Since seeing him, I've grown interested in the women, meekly lying by their husbands' sides with their hands plastered together, eternally praying. Darling, their *waist-lines*, and their *hair*!

Gundulf built a tower, and it's one of Rochester's best attractions to tourists now, though a lot of it has sunk or fallen off. There were bells in it once. But now, I should say, only birds.

Talking of birds, the gulls at Rochester were choice, and they crooned their sad sea crooning with their pink feet hanging down. At some places it's the fashion for gulls, apparently, to keep their feet up tightly pressed against their bosoms; but it's not nearly as becoming, though they may consider it smart, and giving a youthful silhouette.

We had an early lunch, and drove on. You wouldn't believe it, but by and by we were on the Old Kent Road, that your father and mine sang a

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
song about: "Knocked 'em in the Old Kent Road."

Knock 'em is *right*, in one sense of the word, for the traffic began to be murderous, all mixed up with horses (so out of their century, poor dears, and mostly very large, with feathery legs). Jack said that a few years ago they were terrified of motors. Now they simply sneer in a bored way or smile superciliously, refusing to let you pass; or else they prance wildly and pretend to be motors themselves.

We got ourselves jammed in with the most enormous things I ever saw: vans big as houses, lorries for giants, bags piled high, boxes, bales. We couldn't move forward more than an inch now and then; not worth the bother of starting. Jack and Rags were in a rage. Jack cursed. I laughed. I *loved* it. I smelt horses' sweat, and oil and pepper and spices. I knew I did. "Why, you ought to enjoy this!" I said. "It shows you England's alive and working. God save the King!"

"Cheers!" muttered Jack gloomily.

We were hours and hours. It was like going with a slow, almost motionless tide. I smelt river and that strange odour of ships which you can't describe, but you'd know it if you were blind. Ships that had come from all over the world. And here was the great, wide Thames they had talked about. At last Molly cried out, "Look!" I did look, and it was the Tower of London. Nobody told me. I didn't need to be told. The Tower Bridge came together like two arms clasping hands; and we—motors,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

lorries, vans, heaven-knows-what-all-on-wheels—passed over.

Ah, the poor queens who came in their barges along the river from their royal palaces to the Tower prison, which they would never leave alive! They had no such sights to distract them as they gazed and gazed out of their windows through dull, endless hours! I've had them in my mind all the time as I've told you, Hattie Belle, since I saw Hampton Court, before we started on this trip. . . . The Tower is terrible—and romantic. It's *England*. Once it was the greatest fortress of all. Now, when it's a prison, it's only for spies or traitors, and it's much too good and great for them. They should be in some nasty little place with a name like Wormwood Scrubs. There really is a prison named that. I'm not joking. But I don't know what you must do to get into it.

If you think I'm gushing, you must remember, my child, this was my first glimpse of London. As for you, you've never seen it at all, so you just can't realize how I feel.

By this time Jack was out of the grumps, and he and Rags were both quite interested in me as a sort of specimen. Young American girl first coming into London!

Of course, Waterloo Station was London, but I arrived there from Southampton, and went with Jack from one platform to another. When Rags saw how I felt—perhaps I was quite pale, picturing myself as a queen about to be beheaded—he suddenly grew kind and sympathetic. My dear, when a man like Rags

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

becomes *sympathetic*, you know you've achieved something. He said, "Jack, could you drive round and take her along by Westminster Abbey so she'd see it the same day?"

"I could easily," answered Jack.

We'd all forgotten poor Dorando and his temperamental chauffeur, Jaimé, trailing us the whole endless time. And we kept on forgetting. When I did remember, however, my child, I could imagine at least feebly the words and music those two South American men must have used in the traffic jam. I've always heard that Spanish runs to the most terrific swearing of any other language. The Argentine may have added a few items of its own. Besides, Ramon knows English and American; not so very perfectly, to be sure, but the bad words of any language are always the easiest. Isn't that odd in human nature?

I was to be taken into the Abbey and the Tower next day; but it was a wonderful idea of Rags to have me see Westminster when I was all emotional about the Thames and the Tower, and queens and docks and ships.

We passed the House of Parliament (or do I say Houses?—I must look it up) and Big Ben struck as if to greet the stranger. Conceited of me to feel it that way, but I did, and gave the clock a sort of Fascist salute.

The Abbey was even nobler than I'd thought it would be, and I took back everything I'd said about too many cathedrals. The birth of London was there! I'd love to be in the crowd near the Cenotaph on an

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Armistice Day. Maybe I shall be some time—or, again, maybe not. They showed me Trafalgar Square, too, with the fountains playing and the most benevolent-faced lions, almost saintly.

In the end, we arrived at Dorchester Hotel, which used to be the most celebrated house in London, princes living and entertaining in it; but so they do now, only they must pay.

None of us were a bit tired. My lovely room and bath made me feel as if we'd never even started. We had dinner in a fascinating, rather Spanish-looking restaurant. Afterwards we went to the theatre to see Rags's play and, my babe, it *is* done marvellously. Liddy Lallers must have known we were in front, for she gave us all she had. I could see her goggling over the footlights whenever she dared, at Rags and Ramon both. At Molly and me, too, but down her nose at us, as much as to say, "*What* taste in clothes!"

I thought Rags might want to go behind afterwards to speak to the actors and actorines, but he didn't; so he, Molly and I dashed on to the Embassy Club, which I always feel was actually invented by Michael Arlen. Ramon didn't come with us. He said the traffic had given him a bad headache, and asked to be excused. He hoped, if he had a good sleep, he would be all right the next morning.

Whether he was right or not, I don't know, for he didn't turn up for the sight-seeing. Still, why should he? This trip is a free-for-all.

We did go into the Abbey, and it out-abbeyes all other abbeyes to my mind; though it may be the associations;

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

and did you ever hear about Queen Elizabeth's and Charles the Second's funeral effigies, kept in a little room there which you would never know about if you weren't told? I mean, their *real* effigies that rode at their own funerals, in the same clothes. Quaint isn't the word, and not even moth-eaten. They're too attractive. I wouldn't mind having a funeral effigy myself when I die. Such good publicity.

The Tower was a tremendous thrill; the spot marked where Ann Boleyn was beheaded, and all. I suppose some of the Crown Jewels displayed nowadays in such a blaze of glory may have been hers. It's the greatest jewellery shop in the world, my dear. Still, I didn't envy a thing, not even the Koh-i-noor. But I *do* want a Beefeater. I'd rather have a Beefeater to follow me around than the most champion police dog on earth. Isn't it sad, they're not to be hired? I suppose they belong to the King, though he doesn't use them.

That was all they—Molly and Jack—were going to let me see of London this time, because they didn't want to break the trip for too long. But I had to go to Harrods, the most gorgeous shop ever, where I bought hats I didn't need and books I did. We had that one more night in London, and it was arranged to start for Cambridge next morning. Ramon never showed up till dinner-time, though he said he'd missed us by a few minutes. There was a funny change in him. "Hang-dog" expresses it, but he was more full of compliments than ever, and he'd bought us mascots in Bond Street: our birth-stones set in platinum for pendants—really cute, though Molly said her stone was for the wrong

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

birth. She's quite sensitive about age, though she needn't be. She looks almost as young as I do, at night. You said so yourself. I hope you didn't mean to be catty? Anyhow, I don't.

Jack said we might as well go to St. Albans for another spot of Cathedral, as it would be our last but two—Peterborough and York. Molly and I weren't terribly enthusiastic, and Ramon could have burst into tears. However, there was the town along the track of the Great North Road, which sounds exciting because it makes you think of stage coaches and bandits of the past.

When we got to St. Albans we were all pleased (except Ramon, who still looked as if he'd gone through a crisis in London, perhaps only dyspepsia), for the place is too interesting and beautiful. It's packed with history, French as well as English. A Dauphin, I don't know which, camped in the High Street and threatened to burn the whole town unless he could pinch thirty marks from the abbot. I do think he must have had a drop of Hebrew blood in him, don't you? It seemed to me that compared to some of the cathedrals which haunt my brain at night, the St. Albans one looks dumpy, but I was snubbed when I said so. Even if it were true, there are the grandest screens and tombs and things inside. And all the Americans who believe that Bacon wrote Shakespeare's plays make a modern pilgrimage to St. Michael's Church because Lord Bacon lived near, and it was convenient to bury him there. He has quite a nice tomb, but I'm sure, from the look on the face of

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

his effigy, he couldn't have been the *real* Shakespeare. Terribly intelligent, but not sort of gay and super-human in a big way as Shakespeare must have been. To be really ladylike, I'll say it was Shakespeare who had the *guts*. Oh, and I forgot to tell you that St. Albans is named after the first English martyr who ever was: a brave soldier who defended a deacon and was instantly killed for his pains. This turned him into a saint at once. Good gracious, wouldn't the world be full of saints to-day if every hero you read of in the newspapers—"Policeman saves boy from being run over"; "Youth stops runaway horse and rescues driver," etc.—were sainted by law? As we went on, we flashed from county to county so fast that even Jack lost count.

We passed nothing sensational, but all the little villages were so charming and friendly, crowding close to the road, it made you want to pat their roofs, the way you do a nice dog's head. Near Cambridge, however, things became quite lyrical with beauty. There was a divine village called Royston, with a celebrated church, but we couldn't resist looking at jockeys training their horses instead.

After that, we turned sharp left for Cambridge, and no town we've seen yet has quite such a perfect entrance. Jack was proud as Punch when I said this. He and Rags are both Cambridge men, but Rags didn't like being educated too much. He quietly walked out of his college and started to be original and successful, in his own way, from then on.

Dearest, you would love Cambridge, even if you

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

don't care for architecture. It is crammed with really handsome young men, beyond the pimple age, and many with noses almost as nice as Rags's, though not *quite*. The feeling seemed to be entirely for light brown coats. How they could tell each other's apart, I don't see; but I suppose it's the same as with men's hats. Absolutely alike, yet each creature knows its own. Any sort of trousers they had, those boys, trousers that didn't go with their coats at all. If they had, Rags said it wouldn't be smart. And the worse, the better. A man whose coat and trousers matched would be almost sent to Coventry. I suppose Coventry must have been a horrid place through the ages, as people have always hated to be sent there by their pals.

"We put up," as the English constantly say, at the most elderly and enchanting inn or hotel, called "The Bull." It's been famous since Cambridge began, or nearly; and we had the most thoroughly English lunch you can imagine before we started out to see the sights. You simply couldn't get it, in an American hotel, not at the point of a pistol; but everything was perfect of its kind. A dear old dining-room, with very young men in those coats and trousers I've been telling you about, entertaining mothers and grandmothers at lunch, *writhing* with shyness and wishing the ancestors were anywhere else. Yes, wishing them even in the place whose name naturally springs to your mind.

It must be wonderful to be an undergrad. at Cambridge, if you have any feeling for beauty. Even if you haven't at first, it would seep into you, some-

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

how, and become part of you in the end so that you'd be different from a man who had never lived in such a place.

I suppose Oxford is just as glorious, but it surely can't be more so!

The first thing Jack did was to take us to King's College Chapel, which is close to the hotel. Only Ramon stayed behind. He had got a telegram which spoiled his meal, and he said it was about important business he must attend to without delay.

I walked with Rags, and though Corpus Christi had been his college (the little time he spent in it), he agreed about the loveliness of King's. We had great luck there, for an organist was playing—a well-known organist from London we found out afterwards. I never heard such music. It was like the voice of all humanity since the beginning of the world: souls crying out that their sorrows had come upon them because they forgot two things—forgot how kindness and love are the only ways to happiness. The voice seemed to beg us to do better than people of the past had done. It made me feel as I'd never felt in my life. I stole one glance at Rags and he happened to be staring at me.

You know what it is, if you like a man, and how your eyes must look when your emotions are keyed up. You ought to turn away at once, or else you fear you never can: his eyes will hold yours for ever.

So I did manage to turn away quite quickly, with my heart beating fast. I stared up at the ceiling for a change, and it happened to be one of the most heavenly

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

ceilings in the world. At that moment a ray of sunlight poured through the tall, stained-glass windows, which are so famous, and the carved stone was not stone any more: it was a field of bending wheat with lilies sprinkled here and there.

I never thought particularly that I could be religious, but suddenly I wondered if I wasn't, on one side of my nature, and it could easily spread if I gave it a chance. I whispered to Rags, "Aren't you glad now, in this place, that you wrote 'Key to a Soul,' which must have helped so many people?"

He said, "It's funny you should ask me that question. I got the idea for the book one day sitting here, when somebody was playing the organ."

I seemed to know Rags awfully well, just for a minute. Then the music stopped, dying away in soft echoes, and Jack spoke. He wanted to show me the Washington family's coat of arms. He was sure that, as an American, I'd be interested to see it there. And so I was. But I'd have liked just about sixty seconds more with Rags. Minutes like those change your whole life and nature.

Wordsworth wrote about King's College Chapel, and Jack quoted a verse, but, my dear—I may be conceited—I liked my own thoughts better.

When it was time to go, I could hardly tear myself away. I kept on looking back and back over my shoulder. Even if I come again, it will never be the same.

As if this college, and some of the others which we saw (Corpus Christi we visited next, to please

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Rags) weren't exquisite enough in themselves, they have lawns and bridges over a river; and the loveliest trees and swans.

Sir Christopher Wren, who built part of Jack and Molly's house, St. Roland's, built a bridge at St. John's College. Perfect, with the reflection like a dream. But I can't be a good judge of bridges. All these seemed too beautiful to compare with each other.

The undergrads. talk of the "Backs." They mean the backs of the colleges where the river is, and the charm of the walk we took was almost beyond this earth. Molly thought it a pity, for my sake, that we were missing the great week—"May Week"—when all the girls come and Cambridge turns to "revelry and mirth." But I wasn't sorry. You'll scarcely know me when I tell you that the fewer people I see these days the better, so long as they are the *right* ones. If I heard any jazz music or crooning I might commit murder.

Jack said, if I liked Cambridge so much, I wasn't too old for Girton, the women's college. But I don't care to go to college. I just like to look at colleges, and live a more personal life of my own.

Do you know what a "quad" is? I don't think they call them quads at our colleges, but they're beautiful lawns held in the brick or stone arms of the old, old college buildings. And there are great branching trees, and shadows like grey gauze on green velvet; and noble, big gates, and birds making love to each other. Rags's college, Corpus Christi, has the oddest quad of all; but that doesn't put off the birds.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

The whole place has the mellowest look you can imagine. The bricks are the colour of peaches just a little over-ripe, and the stone has shadows like dark sapphires.

We walked and walked by the river-side till we came to Jesus College, where the serious part begins; I mean, the rowing part where the teams and eights practise. We saw all the colleges along the river, too, and sampled their quads.

At last Molly and I were tired in body, though not in spirit. We were almost glad it began to rain a little, so we went home to the Bull Hotel. We'd missed tea without even knowing it, which is a minor tragedy in England.

Next morning we stayed in Cambridge and then went on to Peterborough, which is just a small detour when you are going to York; and the counties were perfectly kaleidoscopic, so fast did we spin out of one into another.

You know, England is a surprising old place! For instance, Peterborough: it seemed like an interruption to have to go, because, darling, it was secretly a fearful excitement to me that, after all, we were on the way to Yorkshire—*Rags's* Yorkshire, which he'd always been boasting about, saying it's like a whole, separate kingdom by itself. I'd pretended that I didn't care so much for going. I'd said I didn't believe, after the splendid things we'd seen, Yorkshire would be so hot. But I was really dying to go, and frightened that something might happen to prevent. I felt I couldn't bear it if anything did. Now we were headed for it; to

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

stop in York for one day, because Rags thinks there's no town like York in England; then to go on towards evening to his real home, Flowers Abbey. It *is* his home, though he doesn't live in it, if you see what I mean. He just visits there, because he has a sickeningly rich aunt who has spent thousands on bathrooms, electricity, steam-heating, and so on, which Rags's ancestors up to now had done without. I wonder what she's like, and if she'll snub me?

I was wild with curiosity to see the place, and I still am, for we haven't got there yet. It wouldn't help to skip out Peterborough, for in any case we'd have got to York at night. But Jack and Molly were both hell-bent, to put it prettily, on Peterborough, so nobody rebelled, not even Ramon. The only thing about him was, he seemed quite odd and said he wasn't well. He was homesick, and being homesick for some wild reason made him long to have me in his car. In fact he begged for me, but Jack said no. This was a most important part of the trip, and he had to keep telling me things. Ramon might have me next day, if I wanted to change then.

What I started out to say, though, was about Peterborough. When we reached there it wasn't an interruption. It was a joy because of its old romance more than its situation, and because of two wonderful stories about the Cathedral, or Minster. It seems to be called both. I wouldn't have missed it for a good deal; and it would only make us a couple of hours later getting to York, Molly and Jack had said. What were a couple of hours when you think of seeing the place where

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Mary, Queen of Scots, the most fascinating heroine of history, was buried? They did cart her body away later, to Westminster. But everything about her thrills me since I saw that bright curl of her hair in Windsor Castle, looking as much alive to-day as Molly's or mine.

And then, poor Catherine of Aragon, who is so tragic in Shakespeare, even if she were rather dull in real life. King Henry the Eighth must have had a twinge of remorse for divorcing her the way he did, because, instead of putting up a mere memorial to her, or one of those tombs other queens have, he said, swearing a rich, round oath, "I'll give her the goodliest monument in Christendom." He probably exclaimed, "I'll be damned if I don't!" And nobody thought he'd really go to the expense and trouble. But he kept his word, and Peterborough is practically Catherine of Aragon's. There was a man called "Old Scarlett" who buried her and the lovely Mary, too. His picture hangs in the Cathedral. Quite a nasty man to look at, as you would suppose.

There is just a heavenly portico, and a surprising sort of bell-tower, which even I noticed as being odd, though I don't know anything scientific about bell-towers.

You may think, lovey, that I'm using the adjective "heavenly" a good deal, but Jack and Rags chaffed Molly and me so much because everything was "marvellous," "wonderful" or "divine," that I had to think up something different. And you can't say a cathedral is "spiffing" or "topping," can you? Those are favourite English adjectives, but almost entirely confined to the male sex.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

I liked Peterborough rather better because the country around was flat; the Minster stood up so nobly. After all the fuss they'd made about seeing the place, which cost us twenty miles each way off the Great North Road, Molly and Jack seemed more indifferent to the place, when we got there, than I've seen them at any cathedral town before. Still, they wanted to linger. Rags was keen to get on to York, but he couldn't drag those two away from Peterborough. They bought books, and trifling antique things, till finally it was so late that Jack proposed having dinner before we started on. Molly said she was starving—so unusual for her, as she eats very little—and, anyhow, we'd had quite a lunch. . . .

Well, we did dine, and Jack was most particular about the wines. He said that he felt "in a vinous mood," and he ordered some port for after dinner which was supposed to be as old as port can be without going to the bad.

Jack was more than usually cordial to Ramon, which pleased him, for anyhow R. was in a lost-dog mood, much worse than "vinous." He drank several glasses, not the glasses themselves, you know, though it sounds like that, the way most people write. Rags didn't quite match up with him, but he did his best. Jack, too; and he wouldn't let Molly and me off from sampling the stuff.

I don't drink wine, as you know. In old days, maybe, as long as a year ago, I could win a bet on polishing off a row of cocktails, and I could get away with a gin and ginger ale. But when it began to seem

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

smart for girls to refuse anything stronger than orange juice, you remember how you and I set the fashion in Elmville. I dare say if we hadn't, our complexions wouldn't be what they are to-day; though when you're eighteen or nineteen you don't have to worry as much about your skin as you do about being just one step ahead of the most modern of the moderns.

In consequence of this old port, we all felt lazy, and sat at the table a long time. It was dark when we started; and there isn't another moon yet since that lovely one we had at Burnham Beeches, which first stirred me up to be romantic over Rags's nose, etc. At least, I *think* it did, as far as I can remember. So much has happened since!

There was hardly even a star, only now and then one would show in a break between purple clouds, for all the world like a silver coin ready to drop from a torn purse.

We went sailing smoothly along a good road, and Jack explained that there wasn't much to see by way of scenery, so we needn't mind travelling at night.

We kept on shooting from county to county, with towns and villages here and there. I remember, for one thing, though I can't recall when, we passed through Stilton, where I suppose they make the cheese which men like so well. Our men had had some with their port, at Peterborough. We didn't know when we'd get to York, and we didn't care, for Rags said that the Station Hotel was always open and always gay, almost like a London hotel. Anyhow, our rooms were engaged ahead.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Often we passed through lonely stretches of road without even a farm-house light to be seen, and in one of these suddenly we saw, drawn up across the road in front, a huge black motor-car. It looked almost like a hearse!

We were only far enough off for Jack to put on his brakes comfortably and shout to Ramon following behind, in case Jaimé didn't see what was holding us up.

My dear, "holding up" was the right expression!

I could hardly believe the thing was true. It seemed more like a dream after the port, and we would soon wake.

Dimly we could spy several men grouped round the car across the road, and Jack shouted: "What's the matter? Are you stalled?"

The men didn't answer. Before we could have counted "One, two!" they attacked.

Yes, *attacked*! Three of these were saying "Hands up!" to Jack and Rags, with automatics pushed through our open windows, and three more had rushed past like evil, dark shadows, to do the same to Jaimé and Ramon. There were six altogether against four, if you can count Jaimé a man.

Then Molly did a thing I never would have thought of her. Instead of being brave, she threw a faint, or a near faint, all across Jack, so he couldn't move.

"We are unarmed," I heard him say in a queer, strained voice. "You don't want to scare the ladies to death, do you?"

"Women out in the road," ordered one of the men. "And you two stick 'em up."

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

I didn't know just what to do for the best! I only wanted most awfully not to be a coward. But Jack carried Molly out, a dead-weight, so the bandits must see he couldn't fight back.

"Go, Spat," Rags said in a cool voice. "Best for everyone." So I went, my knees like poached eggs with no nice hard toast to support them. I thought I'd pick up a stone and throw at the beasts when their backs were turned, but so much was happening there was no chance; besides, it was one of those roads where you wouldn't find a pebble.

Jack put Molly down on the grass, but to my surprise she didn't stay put an instant. She popped up and grabbed me by the arm. Evidently she'd just pulled that faint to keep Jack out of the scrap as long as possible. Still, even that didn't seem like the Randolph character.

The wildest things were going on. It was like an amateur motion picture where several scenes have got mixed together, some of them upside down. Molly was hanging on to me, so I couldn't do a thing if there'd been a thing to do. We were both all eyes and short breaths.

My whole thought was for Rags, as I suppose Molly's was for Jack, but I did just glance from the scrap at Ramon's car, which had stopped close behind ours.

His lot of bandits had by this time jerked him and Jaimé out on to the road, and there they stood like dummies, with not only their hands up, but their arms, as far as they would reach. There wasn't an ounce of fight in either. They were being well looked after by

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

a bandit apiece, while a third was going through the car as if it were a treasure chest. Perhaps they'd already gone through Ramon and Jaimé while my eyes were on something else. But that pair were so like a couple of sheep that I lost interest, and did a flash-back to Rags and Jack.

People do say that when you're being held up by armed men it's silly to resist; you'll only be shot in the tummy, which, it seems, hurts worse than anywhere else. No doubt about it, Ramon and his chauffeur were of that opinion, which they had a right to be; but Rags and Jack were not. They were going for their three like hell let loose, and would you believe it? Rags knew ju-jitsu! He threw himself on to two bandits at once, the most awful-looking hyenas about seven feet tall, and in some miraculous way he whirled them in the air like human windmills; that silent, cynical, mysterious Rags, who has always acted as if he'd rather sit still and watch our inferior old world stagger about on its own than stir himself to use a lever on it. He had both his guys on the ground before you could say knife, their pistols flying and their breath going out in one grunt each.

Then he turned to Jack, but Jack was holding his own and was wrenching the revolver, or whatever it was, away from his hairy gorilla. The question then seemed whether to stand with his foot on the fallen enemy's stomach (which he could do, as one man lay on top of the other) or help Ramon.

Of course, I'm quite fond of Ramon and grateful for all the nice things he's given me, but I didn't want Rags

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

to risk himself with three more men after what he'd already gone through.

That's just what he did, however. He cast himself upon the two who held up Ramon, as if he'd been a catapult, not that I know what one is, but it sounds like a prehistoric tank. He seized one fellow round the waist from behind, and ju-jitsued him as if he—I mean Rags—had been a prize Japanese exhibitionist. The other turned on him, and the third came out of the car with a nasty automatic in his hand. But Rags caught him round the ankle with his own foot and sent him toppling, while at the same time his hands were busy with Ramon's special assailant. (Good word, that, "assailant"!) My dear, Douglas Fairbanks himself couldn't have been slicker!

You would have thought that while Rags was battling and had practically relieved Jaimé and Ramon, those two South Americans would have pitched in to help. Not they, however! They stood as if turned to stone, leaving all the work to Rags and Jack. Jack had downed his man by this time, and while Rags did his Japanese wrestling act with the last of the six bandits still on his feet, Jack gave the brute a tap on the head with one of the dropped revolvers he'd grabbed up. That did for his nibs, though he had on one of those thick Hollywood gangster caps, and the tap didn't look as severe as it might have been.

At this moment, to make the whole episode more like movie melodrama than ever, there came a rap! rap! of a motor-bike, and there was a cop in our midst. He had handcuffs and everything—at least, a pair or

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

two; and Rags and Jack got rope from their cars for the rest.

The sight of the motor cop had brought Ramon and Jaimé out of their trance. They pitched in, both very active and useful, to help bind the almost unconscious bandits whom Rags and Jack had knocked out. Five were piled into the brigand car, which was still drawn up across the road, and the cop ordered the least unconscious bird to take the driver's seat. Then he brought out that little book which we girls have learned to know *so* well, especially when we first began to drive, and our own men told their names and stories. Ramon's story lacked *all* box-office appeal, but nobody seemed to notice much, and quicker than you could imagine possible, the cop was biking along beside the bandit car, while that cowed wretch inside drove under instruction to whatever was the nearest police station.

There was our party, *planté là*, in the road, safe and sound, and our cars as intact as ourselves. Ramon came to me and explained why he had let himself be help up. He said it must have been the port wine at Peterborough. He wasn't used to port, and it had affected his head, so the bandits got him trapped before he could make a move to defend himself and us.

Wonderfully, not a thing had been stolen from any of us, or from the cars. Rags had been too quick for the thieves. There was no doubt in our minds that he was the hero of the occasion. Even poor miserable Ramon felt that, and was sick over it, for he doesn't like Rags. He's jealous of him; and now, to have Rags the brave hero while he's a mere wet smack, is

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

almost too much to bear. I'm sure he would have frothed at the mouth if one could do so voluntarily. But, as a matter of fact, it is the vanquished villains in thrillers who do that. Out of a book it can only be managed with spit. And spit is undignified.

Jack was all right because, hampered with Molly as he had been, he'd done his very best, and come in nobly towards the end. He shook hands with Rags, praised him and said he'd be damned if he'd ever dreamed Rags was a ju-jitsu expert, or words to that effect.

Rags just laughed a bit nervously, and said he'd had a Japanese pal, an artist, living near him in a cottage at Strand-on-the-Green. Not an artist only in ju-jitsu, but in painting, and he—Rags—had bought several pictures; also, he'd introduced the Jap to Sir Robert Reading, who is a great friend of Molly's and Jack's; a play producer who has the new Princess Elizabeth Theatre, where Rags's play has been running for nearly a year. Jack writes to him all the time, because Sir R. is ill with a clot floating about in his blood somewhere that the doctors are trying to chase. I was taken to have tea with him in London at his request, so perhaps Jack or Molly had been telling tales about me, and I had to be shown off as a rare specimen for good or ill. He was adorable, a sort of wise cherub, about forty-five years old, with an impish look in his innocent blue orbs. He's bought in with the American publisher of "Elsa," but he nobly offered not to bring out the novel if Molly and I minded. We didn't mind, as he has lied up hill and down dale to the newspapers, saying we never even heard of the book—in spite of Pom-

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

phreys. If Sir R. isn't hopelessly in love with Molly, I'll eat my hat, but he cast quite a glad eye on me; said that little cat, Liddy Lallers, would be nowhere beside me, if only I were an actress. Naturally he didn't refer to her cat attributes. Well, God alone knows what an actress I am every day in the hidden vicissitudes (is that the way to spell it?) of life.

Oh, but I started out to tell you about Rags and his Japanese. The artist was so grateful, he offered to teach Rags ju-jitsu since it was hopeless to teach him to paint. The two men practised all kinds of passes together for months on end, and at last he and Rags, though the Jap was tiny, could throw each other all over the room.

Molly and I praised Rags, too. I'm afraid we almost fawned on him, and he was quite embarrassed, the way Englishmen are if you tell them they're even decent. Finally, though Rags and Ramon like each other just about as much as two black tom-cats on a roof at night, Rags turned human and told Ramon it wasn't a bit his fault that he and Jaime got so hopelessly held up. I don't think, though, that Rags's and Jack's efforts at consolation helped much. Poor old Ramon, instead of being grateful, could have killed them both, and over their dead bodies have claimed all the credit.

When I saw that Rags didn't like compliments, I decided on another tack. "Well, what are we going to do now?" I asked. "We can't stay here all night saying nice things to each other in the middle of a bandit-infested road."

"It's not bandit-infested," Jack defended his old

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

English highway. "And, of course, we're going on to York. Are you fit to start again now, girls? And are you all right, Dorando?"

Dorando said he was very all right. It was only *things* that had gone wrong, not he; and Molly and I answered by piling back into the car. Heavens, it seemed like Home, Sweet Home!

"Well, if it was *our* country, that motor cop would have made us travel miles and bear witness or something," said I. But Jack didn't seem to think there'd be any danger of that sort, so on we went along the road to York, as if nothing had happened except that Molly and I, and probably Ramon, felt like nothing on earth.

It wasn't terribly long after that before we arrived at York and drove straight to the Station Hotel which Jack had mentioned. "Station Hotel" doesn't sound alluring, does it, but, my dear, it was *Paradise*. Though by this time we were very late, the place was all lit up as Rags had said it would be. The jolliest rooms with huge baths attached were given us, with views looking out on a lovely great garden that somehow reminded me of Queen Elizabeth's day. Perhaps it was patterned after a period garden. You would never have guessed that there was a railway within a mile.

When we'd washed the sweat of anguish from our brows, Molly's and mine, and dusted powder on top, a grand supper was ready for us. We put ourselves out to be kind to Ramon, but he drooped like a big sunflower that hasn't seen the sun for a year. (That *could* be an English sunflower—certainly not a South American one, which must get absolutely scorched.)

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

I suppose we were all tired, though none of us would confess it, and Jack and Rags talked calmly about cricket and football news in an evening paper they found.

I was undressing and had got to the pyjama stage when a knock came at my door. I was surprised, and modestly wrapped a dazzling kimono more or less round me. I thought it might be Molly, but again, it *might* be a policeman or a newspaper man. At home, a call on a young girl at that time of night wouldn't faze one of our tabloid boys!

I opened the door and, by Jove! it was Ramon!

I gave a little gasp, for in an American hotel anything could happen if you let a man put so much as a nose, and rather a large one such as Ramon's, inside your door after midnight. A house policeman might pounce down on us like a thousand of brick, and you more innocent than one of those unborn Persian lambs they make into coats. Besides, Rags's door was on one side of mine, and Jack's and Molly's on the other.

"I *must* speak to you," said Ramon.

"You mustn't to-night," said I.

"Let me in one moment, I beg!" he implored.

"To-morrow," I said. "Sorry!" And quite gently but firmly shut the door in his face.

That, my dear, is as far as my story has got, because it's now next morning, breakfast time, and Ramon hasn't appeared.

It seems he's not dead, at all events not dead in his own room, for Jack made a chambermaid open it after he'd knocked a number of times.

The bed had not been slept in!

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

I feel guilty somehow, though why should I? It's not my fault if Rags is braver than he and knows ju-jitsu like nobody's business except Doug. Fairbanks.

I will write to you again when the next bomb has burst, or the next blow fallen.

Your loving ju-jitsued,
SPAT.

Lord Brighthelmstone to Sir Robert Reading

STATION HOTEL,
YORK.

May 1st.

MY DEAR BOB,

It's midnight, but I won't wait till to-morrow to let you know the success of our plot. In fact, it was almost too much of a whacking success.

The idea (Molly's) was to try out the two men, Rags and Ramon, in the test of quick thinking and physical courage, under the critical nose of Spat.

I hadn't much doubt that it would turn to the advantage of Rags, but he'd never informed me that he was competent to start a school for ju-jitsu.

There was no real danger for anyone in carrying out the plan, because I knew that Rags had no weapon on him of a more serious nature than a penknife, which is particularly hard to open; and I had taken pains to learn that Dorando and his chauffeur travelled unarmed. They would probably not do so in certain other countries, but the poor chaps had a pathetic faith

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

in England as a land of peace. I have destroyed that faith. I did it for the best. In fact, I think Molly would have been almost ready to divorce me in Reno for extreme mental cruelty and have proposed to you if I hadn't consented to help.

When we first started our trip both Dorando and Rags looked like two ripe cherries for her to choose from, if she cared to snap them away from Spat. But lately she has concentrated upon getting Spat off, and may-the-best-man-win sort of thing.

Well, you secured me the actors for our open-air melodrama which was to be staged appropriately in a lonely spot on the Great North Road; ghosts of the past to help us out as extras behind scenes.

Six lusty giants you were able to supply, formidably armed with toy automatics, and a convenient motor cop in costume ready to appear at the right moment. They did you credit as a great producer.

Rags is not to blame for his ju-jitsu exhibition, which felled the giants as if they'd been ninepins—all but one, to whom I dealt a gentle tap which was his cue to fall. Rags genuinely believed in the drama, and certainly turned out to be even more of a hero than our wildest hopes had pictured. The trouble is that four of the actors, if not five, must have suffered from mild cases of concussion as they dropped on the 'ard, 'ard road, to say nothing of miscellaneous sprains. I'm ready and glad to pay damages, as I agreed. But the chaps were bundled into our fine property automobile, hand-cuffed, the one decent driver among them acting as chauffeur (the fellow to whom I'd given that spectacular yet gentle

tap on the head), the car being shepherded by the motor cop. The nearest police station was the supposed destination of the party. In reality, it would have been the nearest pub, just before closing hour. But the looks of rage turned on me by the battered bandits were slightly disconcerting. They'd been so much more hurt than they'd bargained for, that I think several were candidates for a hospital rather than a pub. And I am preparing myself for a game of consequences. I haven't mentioned this contingency to Molly, as she was even more disconcerted by Rags's skill than I was.

In order to give Rags full credit at the beginning for heroism, I was sacrificed. Molly did a very nice faint, allowing me just time to pick out the chauffeur for my man, and save him from Rags's onslaught. I'm afraid Spat, at heart, considers me a poor specimen of an Englishman, but it can't be helped.

I'll get this off at once. I think it will catch a late post, and you will have it some time to-morrow. We are to see the Cathedral and the splendid old town in the morning, if the female members of the party are equal to the effort, and towards evening we expect to drive on to Flowers Abbey, only forty or fifty miles from here. That is to be the high spot of the tour. Though we shall keep our eyes open motoring back to London and St. Roland's, the climax of the trip is Flowers Abbey. Rags has been so keen on our paying this visit that he must have a reason. Possibly it's only to show off his possessions. But if he has it in mind to say to Spat, "What about it, old thing?" the favourite up-to-date formula for proposing marriage, it looks as

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
if the girl were now ready to throw herself upon his
brave and manly breast.

Poor Dorando is under a black cloud, though I have
known a dark horse to come in first, contrary to all
expectations. And pity is akin to love. To-morrow
may tell. Or it may not. Anyhow, this must go off
at once.

You were a sport, getting together a good cast for
us at short notice, and they were magnificent under
difficulties which couldn't have been foreseen.

Yours gratefully,
JACK.

P.S.—I'll write again directly. You shan't be
cheated out of York, for our private affairs.

*Miss Liddy Lallers to her Father, Herr Anton Lallers
at Mainz, Germany*

(Translation from German into English)

PRINCESS ELIZABETH THEATRE,
LONDON.

PAPACHÉN—LIEBLING!

I enclose the usual, but soon it shall be much, much
more. Only I still feel it will be better for us to keep
secret the fact that you are a butcher. You see, you
needn't be one long. You can sell out the business and
forget it. Unless I'm more of a fool than I think I
am, you may count on doing this in a few months'
time. I hope you won't marry again, darling. Women
are so jealous, and they love to make mischief and
spend their husbands' money.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Everything is going grandly. When the Señor came to London first, alone, to talk things over, I was very careful and maidenly, as you advised me to be, from your knowledge of men. I think I must have inherited some of that knowledge, don't you? Quite a lot of gentlemen I have been able to turn around my little finger by using that line.

Lord Ragford was the first hard job I had, but I still think on the strength of his letters and presents to me I might have got him if I hadn't suddenly turned in another direction.

I *would* have liked an English title, as I am in some ways almost an English girl now. I do bless you for making me learn the language as well as if I'd been born in this hypocritical 'old country which I pretend to love as much as I am loved. What little accent I had left when I was called over here for my first talking picture, I've lost long ago. I might be an English girl, or some say an American; and I did think it would be nice to be Lady Ragford for a while, till I grew tired of it. As soon as I did, or anything better came along, I knew very well I could have a divorce by going to Paris or Reno or Mexico. Mexico is awfully convenient if you're in Hollywood, they say.

But, the something else better did come along, just at the right time, darling Papachén, for your Liddy. There was the bother of a breach of promise before me, and though I might have won damages, I saw that night at Winchester when I took my first step on the path, that Ragford would give all he'd got before he'd marry me. Once, it might have been different, but

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

this pert American girl had her claws into him. The best I could expect from Ragford was money, a few thousands. And my newspaper article. Then this dear Señor appeared on the scene. He was like the lamb caught in the bushes which Mamachén used to read about in the Bible before she went to Heaven, or wherever she did go.

Of course, I wouldn't be your daughter or the actress I am on screen and stage if I hadn't seen from the first what he was up to. He wanted to force Ragford into marrying me, at any price, to leave the field free for himself with the American hussy. What the two see in her, I can't tell. She doesn't compare with me, if I do say so myself. Eyelashes, I *grant* her, but anyone with four or five shillings can have eyelashes, and choose the length.

I easily hid from the Señor my certain conviction that Ragford wouldn't marry me. I made him believe that rather than spend his whole fortune and have a scandal, our budding young playwright would toe the mark. It was the Señor as much as I, who suggested there must be plenty of money spent, to put salt on this bird's tail.

I wrote you how he gave me the cheque for thirty thousand pounds, and said that more would follow if needed. At first he was shy about a cheque, but I was so sweet and innocent and made such large eyes, just as I do in "Minette," on the stage. I said, what would I do with thirty thousand pounds in cash? Somebody, even my own maid or chauffeur, who are husband and wife, might steal the money before I even had time

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

to take it to a bank. Besides, the Señor was staying only one night in London then, rejoining his horrid stuck-up friends in Eastbourne, a niceish place where Sir Harry Helman took me for a week-end last year as a change from Brighton. The Señor wouldn't be able himself to go to his London bank and pick up such a big sum in pounds. So in the end he forked out the cheque, and I gave him one little kiss.

He liked it, or he wouldn't be a man, and I wouldn't be the famous Liddy Lallers, the idol of London. But he didn't like it *enough*. He didn't put his whole soul into it. I could feel he was thinking of that—well, darling, I won't write the word, for you're still sentimental, and you don't approve of it on my lips, or pen.

All this you know, because I wrote you a short account of what had happened. But I didn't write after they all motored into London to stay for a couple of days. I had my plans made. The Señor came with me to the flat, after the play, so I could tell him what I was doing about lawyers for my case. I remembered Jean Harlow in the film "Hell's Angels," how she got her young man safely anchored late at night in her sitting-room and then said: "Excuse me one minute while I go put on something comfortable," or a sentence like that.

I followed her example, and, Papachén, maybe you, being a butcher, would have been a little shocked if you had seen your Liddy's idea of "something comfortable." It was awfully becoming, though, what there was of it, and sometimes, as we discussed, I

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
followed the scene in "Hell's Angels" by letting the so-comfortable thing almost drop off my shoulders. We were having champagne and caviare, all by ourselves, and I said if I wanted the best defence, I ought to have just four or five thousand more pounds, or the case might be long drawn-out.

The Señor was writing the cheque, and my dressing-gown was dropping more than ever when Charlotte, my maid, whom you got for me from dear Mainz, opened the door with her key and walked in.

"*Mein Gott!*" she exclaimed, and her husband, Emil, who was just outside, rushed in to see if I was murdered or the place on fire.

The Señor went away as quickly as he could then; but ever since I've been sending him letters and telegrams, saying that Charlotte and Emil may spoil my case against Ragford. I begged him to come back and save me, but he had excuses until to-day. I don't know yet what has happened in York, the place where he last arrived, but something serious must have come up. He has wired me he will be in London to-night. Papachén, congratulate your Liddy. She will be one of the richest ladies in the world, if the Señor marries her. If not, thirty-five thousand is not too bad. Five would have been Ragford's outside best. We shall see. A thousand hugs, my one, true liebling who understands me through and through.

Your BABY.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

*Miss Susan Randolph to Miss Hattie Belle Haynes,
Elmville, Virginia*

STATION HOTEL,
YORK.

DARLING,

I had the scare of my young life when Ramon seemed to have disappeared in the night, for I feared it might have been a weeny bit my fault, shutting the door in his face. But I needn't have worried.

Just after breakfast, when I'd careered upstairs to get my hat and go out with the gang, my 'phone tinkled. Such a relief to hear Ramon's voice, and be practically sure it didn't come from the other world!

He was calling from the hall, and begged me to see him in one of the reception rooms (he explained which one) if only for a minute.

I said I had just about a minute to spare if I didn't keep the others waiting, and down I pelted.

Dearest, if I could ever have married Ramon, it was *finished* when I saw him. Not that I wasn't awfully sorry for the poor fish. I was. But you can't go about marrying every fish you're sorry for. Oh, *help!* He hadn't shaved, and the lower part of his dial might have been smeared with a mixture of soot and blueing. His collar, too! All rumpled. Can anything make a man look worse than that combination? If it can, I don't want to see it.

He began explaining that he hadn't been to bed, or even undressed, he was so unhappy. He knew I

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
misjudged him, and he had other worries, dreadful ones, that were *hounding* him.

I answered, perhaps a little primly, that I didn't misjudge him in the least. "My God!" he exclaimed at that innocent remark, "you might as well tell me you think me a coward!"

"Not at all," I answered. "You were overpowered. It was just too bad—just one of those things . . ."

"And your Lord Ragford is a hero!" he exploded.

He looked so furious I was almost frightened, till I remembered how easy he'd been to hold up.

"We-ell," said I, "he isn't *my* Lord Ragford. But he was—er—sort of resourceful, and saved us all. Maybe even our lives."

Ramon replied that he didn't think so. The whole affair was very likely a bluff. Anyhow, he himself had done far braver things at home and hoped he would again, or he'd not have much to boast about. He could fence. He could "throw the rope" (whatever he meant by that, unless the Will Rogers's act), he could fight bulls. If I would marry him and go to South America, he would *show* me.

I told him that I was afraid I couldn't marry him (heavens, with such a chin liable to happen any moment!), and that, so far as I could see, I probably would never marry at all.

"Will you swear that you won't marry Lord Ragford?" he shot at me. "If you will, I'll take another chance."

I explained that I couldn't *swear* not to marry any

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

particular man, because that was supposed to be bad luck—a regular jinx.

“Then you won’t swear not to marry *me*?” he flung back.

There was a poser! “I’ll simply *say* I can’t,” I answered. “I know I never could.”

“On account of last night?” he asked.

“No,” said I, “on account of *every* night.”

That seemed to hit him where he lived, my dear. Not that I’d meant exactly what I’m sure he thought. It had just slipped out, so I let it stand. He rushed away, and as he went, looking *so* much shorter-legged than Rags, I thought I heard him burble that we should never meet again. He was going to leave at once for South America or, at the least, for London.

“Well, good-bye!” I heard myself calling after him in a pretty little voice. And there is the end of a perfect love story that might have been, but didn’t was!

If he goes to London and sees Miss Lallers again, I shouldn’t wonder if *she’d* be the one to be swept away to South America with him to see him fight bulls and throw ropes. He’s been kind of hinting about her lately, now and then, in a dreary way, as the Ancient Mariner might have hinted about his albatross if he’d switched it round to the back, out of sight, out of smell.

Well, if Liddy goes, *let* her! She’s just the sort of girl to be happy in Buenos Aires where, in case Ramon tires of her, she’ll have other resources, if all the naughty things one hears are true.

I flew upstairs again to put powder on my nose,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
which is so calming, and I needed it. Here comes
Molly, so good-bye.

Love,
SPAT.

Lord Brighthelmstone to Sir Robert Reading

FLOWERS ABBEY,
YORKSHIRE.

May 2nd.

MY DEAR BOB,

Well, our party is now one member short. That's far from being my only news, but it comes first, and may possibly concern you, sooner or later, through Miss Lallers, *alias* "Minette."

Dorando has left us. He didn't even bid us farewell by word of mouth, but preferred to do so by letter. This was addressed to Molly, thanking her and me for our "kindness" in allowing him to join our tour. He said that he was urgently called to London on important business; that he was taking train, and his chauffeur would follow with the car.

No other reason was alleged, but Molly and I have certainly queered his pitch. That is, if he ever had a pitch worth the name in connection with Spat.

Molly went to the girl's room after receiving this brief adieu, but didn't get any change out of Miss Randolph. Even Molly couldn't very well plump out the question, "Have you just refused Señor Dorando?" and Spat didn't offer information on the subject. She

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

actually pretended to be surprised at the news of his departure.

There was no use in holding a wake for the gentleman, so we all set out to walk through streets too good even for the best motor-car. I swear to you there are some in York that practically haven't changed in five centuries.

Spat, who is annoyed by some of our awkward names for gracious places, could find no fault here. She must have been a bit preoccupied, but York pulled her out of her stupor. Gillygate reminded her of flowers in an old-fashioned garden; Palmer's Lane naturally brought thoughts of Romeo and Juliet; Spurriergate filled her with new energy.

York and London are brothers (or sisters) of the Roman eagles, but York-Eboracum has changed less than our Londinium. It hasn't needed to change as a great capital must do. It has kept a mellow beauty entirely its own, and the Minster is its Koh-i-noor.

Rags was right. Not counting Westminster, of course, we had saved the best for the last. And York Minster has glories which even Westminster never boasted, or has lost long ago. A lucky town, I should call York, though birds of evil omen flew over the Roman Emperor Severus as he was carried in to the city with death's black wings as near him as those of the feared ravens.

York was worth the Romans' conquering when they first came marching north. They were greater than the Britons, and if York was worth conquering they were worthy conquerors. I always feel there's some

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

of their blood left in us to this day. We have to be Romans first to be Englishmen. Those fellows made more impression on us than the Normans did, though the Normans were pretty good in their way. Of course, the great Roman Wall isn't in Yorkshire, but if we should happen to make a longer visit than we plan at Flowers Abbey, I'd like to take Molly and Spat for a look at what's left. To me, there's nothing in England with a finer thrill than the Wall, and the thoughts that go with it. Kipling has felt that, too. And dear old Monty, knowing my admiration for the Wall and its history, sent me for a wedding anniversary present not long ago, some Roman dice which had been dug up there, also a few silver coins found near by, paid by the loser in that long-ago game of Roman craps, maybe, and forgotten when orders came to fight or march.

But there are as many Roman memories in York as at the Wall: memories of each stage in our island story. There's no such walk as on the mediæval city walls, and from there you get a grand view of the Minster. It's an old, old Minster; as old in its present form, or nearly, as the middle of the thirteenth century. But there was a wooden church standing where this pile of towers and the mighty fane rear high above the low roofs that cluster too near.

I suppose every period of English architecture is represented in York Minster, but even though there's no nobler Minster in the land, and the town gates, and the wall, the ruins of St. Mary's Abbey, the Guildhall, the Castle, the Treasurer's House, and the Merchant's

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Hall are worth a long journey, I think most people come as worshippers of the fourteenth-century glass.

Several minsters and cathedrals keep good bits of glass, spared accidentally by Cromwell, and my King's College Chapel in Cambridge has a window to boast of. But the stained glass jewels of England are at York. There's nothing anywhere to touch the Window of the Five Sisters. And don't people know it! A new Pilgrims' Way has been created to see that window alone. Impossible to describe the beauty of colour. There's a blue which belongs more to dreams than reality. Having once seen, you can't forget it. Afterwards, when you hear some low and musical voice (it must be low and musical, like Molly's, for instance) murmur the word "blue," you'll find yourself remembering the old glass of York Minster. And if you happen to be present at a service, when the choir boys are singing, you are about as near heaven as you can hope to get on this earth.

I've been told that during the war all the windows were carefully removed and buried, new glass being substituted temporarily, in case of an air raid. Whether it's true or not, I don't know. But they did that trick in France. Why shouldn't we have followed the example?

Days should be spent in York, to do the place justice, and if Molly and I had been alone together, they would have been spent. Rags was so eager to get us to Flowers Abbey, however, that it was all he could do to keep his façade of casual indifference from falling like the Walls of Jericho. We lunched at our own

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

hotel, went out again for more wanderings in spite of Rags's nervousness, but returned rather sooner than Molly and I liked, to pack such belongings as we'd scattered in our rooms.

Just as I was locking Molly's wardrobe-trunk suitcase, a call came for me on the 'phone.

"Gentleman to see you, sir. Won't give his name, but says the business is important."

By the way in which that word "gentleman" was spoken, I knew that my caller wasn't one. And I'm not sure if I had a presentiment, or whether it was a turn of the screw on my guilty conscience. Anyhow, I suspected something wrong. So did Molly when I told her. And it came out that we suspected the same thing.

"I'll be down," I answered, and Molly's eyes, fixed upon me, were even larger than usual.

"Let me go with you," she said.

"Why?" I inquired brightly. "The gentleman or gent hasn't asked for you."

"I know," said Molly, "but . . . I don't want to be interfering, of course, but I'd love to be within ear-shot. The person needn't recognize me. I'll put on a different hat with a wee face veil, and cock it over my eyes. I'll just be buying stamps or Minster post-cards or something. You might like to consult with me about what to do. Or I might keep you from doing what you would do if I weren't there."

I stared at her. She stared back at me. "You think . . ." I began.

She nodded, "I do."

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

“ Then if you’re right you’d best keep out of it,” I ordered.

“ Oh, no, because of Rags and Spat,” Molly pleaded. “ They must *never* learn the truth about last night. If there’s likely to be trouble and I were listening in, I might think of a way to stop it.”

Well, you know what Molly is. I changed my wave-length, and allowed her to descend in the same lift with me. As the door opened on the ground floor, we parted. I went to a desk window to inquire where the gentleman was waiting, and Molly, with an eye on every move, sauntered towards a show-case displaying dresses.

By this time you’ve guessed what I have to tell. Even actors can’t always be trusted!

The “ gentleman ” was one of the leading villains of last night’s attack. All had, of course, agreed to return to London and receive payment; twenty-five pounds each, or more, according to wounds. But, after all, can you much blame them? Skulls treated like egg-shells hadn’t been in the bargain, this fellow reminded me. According to him, also, more than one rib had given way in the strain. Knees and ankles were, as he expressed it, a “ bloody mess.” Five out of the six bandits had been “ pretty well busted up,” and each demanded five hundred pounds compensation, or the whole story should go into the Sunday papers. They had nothing to lose. They’d been hired to do a stunt, so that his “ lordship ” (I—me—if you please!) could pose as a bloomin’ hero before the lydies!

My brain acted quickly, but not comfortably: felt

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

as if it were in low gear when it should have been in high: needed oiling. And suddenly appeared her ladyship to supply the oil.

I'd been thinking, "Gad, Rags will never forgive me for letting him make a show of himself. And as for Dorando. . . ." when Molly's voice chimed in. She had pushed back the "wee face veil" over the top of her little, low-crowned hat.

"I dare say you saw me last night," she said to our visitor, "so there's no reason why you shouldn't see me again now." She turned to me then. "Jack, was a sum named as compensation for injuries, if any?"

"Yes," I answered. "A hundred pounds was talked of as the highest amount that could be asked for by each man."

"*Talked* of!" she echoed. "What was put in writing?"

"Nothing was put in writing," I explained. "The seven men, including the motor cop, engaged have worked for Bob as extras in different plays. They trusted him, and me as his friend. They were jolly glad of the chance at a job. They hadn't had one for some time, and were all on the dole."

"I was watching the scene last night," said Molly, speaking to the big chap whom you may remember as Mr. Percy Vavasour, the toughest of the lot. "You were the one who got the worst of it, yet you're able to get here and attempt to blackmail my husband on the part of yourself and the others."

"I'm a mass o' bruises," he growled. "And there's a lump on the back o' me 'ead the size of a plum."

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

“Let’s see it,” demanded Molly.

“Y’caunt through me ’air,” apologized Mr. Vavasour.

“Oh, we could easily, if the lump existed,” said Molly. “Because your head is shaved so it’s almost a billiard ball.”

“To play the part of a tough,” he argued, “that was what was wanted.”

“It’s a good make-up,” Molly remarked, “all but the plum-sized lump. You forgot to apply that. Where are the other men?”

“In ’ospital,” Mr. Percy Vavasour growled.

“Lead us to them,” she said. “We can go in our own car and you with us.”

She had caught him out.

“Well, it’s not exactly an ’ospital,” he hedged. “But it’s all the syne.”

“Very well, we’ll go, whatever it is, but we’ll just pick up the hotel doctor,” said Molly. “There’s sure to be a good one we can call in at a few minutes’ notice. Then, of course, if he thinks the injuries are not serious, you can have the pleasure of giving yourself and us away in any Sunday paper you like, *instead* of getting the compensation that was agreed on. I’m sure Sir Robert Reading would tell you that was fair.”

Well, under this gruelling, the aristocratic Percy lost his head, plum and all. It came out that the four others who claimed to be severely hurt were in York, at a convenient pub. Their pals had gone, like good boys, home to wife or mother. By this time I had collected my wits, enough to stand pat with Molly on

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

her bluff. Percy was induced then and there to sign a paper confessing that he and his companions had attempted to blackmail Lord Brighthelmstone. This, of course, was after my assurance that a hundred and twenty-five pounds apiece for the injured ones, and not a penny more, should be forthcoming on the return of the invalids to London. All the men were specified by name in this precious document, and at the end, as I pocketed the paper, Molly added insult to injury. "Nice brave chaps you'd look in print, knocked flat by one young man not up to your ears, and as thin as a razor blade!" she exclaimed. "You'd never live it down, or get another engagement."

Percy V. waited for no more. He stood not on the order of his going. My dear Bob, if it hadn't been for that impudent ladyship of mine, née Mary Randolph, I'm afraid I might have given in, hoping at any cost to preserve Rags's friendship and respect. I see now that, meaning to do for the best, I deserved to lose both. What if the stunt *had* been Molly's idea? I ought to have seen that it was a bit of impossible melodrama, without much chance of a happy ending. I ought to have put my foot down. But—the thing's done now, and certainly so far as exalting Rags to hero-hood, it has worked beyond our dreams.

When I blamed myself, without scolding Molly, she laughed at me. "Don't be so *dashed* noble!" she said. "All you needed to do was to bluff. But I believe that's anyhow one thing a born American can manage better than an Englishman."

The scene was hardly over, and Percy obliterated,

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

when Rags appeared. He'd finished his packing, had knocked at our door and, receiving no answer, had come downstairs.

"Are you ready to start?" he asked anxiously.

"*Just* ready," said Molly. "Jack has only to pay the bill. I'll run up and see how Spat is getting along."

In half an hour we were off, on the road to Flowers Abbey and what, in a way, may prove to be the end of our adventure.

Molly says she wants to write and describe Rags's aunt to you, so I'll give place to her.

Yours ever,

JACK.

P.S.—I have interrupted Molly by exclaiming, "Think of Constantine being proclaimed Emperor at York! Think of two Cæsars camping on the very spot where we are now! Think of . . ."

"Don't want to think of them," is her reply. "I want to concentrate on Spat and Rags. They've simply *got* to get engaged, if I have to knock their heads together to do it."

"Why are you so frightfully excited over this romance?" I inquired. "You've made me spend pretty close to a thousand pounds on pinchbeck bandits to help bring it about."

"You can take the money out of my balance at the bank," said Molly. "Can't you guess, you saphead, why Spat must be disposed of?"

Well, I couldn't guess, and "disposed of" sounded sinister; something you do with bodies; dead ones.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

So Molly explained. Bob, you'll hardly believe it. She has been *jealous* of that chit, Spat, ever since one careless day when it seems that I said, "Woman, don't nag. I didn't want to meet Spat at Southampton, because I hadn't *seen* her then."

I did think Molly had a sense of humour and could take a joke.

As if Spat could hold a candle to my glorious girl!

Lady Brighthelmstone to Sir Robert Reading

FLOWERS ABBEY,
YORKSHIRE.

DEAREST SIR BOB,

I know Jack has just written to you about what happened when we were packing to leave the Royal Station Hotel at York. Well, if Rags was a hero the night before, wasn't I a heroine the day after? I've always longed to be the one to save a situation.

I'm sure Jack would have allowed himself to be blackmailed if it hadn't been for my stepping in. It is the very first time I've ever succeeded in bossing him really, though that is not his opinion at all.

He feels guilty about last night, but I'm delighted. It had come to a pass where something drastic had to be done, and it has been done. Ramon Dorando has left the party. Only something like what happened would have made him go, and he was getting to be a fearful nuisance, in spite of orchids, chocolates, and semi-precious jewels.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

I won't say that I didn't *use* him a bit at first. But then I have never pretended to be consistent! Consistent is only another word for being pig-headed. And the game as I began it kept changing. It played itself most of the time. *All* the time since Bath and Pomphreys!

Well, here we are at Rags's spiritual home, and if he wanted to add to his own attractions in the eyes of Spat by showing her this place, he couldn't have contrived better.

You must have heard of Fountains Hall, near Ripon, which is so celebrated? Flowers Abbey is almost a copy of it; Jacobean, with the most perfect bow windows you ever saw, running up three stories. And there are two pointed gables in the front and two sort of square turret effects at each end. Part of the roof is the battlemented kind you could stand on and shoot at your enemy or pour boiling oil on his head. At least, it looks that way, but I suppose Jacobean times were rather late for boiling oil to be needed.

The house is grey stone, not a cold grey, but gilded here and there on the edges with that lichen which Spat admires so immensely. It's thick on the roof, too. Climbing up the towers is a tangle of magnolias, just coming into bloom, lovely moony things, white blossoms! Wistaria like huge pendants of amethysts, and masses of pink roses. The combination of colour with the soft grey of the stone is enchanting, and makes me feel I would like to decorate a room with just that silvery grey on the wall; the pink and purple and cream-white scattered here and there artistically, somehow.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

It was late sunset when we arrived, and not only were the big windows, with their tiny square panes of old glass, lit up to welcome us, but the sky was illuminated in our honour. All the colours of the flowers were in the clouds. And the trees of the lawn—oak and elm, yew, and two Lebanon cedars—seemed to have been splashed red with a big paint-brush.

I think Spat was excited when we drove up to the low, rather stern-looking entrance with funny stone griffins or some other quaint beasts, carved one on each side of it, and immense stone balls in front of their hind claws. A footman in smart livery opened the black oak door, and his twin stood behind him. At a dignified distance was a butler, of the type I used to mistake for high ecclesiastics of the Church when I first came to England, engaged to Jack.

Now, you know, dear Sir Bob, what a simple soul the *real* Rags is, and of his own free will he'd never run to footmen in livery, even at a grand old ancestral place like Flowers Abbey. His little cottage at Strand-on-the-Green, where he likes to work, might belong to quite a poor person of good taste, except for the books. And though his flat is so modernistic, there isn't one ultra touch of decoration. Nothing *rich* about it, only amusing. So I said to myself, "Aha! This is Auntie's deadly work!"

Who should know better than I? For I was terribly over-aunted when I was a girl. Often quite flattened out, as if elephants had sat on me for years. Jack came along and saved me from Aunt Mary.

There were respectful greetings. Then the butler

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

set to work directing the footmen what to do about our luggage, and up sprang a chauffeur from outside to drive the car to the garage.

With all this mass of servanthood out of the way, I had time to realize that we were in a magnificent beamed hall, with a great stone fireplace worthy of a museum. More griffins on it; so I suppose they have something to do with Rags's family motto or coat of arms. I'd hardly appreciated the beauty of the hall and the almost gaudy unsuitableness of some of the furniture, when a lady took the stage, as you might say. Oh, Sir Bob, if you *could* see her make-up, you would have a model for your leading character actress some day!

By nature she's as heraldic as the griffins, but by choice she is futurist. No wonder Rags said that his Aunt Dora, who lived at Flowers Abbey and put in dozens of bathrooms as well as electric light and central-heating, was unlike D.O.R.A. who dominates our post-war lives!

She must be seventy, though why I know it, I can't tell you, for I should say she'd had her face lifted till it wouldn't go any higher. Such an *odd* look, rather like the mask of a Roman matron; old, somehow, yet not a wrinkle, and her lips turning up at the corners as if they were sewn. Six feet tall, if an inch, and the upper part and middle of her figure arriving before the rest; but with a golden wig exquisitely waved ending off in baby curls; and dressed like a young girl just burgeoning into a flapper. I must say her complexion is a credit to some beauty parlour, and she has a pair of big, round, merry blue eyes.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

As to the frock, it was so youthful, I should say *Jenny*, but made to order in an outsize, which Jenny would hate doing. When Auntie tripped forward to meet us on feet too small for her legs, diamond buckles twinkled on her shoes, and my highest heels are low compared to hers. Picture an elderly Venus de Milo (she must weigh twelve stone!) dressed for a society butterfly of 1933, and you will have Aunt Dora.

She is Rags's mother's sister, so has nothing to do with the Ragford ancestors really, and it seems she grabbed herself a husband quite late in life. The sort of person who would spend a long, long girlhood envying married women, and her married life in envying girls. She has *quite* gone "girl" again now, even to the voice and laugh. Her husband was a City knight, oozing money; hence the bathrooms, electricity, etc., at Flowers. Her name is Lady Hodgkins, which fact Rags never broke to us before, I suppose, owing to his love of beauty. He just left us to find out for ourselves. But really she is *nice*. You can't help liking her at sight. And a sight she certainly is!

I long to tell you what followed our meeting, but it's rather more than late and Jack threatens to pour cold water down my back if I don't stop writing. I will, in a minute, but I must ask you first, did you ever suspect I was jealous of poor little Spat with Jack? . . . You see, she is so like me when I was nineteen. And, alas, I'm more than that now! I hope you don't know how many years more.

It was the likeness to me in my past, and her youth which made me—wonder. But I know now I've been

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
an idiot. I hope never to be exactly the same kind of
idiot in future. To keep me sane, you, as well as Jack,
must remain devoted to me—please.

Your ever affectionate friend,
MOLLY B.

P.S.—Soon we three will meet. And you will be
well again. All will be as it has been, and we shall
be happy—*so* happy!

*Telegram from Miss Liddy Lallers to her Father, Herr
Anton Lallers, Mainz, Germany*

(Translation from the German.)

Señor sailed. Couldn't stop him. But he couldn't
stop his cheques. I had cashed them at his London
bank. Will take your advice and not publish my love-
life. True I might get laughed at. Newspaper offered
me one thousand pounds. But what is one thousand
now? I am rich. So shall you be. Write if you
think it would be any use my trying for Sir Robert
when he gets well? He is forty-five and no more than
a baronet, but if you are even a marchioness, which is
next to a duchess, you are only a ladyship in England.
I know he admires my acting, and he has chucked me
under the chin once at a rehearsal, also called me "My
dear." What do you advise? Or would you wait
for a lord?

Much love,
LIDDY.

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

Lord Ragford to Sir Robert Reading

FLOWERS ABBEY,
YORKS.

MY DEAR SIR ROBERT,

Very good of you to telegraph. Many thanks. Yes, everything has turned out wonderfully well. I never expected it would do so. It was a piece of luck for me, Dorando coming to you with his story about our fair Lallers. Of course, you couldn't do anything for him where the money is concerned. He jolly well "dreed his weird," poor chap! I haven't liked him, and I see now that he was even more of a fool than I thought, to throw away thirty-five thousand pounds in the hope of putting me in the soup. Still, I can't help feeling sorry for the blighter. He was so horribly ashamed of himself the night of the hold-up, all of which Jack says he has described to you in a letter. The luck was mine then, and it is again now.

You were dashed clever, as well as kind to me, when you suggested to Dorando his writing you a letter about the money transaction with Liddy. I can see why he was glad to take your advice. It gave him a chance of revenge. But for me the letter means more. The power to keep her claws off me in future. I don't want to see my play again while it runs, with her as "Minette." To think it was I who begged the girl to play the part!

As you know, I was pretty wild that my little secret about "Key to a Soul" should come out. I *felt* the

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

stuff when I wrote it, but the very fact that I did feel it is the sort of thing I liked to keep to myself. Even if you could have put the newspaper chaps off, however, Aunt Dora thoroughly did me in, with the best intentions, the day before we arrived here. She knew about the "Key," because she'd caught me correcting proofs one day; but I thought I could trust her to keep it dark. She's a gay old bird, though, and a winning young man from the *Leeds Mercury* flattered her off her feet. Sent in a card, wanting an interview and pictures of the house. Before she knew what she was doing, she had given him the "Key" story as a "scoop." He'll beat London to it! But, after all, I don't care so much now, as you sincerely think the book would make a fine play. Of course, I'll do my best with it, and you can put it on before or after the good old meller-drammer I finished for you at Strand-on-the-Green. I want to make as much money as I can, to pay back Aunt Dora for what she's done for Flowers Abbey. Unless I saw a good prospect of doing that, I couldn't turn her and her over-stuffed chairs out of the place, though she actually says she wants to go.

I can do without the house for months, if necessary, because I have an idea of playing the part of traveller's guide. Guide to just one traveller, as far as Venice and the Italian Lakes; maybe Cannes later on. You know what I mean without the telling. But I can work *en route*. I'm one of those writing people who write as others breathe. I just can't help it, I suppose. So little am I ashamed of "Key to a Soul," in my present mood, that while *we* travel I may be jotting down

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK
notes for a sequel to that book. If I do so, it ought to be called "Key to a Heart." I shall certainly choose a less sentimental name, but that will be the inward truth of the story.

I felt a bit self-conscious in the heart region from the first day I saw Her. And I knew she had the key, if she cared to use it. Until she saw Flowers Abbey, however, I kept out of reach. I wanted her to learn that, though I'm no South American millionaire, I can give her something that a South American millionaire couldn't. She likes lichen on roofs. Flowers Abbey has it.

Thank you again for many things, Sir Robert.

Yours,

RAGFORD.

*Miss Susan Randolph to Miss Hattie Belle Haynes,
Elmville, Virginia*

FLOWERS ABBEY,
YORKSHIRE.

DARLING,

How wonderful to have a cablegram from you, forwarded from St. Roland's to me here! Just the thing to bring me more luck. A real Corpse Reviver. And how adorable that you should be engaged to Harry Martin. Harry and Hattie! A perfect combination. No, my dear, have no anxiety on that subject. He

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

never proposed to me. We never even thought of each other in that way.

You will have the loveliest place in Elmville to live in, and Harry's a dear. He is suited to you, but not to me. You know I always did like dark men.

It is sweet of you to want me for your maid of honour. If anything could bring me back, it would be that. But—well, you know a good deal of your Spat already, and if I tell you how we arrived at Flowers Abbey, you'll understand the rest.

As we drove up, I dared not let myself dwell on how it would feel to be mistress of a wonderful house like that—the lovely responsibility of it! No, I *dared* not. I was sure enough about myself, but not sure enough about Rags. He has always been mysterious.

A chauffeur took the car, so we all four walked together into a hall such as I've read of in novels but never expected to see. Even St. Roland's is nothing to it. And after a few servants had backed out of the Presence, so to speak, there came forward the most extraordinary female. Can you imagine the Goddess of Liberty trying to go Mary Pickford? Well, that was Aunt Dora.

Jack and Molly were introduced, but before Rags had time to present me, she bent down like a dressed-up Leaning Tower of Pisa and said, "So *you* are the girl my nephew has fallen in love with!"

You can imagine the effect on yours truly. Was my face red?

"I don't know that at all!" I stammered.

"Well," said Aunt Dora, "I do, and have good

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

reason to know. Bill hasn't mentioned it in so many words, but what he wants, is to turn me out of house and home, and instal you here instead."

"Oh! Oh!" I heard myself choking. "*What* a thing to say, Lady Hodges!"

"Lady Hodgkins," she corrected. "You don't expect me to believe Bill hasn't told you before now?"

"He hasn't, indeed," I assured her.

"I was waiting till I got you here," said Rags. "To ask you to marry me, I mean, not about turning Aunt Dee out. You wouldn't be such a little beast, would you, darling? Anyhow, will you marry me? What—what?"

"I almost think, now I've seen this house, I could bear it," I said. "But . . ."

"You don't need to but any buts on my account," butted in Lady Hodgkins, as she seems to have a habit of doing. "I'm sick and tired of Flowers. As soon as I'd finished doing the bathrooms I got bored stiff. The county doesn't take to me and I don't take to the county. The minute you're legally married, if you want to move in, I'll move out. And I don't care if I never get as far from London again as Surbiton!"

I thought I should certainly have hysterics. I felt them coming on. I giggled, and looked at Rags. He seized me in his arms. Dearest, *what* a sensation it is when a man you've been dying for, holds you in his arms for the first time!"

"Have you proposed to me?" I asked him.

"God knows I have," he answered.

"But *I* don't," I objected. "Not till you call me

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR COMES BACK

what the hero of ' Bats ' calls his girl, to make her *sure* he loves her."

" Pie-face! " Rags said.

" Horribloon! " I whispered back quickly, from the same place in his play; one of Rags's invented words, so satisfactory, I think, when you adore a man beyond expression.

Oh, darling, it *was* good to know at last how dearly we loved each other. And we didn't care how many people heard our vows.

That's why I'm afraid I can't come back to Elmville and be your maid of honour. But I do wish you and Harry all the joy in the world—that is, all the joy Rags and I are not using at the time. You may think you are the happiest girl on earth, but I *know* I am.

Your affectionate

SPAT.

THE END



RECOMMENDED BY THE BOOK SOCIETY

MUTINY!

By CHARLES NORDHOFF
and
JAMES NORMAN HALL

“The story of the *Bounty* has been told many times; but never so graphically and excitingly as here . . . an engrossing piece of story-telling . . . we follow with the utmost eagerness until its final pages.”

—SYLVIA LIND (*Book Society News*).

“Seems marked out for sensational success . . . Voyage, adventure, danger, the South Seas, romance.”

—GERALD GOULD (*The Observer*).

“It is irresistible, and it must appeal to readers of all classes and ages.”

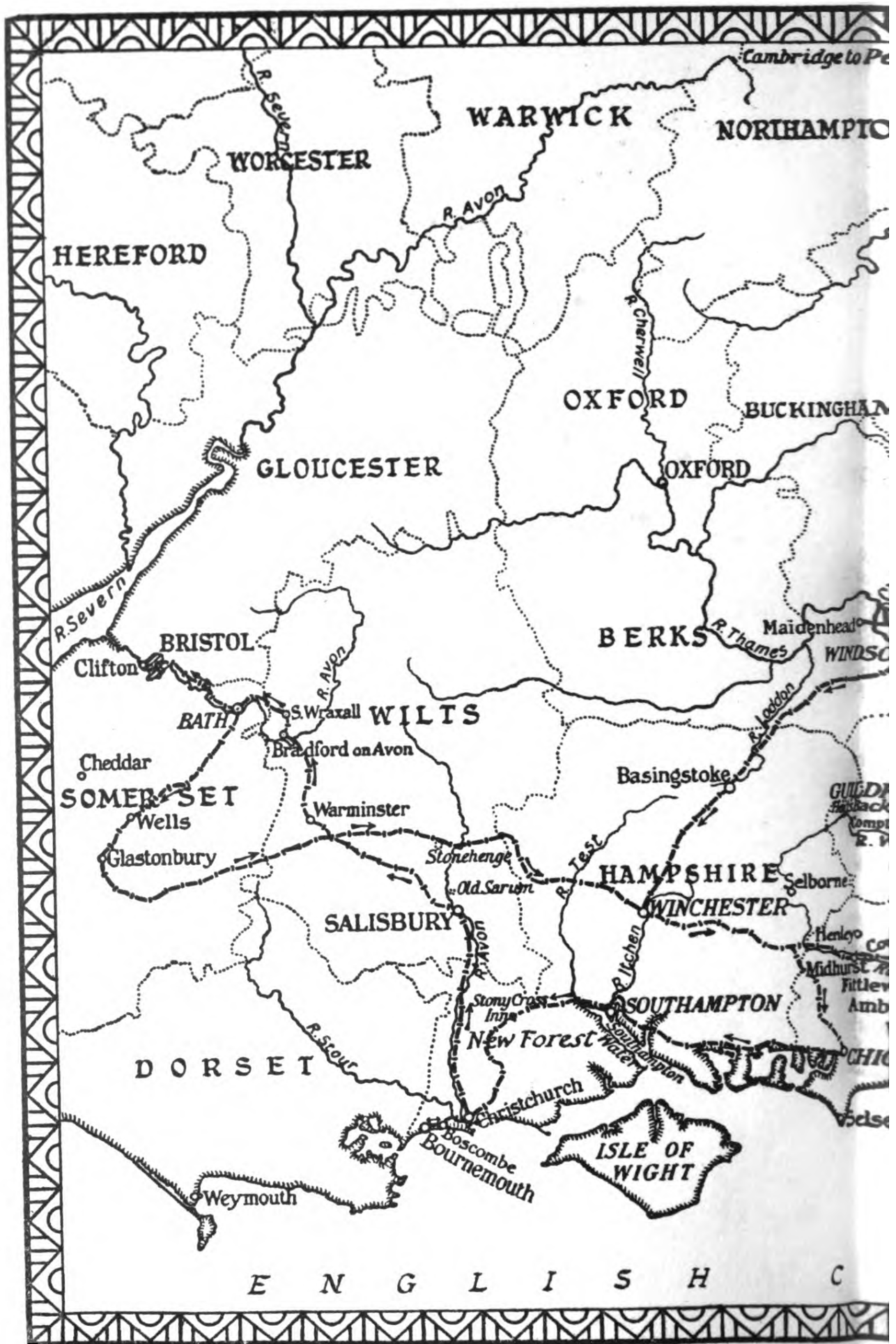
—EDWARD CRICKMAY (*Sunday Referee*).

“Will give a million jaded readers just the tale they want.”

—CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

At all Bookshops and Libraries, 7/6 net

CHAPMAN & HALL LTD., 11 HENRIETTA STREET, W.C.2



Cambridge to Pe

WARWICK

NORTHAMPTON

WORCESTER

HEREFORD

R. Avon

R. Cherwell

OXFORD

BUCKINGHAM

GLOUCESTER

OXFORD

R. Severn

BRISTOL

BERKS

R. Thames

WINDSOR

Clifton

BATH

S. W. Axall

WILTS

Bradford on Avon

Maidenhead

Cheddar

SOMERSET

Wells

Warminster

Basingstoke

Glastonbury

Stonehenge

HAMPSHIRE

Old Sarum

Selborne

SALISBURY

WINCHESTER

DORSET

R. Stour

New Forest

SOUTHAMPTON

GUDDING

W. R. V.

Henley

Midhurst

Fittley

Amb

W. R. V.

Weymouth

Bournemouth

ISLE OF WIGHT

E N G L I S H C