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TALES OF TWO PEOPLE

BY
ANTHONY HOPE

CHAPTER I

AMBROSE, LORD LYNBOROUGH

COMMON opinion said that Lord Lynborough ought never to have had a peerage and forty thousand a year; he ought to have had a pound a week and a back bedroom in Bloomsbury. Then he would have become an eminent man; as it was, he turned out only a singularly erratic individual.

So much for common opinion. Let no more be heard of its dull utilitarian judgments! There are plenty of eminent men—at the moment, it is believed, no less than seventy Cabinet and ex-Cabinet Ministers (or thereabouts)—to say nothing of Bishops, Judges, and the British Academy—and all this in a nook of the world! (And the world too is a point!) Lynborough was something much more uncommon; it is not, however, quite easy to say what. Let the question be postponed; perhaps the story itself will answer it.

He started life—or was started in it—in a series of surroundings of unimpeachable orthodoxy—Eton, Christ Church, the Grenadier Guards. He left each of these schools of mental culture and bodily discipline, not under a cloud—that metaphor would be ludicrously inept—but in an explosion. That, having been thus shot out of the first, he managed to enter the second—that, having been shot out of the second, he walked placidly into the third—that, having been shot out of the third, he suffered no apparent damage from his repeated propulsions—these are matters explicable only by a secret knowledge of British institutions. His father was strong, his mother came of stock even stronger; he himself—Ambrose Caverly as he then was—was very popular, and extraordinarily handsome in his unusual outlandish style.

His father being still alive—and, though devoted to him, by now apprehensive of his doings—his means were for the next few years limited. Yet he contrived to employ himself. He took a soup-kitchen and ran it; he took a yacht and sank it; he took a public-house, ruined

it, and got himself severely fined for watering the beer in the Temperance interest. This injustice rankled in him deeply, and seems to have permanently influenced his development. For a time he forsook the world and joined a sect of persons who called themselves “Theophilanthropists”—and surely no man could call himself much more than that? Returning to mundane affairs, he refused to pay his rates, stood for Parliament in the Socialist interest, and, being defeated, declared himself a practical follower of Count Tolstoy. His father advising a short holiday, he went off and narrowly escaped being shot somewhere in the Balkans, owing to his having taken too keen an interest in local politics. (He ought to have been shot; he was clear—and even vehement—on that point in a letter which he wrote to *The Times*.) Then he sent for Leonard Stabb, disappeared in company with that gentleman, and was no more seen for some years.

He could always send for Stabb, so faithful was that learned student’s affection for him. A few years Ambrose Caverly’s senior, Stabb had emerged late and painfully from a humble origin and a local grammar school, had gone up to Oxford as a non-collegiate man, had gained a first-class and a fellowship, and had settled down to a life of research. Early in his career he became known by the sobriquet of “Cromlech Stabb”—even his unlearned friends would call him “Cromlech” oftener than by any other name. His elaborate monograph on cromlechs had earned him the title; subsequently he extended his researches to other relics of ancient religions—or ancient forms of religion, as he always preferred to put it; “there being,” he would add, with the simplicity of erudition beaming through his spectacles on any auditor, orthodox or other, “of course, only one religion.” He was a very large stout man; his spectacles were large too. He was very strong, but by no means mobile. Ambrose’s father regarded Stabb’s companionship as a certain safeguard to his heir. The validity of this idea is doubtful. Students have so much curiosity—and so many diverse scenes and various types of humanity can minister to that appetite of the mind.

Occasional rumours about Ambrose Caverly reached his native shores; he was heard of in Morocco, located in Spain, familiar in North and in South America. Once he was not heard of for a year; his father and friends concluded that he must be dead—or in prison. Happily the latter explanation proved correct. Once more he and the law had come to loggerheads; when he emerged from confinement he swore never to employ on his own account an instrument so hateful.

“A gentleman should fight his own battles, Cromlech,” he cried to his friend. “I did no more than put a bullet in his arm—in a fair encounter—and he let me go to prison!”

“Monstrous!” Stabb agreed with a smile. He had passed the year in a dirty little inn by the prison gate—among scoundrels, but fortunately in the vicinity of some mounds distinctly prehistoric.

Old Lord Lynborough’s death occurred suddenly and unexpectedly, at a moment when Ambrose and his companion could not be found. They were somewhere in Peru—Stabb among the Incas, Ambrose probably in less ancient company. It was six months before the news reached them.

“I must go home and take up my responsibilities, Cromlech,” said the new Lord Lynborough.

“You really think you’d better?” queried Stabb doubtfully.

“It was my father’s wish.”

“Oh, well——! But you’ll be thought odd over there, Ambrose.”

“Odd? I odd? What the deuce is there odd about me, Cromlech?”

“Everything.” The investigator stuck his cheroot back in his mouth.

Lynborough considered dispassionately—as he fain would hope. “I don’t see it.”

That was the difficulty. Stabb was well aware of it. A man who is odd, and knows it, may be proud, but he will be careful; he may swagger, but he will take precautions. Lynborough had no idea that he was odd; he followed his nature—in all its impulses and in all its whims—with equal fidelity and simplicity. This is not to say that he was never amused at himself; every intelligent observer is amused at himself pretty often; but he did not doubt merely because he was amused. He took his entertainment over his own doings as a bonus life offered. A great sincerity of action and of feeling was his predominant characteristic.

“Besides, if I’m odd,” he went on with a laugh, “it won’t be noticed. I’m going to bury myself at Scarsmoor for a couple of years at least. I’m thinking of writing an autobiography. You’ll come with me, Cromlech?”

“I must be totally undisturbed,” Stabb stipulated. “I’ve a great deal of material to get into shape.”

“There’ll be nobody there but myself—and a secretary, I daresay.”

“A secretary? What’s that for?”

“To write the book, of course.”

“Oh, I see,” said Stabb, smiling in a slow fat fashion. “You won’t write your autobiography yourself?”

“Not unless I find it very engrossing.”

“Well, I’ll come,” said Stabb.

So home they came—an unusual-looking pair—Stabb with his towering bulky frame, his big goggles, his huge head with its scanty black locks encircling a face like a harvest moon—Lynborough, tall, too, but lean as a lath, with tiny feet and hands, a rare elegance of carriage, a crown of chestnut hair, a long straight nose, a waving moustache, a chin pointed like a needle and scarcely thickened to the eye by the close-cropped, short, pointed beard he wore. His bright hazel eyes gleamed out from his face with an attractive restlessness that caught away a stranger’s first attention even from the rare beauty of the lines of his head and face; it was regularity over-refined, sharpened almost to an outline of itself. But his appearance tempted him to no excesses of costume; he had always despised that facile path to a barren eccentricity. On every occasion he wore what all men of breeding were wearing, yet invested the prescribed costume with the individuality of his character: this, it seems, is as near as the secret of dressing well can be tracked.

His manner was not always deemed so free from affectation; it was, perhaps, a little more self-conscious; it was touched with a foreign courtliness, and he employed, on occasions of any ceremony or in intercourse with ladies, a certain formality of speech; it was said of him by an observant woman that he seemed to be thinking in a language more ornate and picturesque than his tongue employed. He was content to say the apt thing, not striving after wit; he was more prone to hide a joke than to tell it; he would ignore a victory and laugh at a defeat; yet he followed up the one and never sat down under the other, unless it were inflicted by one he loved. He liked to puzzle, but took no conscious pains to amuse.

Thus he returned to his “responsibilities.” Cromlech Stabb was wondering what that dignified word would prove to describe.

CHAPTER II

LARGELY TOPOGRAPHICAL

MISS GILLETSON had been studying the local paper, which appeared every Saturday and reached Nab Grange on the following morning. She uttered an exclamation, looked up from her small breakfast-table, and called over to the Marchesa's small breakfast-table.

"Helena, I see that Lord Lynborough arrived at the Castle on Friday!"

"Did he, Jennie?" returned the Marchesa, with no show of interest. "Have an egg, Colonel?" The latter words were addressed to her companion at table, Colonel Wenman, a handsome but bald-headed man of about forty.

"Lord Lynborough, accompanied by his friend Mr Leonard Stabb, the well-known authority on prehistoric remains, and Mr Roger Wilbraham, his private secretary. His lordship's household had preceded him to the Castle.' "

Lady Norah Mountliffey—who sat with Miss Gilletson—was in the habit of saying what she thought. What she said now was: "Thank goodness!" and she said it rather loudly.

"You gentlemen haven't been amusing Norah," observed the Marchesa to the Colonel.

"I hoped that I, at least, was engaged on another task—though, alas, a harder one!" he answered in a low tone and with a glance of respectful homage.

"If you refer to me, you've been admirably successful," the Marchesa assured him graciously—only with the graciousness there mingled that touch of mockery which always made the Colonel rather ill at ease. "Amuse" is, moreover, a word rich in shades of meaning.

Miss Gilletson was frowning thoughtfully. "Helena can't call on him—and I don't suppose he'll call on her," she said to Norah.

"He'll get to know her if he wants to."

"I might call on him," suggested the Colonel. "He was in the service, you know, and that—er—makes a bond. Queer fellow he was, by Jove!"

Captain Irons and Mr Stillford came in from riding, late for breakfast. They completed the party at table, for Violet Dufaure always took the first meal of the day in bed. Irons was a fine young man, still in the twenties, very fair and very bronzed. He had seen fighting and was great at polo. Stillford, though a man of peace (if a solicitor may so be called), was by no means inferior in physique. A cadet of a good county family, he was noted in the hunting field and as a long-distance swimmer. He had come to Nab Grange to confer with the Marchesa on her affairs, but, proving himself an acquisition to the party, had been pressed to stay on as a guest.

The men began to bandy stories of Lynborough from one table to the other. Wenman knew the London gossip, Stillford the local traditions: but neither had seen the hero of their tales for many years. The anecdotes delighted Norah Mountliffey, and caused Miss Gilletson's hands to fly up in horror. Nevertheless it was Miss Gilletson who said, "Perhaps we shall see him at church to-day."

"Not likely!" Stillford opined. "And—er—is anybody going?"

The pause which habitually follows this question ensued upon it now. Neither the Marchesa nor Lady Norah would go—they were both of the Old Church. Miss Dufaure was unlikely to go, by reason of fatigue. Miss Gilletson would, of course, go, so would Colonel Wenman—but that was so well known that they didn't speak.

“Any ladies with Lynborough's party, I wonder!” Captain Irons hazarded. “I think I'll go! Stillford, you ought to go to church—family solicitor and all that, eh?”

A message suddenly arrived from Miss Dufaure, to say that she felt better and proposed to attend church—could she be sent?

“The carriage is going anyhow,” said Miss Gilletson a trifle stiffly.

“Yes, I suppose I ought,” Stillford agreed. “We'll drive there and walk back?”

“Right you are!” said the Captain.

By following the party from Nab Grange to Fillby parish church, a partial idea of the locality would be gained; but perhaps it is better to face the complete task at once. Idle tales suit idle readers; a history such as this may legitimately demand from those who study it some degree of mental application.

If, then, the traveller lands from the North Sea (which is the only sea he can land from) he will find himself on a sandy beach, dipping rapidly to deep water and well adapted for bathing. As he stands facing inland, the sands stretch in a long line southerly on his left; on his right rises the bold bluff of Sandy Nab with its swelling outline, its grass-covered dunes, and its sparse firs; directly in front of him, abutting on the beach, is the high wall enclosing the Grange property; a gate in the middle gives access to the grounds. The Grange faces south, and lies in the shelter of Sandy Nab. In front of it are pleasure-grounds, then a sunk fence, then spacious meadow-lands. The property is about a mile and a half (rather more than less) in length, to half-a-mile in breadth. Besides the Grange there is a small farmhouse, or bailiff's house, in the south-west corner of the estate. On the north the boundary consists of moorlands, to the east (as has been seen) of the beach, to the west and south of a public road. At the end of the Grange walls this road turns to the right, inland, and passes by Fillby village; it then develops into the highroad to Easthorpe with its market, shops, and station, ten miles away. Instead, however, of pursuing this longer route, the traveller from the Grange grounds may reach Fillby and Easthorpe sooner by crossing the road on the west, and traversing the Scarsmoor Castle property, across which runs a broad carriage road, open to the public. He will first—after entering Lord Lynborough's gates—pass over a bridge which spans a little river, often nearly dry, but liable to be suddenly flooded by a rainfall in the hills. Thus he enters a beautiful demesne, rich in wood and undergrowth, in hill and valley, in pleasant rides and winding drives. The Castle itself—an ancient grey building, square and massive, stands on an eminence in the north-west extremity of the property; the ground drops rapidly in front of it, and it commands a view of Nab Grange and the sea beyond, being in its turn easily visible from either of these points. The road above mentioned, on leaving Lynborough's park, runs across the moors in a south-westerly line to Fillby, a little village of some three hundred souls. All around and behind this, stretching to Easthorpe, are great rolling moors, rich in beauty as in opportunities for sport, yet cutting off the little settlement of village, Castle, and Grange from the outer world by an isolation more complete than the mere distance would in these days seem to entail. The church, two or three little shops, and one policeman, sum up Fillby's resources: anything more, for soul's comfort, for body's supply or protection, must come across the moors from Easthorpe.

One point remains—reserved to the end by reason of its importance. A gate has been mentioned as opening on to the beach from the grounds of Nab Grange. He who enters at that gate and makes for the Grange follows the path for about two hundred yards in a straight line, and then takes a curving turn to the right, which in time brings him to the front door of the house. But the path goes on—growing indeed narrower, ultimately becoming a mere grass-grown track, yet persisting quite plain to see—straight across the meadows, about a hundred yards beyond the sunk fence which bounds the Grange gardens, and in full view from the Grange windows; and it desists not from its course till it reaches the rough stone wall which divides the Grange estate from the highroad on the west. This wall it reaches at a point directly opposite to the Scarsmoor lodge; in the wall there is a gate, through which the traveller must pass to gain the road.

There is a gate—and there had always been a gate; that much at least is undisputed. It will, of course, be obvious that if the residents at the Castle desired to reach the beach for the purpose of bathing or other diversions, and proposed to go on their feet, incomparably their best, shortest, and most convenient access thereto lay through this gate and along the path which crossed the Grange property and issued through the Grange gate on to the seashore. To go round by the road would take at least three times as long. Now the season was the month of June; Lord Lynborough was a man tenacious of his rights—and uncommonly fond of bathing.

On the other hand, it might well be that the Marchesa di San Servolo—the present owner of Nab Grange—would prefer that strangers should not pass across her property, in full view and hail of her windows, without her permission and consent. That this, indeed, was the lady's attitude might be gathered from the fact that, on this Sunday morning in June, Captain Irons and Mr Stillford, walking back through the Scarsmoor grounds from Fillby church as they had proposed, found the gate leading from the road into the Grange meadows securely padlocked. Having ignored this possibility, they had to climb, incidentally displacing, but carefully replacing, a number of prickly furze branches which the zeal of the Marchesa's bailiff had arranged along the top rail of the gate.

"Boys been coming in?" asked Irons.

"It may be that," said Stillford, smiling as he arranged the prickly defences to the best advantage.

The Grange expedition to church had to confess to having seen nothing of the Castle party—and in so far it was dubbed a failure. There was indeed a decorous row of servants in the household seat, but the square oaken pew in the chancel, with its brass rods and red curtains in front, and its fireplace at the back, stood empty. The two men reported having met, as they walked home through Scarsmoor, a very large fat man with a face which they described variously, one likening it to the sinking sun on a misty day, the other to a copper saucepan.

"Not Lord Lynborough, I do trust!" shuddered little Violet Dufaure. She and Miss Gilletson had driven home by the road, regaining the Grange by the south gate and the main drive.

Stillford was by the Marchesa. He spoke to her softly, covered by the general conversation. "You might have told us to take a key!" he said reproachfully. "That gorse is very dangerous to a man's Sunday clothes."

"It looks—businesslike, doesn't it?" she smiled.

"Oh, uncommon! When did you have it done?"

“The day before yesterday. I wanted there to be no mistake from the very first. That’s the best way to prevent any unpleasantness.”

“Possibly.” Stillford sounded doubtful. “Going to have a notice-board, Marchesa?”

“He will hardly make that necessary, will he?”

“Well, I told you that in my judgment your right to shut it against him is very doubtful.”

“You told me a lot of things I didn’t understand,” she retorted rather pettishly.

He shrugged his shoulders with a laugh. No good lay in anticipating trouble. Lord Lynborough might take no notice.

In the afternoon the Marchesa’s guests played golf on a rather makeshift nine-hole course laid out in the meadows. Miss Gilletson slept. The Marchesa herself mounted the top of Sandy Nab, and reviewed her situation. The Colonel would doubtless have liked to accompany her, but he was not thereto invited.

Helena Vittoria Maria Antonia, Marchesa di San Servolo, was now in her twenty-fourth year. Born of an Italian father and an English mother, she had bestowed her hand on her paternal country, but her heart remained in her mother’s. The Marchese took her as his second wife and his last pecuniary resource; in both capacities she soothed his declining years. Happily for her—and not unhappily for the world at large—these were few. He had not time to absorb her youth or to spend more than a small portion of her inheritance. She was left a widow—stepmother of adult Italian offspring—owner for life of an Apennine fortress. She liked the fortress much, but disliked the stepchildren (the youngest was of her own age) more. England—her mother’s home—presented itself in the light of a refuge. In short, she had grave doubts about ever returning to Italy.

Nab Grange was in the market. Ancestrally a possession of the Caverlys (for centuries a noble but unennobled family in those parts), it had served for the family’s dower house, till a bad race-meeting had induced the squire of the day to sell it to a Mr Cross of Leeds. The Crosses held it for seventy years. Then the executors of the last Cross sold it to the Marchesa. This final transaction happened a year before Lynborough came home. The “Beach Path” had, as above recorded, been closed only for two days.

The path was not just now in the Marchesa’s thoughts. Nothing very definite was. Rather, as her eyes ranged from moor to sea, from the splendid uniformity of the unclouded sky to the ravishing variety of many-tinted earth, from the green of the Grange meadows (the one spot of rich emerald on the near coastline, owing its hues to Sandy Nab’s kindly shelter) to the grey mass of Scarsmoor Castle—there was in her heart that great mixture of content and longing that youth and—(what put bluntly amounts to)—a fine day are apt to raise. And youth allied with beauty becomes self-assertive, a claimant against the world, a plaintiff against facts before High Heaven’s tribunal. The Marchesa was infinitely delighted with Nab Grange—graciously content with Nature—not ill-pleased with herself—but, in fine, somewhat discontented with her company. That was herself? Not precisely, though, at the moment, objectively. She was wondering whether her house party was all that her youth and her beauty—to say nothing of her past endurance of the Marchesa—entitled her to claim and to enjoy.

Then suddenly across her vision, cutting the skyline, seeming to divide for a moment heaven above from earth beneath, passed a tall meagre figure, and a head of lines clean as if etched by a master’s needle. The profile stood as carved in fine ivory; glints of colour flashed

from hair and beard. The man softly sang a love song as he walked—but he never looked towards the Marchesa.

She sat up suddenly. “Could that be Lord Lynborough?” she thought—and smiled.

CHAPTER III

OF LAW AND NATURAL RIGHTS

LYNBOROUGH sat on the terrace which ran along the front of the Castle and looked down, over Nab Grange, to the sea. With him were Leonard Stabb and Roger Wilbraham. The latter was a rather short, slight man of dark complexion; although a light weight he was very wiry and a fine boxer. His intellectual gifts corresponded well with his physical equipment; an acute ready mind was apt to deal with everyday problems and pressing necessities; it had little turn either for speculation or for fancy. He had dreams neither about the past, like Stabb, nor about present things, like Lynborough. His was, in a word, the practical spirit, and Lynborough could not have chosen a better right-hand man.

They were all smoking; a silence had rested long over the party. At last Lynborough spoke.

“There’s always,” he said, “something seductive in looking at a house when you know nothing about the people who live in it.”

“But I know a good deal about them,” Wilbraham interposed with a laugh. “Coltson’s been pumping all the village, and I’ve had the benefit of it.” Coltson was Lynborough’s own man, an old soldier who had been with him nearly fifteen years and had accompanied him on all his travels and excursions.

Lynborough paid no heed; he was not the man to be put off his reflections by intrusive facts.

“The blank wall of a strange house is like the old green curtain at the theatre. It may rise for you any moment and show you—what? Now what is there at Nab Grange?”

“A lot of country bumpkins, I expect,” growled Stabb.

“No, no,” Wilbraham protested. “I’ll tell you, if you like——”

“What’s there?” Lynborough pursued. “I don’t know. You don’t know—no, you don’t, Roger, and you probably wouldn’t even if you were inside. But I like not knowing—I don’t want to know. We won’t visit at the Grange, I think. We will just idealise it, Cromlech.” He cast his queer elusive smile at his friend.

“Bosh!” said Stabb. “There’s sure to be a woman there—and I’ll be bound she’ll call on you!”

“She’ll call on me? Why?”

“Because you’re a lord,” said Stabb, scorning any more personal form of flattery.

“That fortuitous circumstance should, in my judgment, rather afford me protection.”

"If you come to that, she's somebody herself." Wilbraham's knowledge would bubble out, for all the want of encouragement.

"Everybody's somebody," murmured Lynborough—"and it is a very odd arrangement. Can't be regarded as permanent, eh, Cromlech? Immortality by merit seems a better idea. And by merit I mean originality. Well—I sha'n't know the Grange, but I like to look at it. The way I picture her——"

"Picture whom?" asked Stabb.

"Why, the Lady of the Grange, to be sure——"

"Tut, tut, who's thinking of the woman?—If there is a woman at all."

"I am thinking of the woman, Cromlech, and I've a perfect right to think of her. At least, if not of that woman, of a woman—whose like I've never met."

"She must be of an unusual type," opined Stabb with a reflective smile.

"She is, Cromlech. Shall I describe her?"

"I expect you must."

"Yes, at this moment—with the evening just this colour—and the Grange down there—and the sea, Cromlech, so remarkably large, I'm afraid I must. She is, of course, tall and slender; she has, of course, a rippling laugh; her eyes are, of course, deep and dreamy, yet lighting to a sparkle when one challenges. All this may be presupposed. It's her tint, Cromlech, her colour—that's what's in my mind to-night; that, you will find, is her most distinguishing, her most wonderful characteristic."

"That's just what the Vicar told Coltson! At least he said that the Marchesa had a most extraordinary complexion." Wilbraham had got something out at last.

"Roger, you bring me back to earth. You substitute the Vicar's impression for my imagination. Is that kind?"

"It seems such a funny coincidence."

"Supposing it to be a mere coincidence—no doubt! But I've always known that I had to meet that complexion somewhere. If here—so much the better!"

"I have a great doubt about that," said Leonard Stabb.

"I can get it over, Cromlech! At least consider that."

"But you're not going to know her!" laughed Wilbraham.

"I shall probably see her as we walk down to bathe by Beach Path."

A deferential voice spoke from behind his chair. "I beg your pardon, my lord, but Beach Path is closed." Coltson had brought Lynborough his cigar-case and laid it down on a table by him as he communicated this intelligence.

"Closed, Coltson?"

"Yes, my lord. There's a padlock on the gate, and a—er—barricade of furze. And the gardeners tell me they were warned off yesterday."

"My gardeners warned off Beach Path?"

"Yes, my lord."

"By whose orders?"

"Her Excellency's, my lord."

"That's the Marchesa—Marchesa di San Servolo," Wilbraham supplied.

“Yes, that’s the name, sir,” said Coltson respectfully.

“What about her complexion now, Ambrose?” chuckled Stabb.

“The Marchesa di San Servolo? Is that right, Coltson?”

“Perfectly correct, my lord. Italian, I understand, my lord.”

“Excellent, excellent! She has closed my Beach Path? I think I have reflected enough for to-night. I’ll go in and write a letter.” He rose, smiled upon Stabb, who himself was grinning broadly, and walked through an open window into the house.

“Now you may see something happen,” said Leonard Stabb.

“What’s the matter? Is it a public path?” asked Wilbraham.

With a shrug Stabb denied all knowledge—and, probably, all interest. Coltson, who had lingered behind his master, undertook to reply.

“Not exactly public, as I understand, sir. But the Castle has always used it. Green—that’s the head gardener—tells me so, at least.”

“By legal right, do you mean?” Wilbraham had been called to the Bar, although he had never practised. No situation gives rise to greater confidence on legal problems.

“I don’t think you’ll find that his lordship will trouble much about that, sir,” was Coltson’s answer, as he picked up the cigar-case again and hurried into the library with it.

“What does the man mean by that?” asked Wilbraham scornfully. “It’s a purely legal question—Lynborough must trouble about it.” He rose and addressed Stabb somewhat as though that gentleman were the Court. “Not a public right of way? We don’t argue that? Then it’s a case of dominant and servient tenement—a right of way by user as of right, or by a lost grant. That—or nothing!”

“I daresay,” muttered Stabb very absently.

“Then what does Coltson mean——?”

“Coltson knows Ambrose—you don’t. Ambrose will never go to law—but he’ll go to bathe.”

“But she’ll go to law if he goes to bathe!” cried the lawyer.

Stabb blinked lazily, and seemed to loom enormous over his cigar. “I daresay—if she’s got a good case,” said he. “Do you know, Wilbraham, I don’t much care whether she does or not? But in regard to her complexion——”

“What the devil does her complexion matter?” shouted Wilbraham.

“The human side of a thing always matters,” observed Leonard Stabb. “For instance—pray sit down, Wilbraham—standing up and talking loud prove nothing, if people would only believe it—the permanence of hierarchical systems may be historically observed to bear a direct relation to the emoluments.”

“Would you mind telling me your opinion on two points, Stabb? We can go on with that argument of yours afterwards.”

“Say on, Wilbraham.”

“Is Lynborough in his right senses?”

“The point is doubtful.”

“Are you in yours?”

Stabb reflected. “I am sane—but very highly specialised,” was his conclusion.

Wilbraham wrinkled his brow. "All the same, right of way or no right of way is purely a legal question," he persisted.

"I think you're highly specialised too," said Stabb. "But you'd better keep quiet and see it through, you know. There may be some fun—it will serve to amuse the Archdeacon when you write." Wilbraham's father was a highly-esteemed dignitary of the order mentioned.

Lynborough came out again, smoking a cigar. His manner was noticeably more alert: his brow was unclouded, his whole mien tranquil and placid.

"I've put it all right," he observed. "I've written her a civil letter. Will you men bathe tomorrow?"

They both assented to the proposition.

"Very well. We'll start at eight. We may as well walk. By Beach Path it's only about half-a-mile."

"But the path's stopped, Ambrose," Stabb objected.

"I've asked her to have the obstruction removed before eight o'clock," Lynborough explained.

"If it isn't?" asked Roger Wilbraham.

"We have hands," answered Lynborough, looking at his own very small ones.

"Wilbraham wants to know why you don't go to law, Ambrose."

Lord Lynborough never shrank from explaining his views and convictions.

"The law disgusts me. So does my experience of it. You remember the beer, Cromlech? Nobody ever acted more wisely or from better motives. And if I made money—as I did, till the customers left off coming—why not? I was unobtrusively doing good. Then Juanita's affair! I acted as a gentleman is bound to act. Result—a year's imprisonment! I lay stress on these personal experiences, but not too great stress. The law, Roger, always considers what you have had and what you now have—never what you ought to have. Take that path! It happens to be a fact that my grandfather, and my father, and I have always used that path. That's important by law, I daresay——"

"Certainly, Lord Lynborough."

"Just what would be important by law!" commented Lynborough. "And I have made use of the fact in my letter to the Marchesa. But in my own mind I stand on reason and natural right. Is it reasonable that I, living half-a-mile from my bathing, should have to walk two miles to get to it? Plainly not. Isn't it the natural right of the owner of Scarsmoor to have that path open through Nab Grange? Plainly yes. That, Roger, although, as I say, not the shape in which I have put the matter before the Marchesa—because she, being a woman, would be unappreciative of pure reason—is really the way in which the question presents itself to my mind—and, I'm sure, to Cromlech's?"

"Not the least in the world to mine," said Stabb. "However, Ambrose, the young man thinks us both mad."

"You do, Roger?" His smile persuaded to an affirmative reply.

"I'm afraid so, Lord Lynborough."

"No 'Lord', if you love me! Why do you think me mad? Cromlech, of course, is mad, so we needn't bother about him."

"You're not—not practical," stammered Roger.

“Oh, I don’t know, really I don’t know. You’ll see that I shall get that path open. And in the end I did get that public-house closed. And Juanita’s husband had to leave the country, owing to the heat of local feeling—aroused entirely by me. Juanita stayed behind and, after due formalities, married again most happily. I’m not altogether inclined to call myself unpractical. Roger!” He turned quickly to his secretary. “Your father’s what they call a High Churchman, isn’t he?”

“Yes—and so am I,” said Roger.

“He has his Church. He puts that above the State, doesn’t he? He wouldn’t obey the State against the Church? He wouldn’t do what the Church said was wrong because the State said it was right?”

“How could he? Of course he wouldn’t,” answered Roger.

“Well, I have my Church—inside here.” He touched his breast. “I stand where your father does. Why am I more mad than the Archdeacon, Roger?”

“But there’s all the difference!”

“Of course there is,” said Stabb. “All the difference that there is between being able to do it and not being able to do it—and I know of none so profound.”

“There’s no difference at all,” declared Lynborough. “Therefore—as a good son, no less than as a good friend—you will come and bathe with me to-morrow?”

“Oh, I’ll come and bathe, by all means, Lynborough.”

“By all means! Well said, young man. By all means, that is, which are becoming in opposing a lady. What precisely those may be we will consider when we see the strength of her opposition.”

“That doesn’t sound so very unpractical, after all,” Stabb suggested to Roger.

Lynborough took his stand before Stabb, hands in pockets, smiling down at the bulk of his friend.

“O Cromlech, Haunter of Tombs,” he said, “Cromlech, Lover of Men long Dead, there is a possible—indeed a probable—chance—there is a divine hope—that Life may breathe here on this coast, that the blood may run quick, that the world may move, that our old friend Fortune may smile, and trick, and juggle, and favour us once more. This, Cromlech, to a man who had determined to reform, who came home to assume—what was it? Oh yes—responsibilities!—this is most extraordinary luck. Never shall it be said that Ambrose Caverly, being harnessed and carrying a bow, turned himself back in the day of battle!”

He swayed himself to and fro on his heels, and broke into merry laughter.

“She’ll get the letter to-night, Cromlech. I’ve sent Coltson down with it—he proceeds decorously by the highroad and the main approach. But she’ll get it. Cromlech, will she read it with a beating heart? Will she read it with a flushing cheek? And if so, Cromlech what, I ask you, will be the particular shade of that particular flush?”

“Oh, the sweetness of the game!” said he.

Over Nab Grange the stars seemed to twinkle roguishly.

CHAPTER IV

THE MESSAGE OF A PADLOCK

“Lord Lynborough presents his compliments to her Excellency the Marchesa di San Servolo. Lord Lynborough has learnt, with surprise and regret, that his servants have within the last two days been warned off Beach Path, and that a padlock and other obstacles have been placed on the gate leading to the path, by her Excellency’s orders. Lord Lynborough and his predecessors have enjoyed the use of this path by themselves, their agents, and servants, for many years back—certainly for fifty, as Lord Lynborough knows from his father and from old servants, and Lord Lynborough is not disposed to acquiesce in any obstruction being raised to his continued use of it. He must therefore request her Excellency to have the kindness to order that the padlock and other obstacles shall be removed, and he will be obliged by this being done before eight o’clock to-morrow morning—at which time Lord Lynborough intends to proceed by Beach Path to the sea in order to bathe. Scarsmoor Castle; 13th June.”

THE reception of this letter proved an agreeable incident of an otherwise rather dull Sunday evening at Nab Grange. The Marchesa had been bored; the Colonel was sulky. Miss Gilletson had forbidden cards; her conscience would not allow herself, nor her feelings of envy permit other people, to play on the Sabbath. Lady Norah and Violet Dufaure were somewhat at cross-purposes, each preferring to talk to Stillford and endeavouring, under a false show of amity, to foist Captain Irons on to the other.

“Listen to this!” cried the Marchesa vivaciously. She read it out. “He doesn’t beat about the bush, does he? I’m to surrender before eight o’clock to-morrow morning!”

“Sounds rather a peremptory sort of a chap!” observed Colonel Wenman.

“I,” remarked Lady Norah, “shouldn’t so much as answer him, Helena.”

“I shall certainly answer him and tell him that he’ll trespass on my property at his peril,” said the Marchesa haughtily. “Isn’t that the right way to put it, Mr Stillford?”

“If it would be a trespass, that might be one way to put it,” was Stillford’s professionally cautious advice. “But as I ventured to tell you when you determined to put on the padlock, the rights in the matter are not quite as clear as we could wish.”

“When I bought this place, I bought a private estate—a private estate, Mr Stillford—for myself—not a short cut for Lord Lynborough! Am I to put up a notice for him, ‘This Way to the Bathing Machines’?”

“I wouldn’t stand it for a moment.” Captain Irons sounded bellicose.

Violet Dufaure was amicably inclined.

“You might give him leave to walk through. It would be a bore for him to go round by the road every time.”

“Certainly I might give him leave if he asked for it,” retorted the Marchesa rather sharply. “But he doesn’t. He orders me to open my gate—and tells me he means to bathe! As if I cared whether he bathed or not! What is it to me, I ask you, Violet, whether the man bathes or not?”

“I beg your pardon, Marchesa, but aren’t you getting a little off the point?” Stillford intervened deferentially.

“No, I’m not. I never get off the point, Mr Stillford. Do I, Colonel Wenman?”

“I’ve never known you to do it in my life, Marchesa.” There was, in fact, as Lynborough had ventured to anticipate, a flush on the Marchesa’s cheek, and the Colonel knew his place.

“There, Mr Stillford!” she cried triumphantly. Then she swept—the expression is really applicable—across the room to her writing-table. “I shall be courteous, but quite decisive,” she announced over her shoulder as she sat down.

Stillford stood by the fire, smiling doubtfully. Evidently it was no use trying to stop the Marchesa; she had insisted on locking the gate, and she would persist in keeping it locked till she was forced, by process of law or otherwise, to open it again. But if the Lords of Scarsmoor Castle really had used it without interruption for fifty years (as Lord Lynborough asserted)—well, the Marchesa’s rights were at least in a precarious position.

The Marchesa came back with her letter in her hand. “ ‘The Marchesa di San Servolo,’ ” she read out to an admiring audience, “ ‘presents her compliments to Lord Lynborough. The Marchesa has no intention of removing the padlock and other obstacles which have been placed on the gate to prevent trespassing—either by Lord Lynborough or by anybody else. The Marchesa is not concerned to know Lord Lynborough’s plans in regard to bathing or otherwise. Nab Grange; 13th June.’ ”

The Marchesa looked round on her friends with a satisfied air.

“I call that good,” she remarked. “Don’t you, Norah?”

“I don’t like the last sentence.”

“Oh yes! Why, that’ll make him angrier than anything else! Please ring the bell for me, Mr Stillford; it’s just behind you.”

The butler came back.

“Who brought Lord Lynborough’s letter?” asked the Marchesa.

“I don’t know who it is, your Excellency—one of the upper servants at the Castle, I think.”

“How did he come to the house?”

“By the drive—from the south gate—I believe, your Excellency.”

“I’m glad of that,” she declared, looking positively dangerous. “Tell him to go back the same way, and not by the—by what Lord Lynborough chooses to call ‘Beach Path.’ Here’s a letter for him to take.”

“Very good, your Excellency.” The butler received the letter and withdrew.

“Yes,” said Lady Norah, “rather funny he should call it Beach Path, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know whether it’s funny or not, Norah, but I do know that I don’t care what he calls it. He may call it Piccadilly if he likes, but it’s my path all the same.” As she spoke she looked, somewhat defiantly, at Mr Stillford.

Violet Dufaure, whose delicate frame held an indomitable and indeed pugnacious spirit, appealed to Stillford; “Can’t Helena have him taken up if he trespasses?”

“Well, hardly, Miss Dufaure. The remedy would lie in the civil courts.”

“Shall I bring an action against him? Is that it? Is that right?” cried the Marchesa.

“That’s the ticket, eh, Stillford?” asked the Colonel.

Stillford’s position was difficult; he had the greatest doubt about his client’s case.

“Suppose you leave him to bring the action?” he suggested. “When he does, we can fully consider our position.”

“But if he insists on using the path to-morrow?”

"He'll hardly do that," Stillford persuaded her. "You'll probably get a letter from him, asking for the name of your solicitor. You will give him my name; I shall obtain the name of his solicitor, and we shall settle it between us—amicably, I hope, but in any case without further personal trouble to you, Marchesa."

"Oh!" said the Marchesa blankly. "That's how it will be, will it?"

"That's the usual course—the proper way of doing the thing."

"It may be proper; it sounds very dull, Mr Stillford. What if he does try to use the path to-morrow—'in order to bathe' as he's good enough to tell me?"

"If you're right about the path, then you've the right to stop him," Stillford answered rather reluctantly. "If you do stop him, that, of course, raises the question in a concrete form. You will offer a formal resistance. He will make a formal protest. Then the lawyers step in."

"We always end with the lawyers—and my lawyer doesn't seem sure I'm right!"

"Well, I'm not sure," said Stillford bluntly. "It's impossible to be sure at this stage of the case."

"For all I see, he may use my path to-morrow!" The Marchesa was justifying her boast that she could stick to a point.

"Now that you've lodged your objection, that won't matter much legally."

"It will annoy me intensely," the Marchesa complained.

"Then we'll stop him," declared Colonel Wenman valorously.

"Politely—but firmly," added Captain Irons.

"And what do you say, Mr Stillford?"

"I'll go with these fellows anyhow—and see that they don't overstep the law. No more than the strictly necessary force, Colonel!"

"I begin to think that the law is rather stupid," said the Marchesa. She thought it stupid; Lynborough held it iniquitous; the law was at a discount, and its majesty little revered, that night.

Ultimately, however, Stillford persuaded the angry lady to—as he tactfully put it—give Lynborough a chance. "See what he does first. If he crosses the path now, after warning, your case is clear. Write to him again then, and tell him that, if he persists in trespassing, your servants have orders to interfere."

"That lets him bathe to-morrow!" Once more the Marchesa returned to her point—a very sore one.

"Just for once, it really doesn't matter!" Stillford urged.

Reluctantly she acquiesced; the others were rather relieved—not because they objected to a fight, but because eight in the morning was rather early to start one. Breakfast at the Grange was at nine-thirty, and, though the men generally went down for a dip, they went much later than Lord Lynborough proposed to go.

"He shall have one chance of withdrawing gracefully," the Marchesa finally decided.

Stillford was unfeignedly glad to hear her say so; he had, from a professional point of view, no desire for a conflict. Inquiries which he had made in Fillby—both from men in Scarsmoor Castle employ and from independent persons—had convinced him that Lynborough's case was strong. For many years—through the time of two Lynboroughs before the present at Scarsmoor, and through the time of three Crosses (the predecessors of the

Marchesa) at Nab Grange, Scarsmoor Castle had without doubt asserted this dominant right over Nab Grange. It had been claimed and exercised openly—and, so far as he could discover, without protest or opposition. The period, as he reckoned it, would prove to be long enough to satisfy the law as to prescription; it was very unlikely that any document existed—or anyhow could be found—which would serve to explain away the presumption which user such as this gave. In fine, the Marchesa's legal adviser was of opinion that in a legal fight the Marchesa would be beaten. His own hope lay in compromise; if friendly relations could be established, there would be a chance of a compromise. He was sure that the Marchesa would readily grant as a favour—and would possibly give in return for a nominal payment—all that Lynborough asked. That would be the best way out of the difficulty. "Let us temporise, and be conciliatory," thought the man of law.

Alas, neither conciliation nor dilatoriness was in Lord Lynborough's line! He read the Marchesa's letter with appreciation and pleasure. He admired the curtness of its intimation, and the lofty haughtiness with which the writer dismissed the subject of his bathing. But he treated the document—it cannot be said that he did wrong—as a plain defiance. It appeared to him that no further declaration of war was necessary; he was not concerned to consider evidence nor to weigh his case, as Stillford wanted to consider the Marchesa's evidence and to weigh her case. This for two reasons: first, because he was entirely sure that he was right; secondly, because he had no intention of bringing the question to trial. Lynborough knew but one tribunal; he had pointed out its local habitation to Roger Wilbraham.

Accordingly it fell out that conciliatory counsels and Fabian tactics at Nab Grange received a very severe—perhaps indeed a fatal—shock the next morning.

At about nine o'clock the Marchesa was sitting in her dressing-gown by the open window, reading her correspondence and sipping an early cup of tea—she had become quite English in her habits. Her maid re-entered the room, carrying in her hand a small parcel. "For your Excellency," she said. "A man has just left it at the door." She put the parcel down on the marble top of the dressing-table.

"What is it?" asked the Marchesa indolently.

"I don't know, your Excellency. It's hard, and very heavy for its size."

Laying down the letter which she had been perusing, the Marchesa took up the parcel and cut the string which bound it. With a metallic clink there fell on her dressing-table—a padlock! To it was fastened a piece of paper, bearing these words: "Padlock found attached to gate leading to Beach Path. Detached by order of Lord Lynborough. With Lord Lynborough's compliments."

Now, too, Lynborough might have got his flush—if he could have been there to see it!

"Bring me my field-glasses!" she cried.

The window commanded a view of the gardens, of the meadows beyond the sunk fence, of the path—Beach Path as that man was pleased to call it!—and of the gate. At the last-named object the enraged Marchesa directed her gaze. The barricade of furze branches was gone! The gate hung open upon its hinges!

While she still looked, three figures came across the lens. A very large stout shape—a short spare form—a tall, lithe, very lean figure. They were just reaching the gate, coming from the direction of the sea. The two first were strangers to her; the third she had seen for a moment the afternoon before on Sandy Nab. It was Lynborough himself, beyond a doubt. The

others must be friends—she cared not about them. But to sit here with the padlock before her, and see Lynborough pass through the gate—a meeker woman than she had surely been moved to wrath! He had bathed—as he had said he would. And he had sent her the padlock. That was what came of listening to conciliatory counsels, of letting herself give ear to dilatory persuasions!

“War!” declared the Marchesa. “War—war—war! And if he’s not careful, I won’t confine it to the path either!” She seemed to dream of conquests, perhaps to reckon resources, whereof Mr Stillford, her legal adviser, had taken no account.

She carried the padlock down to breakfast with her; it was to her as a Fiery Cross; it summoned her and her array to battle. She exhibited it to her guests.

“Now, gentlemen, I’m in your hands!” said she. “Is that man to walk over my property for his miserable bathing to-morrow?”

He would have been a bold man who, at that moment, would have answered her with a “Yes.”

CHAPTER V

THE BEGINNING OF WAR

AN enviable characteristic of Lord Lynborough’s was that, when he had laid the fuse, he could wait patiently for the explosion. (That last word tends to recur in connection with him.) Provided he knew that his adventure and his joke were coming, he occupied the interval profitably—which is to say, as agreeably as he could. Having launched the padlock—his symbolical ultimatum—and asserted his right, he spent the morning in dictating to Roger Wilbraham a full, particular, and veracious account of his early differences with the Dean of Christ Church. Roger found his task entertaining, for Lynborough’s mimicry of his distinguished opponent was excellent. Stabb meanwhile was among the tombs in an adjacent apartment.

This studious tranquillity was disturbed by the announcement of a call from Mr Stillford. Not without difficulty he had persuaded the Marchesa to let him reconnoitre the ground—to try, if it seemed desirable, the effect of a bit of “bluff”—at anyrate to discover, if he could, something of the enemy’s plan of campaign. Stillford was, in truth, not a little afraid of a lawsuit!

Lynborough denied himself to no man, and received with courtesy every man who came. But his face grew grim and his manner distant when Stillford discounted the favourable effect produced by his appearance and manner—also by his name, well known in the county—by confessing that he called in the capacity of the Marchesa’s solicitor.

“A solicitor?” said Lynborough, slightly raising his brows.

“Yes. The Marchesa does me the honour to place her confidence in me; and it occurs to me that, before this unfortunate dispute——”

“Why unfortunate?” interrupted Lynborough with an air of some surprise.

“Surely it is—between neighbours? The Castle and the Grange should be friends.” His cunning suggestion elicited no response. “It occurred to me,” he continued, somewhat less glibly, “that, before further annoyance or expense was caused, it might be well if I talked matters over with your lordship’s solicitor.”

“Sir,” said Lynborough, “saving your presence—which, I must beg you to remember, was not invited by me—I don’t like solicitors. I have no solicitor. I shall never have a solicitor. You can’t talk with a non-existent person.”

“But proceedings are the natural—the almost inevitable result—of such a situation as your action has created, Lord Lynborough. My client can’t be flouted, she can’t have her indubitable rights outraged——”

“Do you think they’re indubitable?” Lynborough put in, with a sudden quick flash of his eyes.

For an instant Stillford hesitated. Then he made his orthodox reply. “As I am instructed, they certainly are.”

“Ah!” said Lynborough drily.

“No professional man could say more than that, Lord Lynborough.”

“And they all say just as much! If I say anything you don’t like, again remember that this interview is not of my seeking, Mr Stillford.”

Stillford waxed a trifle sarcastic. “You’ll conduct your case in person?” he asked.

“If you hale me to court, I shall. Otherwise there’s no question of a case.”

This time Stillford’s eyes brightened; yet still he doubted Lynborough’s meaning.

“We shouldn’t hesitate to take our case into court.”

“Since you’re wrong, you’d probably win,” said Lynborough, with a smile. “But I’d make it cost you the devil of a lot of money. That, at least, the law can do—I’m not aware that it can do much else. But, as far as I’m concerned, I should as soon appeal to the Pope of Rome in this matter as to a law-court—sooner, in fact.”

Stillford grew more confidently happy—and more amazed at Lynborough.

“But you’ve no right to—er—assert rights if you don’t intend to support them.”

“I do intend to support them, Mr Stillford. That you’ll very soon find out.”

“By force?” Stillford himself was gratified by the shocked solemnity which he achieved in this question.

“If so, your side has no prejudice against legal proceedings. Prisons are not strange to me——”

“What?” Stillford was a little startled. He had not heard all the stories about Lord Lynborough.

“I say, prisons are not strange to me. If necessary, I can do a month. I am, however, not altogether a novice in the somewhat degrading art of getting the other man to hit first. Then he goes to prison, doesn’t he? Just like the law! As if that had anything to do with the merits!”

Stillford kept his eye on the point valuable to him. “By supporting your claim I intended to convey supporting it by legal action.”

“Oh, the cunning of this world, the cunning of this world, Roger!” He flung himself into an arm-chair, laughing. Stillford was already seated. “Take a cigarette, Mr Stillford. You want

to know whether I'm going to law or not, don't you? Well, I'm not. Is there anything else you want to know? Oh, by the way, we don't abstain from the law because we don't know the law. Permit me—Mr Stillford, solicitor—Mr Roger Wilbraham, of the Middle Temple, Esquire, barrister-at-law. Had I known you were coming, Roger should have worn his wig. No, no, we know the law—but we hate it.”

Stillford was jubilant at a substantial gain—the appeal to law lay within the Marchesa's choice now; and that was in his view a great advantage. But he was legitimately irritated by Lynborough's sneers at his profession.

“So do most of the people who belong to—the people to whom prisons are not strange, Lord Lynborough.”

“Apostles—and so on?” asked Lynborough airily.

“I hardly recognise your lordship as belonging to that—er—er—category.”

“That's the worst of it—nobody will,” Lynborough admitted candidly. A note of sincere, if whimsical, regret sounded in his voice. “I've been trying for fifteen years. Yet some day I may be known as St Ambrose!” His tones fell to despondency again. “St Ambrose the Less, though—yes, I'm afraid the Less. Apostles—even Saints—are much handicapped in these days, Mr Stillford.”

Stillford rose to his feet. “You've no more to say to me, Lord Lynborough?”

“I don't know that I ever had anything to say to you, Mr Stillford. You must have gathered before now that I intend to use Beach Path.”

“My client intends to prevent you.”

“Yes?—Well, you're three able-bodied men down there—so my man tells me—you, and the Colonel, and the Captain. And we're three up here. It seems to me fair enough.”

“You don't really contemplate settling the matter by personal conflict?” He was half amused, yet genuinely stricken in his habits of thought.

“Entirely a question for your side. We shall use the path.” Lynborough cocked his head on one side, looking up at the sturdy lawyer with a mischievous amusement. “I shall harry you, Mr Stillford—day and night I shall harry you. If you mean to keep me off that path, vigils will be your portion. And you won't succeed.”

“I make a last appeal to your lordship. The matter could, I believe, be adjusted on an amicable basis. The Marchesa could be prevailed upon to grant permission——”

“I'd just as soon ask her permission to breathe,” interrupted Lynborough.

“Then my mission is at an end.”

“I congratulate you.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well, you've found out the chief thing you wanted to know, haven't you? If you'd asked it point-blank, we should have saved a lot of time. Good-bye, Mr Stillford. Roger, the bell's in reach of your hand.”

“You're pleased to be amused at my expense?” Stillford had grown huffy.

“No—only don't think you've been clever at mine,” Lynborough retorted placidly.

So they parted. Lynborough went back to his Dean, Stillford to the Marchesa. Still ruffled in his plumes, feeling that he had been chaffed and had made no adequate reply, yet still happy in the solid, the important fact which he had ascertained, he made his report to his client. He

refrained from openly congratulating her on not being challenged to a legal fight; he contented himself with observing that it was convenient to be able to choose her own time to take proceedings.

Lady Norah was with the Marchesa. They both listened attentively and questioned closely. Not the substantial points alone attracted their interest; Stillford was constantly asked—"How did he look when he said that?" He had no other answer than "Oh—well—er—rather queer." He left them, having received directions to rebarricade the gate as solidly and as offensively as possible; a board warning off trespassers was also to be erected.

Although not apt at a description of his interlocutor, yet Stillford seemed to have conveyed an impression.

"I think he must be delightful," said Norah thoughtfully, when the two ladies were left together. "I'm sure he's just the sort of a man I should fall in love with, Helena."

As a rule the Marchesa admired and applauded Norah's candour, praising it for a certain patrician flavour—Norah spoke her mind, let the crowd think what it would! On this occasion she was somehow less pleased; she was even a little startled. She was conscious that any man with whom Norah was gracious enough to fall in love would be subjected to no ordinary assault; the Irish colouring is bad to beat, and Norah had it to perfection; moreover, the aforesaid candour makes matters move ahead.

"After all, it's my path he's trespassing on, Norah," the Marchesa remonstrated.

They both began to laugh. "The wretch is as handsome as—as a god," sighed Helena.

"You've seen him?" eagerly questioned Norah; and the glimpse—that tantalising glimpse—on Sandy Nab was confessed to.

The Marchesa sprang up, clenching her fist. "Norah, I should like to have that man at my feet, and then to trample on him! Oh, it's not only the path! I believe he's laughing at me all the time!"

"He's never seen you. Perhaps if he did he wouldn't laugh. And perhaps you wouldn't trample on him either."

"Ah, but I would!" She tossed her head impatiently. "Well, if you want to meet him, I expect you can do it—on my path to-morrow!"

This talk left the Marchesa vaguely vexed. Her feeling could not be called jealousy; nothing can hardly be jealous of nothing, and even as her acquaintance with Lynborough amounted to nothing, Lady Norah's also was represented by a cypher. But why should Norah want to know him? It was the Marchesa's path—by consequence it was the Marchesa's quarrel. Where did Norah stand in the matter? The Marchesa had perhaps been constructing a little drama. Norah took leave to introduce a new character!

And not Norah alone, as it appeared at dinner. Little Violet Dufaure, whose appealing ways were notoriously successful with the emotionally weaker sex, took her seat at table with a demurely triumphant air. Captain Irons reproached her, with polite gallantry, for having deserted the croquet lawn after tea.

"Oh, I went for a walk to Fillby—through Scarsmoor, you know."

"Through Scarsmoor, Violet?" The Marchesa sounded rather startled again.

"It's a public road, you know, Helena. Isn't it, Mr Stillford?"

Stillford admitted that it was. "All the same, perhaps the less we go there at the present moment——"

"Oh, but Lord Lynborough asked me to come again and to go wherever I liked—not to keep to the stupid road."

Absolute silence reigned. Violet looked round with a smile which conveyed a general appeal for sympathy; there was, perhaps, special reference to Miss Gilletson as the guardian of propriety, and to the Marchesa as the owner of the disputed path.

"You see, I took Nellie, and the dear always does run away. She ran after a rabbit. I ran after her, of course. The rabbit ran into a hole, and I ran into Lord Lynborough. Helena, he's charming!"

"I'm thoroughly tired of Lord Lynborough," said the Marchesa icily.

"He must have known I was staying with you, I think; but he never so much as mentioned you. He just ignored you—the whole thing, I mean. Wasn't it tactful?"

Tactful it might have been; it did not appear to gratify the Marchesa.

"What a wonderful air there is about a—a *grand seigneur*!" pursued Violet reflectively. "Such a difference it makes!"

That remark did not gratify any of the gentlemen present; it implied a contrast, although it might not definitely assert one.

"It is such a pity that you've quarrelled about that silly path!"

"Oh! oh! Miss Dufaure!"—"I say, come, Miss Dufaure!"—"Er—really, Miss Dufaure!"—these three remonstrances may be distributed indifferently among the three men. They felt that there was a risk of treason in the camp.

The Marchesa assumed her grandest manner; it was mediæval—it was Titianesque.

"Fortunately, as it seems, Violet, I do not rely on your help to maintain my rights in regard to the path. Pray meet Lord Lynborough as often as you please, but spare me any unnecessary mention of his name."

"I didn't mean any harm. It was all Nellie's fault."

The Marchesa's reply—if such it can be called—was delivered *sotto voce*, yet was distinctly audible. It was also brief. She said "*Nellie!*" Nellie was, of course, Miss Dufaure's dog.

Night fell upon an apparently peaceful land. Yet Violet was an absentee from the Marchesa's dressing-room that night, and even between Norah and her hostess the conversation showed a tendency to flag. Norah, for all her courage, dared not mention the name of Lynborough, and Helena most plainly would not. Yet what else was there to talk about? It had come to that point even so early in the war!

Meanwhile, up at Scarsmoor Castle, Lynborough, in exceedingly high spirits, talked to Leonard Stabb.

"Yes, Cromlech," he said, "a pretty girl, a very pretty girl if you like that *petite* insinuating style. For myself I prefer something a shade more—what shall we call it?"

"Don't care a hang," muttered Stabb.

“A trifle more in the grand manner, perhaps, Cromlech. And she hadn’t anything like the complexion. I knew at once that it couldn’t be the Marchesa. Do you bathe to-morrow morning?”

“And get my head broken?”

“Just stand still, and let them throw themselves against you, Cromlech. Roger!—Oh, he’s gone to bed; stupid thing to do—that! Cromlech, old chap, I’m enjoying myself immensely.”

He just touched his old friend’s shoulder as he passed by: the caress was almost imperceptible. Stabb turned his broad red face round to him and laughed ponderously.

“Oh, and you understand!” cried Lynborough.

“I have never myself objected to a bit of fun with the girls,” said Stabb.

Lynborough sank into a chair murmuring delightedly, “You’re priceless, Cromlech!”

CHAPTER VI

EXERCISE BEFORE BREAKFAST

“**L**IFE—” (The extract is from Lynborough’s diary, dated this same fourteenth of June)—“may be considered as a process (Cromlech’s view, conducting to the tomb)—a programme (as, I am persuaded, Roger conceives it, marking off each stage thereof with a duly guaranteed stamp of performance)—or as a progress—in which light I myself prefer to envisage it. Process—programme—progress; the words, with my above-avowed preference, sound unimpeachably orthodox. Once I had a Bishop ancestor. He crops out.

“Yet I don’t mean what he does. I don’t believe in growing better in the common sense—that is, in an increasing power to resist what tempts you, to refrain from doing what you want. That ideal seems to me, more and more, to start from the wrong end. No man refrains from doing what he wants to do. In the end the contradiction—the illogicality—is complete. You learn to want more wisely—that’s all. Train desire, for you can never chain it.

“I’m engaged here and now on what is to all appearance the most trivial of businesses. I play the spiteful boy—she is an obstinate peevish girl. There are other girls too—one an insinuating tiny minx, who would wheedle a backward glance out of Simon Stylites as he remounted his pillar—and, by the sun in heaven, will get little more from this child of Mother Earth! There’s another, I hear—Irish!—And Irish is near my heart. But behind her—set in the uncertain radiance of my imagination—lies her Excellency. Heaven knows why! Save that it is gloriously paradoxical to meet a foreign Excellency in this spot, and to get to most justifiable, most delightful, loggerheads with her immediately. I have conceived Machiavellian devices. I will lure away her friends. I will isolate her, humiliate her, beat her in the fight. There may be some black eyes—some bruised hearts—but I shall do it. Why? I have always been gentle before. But so I feel towards her. And therefore I am afraid. This is the foeman for my steel, I think—I have my doubts but that she’ll beat me in the end.

“When I talk like this, Cromlech chuckles, loves me as a show, despises me as a mind. Roger—young Roger Fitz-Archdeacon—is all an incredulous amazement. I don’t wonder. There is nothing so small and nothing so great—nothing so primitive and not a thing so complex—nothing so unimportant and so engrossing as this ‘duel of the sexes.’ A proves it a trifle, and is held great. B reckons it all-supreme, and becomes popular. C (a woman) describes the Hunter Man. D (a man) descants of the Pursuit by Woman. The oldest thing is the most canvassed and the least comprehended. But there’s a reputation—and I suppose money—in it for anybody who can string phrases. There’s blood-red excitement for everybody who can feel. Yet I’ve played my part in other affairs—not so much in dull old England, where you work five years to become a Member of Parliament, and five years more in order to get kicked out again—but in places where in a night you rise or fall—in five minutes order the shooting squad or face it—boil the cook or are stuffed into the pot yourself. (Cromlech, this is not exact scientific statement!) Yet always—everywhere—the woman! And why? On my honour, I don’t know. What in the end is she?

“I adjourn the question—and put a broader one. What am I? The human being as such? If I’m a vegetable, am I not a mistake? If I’m an animal, am I not a cruelty? If I’m a soul, am I not misplaced? I’d say ‘Yes’ to all this, save that I enjoy myself so much. Because I have forty thousand a year? Hardly. I’ve had nothing, and been as completely out of reach of getting anything as the veriest pauper that ever existed—and yet I’ve had the deuce of a fine existence the while. I think there’s only one solid blunder been made about man—he oughtn’t to have been able to think. It wastes time. It makes many people unhappy. That’s not my case. I like it. It just wastes time.

“That insinuating minx, possessed of a convenient dog and an ingratiating manner, insinuated to-day that I was handsome. Well, she’s pretty, and I suppose we’re both better off for it. It is an introduction. But to myself I don’t seem very handsome. I have my pride—I look a gentleman. But I look a queer foreign fish. I found myself envying the British robustness of that fine young chap who is so misguided as to be a lawyer.

“Ah, why do I object to lawyers? Tolstoy!—I used to say—or, at the risk of advanced intellects not recognising one’s allusions, one could go farther back. But that is, in the end, all gammon. Every real conviction springs from personal experience. I hate the law because it interfered with me. I’m not aware of any better reason. So I’m going on without it—unless somebody tries to steal my forty thousand, of course. Ambrose, thou art a humbug—or, more precisely, thou canst not avoid being a human individual!”

Lord Lynborough completed the entry in his diary—he was tolerably well aware that he might just as well not have written it—and cast his eyes towards the window of the library. The stars were bright; a crescent moon decorated, without illuminating, the sky. The regular recurrent beat of the sea on the shore, traversing the interval in night’s silence, struck on his ear. “If God knew Time, that might be His clock,” said he. “Listen to its inexorable, peaceable, gentle, formidable stroke!”

His sleep that night was short and broken. A fitful excitement was on his spirit: the glory of the summer morning wooed his restlessness. He would take his swim alone, and early. At six o’clock he slipped out of the house and made for Beach Path. The fortified gate was too strong for his unaided efforts. Roger Wilbraham had told him that, if the way were impeded, he had a right to “deviate.” He deviated now, lightly vaulting over the four-foot-high stone

wall. None was there to hinder him, and, with emotions appropriate to the occasion, he passed Nab Grange and gained the beach. When once he was in the water, the emotions went away.

They were to return—or, at any rate, to be succeeded by their brethren. After he had dressed, he sat down and smoked a cigarette as he regarded the smiling sea. This situation was so agreeable that he prolonged it for full half-an-hour; then a sudden longing for Coltson's coffee came over him. He jumped up briskly and made for the Grange gate.

He had left it open—it was shut now. None had been nigh when he passed through. Now a young woman in a white frock leant her elbows comfortably on its top rail and rested her pretty chin upon her hands. Lady Norah's blue eyes looked at him serenely from beneath black lashes of noticeable length—at anyrate Lynborough noticed their length.

Lynborough walked up to the gate. With one hand he removed his hat, with the other he laid a tentative hand on the latch. Norah did not move or even smile.

"I beg your pardon, madam," said Lynborough, "but if it does not incommode you, would you have the great kindness to permit me to open the gate?"

"Oh, I'm sorry; but this is a private path leading to Nab Grange. I suppose you're a stranger in these parts?"

"My name is Lynborough. I live at Scarsmoor there."

"Are you Lord Lynborough?" Norah sounded exceedingly interested. "*The* Lord Lynborough?"

"There's only one, so far as I'm aware," the owner of the title answered.

"I mean the one who has done all those—those—well, those funny things?"

"I rejoice if the recital of them has caused you any amusement. And now, if you will permit me——"

"Oh, but I can't! Helena would never forgive me. I'm a friend of hers, you know—of the Marchesa di San Servolo. Really you can't come through here."

"Do you think you can stop me?"

"There isn't room for you to get over as long as I stand here—and the wall's too high to climb, isn't it?"

Lynborough studied the wall; it was twice the height of the wall on the other side; it might be possible to scale, but difficult and laborious; nor would he look imposing while struggling at the feat.

"You'll have to go round by the road," remarked Norah, breaking into a smile.

Lynborough was enjoying the conversation just as much as she was—but he wanted two things; one was victory, the other coffee.

"Can't I persuade you to move?" he said imploringly. "I really don't want to have to resort to more startling measures."

"You surely wouldn't use force against a girl, Lord Lynborough!"

"I said startling measures—not violent ones," he reminded her. "Are your nerves good?"

"Excellent, thank you."

"You mean to stand where you are?"

"Yes—till you've gone away." Now she laughed openly at him. Lynborough delighted in the merry sound and the flash of her white teeth.

"It's a splendid morning, isn't it?" he asked. "I should think you stand about five feet five, don't you? By the way, whom have I the pleasure of conversing with?"

"My name is Norah Mountliffey."

"Ah, I knew your father very well." He drew back a few steps. "So you must excuse an old family friend for telling you that you make a charming picture at that gate. If I had a camera—— Just as you are, please!" He held up his hand, as though to pose her.

"Am I quite right?" she asked, humouring the joke, with her merry mischievous eyes set on Lynborough's face as she leant over the top of the gate.

"Quite right. Now, please! Don't move!"

"Oh, I've no intention of moving," laughed Norah mockingly.

She kept her word; perhaps she was too surprised to do anything else. For Lynborough, clapping his hat on firmly, with a dart and a spring flew over her head.

Then she wheeled round—to see him standing two yards from her, his hat in his hand again, bowing apologetically.

"Forgive me for getting between you and the sunshine for a moment," he said. "But I thought I could still do five feet five; and you weren't standing upright either. I've done within an inch of six feet, you know. And now I'm afraid I must reluctantly ask you to excuse me. I thank you for the pleasure of this conversation." He bowed, put on his hat, turned, and began to walk away along Beach Path.

"You got the better of me that time, but you've not done with me yet," she cried, starting after him.

He turned and looked over his shoulder: save for his eyes his face was quite grave. He quickened his pace to a very rapid walk. Norah found that she must run, or fall behind. She began to run. Again that gravely derisory face turned upon her. She blushed, and fell suddenly to wondering whether in running she looked absurd. She fell to a walk. Lynborough seemed to know. Without looking round again, he abated his pace.

"Oh, I can't catch you if you won't stop!" she cried.

"My friend and secretary, Roger Wilbraham, tells me that I have no right to stop," Lynborough explained, looking round again, but not standing still. "I have only the right to pass and re-pass. I'm re-passing now. He's a barrister, and he says that's the law. I daresay it is—but I regret that it prevents me from obliging you, Lady Norah."

"Well, I'm not going to make a fool of myself by running after you," said Norah crossly.

Lynborough walked slowly on; Norah followed; they reached the turn of the path towards the Grange hall door. They reached it—and passed it—both of them. Lynborough turned once more—with a surprised lift of his brows.

"At least I can see you safe off the premises!" laughed Norah, and with a quick dart forward she reduced the distance between them to half-a-yard. Lynborough seemed to have no objection; proximity made conversation easier; he moved slowly on.

Norah seemed defeated—but suddenly she saw her chance, and hailed it with a cry. The Marchesa's bailiff—John Goodenough—was approaching the path from the house situated at the south-west corner of the meadow. Her cry of his name caught his attention—as well as Lynborough's. The latter walked a little quicker. John Goodenough hurried up. Lynborough walked steadily on.

“Stop him, John!” cried Norah, her eyes sparkling with new excitement. “You know her Excellency’s orders? This is Lord Lynborough!”

“His lordship! Ay, it is. I beg your pardon, my lord, but—I’m very sorry to interfere with your lordship, but——”

“You’re in my way, Goodenough.” For John had got across his path, and barred progress. “Of course I must stand still if you impede my steps, but I do it under protest. I only want to repass.”

“You can’t come this way, my lord. I’m sorry, but it’s her Excellency’s strict orders. You must go back, my lord.”

“I am going back—or I was till you stopped me.”

“Back to where you came from, my lord.”

“I came from Scarsmoor and I’m going back there, Goodenough.”

“Where you came from last, my lord.”

“No, no, Goodenough. At all events, her Excellency has no right to drive me into the sea.” Lynborough’s tone was plaintively expostulatory.

“Then if you won’t go back, my lord, here we stay!” said John, bewildered but faithfully obstinate.

“Just your tactics!” Lynborough observed to Norah, a keen spectator of the scene. “But I’m not so patient of them from Goodenough.”

“I don’t know that you were very patient with me.”

“Goodenough, if you use sufficient force I shall, of course, be prevented from continuing on my way. Nothing short of that, however, will stop me. And pray take care that the force is sufficient—neither more nor less than sufficient, Goodenough.”

“I don’t want to use no violence to your lordship. Well, now, if I lay my hand on your lordship’s shoulder, will that do to satisfy your lordship?”

“I don’t know until you try it.”

John’s face brightened. “I reckon that’s the way out. I reckon that’s law, my lord. I puts my hand on your lordship’s shoulder like that——”

He suited the action to the word. In an instant Lynborough’s long lithe arms were round him, Lynborough’s supple lean leg twisted about his. Gently, as though he had been a little baby, Lynborough laid the sturdy fellow on the grass.

For all she could do, Norah Mountliffey cried “Bravo!” and clapped her hands. Goodenough sat up, scratched his head, and laughed feebly.

“Force not quite sufficient, Goodenough,” cried Lynborough gaily. “Now I repass!”

He lifted his hat to Norah, then waved his hand. In her open impulsive way she kissed hers back to him as he turned away.

By one of those accidents peculiar to tragedy, the Marchesa’s maid, performing her toilet at an upper window, saw this nefarious and traitorous deed!

“Swimming—jumping—wrestling! A good morning’s exercise! And all before those lazy chaps, Roger and Cromlech, are out of bed!”

So saying, Lord Lynborough vaulted the wall again in high good humour.

CHAPTER VII

ANOTHER WEDGE!

DEPRIVED of their leader's inspiration, the other two representatives of Scarsmoor did not brave the Passage Perilous to the sea that morning. Lynborough was well content to forgo further aggression for the moment. His words declared his satisfaction—

"I have driven a wedge—another wedge—into the Marchesa's phalanx. Yes, I think I may say a second wedge. Disaffection has made its entry into Nab Grange, Cromlech. The process of isolation has begun. Perhaps after lunch we will resume operations."

But fortune was to give him an opportunity even before lunch. It appeared that Stabb had sniffed out the existence of two old brasses in Fillby Church; he was determined to inspect them at the earliest possible moment. Lynborough courteously offered to accompany him, and they set out together about eleven o'clock.

No incident marked their way. Lynborough rang up the parish clerk at his house, presented Stabb to that important functionary, and bespoke for him every consideration. Then he leant against the outside of the churchyard wall, peacefully smoking a cigarette.

On the opposite side of the village street stood the Lynborough Arms. The inn was kept by a very superior man, who had retired to this comparative leisure after some years of service as butler with Lynborough's father. This excellent person, perceiving Lynborough, crossed the road and invited him to partake of a glass of ale in memory of old days. Readily acquiescing, Lynborough crossed the road, sat down with the landlord on a bench by the porch, and began to discuss local affairs over the beer.

"I suppose you haven't kept up your cricket since you've been in foreign parts, my lord?" asked Dawson, the landlord, after some conversation which need not occupy this narrative. "We're playing a team from Easthorpe to-morrow, and we're very short."

"Haven't played for nearly fifteen years, Dawson. But I tell you what—I daresay my friend Mr Wilbraham will play. Mr Stabb's no use."

"Every one helps," said Dawson. "We've got two of the gentlemen from the Grange—Mr Stillford, a good bat, and Captain Irons, who can bowl a bit—or so John Goodenough tells me."

Lynborough's eyes had grown alert. "Well, I used to bowl a bit, too. If you're really hard up for a man, Dawson—really at a loss, you know—I'll play. It'll be better than going into the field short, won't it?"

Dawson was profuse in his thanks. Lynborough listened patiently.

"I tell you what I should like to do, Dawson," he said. "I should like to stand the lunch."

It was the turn of Dawson's eyes to grow alert. They did. Dawson supplied the lunch. The club's finances were slender, and its ideas correspondingly modest. But if Lord Lynborough "stood" the lunch——!

"And to do it really well," added that nobleman. "A sort of little feast to celebrate my homecoming. The two teams—and perhaps a dozen places for friends—ladies, the Vicar, and so on, eh, Dawson? Do you see the idea?"

Dawson saw the idea much more clearly than he saw most ideas. Almost corporeally he beheld the groaning board.

“On such an occasion, Dawson, we shouldn’t quarrel about figures.”

“Your lordship’s always most liberal,” Dawson acknowledged in tones which showed some trace of emotion.

“Put the matter in hand at once. But look here, I don’t want it talked about. Just tell the secretary of the club—that’s enough. Keep the tent empty till the moment comes. Then display your triumph! It’ll be a pleasant little surprise for everybody, won’t it?”

Dawson thought it would; at any rate it was one for him.

At this instant an elderly lady of demure appearance was observed to walk up to the lych-gate and enter the churchyard. Lynborough inquired of his companion who she was.

“That’s Miss Gilletson from the Grange, my lord—the Marchesa’s companion.”

“Is it?” said Lynborough softly. “Oh, is it indeed?” He rose from his seat. “Good-bye, Dawson. Mind—a dead secret, and a rattling good lunch!”

“I’ll attend to it, my lord,” Dawson assured him with the utmost cheerfulness. Never had Dawson invested a glass of beer to better profit!

Lynborough threw away his cigar and entered the sacred precincts. His brain was very busy. “Another wedge!” he was saying to himself. “Another wedge!”

The lady had gone into the church. Lynborough went in too. He came first on Stabb—on his hands and knees, examining one of the old brasses and making copious notes in a pocket-book.

“Have you seen a lady come in, Cromlech?” asked Lord Lynborough.

“No, I haven’t,” said Cromlech, now producing a yard measure and proceeding to ascertain the dimensions of the brass.

“You wouldn’t, if it were Venus herself,” replied Lynborough pleasantly. “Well, I must look for her on my own account.”

He found her in the neighbourhood of his family monuments which, with his family pew, crowded the little chancel of the church. She was not employed in devotions, but was arranging some flowers in a vase—doubtless a pious offering. Somewhat at a loss how to open the conversation, Lynborough dropped his hat—or rather gave it a dexterous jerk, so that it fell at the lady’s feet. Miss Gilletson started violently, and Lord Lynborough humbly apologised. Thence he glided into conversation, first about the flowers, then about the tombs. On the latter subject he was exceedingly interesting and informing.

“Dear, dear! Married the Duke of Dexminster’s daughter, did he?” said Miss Gilletson, considerably thrilled. “She’s not buried here, is she?”

“No, she’s not,” said Lynborough, suppressing the fact that the lady had run away after six months of married life. “And my own father’s not buried here, either; he chose my mother’s family place in Devonshire. I thought it rather a pity.”

“Your own father?” Miss Gilletson gasped.

“Oh, I forgot you didn’t know me,” he said, laughing. “I’m Lord Lynborough, you know. That’s how I come to be so well up in all this. And I tell you what—I should like to show you some of our Scarsmoor roses on your way home.”

“Oh, but if you’re Lord Lynborough, I—I really couldn’t——”

“Who’s to know anything about it, unless you choose, Miss Gilletson?” he asked with his ingratiating smile and his merry twinkle. “There’s nothing so pleasant as a secret shared with a lady!”

It was a long time since a handsome man had shared a secret with Miss Gilletson. Who knows, indeed, whether such a thing had ever happened? Or whether Miss Gilletson had once just dreamed that some day it might—and had gone on dreaming for long, long days, till even the dream had slowly and sadly faded away? For sometimes it does happen like that. Lynborough meant nothing—but no possible effort (supposing he made it) could enable him to look as if he meant nothing. One thing at least he did mean—to make himself very pleasant to Miss Gilletson.

Interested knave! It is impossible to avoid that reflection. Yet let ladies in their turn ask themselves if they are over-scrupulous in their treatment of one man when their affections are set upon another.

He showed Miss Gilletson all the family tombs. He escorted her from the church. Under renewed vows of secrecy he induced her to enter Scarsmoor. Once in the gardens, the good lady was lost. They had no such roses at Nab Grange! Lynborough insisted on sending an enormous bouquet to the Vicar’s wife in Miss Gilletson’s name—and Miss Gilletson grew merry as she pictured the mystification of the Vicar’s wife. For Miss Gilletson herself he superintended the selection of a nosegay of the choicest blooms; they laughed again together when she hid them in a large bag she carried—destined for the tea and tobacco which represented her little charities. Then—after pausing for one private word in his gardener’s ear, which caused a boy to be sent off post-haste to the stables—he led her to the road, and in vain implored her to honour his house by setting foot in it. There the fear of the Marchesa or (it is pleasanter to think) some revival of the sense of youth, bred by Lynborough’s deferential courtliness, prevailed. They came together through his lodge gates; and Miss Gilletson’s face suddenly fell.

“That wretched gate!” she cried. “It’s locked—and I haven’t got the key.”

“No more have I, I’m sorry to say,” said Lynborough. He, on his part, had forgotten nothing.

“It’s nearly two miles round by the road—and so hot and dusty!—Really Helena does cut off her nose to spite her face!” Though, in truth, it appeared rather to be Miss Gilletson’s nose the Marchesa had cut off.

A commiserating gravity sat on Lord Lynborough’s attentive countenance.

“If I were younger, I’d climb that wall,” declared Miss Gilletson. “As it is—well, but for your lovely flowers, I’d better have gone the other way after all.”

“I don’t want you to feel that,” said he, almost tenderly.

“I must walk!”

“Oh no, you needn’t,” said Lynborough.

As he spoke, there issued from the gates behind them a luxurious victoria, drawn by two admirable horses. It came to a stand by Lynborough, the coachman touching his hat, the footman leaping to the ground.

“Just take Miss Gilletson to the Grange, Williams. Stop a little way short of the house. She wants to walk through the garden.”

“Very good, my lord.”

“Put up the hood, Charles. The sun’s very hot for Miss Gilletson.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Nobody’ll see you if you get out a hundred yards from the door—and it’s really better than tramping the road on a day like this. Of course, if Beach Path were open——!” He shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly.

Fear of the Marchesa struggled in Miss Gilletson’s heart with the horror of the hot and tiring walk—with the seduction of the shady, softly rolling, speedy carriage.

“If I met Helena!” she whispered; and the whisper was an admission of reciprocal confidence.

“It’s the chance of that against the certainty of the tramp!”

“She didn’t come down to breakfast this morning——”

“Ah, didn’t she?” Lynborough made a note for his Intelligence Department.

“Perhaps she isn’t up yet! I—I think I’ll take the risk.”

Lynborough assisted her into the carriage.

“I hope we shall meet again,” he said, with no small *empressement*.

“I’m afraid not,” answered Miss Gilletson dolefully. “You see, Helena——”

“Yes, yes; but ladies have their moods. Anyhow you won’t think too hardly of me, will you? I’m not altogether an ogre.”

There was a pretty faint blush on Miss Gilletson’s cheek as she gave him her hand. “An ogre! No, dear Lord Lynborough,” she murmured.

“A wedge!” said Lynborough, as he watched her drive away.

He was triumphant with what he had achieved—he was full of hope for what he had planned. If he reckoned right, the loyalty of the ladies at Nab Grange to the mistress thereof was tottering, if it had not fallen. His relations with the men awaited the result of the cricket match. Yet neither his triumph nor his hope could in the nature of the case exist without an intermixture of remorse. He hurt—or tried to hurt—what he would please—and hoped to please. His mood was mixed, and his smile not altogether mirthful as he stood looking at the fast-receding carriage.

Then suddenly, for the first time, he saw his enemy. Distantly—afar off! Yet without a doubt it was she. As he turned and cast his eyes over the forbidden path—the path whose seclusion he had violated, bold in his right—a white figure came to the sunk fence and stood there, looking not towards where he stood, but up to his castle on the hill. Lynborough edged near to the barricaded gate—a new padlock and new *chevaux-de-frise* of prickly branches guarded it. The latter, high as his head, screened him completely; he peered through the interstices in absolute security.

The white figure stood on the little bridge which led over the sunk fence into the meadow. He could see neither feature nor colour; only the slender shape caught and chained his eye. Tall she was, and slender, as his mocking forecast had prophesied. More than that he could not see.

Well, he did see one more thing. This beautiful shape, after a few minutes of what must be presumed to be meditation, raised its arm and shook its fist with decision at Scarsmoor Castle; then it turned and walked straight back to the Grange.

There was no sort of possibility of mistaking the nature or the meaning of the gesture.

It had the result of stifling Lynborough's softer mood, of reviving his pugnacity. "She must do more than that, if she's to win!" said he.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MARCHESA MOVES

AFTER her demonstration against Scarsmoor Castle, the Marchesa went in to lunch. But there were objects of her wrath nearer home also. She received Norah's salute—they had not met before, that morning—with icy coldness.

"I'm better, thank you," she said, "but you must be feeling tired—having been up so very early in the morning! And you—Violet—have you been over to Scarsmoor again?"

Violet had heard from Norah all about the latter's morning adventure. They exchanged uneasy glances. Yet they were prepared to back one another up. The men looked more frightened; men are frightened when women quarrel.

"One of you," continued the Marchesa accusingly, "pursues Lord Lynborough to his own threshold—the other flirts with him in my own meadow! Rather peculiar signs of friendship for me under the present circumstances—don't you think so, Colonel Wenman?"

The Colonel thought so—though he would have greatly preferred to be at liberty to entertain—or at least to express—no opinion on so thorny a point.

"Flirt with him? What do you mean?" But Norah's protest lacked the ring of honest indignation.

"Kissing one's hand to a mere stranger——"

"How do you know that? You were in bed."

"Carlotta saw you from her window. You don't deny it?"

"No, I don't," said Norah, perceiving the uselessness of such a course. "In fact, I glory in it. I had a splendid time with Lord Lynborough. Oh, I did try to keep him out for you—but he jumped over my head."

Sensation among the gentlemen! Increased scorn on the Marchesa's face!

"And when I got John Goodenough to help me, he just laid John down on the grass as—as I lay that spoon on the table! He's splendid, Helena!"

"He seems a good sort of chap," said Irons thoughtfully.

The Marchesa looked at Wenman.

"Nothing to be said for the fellow, nothing at all," declared the Colonel hastily.

"Thank you, Colonel Wenman. I'm glad I have one friend left anyhow. Oh, besides you, Mr Stillford, of course. Oh, and you, dear old Jennie, of course. You wouldn't forsake me, would you?"

The tone of affection was calculated to gratify Miss Gilletson. But against it had to be set the curious and amused gaze of Norah and Violet. Seen by these two ladies in the act of

descending from a stylish (and coroneted) victoria in the drive of Nab Grange, Miss Gilletson had, pardonably perhaps, broken down rather severely in cross-examination. She had been so very proud of the roses—so very full of Lord Lynborough's graces! She was conscious now that the pair held her in their hands and were demanding courage from her.

"Forsake you, dearest Helena? Of course not! There's no question of that with any of us."

"Yes—there is—with those of you who make friends with that wretch at Scarsmoor!"

"Really, Helena, you shouldn't be so—so vehement. I'm not sure it's ladylike. It's absurd to call Lord Lynborough a wretch." The pale faint flush again adorned her fading cheeks. "I never met a man more thoroughly a gentleman."

"You never met——" began the Marchesa in petrified tones. "Then you have met——?" Again her words died away.

Miss Gilletson took her courage in both hands.

"Circumstances threw us together. I behaved as a lady does under such circumstances, Helena. And Lord Lynborough was, under the circumstances, most charming, courteous, and considerate." She gathered more courage as she proceeded. "And, really, it's highly inconvenient having that gate locked, Helena. I had to come all the way round by the road."

"I'm sorry if you find yourself fatigued," said the Marchesa with formal civility.

"I'm not fatigued, thank you, Helena. I should have been terribly—but for Lord Lynborough's kindness in sending me home in his carriage."

A pause followed. Then Norah and Violet began to giggle.

"It was so funny this morning!" said Norah—and boldly launched on a full story of her adventure. She held the attention of the table. The Marchesa sat in gloomy silence. Violet chimed in with more reminiscences of her visit to Scarsmoor; Miss Gilletson contributed new items, including that matter of the roses. Norah ended triumphantly with a eulogy on Lynborough's extraordinary physical powers. Captain Irons listened with concealed interest. Even Colonel Wenman ventured to opine that the enemy was worth fighting. Stillford imitated his hostess's silence, but he was watching her closely. Would her courage—or her obstinacy—break down under these assaults, this lukewarmness, these desertions? In his heart, fearful of that lawsuit, he hoped so.

"I shall prosecute him for assaulting Goodenough," the Marchesa announced.

"Goodenough touched him first!" cried Norah.

"That doesn't matter, since I'm in the right. He had no business to be there. That's the law, isn't it, Mr Stillford? Will he be sent to prison or only heavily fined?"

"Well—er—I'm rather afraid—neither, Marchesa. You see, he'll plead his right, and the Bench would refer us to our civil remedy and dismiss the summons. At least, that's my opinion."

"Of course that's right," pronounced Norah in an authoritative tone.

"If that's the English law," observed the Marchesa, rising from the table, "I greatly regret that I ever settled in England."

"What are you going to do this afternoon, Helena? Going to play tennis—or croquet?"

"I'm going for a walk, thank you, Violet." She paused for a moment and then added, "By myself."

"Oh, mayn't I have the privilege——?" began the Colonel.

“Not to-day, thank you, Colonel Wenman. I—I have a great deal to think about. We shall meet again at tea—unless you’re all going to tea at Scarsmoor Castle!” With this Parthian shot she left them.

She had indeed much to think of—and her reflections were not cast in a cheerful mould. She had underrated her enemy. It had seemed sufficient to lock the gate and to forbid Lynborough’s entry. These easy measures had appeared to leave him no resource save blank violence: in that confidence she had sat still and done nothing. He had been at work—not by blank violence, but by cunning devices and subtle machinations. He had made a base use of his personal fascinations, of his athletic gifts, even of his lordly domain, his garden of roses, and his carriage. She perceived his strategy; she saw now how he had driven in his wedges. Her ladies had already gone over to his side; even her men were shaken. Stillford had always been lukewarm; Irons was fluttering round Lynborough’s flame; Wenman might still be hers—but an isolation mitigated only by Colonel Wenman seemed an isolation not mitigated in the least. When she had looked forward to a fight, it had not been to such a fight as this. An enthusiastic, hilarious, united Nab Grange was to have hurled laughing defiance at Scarsmoor Castle. Now more than half Nab Grange laughed—but its laughter was not at the Castle; its laughter, its pitying amusement, was directed at her; Lynborough’s triumphant campaign drew all admiration. He had told Stillford that he would harry her; he was harrying her to his heart’s content—and to a very soreness in hers.

For the path—hateful Beach Path which her feet at this moment trod—became now no more than an occasion for battle, a symbol of strife. The greater issue stood out. It was that this man had peremptorily challenged her to a fight—and was beating her! And he won his victory, not by male violence in spite of male stupidity, but by just the arts and the cunning which should have been her own weapons. To her he left the blunt, the inept, the stupid and violent methods. He chose the more refined, and wielded them like a master. It was a position to which the Marchesa’s experience had not accustomed her—one to which her spirit was by no means attuned.

What was his end—that end whose approach seemed even now clearly indicated? It was to convict her at once of cowardice and of pig-headedness, to exhibit her as afraid to bring him to book by law, and yet too churlish to cede him his rights. He would get all her friends to think that about her. Then she would be left alone—to fight a lost battle all alone.

Was he right in his charge? Did it truly describe her conduct? For any truth there might be in it, she declared that he was himself to blame. He had forced the fight on her by his audacious demand for instant surrender; he had given her no fair time for consideration, no opportunity for a dignified retreat. He had offered her no choice save between ignominy and defiance. If she chose defiance, his rather than hers was the blame.

Suddenly—across these dismal broodings—there shot a new idea. *Fas est et ab hoste doceri*; she did not put it in Latin, but it came to the same thing—Couldn’t she pay Lynborough back in his own coin? She had her resources—perhaps she had been letting them lie idle! Lord Lynborough did not live alone at Scarsmoor. If there were women open to his wiles at the Grange, were there no men open to hers at Scarsmoor? The idea was illuminating; she accorded it place in her thoughts.

She was just by the gate. She took out her key, opened the padlock, closed the gate behind her, but did not lock it, walked on to the road, and surveyed the territory of Scarsmoor.

Fate helps those who help themselves: her new courage of brain and heart had its reward. She had not been there above a minute when Roger Wilbraham came out from the Scarsmoor gates.

Lynborough had, he considered, done enough for one day. He was awaiting the results of to-morrow's manœuvres anent the cricket match. But he amused himself after lunch by proffering to Roger a wager that he would not succeed in traversing Beach Path from end to end, and back again, alone, by his own unassisted efforts, and without being driven to ignominious flight. Without a moment's hesitation Roger accepted. "I shall just wait till the coast's clear," he said.

"Ah, but they'll see you from the windows! They will be on the lookout," Lynborough retorted.

The Marchesa had strolled a little way down the road. She was walking back towards the gate when Roger first came in sight. He did not see her until after he had reached the gate. There he stood a moment, considering at what point to attack it—for the barricade was formidable. He came to the same conclusion as Lynborough had reached earlier in the day. "Oh, I'll jump the wall," he said.

"The gate isn't locked," remarked a charming voice just behind him.

He turned round with a start and saw—he had no doubt whom he saw. The Marchesa's tall slender figure stood before him—all in white, crowned by a large, yet simple, white hat; her pale olive cheeks were tinged with underlying red (the flush of which Lynborough had dreamed!); her dark eyes rested on the young man with a kindly languid interest; her very red lips showed no smile, yet seemed to have one in ready ambush. Roger was overcome; he blushed and stood silent before the vision.

"I expect you're going to bathe? Of course this is the shortest way, and I shall be so glad if you'll use it. I'm going to the Grange myself, so I can put you on your way."

Roger was honest. "I—I'm staying at the Castle."

"I'll tell somebody to be on the lookout and open the gate for you when you come back," said she.

If Norah was no match for Lynborough, Roger was none for the Marchesa's practised art.

"You're—you're awfully kind. I—I shall be delighted, of course."

The Marchesa passed through the gate. Roger followed. She handed him the key.

"Will you please lock the padlock? It's not—safe—to leave the gate open."

Her smile had come into the open—it was on the red lips now! For all his agitation Roger was not blind to its meaning. His hand was to lock the gate against his friend and chief! But the smile and the eyes commanded. He obeyed.

It was the first really satisfactory moment which the contest had brought to the Marchesa—some small instalment of consolation for the treason of her friends.

Roger had been honestly in love once with a guileless maiden—who had promptly and quite unguilefully refused him; his experience did not at all fit him to cope with the Marchesa. She, of course, was merciless: was he not of the hated house? As an individual, however, he appeared to be comely and agreeable.

They walked on side by side—not very quickly. The Marchesa's eyes were now downcast. Roger was able to steal a glance at her profile; he could compare it to nothing less than a Roman Empress on an ancient silver coin.

"I suppose you've been taught to think me a very rude and unneighbourly person, haven't you, Mr Wilbraham? At least, I suppose you're Mr Wilbraham? You don't look old enough to be that learned Mr Stabb the Vicar told me about. Though he said Mr Stabb was absolutely delightful—how I should love to know him, if only——!" She broke off, sighing deeply.

"Yes, my name's Wilbraham. I'm Lynborough's secretary. But—er—I don't think anything of that sort about you. And—and I've never heard Lynborough say anything—er—unkind."

"Oh, Lord Lynborough!" She gave a charming little shrug, accompanied with what Roger, from his novel-reading, conceived to be a *moue*.

"Of course I—I know that you—you think you're right," he stammered.

She stopped on the path. "Yes, I do think I'm right, Mr Wilbraham. But that's not it. If it were merely a question of right, it would be unneighbourly to insist. I'm not hurt by Lord Lynborough's using this path. But I'm hurt by Lord Lynborough's discourtesy. In my country women are treated with respect—even sometimes (she gave a bitter little laugh) with deference. That doesn't seem to occur to Lord Lynborough."

"Well, you know——"

"Oh, I can't let you say a word against him, whatever you may be obliged to think. In your position—as his friend—that would be disloyal; and the one thing I dislike is disloyalty. Only I was anxious"—she turned and faced him—"that you should understand my position—and that Mr Stabb should too. I shall be very glad if you and Mr Stabb will use the path whenever you like. If the gate's locked you can manage the wall!"

"I'm—I'm most awfully obliged to you—er—Marchesa—but you see——"

"No more need be said about that, Mr Wilbraham. You're heartily welcome. Lord Lynborough would have been heartily welcome too, if he would have approached me properly. I was open to discussion. I received orders. I don't take orders—not even from Lord Lynborough."

She looked splendid—so Roger thought. The underlying red dyed the olive to a brighter hue; her eyes were very proud; the red lips shut decisively. Just like a Roman Empress! Then her face underwent a rapid transformation; the lips parted, the eyes laughed, the cheeks faded to hues less stormy, yet not less beautiful. (These are recorded as Mr Wilbraham's impressions.) Lightly she laid the tips of her fingers on his arm for just a moment.

"There—don't let's talk any more about disagreeable things," she said. "It's too beautiful an afternoon. Can you spare just five minutes? The strawberries are splendid! I want some—and it's so hot to pick them for oneself!"

Roger paused, twisting the towel round his neck.

"Only five minutes!" pleaded—yes, pleaded—the beautiful Marchesa. "Then you can go and have your swim in peace."

It was a question whether poor Roger was to do anything more in peace that day—but he went and picked the strawberries.

CHAPTER IX

LYNBOROUGH DROPS A CATCH

“SOMETHING has happened!” (So Lynborough records the same evening.) “I don’t know precisely what—but I think that the enemy is at last in motion. I’m glad. I was being too successful. I had begun to laugh at her—and that only. I prefer the admixture of another element of emotion. All that ostensibly appears is that I have lost five shillings to Roger. ‘You did it?’ I asked. ‘Certainly,’ said Roger. ‘I went at my ease and came back at my ease, and—’ I interrupted, ‘Nobody stopped you?’ ‘Nobody made any objection,’ said Roger. ‘You took your time,’ says I. ‘You were away three hours!’ ‘The water was very pleasant this afternoon,’ says Roger. Hum! I hand over my two half-crowns, which Roger pockets with a most peculiar sort of smile. There that incident appears to end—with a comment from me that the Marchesa’s garrison is not very alert. Another smile—not less peculiar—from Roger! *Hum!*”

“Then Cromlech! I trust Cromlech as myself—that is, as far as I can see him. He has no secrets from me—that I know of; I have none from him—which would be at all likely to interest him. Yet, soon after Roger’s return, Cromlech goes out! And they had been alone together for some minutes, as I happen to have observed. Cromlech is away an hour and a half! If I were not a man of honour, I would have trained the telescope on to him. I refrained. Where was Cromlech? At the church, he told me. I accept his word—but the church has had a curious effect upon him. Sometimes he is silent, sulky, reflective, embarrassed—constantly rubbing the place where his hair ought to be—not altogether too civil to me either. Anon, sits with a fat happy smile on his face! Has he found a new tomb? No; he’d tell me about a new tomb. What has happened to Cromlech?”

“At first sight Violet—the insinuating one—would account for the phenomena. Or Norah’s eyes and lashes? Yet I hesitate. Woman, of course, it is, with both of them. Violet might make men pleased with themselves; Norah could make them merry and happy. Yet these two are not so much pleased with themselves—rather they are pleased with events; they are not merry—they are thoughtful. And I think they are resentful. I believe the hostile squadron has weighed anchor. In these great results, achieved so quickly, demanding on my part such an effort in reply, I see the Marchesa’s touch! I have my own opinion as to what has happened to Roger and to Cromlech. Well, we shall see—to-morrow is the cricket match!”

“*Later.* I had closed this record; I was preparing to go to bed (wishing to bathe early to-morrow) when I found that I had forgotten to bring up my book. Coltson had gone to bed—or out—anyhow, away. I went down myself. The library door stood ajar; I had on my slippers; a light burnt still; Cromlech and Roger were up. As I approached—with an involuntary noiselessness (I really couldn’t be expected to think of coughing, in my own house and with no ladies about)—I overheard this remarkable, most significant, most important conversation:—

“*Cromlech:* ‘On my soul, there were tears in her eyes!’

“*Roger:* ‘Stabb, can we as gentlemen——?’

“Then, as I presume, the shuffle of my slippers became audible. I went in; both drank whisky-and-soda in a hurried fashion. I took my book from the table. Naught said I. Their confusion was obvious. I cast on them one of my looks; Roger blushed, Stabb shuffled his feet. I left them.

“ ‘Tears in her eyes!’ ‘Can we as gentlemen?’

“The Marchesa moves slowly, but she moves in force!”

It is unnecessary to pursue the diary further; for his lordship—forgetful apparently of the bourne of bed, to which he had originally destined himself—launches into a variety of speculations as to the Nature of Love. Among other questions, he puts to himself the following concerning Love:—(1) Is it Inevitable? (2) Is it Agreeable? (3) Is it Universal? (4) Is it Wise? (5) Is it Remunerative? (6) Is it Momentary? (7) Is it Sempiternal? (8) Is it Voluntary? (9) Is it Conditioned? (10) Is it Remediable? (11) Is it Religious? (There’s a note here—“Consult Cromlech”)—(12) May it be expected to survive the Advance of Civilisation? (13) Why does it exist at all? (14) Is it Ridiculous?

It is not to be inferred that Lord Lynborough answers these questions. He is, like a wise man, content to propound them. If, however, he had answered them, it might have been worth while to transcribe the diary.

“Can we as gentlemen——?”—Roger had put the question. It waited unanswered till Lynborough had taken his book and returned to record its utterance—together with the speculations to which that utterance gave rise. Stabb weighed it carefully, rubbing his bald head, according to the habit which his friend had animadverted upon.

“If such a glorious creature——” cried Roger.

“If a thoroughly intelligent and most sympathetic woman——” said Stabb.

“Thinks that she has a right, why, she probably has one!”

“At any rate her view is entitled to respect—to a courteous hearing.”

“Lynborough does appear to have been a shade—er——”

“Ambrose is a spoilt child, bless him! She took a wonderful interest in my brasses. I don’t know what brought her to the church.”

“She waited herself to let me through that beastly gate again!”

“She drove me round herself to our gates. Wouldn’t come through Scarsmoor!”

They both sighed. They both thought of telling the other something—but on second thoughts refrained.

“I suppose we’d better go to bed. Shall you bathe to-morrow morning?”

“With Ambrose? No, I sha’n’t, Wilbraham.”

“No more shall I. Good-night, Stabb. You’ll—think it over?”

Stabb grunted inarticulately. Roger drew the blind aside for a moment, looked down on Nab Grange, saw a light in one window—and went to bed. The window was, in objective fact (if there be such a thing), Colonel Wenman’s. No matter. There nothing is but thinking makes it so. The Colonel was sitting up, writing a persuasive letter to his tailor. He served emotions that he did not feel; it is a not uncommon lot.

Lynborough’s passing and repassing to and from his bathing were uninterrupted next morning. Nab Grange seemed wrapped in slumber; only Goodenough saw him, and Goodenough did not think it advisable to interrupt his ordinary avocations. But an air of

constraint—even of mystery—marked both Stabb and Roger at breakfast. The cricket match was naturally the topic—though Stabb declared that he took little interest in it and should probably not be there.

“There’ll be some lunch, I suppose,” said Lynborough carelessly. “You’d better have lunch there—it’d be dull for you all by yourself here, Cromlech.”

After apparent consideration Stabb conceded that he might take luncheon on the cricket ground; Roger, as a member of the Fillby team, would, of course, do likewise.

The game was played in a large field, pleasantly surrounded by a belt of trees, and lying behind the Lynborough Arms. Besides Roger and Lynborough, Stillford and Irons represented Fillby. Easthorpe Polytechnic came in full force, save for an umpire. Colonel Wenman, who had walked up with his friends, was pressed into this honourable and responsible service, landlord Dawson officiating at the other end. Lynborough’s second gardener, a noted fast bowler, was Fillby’s captain; Easthorpe was under the command of a curate who had played several times for his University, although he had not actually achieved his “blue.” Easthorpe won the toss and took first innings.

The second gardener, aware of his employer’s turn of speed, sent Lord Lynborough to field “in the country.” That gentleman was well content; few balls came his way and he was at leisure to contemplate the exterior of the luncheon tent—he had already inspected the interior thereof with sedulous care and high contentment—and to speculate on the probable happenings of the luncheon hour. So engrossed was he that only a rapturous cheer, which rang out from the field and the spectators, apprised him of the fact that the second gardener had yorked the redoubtable curate with the first ball of his second over! Young Woodwell came in; he was known as a mighty hitter; Lynborough was signalled to take his position yet deeper in the field. Young Woodwell immediately got to business—but he kept the ball low. Lynborough had, however, the satisfaction of saving several “boundaries.” Roger, keeping wicket, observed his chief’s exertions with some satisfaction. Other wickets fell rapidly—but young Woodwell’s score rapidly mounted up. If he could stay in, they would make a hundred—and Fillby looked with just apprehension on a score like that. The second gardener, who had given himself a brief rest, took the ball again with an air of determination.

“Peters doesn’t seem to remember that I also bowl,” reflected Lord Lynborough.

The next moment he was glad of this omission. Young Woodwell was playing for safety now—his fifty loomed ahead! Lynborough had time for a glance round. He saw Stabb saunter on to the field; then—just behind where he stood when the second gardener was bowling from the Lynborough Arms end of the field—a waggonette drove up. Four ladies descended. A bench was placed at their disposal, and the two men-servants at once began to make preparations for lunch, aided therein by the ostler from the Lynborough Arms, who rigged up a table on trestles under a spreading tree.

Lord Lynborough’s reputation as a sportsman inevitably suffers from this portion of the narrative. Yet extenuating circumstances may fairly be pleaded. He was deeply interested in the four ladies who sat behind him on the bench; he was vitally concerned in the question of the lunch. As he walked back, between the overs, to his position, he could see that places were being set for some half-dozen people. Would there be half-a-dozen there? As he stood, watching, or trying to watch, young Woodwell’s dangerous bat, he overheard fragments of conversation wafted from the bench. The ladies were too far from him to allow of their faces being clearly seen, but it was not hard to recognise their figures.

The last man in had joined young Woodwell. That hero's score was forty-eight, the total ninety-three. The second gardener was tempting the Easthorpe champion with an occasional slow ball; up to now young Woodwell had declined to hit at these deceivers.

Suddenly Lynborough heard the ladies' voices quite plainly. They—or some of them—had left the bench and come nearer to the boundary. Irresistibly drawn by curiosity, for an instant he turned his head. At the same instant the second gardener delivered a slow ball—a specious ball. This time young Woodwell fell into the snare. He jumped out and opened his shoulders to it. He hit it—but he hit it into the air. It soared over the bowler's head and came travelling through high heaven towards Lord Lynborough.

“Look out!” cried the second gardener. Lynborough's head spun round again—but his nerves were shaken. His eyes seemed rather in the back of his head, trying to see the Marchesa's face, than fixed on the ball that was coming towards him. He was in no mood for bringing off a safe catch!

Silence reigned, the ball began to drop. Lynborough had an instant to wait for it. He tried to think of the ball and the ball only.

It fell—it fell into his hands; he caught it—fumbled it—caught it—fumbled it again—and at last dropped it on the grass! “Oh!” went in a long-drawn expostulation round the field; and Lynborough heard a voice say plainly:

“Who is that stupid clumsy man?” The voice was the Marchesa's.

He wheeled round sharply—but her back was turned. He had not seen her face after all!

“Over!” was called. Lynborough apologised abjectly to the second gardener.

“The sun was in my eyes, Peters, and dazzled me,” he pleaded.

“Looks to *me* as if the sun was shining the other way, my lord,” said Peters drily. And so, in physical fact, it was.

In Peters' next over Lynborough atoned—for young Woodwell had got his fifty and grown reckless. A one-handed catch, wide on his left side, made the welkin ring with applause. The luncheon bell rang too—for the innings was finished. Score 101. Last man out 52. Jim (office boy at Polytechnic) not out 0. Young Woodwell received a merited ovation—and Lord Lynborough hurried to the luncheon tent. The Marchesa, with an exceedingly dignified mien, repaired to her table under the spreading oak.

Mr Dawson had done himself more than justice; the repast was magnificent. When Stillford and Irons saw it, they became more sure than ever what their duty was, more convinced still that the Marchesa would understand. Colonel Wenman became less sure what his duty was—previously it had appeared to him that it was to lunch with the Marchesa. But the Marchesa had spoken of a few sandwiches and perhaps a bottle of claret. Stillford told him that, as umpire, he ought to lunch with the teams. Irons declared it would look “deuced standoffish” if he didn't. Lynborough, who appeared to act as deputy-landlord to Mr Dawson, pressed him into a chair with a friendly hand.

“Well, she'll have the ladies with her, won't she?” said the Colonel, his last scruple vanishing before a large jug of hock-cup, artfully iced. The Nab Grange contingent fell to.

Just then—when they were irrevocably committed to this feast—the flap of the tent was drawn back, and Lady Norah's face appeared. Behind her stood Violet and Miss Gilletson. Lynborough ran forward to meet them.

“Here we are, Lord Lynborough,” said Norah. “The Marchesa was so kind, she told us to do just as we liked, and we thought it would be such fun to lunch with the cricketers.”

“The cricketers are immensely honoured. Let me introduce you to our captain, Mr Peters. You must sit by him, you know. And, Miss Dufaure, will you sit by Mr Jeffreys?—he’s their captain—Miss Dufaure—Mr Jeffreys. You, Miss Gilletson, must sit between Mr Dawson and me. Now we’re right—What, Colonel Wenman?—What’s the matter?”

Wenman had risen from his place. “The—the Marchesa!” he said. “We—we can’t leave her to lunch alone!”

Lady Norah broke in again. “Oh, Helena expressly said that she didn’t expect the gentlemen. She knows what the custom is, you see.”

The Marchesa had, no doubt, made all these speeches. It may, however, be doubted whether Norah reproduced exactly the manner, and the spirit, in which she made them. But the iced hock-cup settled the Colonel. With a relieved sigh he resumed his place. The business of the moment went on briskly for a quarter of an hour.

Mr Dawson rose, glass in hand. “Ladies and gentlemen,” said he, “I’m no hand at a speech, but I give you the health of our kind neighbour and good host to-day—Lord Lynborough. Here’s to his lordship!”

“I—I didn’t know he was giving the lunch!” whispered Colonel Wenman.

“Is it his lunch?” said Irons, nudging Stillford.

Stillford laughed. “It looks like it. And we can hardly throw him over the hedge after this!”

“Well, he seems to be a jolly good chap,” said Captain Irons.

Lynborough bowed his acknowledgments, and flirted with Miss Gilletson; his face wore a contented smile. Here they all were—and the Marchesa lunched alone on the other side of the field! Here indeed was a new wedge! Here was the isolation at which his diabolical schemes had aimed. He had captured Nab Grange! Bag and baggage they had come over—and left their chieftainess deserted.

Then suddenly—in the midst of his triumph—in the midst too of a certain not ungenerous commiseration which he felt that he could extend to a defeated enemy and to beauty in distress—he became vaguely aware of a gap in his company. Stabb was not there! Yet Stabb had come upon the ground. He searched the company again. No, Stabb was not there. Moreover—a fact the second search revealed—Roger Wilbraham was not there. Roger was certainly not there; yet, whatever Stabb might do, Roger would never miss lunch!

Lynborough’s eyes grew thoughtful; he pursed up his lips. Miss Gilletson noticed that he became silent.

He could bear the suspense no longer. On a pretext of looking for more bottled beer, he rose and walked to the door of the tent.

Under the spreading tree the Marchesa lunched—not in isolation, not in gloom. She had company—and, even as he appeared, a merry peal of laughter was wafted by a favouring breeze across the field of battle. Stabb’s ponderous figure, Roger Wilbraham’s highly recognisable “blazer,” told the truth plainly.

Lord Lynborough was not the only expert in the art of driving wedges!

“Well played, Helena!” he said under his breath.

The rest of the cricket match interested him very little. Successful beyond their expectations, Fillby won by five runs (Wilbraham not out thirty-seven)—but Lynborough's score did not swell the victorious total. In Easthorpe's second innings—which could not affect the result—Peters let him bowl, and he got young Woodwell's wicket. That was a distinction; yet, looking at the day as a whole, he had scored less than he expected.

CHAPTER X

IN THE LAST RESORT!

IT will have been perceived by now that Lord Lynborough delighted in a fight. He revelled in being opposed; the man who withstood him to the face gave him such pleasure as to beget in his mind certainly gratitude, perhaps affection, or at least a predisposition thereto. There was nothing he liked so much as an even battle—unless, by chance, it were the scales seeming to incline a little against him. Then his spirits rose highest, his courage was most buoyant, his kindness most sunny.

The benefit of this disposition accrued to the Marchesa; for by her sudden counter-attack she had at least redressed the balance of the campaign. He could not be sure that she had not done more. The ladies of her party were his—he reckoned confidently on that; but the men he could not count as more than neutral at the best; Wenman, anyhow, could easily be whistled back to the Marchesa's heel. But in his own house, he admitted at once, she had secured for him open hostility, for herself the warmest of partisanship. The meaning of her lunch was too plain to doubt. No wonder her opposition to her own deserters had been so faint; no wonder she had so readily, even if so scornfully, afforded them the pretext—the barren verbal permission—that they had required. She had not wanted them—no, not even the Colonel himself! She had wanted to be alone with Roger and with Stabb—and to complete the work of her blandishments on those guileless, tender-hearted, and susceptible persons. Lynborough admired, applauded, and promised himself considerable entertainment at dinner.

How was the Marchesa, in her turn, bearing her domestic isolation, the internal disaffection at Nab Grange? He flattered himself that she would not be finding in it such pleasure as his whimsical temper reaped from the corresponding position of affairs at Scarsmoor.

There he was right. At Nab Grange the atmosphere was not cheerful. Not to want a thing by no means implies an admission that you do not want it; that is elementary diplomacy. Rather do you insist that you want it very much; if you do not get it, there is a grievance—and a grievance is a mighty handy article of barter. The Marchesa knew all that.

The deserters were severely lashed. The Marchesa had said that she did not expect Colonel Wenman; ought she to have sent a message to say that she was pining for him—must that be wrung from her before he would condescend to come? She had said that she knew the custom with regard to lunch at cricket matches; was that to say that she expected it to be observed to her manifest and public humiliation? She had told Miss Gilletson and the girls to

please themselves; of course she wished them to do that always. Yet it might be a wound to find that their pleasure lay in abandoning their friend and hostess, in consorting with her arch-enemy, and giving him a triumph.

“Well, what do you say about Wilbraham and Stabb?” cried the trampled Colonel.

“I say that they’re gentlemen,” retorted the Marchesa. “They saw the position I was in—and they saved me from humiliation.”

That was enough for the men; men are, after all, poor fighters. It was not, however, enough for Lady Norah Mountliffey—a woman—and an Irishwoman to boot!

“Are you really asking us to believe that you hadn’t arranged it with them beforehand?” she inquired scornfully.

“Oh, I don’t ask you to believe anything I say,” returned the Marchesa, dexterously avoiding saying anything on the point suggested.

“The truth is, you’re being very absurd, Helena,” Norah pursued. “If you’ve got a right, go to law with Lord Lynborough and make him respect it. If you haven’t got a right, why go on making yourself ridiculous and all the rest of us very uncomfortable?”

It was obvious that the Marchesa might reply that any guest of hers who felt himself or herself uncomfortable at Nab Grange had, in his or her own hand, the easy remedy. She did not do that. She did a thing more disconcerting still. Though the mutton had only just been put on the table, she pushed back her chair, rose to her feet, and fled from the room very hastily.. Miss Gilletson sprang up. But Norah was beforehand with her.

“No! I said it. I’m the one to go. Who could think she’d take it like that?” Norah’s own blue eyes were less bright than usual as she hurried after her wounded friend. The rest ate on in dreary conscience-stricken silence. At last Stillford spoke.

“Don’t urge her to go to law,” he said. “I’m pretty sure she’d be beaten.”

“Then she ought to give in—and apologise to Lord Lynborough,” said Miss Gilletson decisively. “That would be right—and, I will add, Christian.”

“Humble Pie ain’t very good eating,” commented Captain Irons.

Neither the Marchesa nor Norah came back. The meal wended along its slow and melancholy course to a mirthless weary conclusion. Colonel Wenman began to look on the repose of bachelorhood with a kinder eye, on its loneliness with a more tolerant disposition. He went so far as to remember that, if the worst came to the worst, he had another invitation for the following week.

The Spirit of Discord (The tragic atmosphere now gathering justifies these figures of speech—the chronicler must rise to the occasion of a heroine in tears), having wrought her fell work at Nab Grange, now winged her way to the towers of Scarsmoor Castle.

Dinner had passed off quite as Lynborough anticipated; he had enjoyed himself exceedingly. Whenever the temporary absence of the servants allowed, he had rallied his friends on their susceptibility to beauty, on their readiness to fail him under its lures, on their clumsy attempts at concealment of their growing intimacy, and their confidential relations, with the fascinating mistress of Nab Grange. He too had been told to take his case into the Courts or to drop his claim—and had laughed triumphantly at the advice. He had laughed when Stabb said that he really could not pursue his work in the midst of such distractions, that his mind was too perturbed for scientific thought. He had laughed lightly and good-humouredly even when (as they were left alone over coffee) Roger Wilbraham, going

suddenly a little white, said he thought that persecuting a lady was no fit amusement for a gentleman. Lynborough did not suppose that the Marchesa—with the battle of the day at least drawn, if not decided in her favour—could be regarded as the subject of persecution—and he did recognise that young fellows, under certain spells, spoke hotly and were not to be held to serious account. He was smiling still when, with a forced remark about the heat, the pair went out together to smoke on the terrace. He had some letters to read, and for the moment dismissed the matter from his mind.

In ten minutes young Roger Wilbraham returned; his manner was quiet now, but his face still rather pale. He came up to the table by which Lynborough sat.

“Holding the position I do in your house, Lord Lynborough,” he said, “I had no right to use the words I used this evening at dinner. I apologise for them. But, on the other hand, I have no wish to hold a position which prevents me from using those words when they represent what I think. I beg you to accept my resignation, and I shall be greatly obliged if you can arrange to relieve me of my duties as soon as possible.”

Lynborough heard him without interruption; with grave impassive face, with surprise, pity, and a secret amusement. Even if he were right, he was so solemn over it!

The young man waited for no answer. With the merest indication of a bow, he left Lynborough alone, and passed on into the house.

“Well, now!” said Lord Lynborough, rising and lighting a cigar. “This Marchesa! Well, now!”

Stabb’s heavy form came lumbering in from the terrace; he seemed to move more heavily than ever, as though his bulk were even unusually inert. He plumped down into a chair and looked up at Lynborough’s graceful figure.

“I meant what I said at dinner, Ambrose. I wasn’t joking, though I suppose you thought I was. All this affair may amuse you—it worries me. I can’t settle to work. If you’ll be so kind as to send me over to Easthorpe to-morrow, I’ll be off—back to Oxford.”

“Cromlech, old boy!”

“Yes, I know. But I—I don’t want to stay, Ambrose. I’m not—comfortable.” His great face set in a heavy, disconsolate, wrinkled frown.

Lord Lynborough pursed his lips in a momentary whistle, then put his cigar back into his mouth, and walked out on to the terrace.

“This Marchesa!” said he again. “This very remarkable Marchesa! Her *riposte* is admirable. Really I venture to hope that I, in my turn, have very seriously disturbed her household!”

He walked to the edge of the terrace, and stood there musing. Sandy Nab loomed up, dimly the sea rose and fell, twinkled and sank into darkness. It talked too—talked to Lynborough with a soft, low, quiet voice; it seemed (to his absurdly whimsical imagination) as though some lovely woman gently stroked his brow and whispered to him. He liked to encourage such freaks of fancy.

Cromlech couldn’t go. That was absurd.

And the young fellow? So much a gentleman! Lynborough had liked the terms of his apology no less than the firmness of his protest. “It’s the first time, I think, that I’ve been told that I’m no gentleman,” he reflected with amusement. But Roger had been pale when he said

it. Imaginatively Lynborough assumed his place. “A brave boy,” he said. “And that dear old knight-errant of a Cromlech!”

A space—room indeed and room enough—for the softer emotions—so much Lynborough was ever inclined to allow. But to acquiesce in this state of things as final—that was to admit defeat at the hands of the Marchesa. It was to concede that one day had changed the whole complexion of the fight.

“Cromlech sha’n’t go—the boy sha’n’t go—and I’ll still use the path,” he thought. “Not that I really care about the path, you know.” He paused. “Well, yes, I do care about it—for bathing in the morning.” He hardened his heart against the Marchesa. She chose to fight; the fortune of war must be hers. He turned his eyes down to Nab Grange. Lights burned there—were her guests demanding to be sent to Easthorpe? Why, no! As he looked, Lynborough came to the conclusion that she had reduced them all to order—that they would be whipped back to heel—that his manœuvres (and his lunch!) had probably been wasted. He was beaten then?

He scorned the conclusion. But if he were not—the result was deadlock! Then still he was beaten; for unless Helena (he called her that) owned his right, his right was to him as nothing.

“I have made myself a champion of my sex,” he said. “Shall I be beaten?”

In that moment—with all the pang of forsaking an old conviction—of disowning that stronger tie, the loved embrace of an ancient and perversely championed prejudice—he declared that any price must be paid for victory.

“Heaven forgive me, but, sooner than be beaten, I’ll go to law with her!” he cried.

A face appeared from between two bushes—a voice spoke from the edge of the terrace.

“I thought you might be interested to hear——”

“Lady Norah?”

“Yes, it’s me—to hear that you’ve made her cry—and very bitterly.”

CHAPTER XI

AN ARMISTICE

LORD LYNBOROUGH walked down to the edge of the terrace; Lady Norah stood half hidden in the shrubbery.

“And that, I suppose, ought to end the matter?” he asked. “I ought at once to abandon all my pretensions and to give up my path?”

“I just thought you might like to know it,” said Norah.

“Actually I believe I do like to know it—though what Roger would say to me about that I really can’t imagine. You’re mistaking my character, Lady Norah. I’m not the hero of this piece. There are several gentlemen from among whom you can choose one for that effective part. Lots of candidates for it! But I’m the villain. Consequently you must be prepared for my receiving your news with devilish glee.”

“Well, you haven’t seen it—and I have.”

“Well put!” he allowed. “How did it happen?”

“Over something I said to her—something horrid.”

“Well, then, why am I——?” Lynborough’s hands expostulated eloquently.

“But you were the real reason, of course. She thinks you’ve turned us all against her; she says it’s so mean to get her own friends to turn against her.”

“Does she now?” asked Lord Lynborough with a thoughtful smile.

Norah too smiled faintly. “She says she’s not angry with us—she’s just sorry for us—because she understands——”

“What?”

“I mean she says she—she can imagine——” Norah’s smile grew a little more pronounced. “I’m not sure she’d like me to repeat that,” said Norah. “And of course she doesn’t know I’m here at all—and you must never tell her.”

“Of course it’s all my fault. Still, as a matter of curiosity, what did you say to her?”

“I said that, if she had a good case, she ought to go to law; and, if she hadn’t, she ought to stop making herself ridiculous and the rest of us uncomfortable.”

“You spoke with the general assent of the company?”

“I said what I thought—yes, I think they all agreed—but she took it—well, in the way I’ve told you, you know.”

Lady Norah had, in the course of conversation, insensibly advanced on to the terrace. She stood there now beside Lynborough.

“How do you think I’m taking it?” he asked. “Doesn’t my fortitude wring applause from you?”

“Taking what?”

“Exactly the same thing from my friends. They tell me to go to law if I’ve got a case—and at any rate to stop persecuting a lady. And they’ve both given me warning.”

“Mr Stabb and Mr Wilbraham? They’re going away?”

“So it appears. Carry back those tidings. Won’t they dry the Marchesa’s tears?”

Norah looked at him with a smile. “Well, it is pretty clever of her, isn’t it?” she said. “I didn’t think she’d got along as quickly as that!” Norah’s voice was full of an honest and undisguised admiration.

“It’s a little unreasonable of her to cry under the circumstances. I’m not crying, Lady Norah.”

“I expect you’re rather disgusted, though, aren’t you?” she suggested.

“I’m a little vexed at having to surrender—for the moment—a principle which I’ve held dear—at having to give my enemies an occasion for mockery. But I must bow to my friends’ wishes. I can’t lose them under such painful circumstances. No, I must yield, Lady Norah.”

“You’re going to give up the path?” she cried, not sure whether she were pleased or not with his determination.

“Dear me, no! I’m going to law about it.”

Open dismay was betrayed in her exclamation: “Oh, but what will Mr Stillford say to that?”

Lynborough laughed. Norah saw her mistake—but she made no attempt to remedy it. She took up another line of tactics. “It would all come right if only you knew one another! She’s the most wonderful woman in the world, Lord Lynborough. And you——”

“Well, what of me?” he asked in deceitful gravity.

Norah parried, with a hasty little laugh; “Just ask Miss Gilletson that!”

Lynborough smiled for a moment, then took a turn along the terrace, and came back to her.

“You must tell her that you’ve seen me——”

“I couldn’t do that!”

“You must—or here the matter ends, and I shall be forced to go to law—ugh! Tell her you’ve seen me, and that I’m open to reason——”

“Lord Lynborough! How can I tell her that?”

“That I’m open to reason, and that I propose an armistice. Not peace—not yet, anyhow—but an armistice. I undertake not to exercise my right over Beach Path for a week from to-day, and before the end of that week I will submit a proposal to the Marchesa.”

Norah saw a gleam of hope. “Very well. I don’t know what she’ll say to me, but I’ll tell her that. Thank you. You’ll make it a—a pleasant proposal?”

“I haven’t had time to consider the proposal yet. She must inform me to-morrow morning whether she accepts the armistice.” He suddenly turned to the house, and shouted up to a window above his head, “Roger!”

The window was open. Roger Wilbraham put his head out.

“Come down,” said Lynborough. “Here’s somebody wants to see you.”

“I never said I did, Lord Lynborough.”

“Let him take you home. He wants cheering up.”

“I like him very much. He won’t really leave you, will he?”

“I want you to persuade him to stay during the armistice. I’m too proud to ask him for myself. I shall think very little of you, however, if he doesn’t.”

Roger appeared. Lynborough told him that Lady Norah required an escort back to Nab Grange; for obvious reasons he himself was obliged to relinquish the pleasure; Roger, he felt sure, would be charmed to take his place. Roger was somewhat puzzled by the turn of events, but delighted with his mission.

Lynborough saw them off, went into the library, sat down at his writing-table, and laid paper before him. But he sat idle for many minutes. Stabb came in, his arms full of books.

“I think I left some of my stuff here,” he said, avoiding Lynborough’s eye. “I’m just getting it together.”

“Drop that lot too. You’re not going to-morrow. Cromlech, there’s an armistice.”

Stabb put his books down on the table, and came up to him with outstretched hand. Lynborough leant back, his hands clasped behind his head.

“Wait for a week,” he said. “We may, Cromlech, arrive at an accommodation. Meanwhile, for that week, I do not use the path.”

“I’ve been feeling pretty badly, Ambrose.”

“Yes, I don’t think it’s safe to expose you to the charms of beauty.” He looked at his friend in good-natured mockery. “Return to your tombs in peace.”

The next morning he received a communication from Nab Grange. It ran as follows:—

“The Marchesa di San Servolo presents her compliments to Lord Lynborough. The Marchesa will be prepared to consider any proposal put forward by Lord Lynborough, and will place no hindrance in the way of Lord Lynborough’s using the path across her property if it suits his convenience to do so in the meantime.”

“No, no!” said Lynborough, as he took a sheet of paper.

“Lord Lynborough presents his compliments to her Excellency the Marchesa di San Servolo. Lord Lynborough will take an early opportunity of submitting his proposal to the Marchesa di San Servolo. He is obliged for the Marchesa di San Servolo’s suggestion that he should in the meantime use Beach Path, but cannot consent to do so except in the exercise of his right. He will therefore not use Beach Path during the ensuing week.”

“And now to pave the way for my proposal!” he thought. For the proposal, which had assumed a position so important in the relations between the Marchesa and himself, was to be of such a nature that a grave question arose how best the way should be paved for it.

The obvious course was to set his spies to work—he could command plenty of friendly help among the Nab Grange garrison—learn the Marchesa’s probable movements, throw himself in her way, contrive an acquaintance, make himself as pleasant as he could, establish relations of amity, of cordiality, even of friendship and of intimacy. That might prepare the way, and incline her to accept the proposal—to take the jest—it was little more in hard reality—in the spirit in which he put it forward, and so to end her resistance.

That seemed the reasonable method—the plain and rational line of advance. Accordingly Lynborough disliked and distrusted it. He saw another way—more full of risk, more hazardous in its result, making an even greater demand on his confidence in himself, perhaps also on the qualities with which his imagination credited the Marchesa. But, on the other hand, this alternative was far richer in surprise, in dash—as it seemed to him, in gallantry and a touch of romance. It was far more mediæval, more picturesque, more in keeping with the actual proposal itself. For the actual proposal was one which, Lynborough flattered himself, might well have come from a powerful yet chivalrous baron of old days to a beautiful queen who claimed a suzerainty which not her power, but only her beauty, could command or enforce.

“It suits my humour, and I’ll do it!” he said. “She sha’n’t see me, and I won’t see her. The first she shall hear from me shall be the proposal; the first time we meet shall be on the twenty-fourth—or never! A week from to-day—the twenty-fourth.”

Now the twenty-fourth of June is, as all the world knows (or an almanac will inform the heathen), the Feast of St John Baptist, also called Midsummer Day.

So he disappeared from the view of Nab Grange and the inhabitants thereof. He never left his own grounds; even within them he shunned the public road; his beloved sea-bathing he abandoned. Nay, more, he strictly charged Roger Wilbraham, who often during this week of armistice went to play golf or tennis at the Grange, to say nothing of him; the same instructions were laid on Stabb in case, on his excursions amidst the tombs, he should meet any member of the Marchesa’s party. So far as the thing could be done, Lord Lynborough obliterated himself.

It was playing a high stake on a risky hand. Plainly it assumed an interest in himself on the part of the Marchesa—an interest so strong that absence and mystery (if perchance he achieved a flavour of that attraction!) would foster and nourish it more than presence and friendship could conduce to its increase. She might think nothing about him during the week! Impossible surely—with all that had gone before, and with his proposal to come at the end! But if it were so—why, so he was content. “In that case, she’s a woman of no imagination, of no taste in the picturesque,” he said.

For five days the Marchesa gave no sign, no clue to her feelings which the anxious watchers could detect. She did indeed suffer Colonel Wenman to depart all forlorn, most unsuccessful and uncomfited—save by the company of his brother-in-arms, Captain Irons; and he was not cheerful either, having failed notably in certain designs on Miss Dufaure which he had been pursuing, but whereunto more pressing matters have not allowed of attention being given. But Lord Lynborough she never mentioned—not to Miss Gilletson, nor even to Norah. She seemed to have regained her tranquillity; her wrath at least was over; she was very friendly to all the ladies; she was markedly cordial to Roger Wilbraham on his visits. But she asked him nothing of Lord Lynborough—and, if she ever looked from the window towards Scarsmoor Castle, none—not even her observant maid—saw her do it.

Yet Cupid was in the Grange—and very busy. There were signs, not to be misunderstood, that Violet had not for handsome Stillford the scorn she had bestowed on unfortunate Irons; and Roger, humbly and distantly worshipping the Marchesa, deeming her far as a queen beyond his reach, rested his eyes and solaced his spirit with the less awe-inspiring charms, the more accessible comradeship, of Norah Mountliffey. Norah, as her custom was, flirted hard, yet in her delicate fashion. Though she had not begun to ask herself about the end yet, she was well amused, and by no means insensible to Roger’s attractions. Only she was preoccupied with Helena—and Lord Lynborough. Till that riddle was solved, she could not turn seriously to her own affairs.

On the night of the twenty-second she walked with the Marchesa in the gardens of the Grange after dinner. Helena was very silent; yet to Norah the silence did not seem empty. Over against them, on its high hill, stood Scarsmoor Castle. Roger had dined with them, but had now gone back.

Suddenly—and boldly—Norah spoke. “Do you see those three lighted windows on the ground floor at the left end of the house? That’s his library, Helena. He sits there in the evening. Oh, I do wonder what he’s been doing all this week!”

“What does it matter?” asked the Marchesa coldly.

“What will he propose, do you think?”

“Mr Stillford thinks he may offer to pay me some small rent—more or less nominal—for a perpetual right—and that, if he does, I’d better accept.”

“That’ll be rather a dull ending to it all.”

“Mr Stillford thinks it would be a favourable one for me.”

“I don’t believe he means to pay you money. It’ll be something”—she paused a moment—“something prettier than that.”

“What has prettiness to do with it, you child? With a right of way?”

“Prettiness has to do with you, though, Helena. You don’t suppose he thinks only of that wretched path?”

The flush came on the Marchesa's cheek.

"He can hardly be said to have seen me," she protested.

"Then look your best when he does—for I'm sure he's dreamt of you."

"Why do you say that?"

Norah laughed. "Because he's a man who takes a lot of notice of pretty women—and he took so very little notice of me. That's why I think so, Helena."

The Marchesa made no comment on the reason given. But now—at last and undoubtedly—she looked across at the windows of Scarsmoor.

"We shall come to some business arrangement, I suppose—and then it'll all be over," she said.

All over? The trouble and the enmity—the defiance and the fight—the excitement and the fun? The duel would be stayed, the combatants and their seconds would go their various ways across the diverging tracks of this great dissevering world. All would be over!

"Then we shall have time to think of something else!" the Marchesa added.

Norah smiled discreetly. Was not that something of an admission?

In the library at Scarsmoor Lynborough was inditing the proposal which he intended to submit by his ambassadors on the morrow.

CHAPTER XII

AN EMBASSAGE

THE Marchesa's last words to Lady Norah betrayed the state of her mind. While the question of the path was pending, she had been unable to think of anything else; until it was settled she could think of nobody except of the man in whose hands the settlement lay. Whether Lynborough attracted or repelled, he at least occupied and filled her thoughts. She had come to recognise where she stood and to face the position. Stillford's steady pessimism left her no hope from an invocation of the law; Lynborough's dexterity and resource promised her no abiding victory—at best only precarious temporary successes—in a private continuance of the struggle. Worst of all—whilst she chafed or wept, he laughed! Certainly not to her critical friends, hardly even to her proud self, would she confess that she lay in her antagonist's mercy; but the feeling of that was in her heart. If so, he could humiliate her sorely.

Could he spare her? Or would he? Try how she might, it was hard to perceive how he could spare her without abandoning his right. That she was sure he would not do; all she heard of him, every sharp intuition of him which she had, the mere glimpse of his face as he passed by on Sandy Nab, told her that.

But if he consented to pay a small—a nominal—rent, would not her pride be spared? No. That would be victory for him; she would be compelled to surrender what she had haughtily refused, in return for something which she did not want and which was of no value. If that

were a cloak for her pride, the fabric of it was terribly threadbare. Even such concession as lay in such an offer she had wrung from him by setting his friends against him; would that incline him to tenderness? The offer might leave his friends still unreconciled; what comfort was that to her when once the fight and the excitement of countering blow with blow were done—when all was over? And it was more likely that what seemed to her cruel would seem to Stabb and Roger reasonable—men had a terribly rigid sense of reason in business matters. They would return to their allegiance; her friends would be ranged on the same side; she would be alone—alone in humiliation and defeat. From that fate in the end only Lynborough himself could rescue her; only the man who threatened her with it could avert it. And how could even he, save by a surrender which he would not make? Yet if he found out a way?

The thought of that possibility—though she could devise or imagine no means by which it might find accomplishment—carried her towards Lynborough in a rush of feeling. The idea—never wholly lost even in her moments of anger and dejection—came back—the idea that all the time he had been playing a game, that he did not want the wounds to be mortal, that in the end he did not hate. If he did not hate, he would not desire to hurt. But he desired to win. Could he win without hurting? Then there was a reward for him—applause for his cleverness, and gratitude for his chivalry.

Stretching out her arms towards Scarsmoor Castle, she vowed that according to his deed she could hate or love Lord Lynborough. The next day was to decide that weighty question.

The fateful morning arrived—the last day of the armistice—the twenty-third. The ladies were sitting on the lawn after breakfast when Stillford came out of the house with a quick step and an excited air.

“Marchesa,” he said, “the Embassy has arrived! Stabb and Wilbraham are at the front door, asking an audience of you. They bring the proposal!”

The Marchesa laid down her book; Miss Gilletson made no effort to conceal her agitation.

“Why didn’t they come by the path?” cried Norah.

“They couldn’t very well; Lynborough’s sent them in a carriage—with postillions and four horses,” Stillford answered gravely. “The postillions appear to be amused, but the Ambassadors are exceedingly solemn.”

The Marchesa’s spirits rose. If the piece were to be a comedy, she could play her part! The same idea was in Stillford’s mind. “He can’t mean to be very unpleasant if he plays the fool like this,” he said, looking round on the company with a smile.

“Admit the Ambassadors!” cried the Marchesa gaily.

The Ambassadors were ushered on to the lawn. They advanced with a gravity befitting the occasion, and bowed low to the Marchesa. Roger carried a roll of paper of impressive dimensions. Stillford placed chairs for the Ambassadors and, at a sign from the Marchesa, they seated themselves.

“What is your message?” asked the Marchesa. Suddenly nervousness and fear laid hold of her again; her voice shook a little.

“We don’t know,” answered Stabb. “Give me the document, Roger.”

Roger Wilbraham handed him the scroll.

“We are charged to deliver this to your Excellency’s adviser, and to beg him to read it to you in our presence.” He rose, delivered the scroll into Stillford’s hands, and returned, majestic in his bulk, to his seat.

“You neither of you know what’s in it?” the Marchesa asked.

They shook their heads.

The Marchesa took hold of Norah’s hand and said quietly, “Please read it to us, Mr Stillford. I should like you all to hear.”

“That was also Lord Lynborough’s desire,” said Roger Wilbraham.

Stillford unrolled the paper. It was all in Lynborough’s own hand—written large and with fair flourishes. In mockery of the institution he hated, he had cast it in a form which at all events aimed at being legal; too close scrutiny on that score perhaps it would not abide successfully.

“Silence while the document is read!” said Stillford; and he proceeded to read it in a clear and deliberate voice:

“ ‘Sir Ambrose Athelstan Caverly, Baronet, Baron Lynborough of Lynborough in the County of Dorset and of Scarsmoor in the County of Yorkshire, unto her Excellency Helena Vittoria Maria Antonia, Marchesa di San Servolo, and unto All to whom these Presents Come, Greeting. Whereas the said Lord Lynborough and his predecessors in title have been ever entitled as of right to pass and repass along the path called Beach Path leading across the lands of Nab Grange from the road bounding the same on the west to the seashore on the east thereof, and to use the said path by themselves, their agents and servants, at their pleasure, without let or interference from any person or persons whatsoever——’ ”

Stillford paused and looked at the Marchesa. The document did not begin in a conciliatory manner. It asserted the right to use Beach Path in the most uncompromising way.

“Go on,” commanded the Marchesa, a little flushed, still holding Norah’s hand.

“ ‘And Whereas the said Lord Lynborough is desirous that his right as above defined shall receive the recognition of the said Marchesa, which recognition has hitherto been withheld and refused by the said Marchesa: And Whereas great and manifold troubles have arisen from such refusal: And Whereas the said Lord Lynborough is desirous of dwelling in peace and amity with the said Marchesa——’ ”

“There, Helena, you see he is!” cried Norah triumphantly.

“I really must not be interrupted,” Stillford protested. “ ‘Now Therefore the said Lord Lynborough, moved thereunto by divers considerations and in chief by his said desire to dwell in amity and goodwill, doth engage and undertake that, in consideration of his receiving a full, gracious, and amicable recognition of his right from the said Marchesa, he shall and will, year by year and once a year, to wit on the Feast of St John Baptist, also known as Midsummer Day——’ ”

“Why, that’s to-morrow!” exclaimed Violet Dufaure.

Once more Stillford commanded silence. The Terms of Peace were not to be rudely interrupted just as they were reaching the most interesting point. For up to now nothing had come except a renewed assertion of Lynborough’s right!

“ ‘That is to say the twenty-fourth day of June—repair in his own proper person, with or without attendants as shall seem to him good, to Nab Grange or such other place as may then and on each occasion be the abode and residence of the said Marchesa, and shall and will present himself in the presence of the said Marchesa at noon. And that he then shall and will do homage to the said Marchesa for such full, gracious, and amicable recognition as above mentioned by falling on his knee and kissing the hand of the said Marchesa. And if the said

Lord Lynborough shall wilfully or by neglect omit so to present himself and so to pay his homage on any such Feast of St John Baptist, then his said right shall be of no effect and shall be suspended (And he hereby engages not to exercise the same) until he shall have purged his contempt or neglect by performing his homage on the next succeeding Feast. Provided Always that the said Marchesa shall and will, a sufficient time before the said Feast in each year, apprise and inform the said Lord Lynborough of her intended place of residence, in default whereof the said Lord Lynborough shall not be bound to pay his homage and shall suffer no diminution of his right by reason of the omission thereof. Provided Further and Finally that whensoever the said Lord Lynborough shall duly and on the due date as in these Presents stipulated present himself at Nab Grange or elsewhere the residence for the time being of the said Marchesa, and claim to be admitted to the presence of the said Marchesa and to perform his homage as herein prescribed and ordered, the said Marchesa shall not and will not, on any pretext or for any cause whatsoever, deny or refuse to accept the said homage so duly proffered, but shall and will in all gracious condescension and neighbourly friendship extend and give her hand to the said Lord Lynborough, to the end and purpose that, he rendering and she accepting his homage in all mutual trust and honourable confidence, Peace may reign between Nab Grange and Scarsmoor Castle so long as they both do stand. In Witness whereof the said Lord Lynborough has affixed his name on the Eve of the said Feast of St John Baptist.

“LYNBOROUGH.”

Stillford ended his reading, and handed the scroll to the Marchesa with a bow. She took it and looked at Lynborough’s signature. Her cheeks were flushed, and her lips struggled not to smile. The rest were silent. She looked at Stillford, who smiled back at her and drew from his pocket—a stylographic pen.

“Yes,” she said, and took it.

She wrote below Lynborough’s name:

“In Witness whereof, in a desire for peace and amity, in all mutual trust and honourable confidence, the said Marchesa has affixed her name on this same Eve of the said Feast of St John Baptist. HELENA DI SAN SERVULO.”

She handed it back to Stillford. “Let it dry in the beautiful sunlight,” she said.

The Ambassadors rose to their feet. She rose too and went over to Stabb with outstretched hands. A broad smile spread over Stabb’s spacious face. “It’s just like Ambrose,” he said to her as he took her hands. “He gets what he wants—but in the prettiest way!”

She answered him in a low voice: “A very knightly way of saving a foolish woman’s pride.” She raised her voice. “Bid Lord Lynborough—ay, Sir Ambrose Athelstan Caverly, Baron Lynborough, attend here at Nab Grange to pay his homage to-morrow at noon.” She looked round on them all, smiling now openly, the red in her cheeks all triumphant over her olive hue. “Say I will give him private audience to receive his homage and to ask his friendship.” With that the Marchesa departed, somewhat suddenly, into the house.

Amid much merriment and reciprocal congratulations the Ambassadors were honourably escorted back to their coach and four.

“Keep your eye on the Castle to-night,” Roger Wilbraham whispered to Norah as he pressed her hand.

They drove off, Stillford leading a gay “Hurrah!”

At night indeed Scarsmoor Castle was a sight to see. Every window of its front blazed with light; rockets and all manner of amazing bright devices rose to heaven. All Fillby turned out to see the show; all Nab Grange was in the garden looking on.

All save Helena herself. She had retreated to her own room; there she sat and watched alone. She was in a fever of feeling and could not rest. She twisted one hand round the other, she held up before her eyes the hand which was destined to receive homage on the morrow. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed, her red lips trembled.

“Alas, how this man knows his way to my heart!” she sighed.

The blaze at Scarsmoor Castle died down. A kindly darkness fell. Under its friendly cover she kissed her hand to the Castle, murmuring “To-morrow!”

CHAPTER XIII

THE FEAST OF ST JOHN BAPTIST

“AS there’s a heaven above us,” wrote Lynborough that same night—having been, one would fain hope, telepathically conscious of the hand-kissing by the red lips, of the softly breathed “To-morrow!” (for if he were not, what becomes of Love’s Magic?)—“As there’s a heaven above us, I have succeeded! Her answer is more than a consent—it’s an appreciation. The rogue knew how she stood: she is haughtily, daintily grateful. Does she know how near she drove me to the abominable thing? Almost had I—I, Ambrose Caverly—issued a writ! I should never, in all my life, have got over the feeling of being a bailiff! She has saved me by the rightness of her taste. ‘Knightly’ she called it to old Cromlech. Well, that was in the blood—it had been my own fault if I had lost it, no credit of mine if to some measure I have it still. But to find the recognition! I have lit up the countryside to-night to celebrate that rare discovery.

“Rare—yes—yet not doubted. I knew it of her. I believe that I have broken all records—since the Renaissance at least. Love at first sight! Where’s the merit in that? Given the sight be fine enough (a thing that I pray may not admit of doubt in the case of Helena), it is no exploit; it is rather to suffer the inevitable than to achieve the great. But unless the sight of a figure a hundred yards away—and of a back fifty—is to count against me as a practical inspection, I am so supremely lucky as never to have seen her! I have made her for myself—a few tags of description, a noting of the effect on Roger and on Cromlech, mildly (and very unimaginatively) aided my work, I admit—but for the most part, and in all essentials, she, as I love her (for of course I love her, or no amount of Feasts of St John Baptist should have moved me from my path—take that for literal or for metaphorical as ye will!)—is of my own craftsmanship—work of my heart and brain, wrought just as I would have her—as I knew, through all delightful wanderings, that some day she must come to me.

“Think then of my mood for to-morrow! With what feelings do I ring the bell (unless perchance it be a knocker)! With what sensations accost the butler! With what emotions enter the presence! Because if by chance I am wrong——! Upon which awful doubt arises the

question whether, if I be wrong, I can go back. I am plaguily the slave of putting the thing as prettily as it can be put (Thanks, Cromlech, for giving me the adverb—not so bad a touch for a Man of Tombs!), and, on my soul, I have put that homage of mine so prettily that one who was prudent would have addressed it to none other than a married lady—*vivente marito*, be it understood. But from my goddess her mortal mate is gone—and to explain—nay, not to explain (which would indeed tax every grace of style)—but to let it appear that the homage lingers, abides, and is confined within the letter of the bond—that would seem scarce ‘knightly.’ Therefore, being (as all tell me) more of a fool than most men, and (as I soberly hope) not less of a gentleman, I stand thus. I love the Image I have made out of dim distant sight, prosaic shreds of catalogued description, a vividly creating mind, and—to be candid—the absolute necessity of amusing myself in the country. But the Woman I am to see to-morrow? Is she the Image? I shall know in the first moment of our encounter. If she is, all is well for me—for her it will be just a question of her dower of heavenly venturousness. If she is not—in my humble judgment, you, Ambrose Caverly, having put the thing with so excessive a prettiness, shall for your art’s sake perish—you must, in short, if you would end this thing in the manner (creditable to yourself, Ambrose!) in which it has hitherto been conducted, willy-nilly, hot or cold, confirmed in divine dreams or slapped in the face by disenchanting fact—within a brief space of time, propose marriage to this lady. If there be any other course, the gods send me scent of it this night! But if she should refuse? Reckon not on that. For the more she fall short of her Image, the more will she grasp at an outward showing of triumph—and the greatest outward triumph would not be in refusal.

“In my human weakness I wish that—just for once—I had seen her! But in the strong spirit of the wine of life—whereof I have been and am an inveterate and most incurable bibber—I rejoice in that wonderful moment of mine to-morrow—when the door of the shrine opens, and I see the goddess before whom my offering must be laid. Be she giant or dwarf, be she black or white, have she hair or none—by the powers, if she wears a sack only, and is well advised to stick close to that, lest casting it should be a change for the worse—in any event the offering must be made. Even so the Prince in the tales, making his vows to the Beast and not yet knowing if his spell shall transform it to the Beauty! In my stronger moments, so would I have it. Years of life shall I live in that moment to-morrow! If it end ill, no human being but myself shall know. If it end well, the world is not great enough to hold, nor the music of its spheres melodious enough to sound, my triumph!”

It will be observed that Lord Lynborough, though indeed no novice in the cruel and tender passion, was appreciably excited on the Eve of the Feast of St John Baptist. In view of so handsome a response, the Marchesa’s kiss of the hand and her murmured “To-morrow” may pass excused of forwardness.

It was, nevertheless, a gentleman to all seeming most cool and calm who presented himself at the doors of Nab Grange at eleven fifty-five the next morning. His Ambassadors had come in magnificence; humbly he walked—and not by Beach Path, since his homage was not yet paid—but round by the far-stretching road and up the main avenue most decorously. Stabb and Roger had cut across by the path—holding the Marchesa’s leave and licence so to do—and had joined an excited group which sat on chairs under sheltering trees.

“I wish she hadn’t made the audience private!” said Norah Mountliffey.

“If ever a keyhole were justifiable——” sighed Violet Dufaure.

“My dear, I’d box your ears myself,” Miss Gilletson brusquely interrupted.

The Marchesa sat in a high arm-chair, upholstered in tarnished fading gold. The sun from the window shone on her hair; her face was half in shadow. She rested her head on her left hand; the right lay on her knee. It was stripped of any ring—unadorned white. Her cheeks were pale—the olive reigned unchallenged; her lips were set tight, her eyes downcast. She made no movement when Lord Lynborough entered.

He bowed low, but said nothing. He stood opposite to her some two yards away. The clock ticked. It wanted still a minute before noon struck. That was the minute of which Lynborough had raved and dreamed the night before. He had the fruit of it in full measure.

The first stroke of twelve rang silvery from the clock. Lynborough advanced and fell upon his knee. She did not lift her eyes, but slowly raised her hand from her knee. He placed his hand under it, pressing it a little upwards and bowing his head to meet it half-way in its ascent. She felt his lips lightly brush the skin. His homage for Beach Path and his right therein was duly paid.

Slowly he rose to his feet; slowly her eyes turned upwards to his face. It was ablaze with a great triumph; the fire seemed to spread to her cheeks.

“It’s better than I dreamed or hoped,” he murmured.

“What? To have peace between us? Yes, it’s good.”

“I have never seen your face before.” She made no answer. “Nor you mine?” he asked.

“Once on Sandy Nab you passed by me. You didn’t notice me—but, yes, I saw you.” Her eyes were steadily on him now; the flush had ceased to deepen, nay, had receded, but abode still, tingeing the olive of her cheeks.

“I have rendered my homage,” he said.

“It is accepted.” Suddenly tears sprang to her eyes. “And you might have been so cruel to me!” she whispered.

“To you? To you who carry the power of a world in your face?”

The Marchesa was confused—as was, perhaps, hardly unnatural.

“There are other things, besides gates and walls, and Norah’s head, that you jump over, Lord Lynborough.”

“I lived a life while I stood waiting for the clock to strike. I have tried for life before—in that minute I found it.” He seemed suddenly to awake as though from a dream. “But I beg your pardon. I have paid my dues. The bond gives me no right to linger.”

She rose with a light laugh—yet it sounded nervous. “Is it good-bye till next St John Baptist’s day?”

“You would see me walking on Beach Path day by day.”

“I never call it Beach Path.”

“May it now be called—Helena’s?”

“Or will you stay and lunch with me to-day? And you might even pay homage again—say to-morrow—or—or some day in the week.”

“Lunch, most certainly. That commits me to nothing. Homage, Marchesa, is quite another matter.”

“Your chivalry is turning to bargaining, Lord Lynborough.”

“It was never anything else,” he answered. “Homage is rendered in payment—that’s why one says ‘Whereas.’” His keen eager eyes of hazel raised once more the flood of subdued

crimson in her face. "For every recognition of a right of mine, I will pay you homage according to the form prescribed for St John Baptist's Feast."

"Of what other rights do you ask recognition?"

"There might be the right of welcoming you at Scarsmoor to-morrow?"

She made him a little curtsy. "It is accorded—on the prescribed terms, my lord."

"That will do for the twenty-fifth. There might be the right of escorting you home from Scarsmoor by the path called—Helena's?"

"On the prescribed terms it is your lordship's."

"What then of the right to see you daily, and day by day?"

"If your leisure serves, my lord, I will endeavour to adjust mine—so long as we both remain at Fillby. But so that the homage is paid!"

"But if you go away?"

"I'm bound to tell you of my whereabouts only on St John Baptist's Feast."

"The right to know it on other days—would that be recognised in return for a homage, Marchesa?"

"One homage for so many letters?"

"I had sooner there were no letters—and daily homages."

"You take too many obligations—and too lightly."

"For every one I gain the recognition of a right."

"The richer you grow in rights then, the harder you must work!"

"I would have so many rights accorded me as to be no better than a slave!" cried Lynborough. "Yet, if I have not one, still I have nothing."

She spoke no word, but looked at him long and searchingly. She was not nervous now, but proud. Her look bade him weigh words; they had passed beyond the borders of merriment, beyond the bandying of challenges. Yet her eyes carried no prohibition; it was a warning only. She interposed no conventional check, no plea for time. She laid on him the responsibility for his speech; let him remember that he owed her homage.

They grew curious and restless on the lawn; the private audience lasted long, the homage took much time in paying.

"A marvellous thing has come to me," said Lynborough, speaking slower than his wont, "and with it a great courage. I have seen my dream. This morning I came here not knowing whether I should see it. I don't speak of the face of my dream-image only, though I could speak till next St John's Day upon that. I speak to a soul. I think our souls have known one another longer, ay, and better than our faces."

"Yes, I think it is so," she said quietly. "Yet who can tell so soon?"

"There's a great gladness upon me because my dream came true."

"Who can tell so soon?" she asked again. "It's strange to speak of it."

"It may be that some day—yes, some day soon—in return for the homage of my lips on your hand, I would ask the recognition of my lips' right on your cheek."

She came up to him and laid her hand on his arm. "Suffer me a little while, my lord," she said. "You've swept into my life like a whirlwind; you would carry me by assault as though I were a rebellious city. Am I to be won before ever I am wooed?"

“You sha’n’t lack wooing,” he said quickly. “Yet haven’t I wooed you already—as well in my quarrel as in my homage, in our strife as in the end of it?”

“I think so, yes. Yet suffer me a little still.”

“If you doubt——” he cried.

“I don’t think I doubt. I linger.” She gave her hand into his. “It’s strange, but I cannot doubt.”

Lynborough sank again upon his knee and paid his homage. As he rose, she bent ever so slightly towards him; delicately he kissed her cheek.

“I pray you,” she whispered, “use gently what you took with that.”

“Here’s a heart to my heart, and a spirit to my spirit—and a glad venture to us both!”

“Come on to the lawn now, but tell them nothing.”

“Save that I have paid my homage, and received the recognition of my right?”

“That, if you will—and that your path is to be—henceforward—Helena’s.”

“I hope to have no need to travel far on the Feast of St John!” cried Lynborough.

They went out on the lawn. Nothing was asked, and nothing told, that day. In truth there appeared to be no need. For it seems as though Love were not always invisible, nor the twang of his bow so faint as to elude the ear. With joyous blood his glad wounds are red, and who will may tell the sufferers. Sympathy too lends insight; your fellow-sufferer knows your plight first. There were fellow-sufferers on the lawn that day—to whom, as to all good lovers, here’s Godspeed!

She went with him in the afternoon through the gardens, over the sunk fence, across the meadows, till they came to the path. On it they walked together.

“So is your right recognised, my lord,” she said.

“We will walk together on Helena’s Path,” he answered, “until it leads us—still together—to the Boundless Sea.”

MRS THISTLETON’S PRINCESS

I

THE Great Ones of the Earth do not come our way much down at Southam Parva. Our Member’s wife is an “Honourable,” and most of us, in referring to her, make express mention of that rank; moreover she comes very seldom. In the main our lot lies among the undistinguished, and our table of precedence is employed in determining the dividing lines between “Esquire,” “Mr,” and plain “John Jones”—a humble, though no doubt a subtle, inquiry into the gradations of Society. So I must confess to feeling a thrill when I read Mrs Thistleton’s invitation to dinner at the Manor. Thistleton is lord of the manor—by purchase,

not by inheritance—and lives in the old house, proceeding every day to town, where he has a fine practice as a solicitor (Bowes, Thistleton, & Kent) in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Mrs Thistleton and the children (there are eight, ranging from Tom, nineteen, to Molly, seven, so that the practice needs to be fine), are, however, quite country folk. Indeed, Mrs Thistleton comes of a county family—in a county situated, I must not say judiciously but perhaps luckily, at the other end of England from ours; distance prevents cavil in such matters, and, practically speaking, Mrs Thistleton can say what she pleases about her parental stock, besides exhibiting some highly respectable coat-of-armoured silver to back her discreet vaunts. Mrs Thistleton is always discreet; indeed, she is, in my opinion, a woman of considerable talent, and the way in which she dealt with the Princess—with the problem of the Princess—confirmed the idea I had of her.

The mention of the Princess brings me back to the card of invitation, though I must add, in a minor digression, that the Thistletons are the only people in Southam Parva who employ printed cards of invitation—the rest of us would not get through a hundred in a lifetime, and therefore write notes. The invitation card, then, sent to me by Mrs Thistleton was headed as follows:—"To have the honour of meeting Her Royal Highness the Princess Vera of Boravia." Subsequent knowledge taught me that the "Royal" was an embellishment of Mrs Thistleton's—justifiable for aught I know, since the Princess had legitimate pretensions to the throne, though her immediate line was not at this time in occupation of it—but never employed by the Princess herself. However, I think Mrs Thistleton was quite right to do the thing handsomely, and I should have gone even without the "Royal," so there was no real deception. All of us who were invited went: the Rector and his wife, the Doctor and his wife, old Mrs Marsfold (the Major-General had, unfortunately, died the year before), Miss Dunlop (of the Elms), and Charley Miles (of the Stock Exchange).

From what I have said already it will be evident that I am no authority, yet I feel safe in declaring that never was etiquette more elaborately observed at any party—I don't care where. One of Thistleton's clients was old Lord Ogleferry, and at Lord Ogleferry's he had once met a real princess (I apologise to Princess Vera for stumbling, in my insular way, into this invidious distinction, but, after all, Boravia is not a first-class Power). Everything that Lord and Lady Ogleferry had done and caused to be done for the real—the British—princess, Thistleton and Mrs Thistleton did and caused to be done for Princess Vera; uncomfortable things some of them seemed to me to be, but Thistleton, over the wine after dinner, told us that they were perfectly correct. He also threw light on the Princess's visit. She had come to him as a client, wishing him to recover for her, not, as Charley Miles flippantly whispered to me, the throne of Boravia by force of arms, but a considerable private fortune at present impounded—or sequestrated, as Thistleton preferred to call it—by the *de facto* monarch of Boravia. "It's the case of the Orleans Princes over again," Thistleton observed, as he plied a dignified toothpick in such decent obscurity as his napkin afforded. This parallel with the Orleans Princes impressed us much—without, perhaps, illuminating all of us in an equal degree; and we felt that Charley betrayed a mercantile attitude of mind when he asked briefly—

"What's the figure?"

"Upwards of two million francs," answered Thistleton.

I think we all wished we had pencil and paper; the Rector scribbled on the menu—I saw him do it—and got the translation approximately accurate. Imagination was left to play with the "upwards."

“How much would you take for it—cash?” asked sceptical Charley.

“The matter is hardly as simple as that,” said Thistleton, with a slight frown; and he added gravely: “We mustn’t stay here any longer.”

So we went upstairs, where Her Royal Highness sat in state, and we all had a word with her. She spoke just a little English, with a pretty, outlandish accent, but was not at all at home in the language. When my turn came—and it came last—I ventured to reply to her first question in French, which I daresay was a gross breach of etiquette. None the less, she was visibly relieved; indeed she smiled for the first time and chatted away for a few minutes quite merrily. Then Thistleton terminated my audience. He used precisely this expression. “I’m afraid I must terminate your audience,” he said. Against any less impressive formula I might have rebelled; because I liked the Princess.

And what was she like? Very small, very slight, about half the size of bouncing Bessie Thistleton, though Bessie was not yet seventeen, and the Princess, as I suppose, nineteen or twenty. Her face was pale, rather thin, a pretty oval in shape; her nose was a trifle turned up, she had plentiful black hair and large dark eyes. In fact, she was a pretty timid little lady, sadly frightened of us all, and most of all of Mrs Thistleton. I don’t wonder at that; I’m rather frightened of Mrs Thistleton myself.

Before I went, I tried to get some more information out of my hostess, but mystery reigned. Mrs Thistleton would not tell me how the Princess had come to put her affairs in Thistleton’s hands, who had sent her to him, or how he was supposed to be going to get two million francs out of the *de facto* King of Boravia. All she said was that Her Royal Highness had graciously consented to pay them a visit of a very few days.

“Very few days indeed,” she repeated impressively.

“Of course,” I nodded with a sagacious air. Probably Her Royal Highness was due at Windsor the day after to-morrow; at any rate, that was the sort of impression Mrs Thistleton gave.

“I wonder if the money’s genuine!” said Charley Miles as we walked home.

“Is she genuine herself?” I asked.

“Well, there’s a girl corresponding to her description, anyhow. I went to the club to-day and looked her up. Ought to be Queen, too, if she ’ad ’er rights. (Here he was quoting). Oh yes, she’s all correct. But I wouldn’t care to say as much for the fortune. Wonder if old Thistleton’s taken it up on commission!”

“I hope she’ll get it. I liked the little thing, didn’t you, Charley?”

He cocked his hat rather more on one side and smiled; he is a good-natured young man, and no fool in his own business. “Yes, I did,” he answered. “And what the dickens must she have thought of us?”

I couldn’t reply to that, though I entertained the private opinion that I, at least, had made a good impression.

So much for the introduction of the Princess. And now comes, of necessity, a gap in my story; for the next day I went to Switzerland on my annual holiday, and was absent from Southam Parva for two full months. Not seeing the English papers during most of that period, I was unable to learn whether Her Royal Highness Princess Vera of Boravia had proceeded from the Manor House, Southam Parva, to the Castle, Windsor, or anywhere else.

II

SHE had not, as a fact—and a fact which came to my knowledge even before I reached my own threshold. I stepped into the train at Liverpool Street, fat, brown, and still knickerbockered. In one corner of the carriage sat Thistleton, in another Charley Miles.

“Not seen you for a day or two, old chap,” said the latter genially.

I nodded and sat down opposite Thistleton, who welcomed my reappearance in a few well-chosen words. I reciprocated his civility with inquiries after his family, and finally, before taking up my paper, I added—

“And your distinguished visitor? The charming Princess? Have you any news of her?”

At the same moment I happened to catch Charley’s eye. It was cocked at me in a distinctly satirical manner. For an instant I feared that the Princess had run off with the spoons, or annexed Mrs Thistleton’s garnets (we all knew them) to enrich the Boravian diadem. But after the briefest pause—which was a pause, all the same—Thistleton answered—

“She is still with us, and very well indeed, thank you.”

He cleared his throat, opened *The Globe*, and said no more. Charley’s eye drew me with an irresistible attraction; it was still cocked at me over the top of the *Evening News*. But he made no remark, so I fell back on my own organ of opinion, and silence was unbroken until we had passed the station immediately before Beechington—we alight (as the Company puts it) at Beechington for Southam Parva. Then, when there were just three minutes left, Thistleton glanced at Charley, saw that he was busy with his paper (the “racing” corner unless I’m mistaken), leant forward and tapped my knee with his gold eyeglasses. I started slightly and accorded him my attention. There seemed to be a little embarrassment in his manner.

“By the way, Tregaskis,” he said, “you remember I told you that I was engaged on certain—er—delicate negotiations on behalf of our guest?”

I nodded. “About Her Royal Highness’s private fortune?”

He nodded. “They involve,” he proceeded, “approaches to the present King in—er—an amicable spirit—more or less amicable. We have thought it well that for the present—provisionally and without prejudice—Her Highness should employ a designation to which her claim is absolutely beyond dispute. By a disuse—temporary, perhaps—of her proper style, she may smooth certain—er—susceptibilities, and so render my task easier and give us a better prospect of success. Our guest now prefers to be known as the Countess Vera von Friedenburg.”

I nodded again—it was the only safe thing to do. Thistleton said no more, save to express a hope (as he got into his waggonette) that they would see me soon at the Manor. Charley and I started together to walk the long mile from Beechington Station to Southam Parva; the cart was to bring my luggage. We had covered some half of the distance when Charley pushed his hat well over his left ear and ejaculated—

“Rum go, ain’t it, Treg? What do you make of it?”

“Her being still here, you mean?”

“Yes; and the business about her name. For a fortnight she was Her Royal Highness. Then she was Her Highness for three weeks. And for the last three she’s been Countess Vera von Friedenburg!”

“Thistleton gave what appeared to me an admirable reason.”

“I don’t believe he’ll get a *sou*, not if he offered to endorse the cheque ‘Sarah Smith.’ Is it likely they’d part?” By “they,” I understood him to mean the Court of Boravia.

“I’m sorry for her, then.”

“So am I, and for old Thistleton too. He’s out of pocket, I expect, besides losing his comm. And there she is!”

“The Princess?”

“The Countess, you mean.” His smile was sardonic.

“Yes, there she is,” I agreed, not very hopefully however.

“Rum go!” he added, just as he had begun, and then fell to whistling the ditty of the hour. He made only one more remark, and that fell from him just as we parted.

“Ta-ta, Treg,” said he. “Old Thistles (he had an objectionable habit of abbreviating names) has got a tidy practice; but there are a good many mouths to fill, eh? And no comm.! Ta-ta!”

Was it really as bad as that? The thought made me uncomfortable. Poor girl! The title that had filled our mouths would not fill hers. And her descent in rank had been remarkable and rapid. Her fall in public esteem had, as I soon found, kept pace with it. The word as to her style of address had gone round. She was “Countess Vera” now. Mrs Marsfold said: “Poor Countess Vera.” Miss Dunlop’s accent was less charitable: “Susan Thistleton’s Countess” was her form of expression, and beneath it lay an undoubted sneer at the Princess’s pretensions. Boravia, too, was spoken of with scant respect. “Really a barbarous place, I’m told,” said the Rector. “They call their kings kings; but of course——!” He shrugged his shoulders, without, however, indicating what title the Boravians might, in accordance with British standards, appropriate to the person who had the doubtful good fortune of ruling over them. In fact, they—and I don’t know that I am altogether entitled to except myself—all felt a little hot when they remembered the high-mightiness of that dinner-party.

I took advantage of Thistleton’s kind intimation and called on his wife. It was a fine autumn afternoon, and while we sat in the drawing-room and talked, I looked through the open windows on to the lawn. Countess Vera sat there, surrounded by the four youngest Thistleton children—Gladys, Myra, Molly, and the boy Evanstone (Mrs Thistleton was a Miss Evanstone). The Countess and the children all held books in their hands, and snatches of the French tongue fell on my ear from time to time.

“It’s really very perplexing,” said Mrs Thistleton, “and it’s difficult to do the right thing. I’m sure you credit us with wanting to do the right thing, Mr Tregaskis?”

“I’m sure you’d do the right and the kind thing.”

“The money she brought over is quite exhausted. Mr Thistleton has spent a considerable sum in getting up her case and presenting it to the Boravian Court. His efforts meet with no attention—indeed with absolute contempt.”

“They’re not afraid of her?”

“Not in the least. And here she is—literally without a farthing! And hardly a gown to her back—at least, hardly one suitable for——” She broke off, ending: “But what do you know about gowns?”

“Rather a remarkable situation for a princess!”

“If she would let us beg for her, even! The Government might do something. But she won’t hear of it. Then she says she’ll go. Where to? What can she do? If she won’t beg, she’d starve. We can’t let her starve, can we? But times aren’t good, and—— Oh, well, I must give you some tea. Would you mind ringing?”

I obeyed. Merry laughs came from the children on the lawn.

“The kids seem to like her,” said I, for want of better consolation.

“She’s very nice to them. She’s helping them with their French.” She caught me looking at her and blushed a little. I had not seen Mrs Thistleton blush before. Suddenly the plan came before my eyes. There was no need to blush for it; it seemed to me rather great—rather great, perhaps, on both sides, but greater on Mrs Thistleton’s. “It gives her a sense of—of doing something in return, I suppose,” Mrs Thistleton went on.

The maid brought in tea.

“Is nursery tea ready?” Mrs Thistleton asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then send the children upstairs and tell the Countess that tea is here.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Soon the Countess came—as small, as slight, as dark as ever, even more timid. I rose as she entered; she bowed nervously, and, going to the table, busied herself with making the tea. Mrs Thistleton lay back in her arm-chair.

“Sit down, Mr Tregaskis,” she said. “You like making tea for us, don’t you, Countess?”

“Yes, Mrs Thistleton, thank you,” said Countess Vera von Friedenburg.

But I didn’t sit down—I couldn’t do it. I leant against the table and looked an ass all the time she made tea.

III

THE next chapter, or division, or what you will, of this small history may be very short. I write it with two objects, which seem to me to justify its appearance, in spite of its fragmentary character. In the first place, it serves to exhibit the final stage of the descent of the Princess—the logical conclusion of the process which was begun when Thistleton dropped “Royal” from between “Her” and “Highness” in the train from Liverpool Street to Beechington. In the second place, it exhibits Mrs Thistleton’s good sense and fine feeling for the suitability of things. You couldn’t have princesses—nay, nor countesses—about the house in that sort of position. It would have been absurd.

So here it is. I seldom give even small dinner-parties; such gatherings annoy my cook. But about a month after my return, I got leave to have four or five friends, and I bade to my board the Rector and his wife and Mr and Mrs Thistleton. If for no other reason than to “balance,” I said in my note to Mrs Thistleton that I should be exceedingly pleased if Countess Vera von Friedenburg would do me the honour of accompanying them. Perhaps that was a mistake in taste. I meant no harm, and I don’t think that Mrs Thistleton intended to rebuke me; though she did, I imagine, mean to convey to me a necessary intimation.

“DEAR MR TREGASKIS,” she wrote, “Mr Thistleton and I are delighted to accept your very kind invitation, and we shall be charmed, as always, to meet our dear Rector and Mrs Carr. I am told to thank you very sincerely for your kind invitation to our young friend, but Fräulein Friedenburg agrees with me in thinking that during my absence she had better stay with the children. Yours very sincerely,

“SUSAN THISTLETON.”

Fräulein Friedenburg! Even her particle—her last particle—of nobility gone! Fräulein Friedenburg! Her Royal Highness——! Let us forget—let us and all Southam Parva forget!

It was not unkind of Mrs Thistleton. It was right and suitable. Who should not come out to dinner, but stay and mind the children? Who save Fräulein—Fräulein Friedenburg? It would have been a ludicrous position for Her Royal Highness Princess Vera of Boravia. Leave it to Fräulein Friedenburg!

So, as Fräulein Friedenburg, she passed into our ordinary lives, and out of our ordinary thoughts, as is the way with things when they become familiar. Mrs Thistleton’s courage and talent had saved the situation—and her own face. The Princess was forgotten, and the Thistletons’ nursery governess little heeded. Who does heed a nursery governess much?

But one night, as I turned over the atlas looking for something else, I came on the map of Boravia and saw the city of Friedenburg set astride the great river, dominating the kingdom, a sentinel at the outposts of Western Europe. If Divine Right were not out of fashion, the key of that citadel should have been in the hand which ruled exercise-books for the Thistleton children. For a few moments after that I went on thinking about the nursery governess.

IV

SO Fräulein—she soon came to be called just “Fräulein”—was not at my dinner-party; but two or three weeks later I had a little talk with her. I went up to the Manor one afternoon in October, seeking a game of croquet with Bessie Thistleton—such are our mild delights at Southam Parva—but found the whole family gone off to a Primrose League bazaar at Beechington. Only Fräulein was at home, said the parlour-maid; and Fräulein was visible in the garden, sitting under a tree, turning over the leaves of a big book. I used the privilege of a friend of the house, strolled out on to the lawn, and raised my hat to the—I mean to Fräulein. She smiled brightly and beckoned to me to come and sit by her; her words were beyond reproach, but her gestures were sometimes obstinately un-Fräuleinish, if I may so express myself. I sat down in the other deck-chair and said that it was very fine for so late in the year.

She made no reply and, raising my eyes to her face, I found her looking at me with an unmistakable gleam of amusement.

“Do you think this very funny?” she asked.

“I think it’s deplorable,” I answered promptly.

“It’s very simple. I owe Mr Thistleton two hundred pounds. I do this till I have worked it off.”

“How many years?”

“Several, monsieur.”

“And after that?”

“The children will grow up.”

“Yes. And then?”

“Mrs Thistleton will give Fräulein Friedenburg a good character.”

“Meanwhile you work for nothing?”

“No. For clothes, for food, to pay my debt.”

“And how do you like it?”

That question of mine, which sounds brutal, was inspired and, as I still believe, excused by the satirical amusement in her eyes; our previous meetings had shown me no such expression. Her answer to the question had its irony too. She turned over a dozen pages of the big book and came on a picture. She held the book out to me, saying—

“That’s my home.”

I looked at the picture of her home, the great grim castle towering aloft on the river bank. A few centuries ago the Turks had fallen back beaten from before these giant walls. Then I glanced round Mrs Thistleton’s gentle trim old garden.

“I think you’ve answered my question,” I said.

She closed the book, with a shrug of her thin little shoulders, and sat silent for a moment. The oval of her face was certainly beautiful, and the thick masses of her hair were dark as night, or the inside of a dungeon in her castle of Friedenburg. (I liked to think of her having dungeons, though I really don’t know whether she had.)

“And is it for ever?” I asked.

She leant over towards me and whispered: “They know where I am.” An intense excitement seemed to be fighting against the calm she imposed on herself; but it lasted only a moment. The next instant she fell back in her chair with a sigh of dejection; a listless despair spread over her face; the satirical gleam illuminated no more the depths of her eyes. The veil had fallen over the Princess again. Only Fräulein sat beside me.

Then I made a fool of myself.

“Are there no men in Boravia?” I asked in a low voice.

This at Southam Parva, in the twentieth century, and to the governess! Moreover, from me, who have always been an advanced Liberal in politics, and hold that the Boravians are at entire liberty to change the line of succession, or to set up a republic if they be so disposed! None the less, in the Thistletons’ garden that afternoon, I did ask Fräulein whether there were men in Boravia.

She answered the question in the words she had used before.

“They know where I am,” she said, but now languidly, with half-closed eyes.

That I might be saved from further folly, from offering my strong right arm and all my worldly goods (I was at the moment overdrawn at the bank) as a contribution towards a Legitimist crusade in Boravia—Fortune sent interruption. The family came back from the bazaar, and most of them trooped into the garden. Charley Miles was with them, having joined the party at the *fête* on his way back from town. As they all came up Fräulein put the big book—with its picture of her home—behind her back; I rose and walked forward to greet Mrs Thistleton. In an instant Charley, passing me with a careless “Hallo, Treg!” had seated himself by Fräulein and begun to talk to her with great vivacity and every appearance of pleasure—indeed of admiration.

I joined Mrs Thistleton—and Bessie, who stood beside her mother. Bessie was frowning; that frown was to me the first announcement of a new situation. Bessie was grown up now, or so held herself, and she and Charley were great friends. Charley was doing remarkably well on the Stock Exchange, making his three or four thousand a year; I remembered that Thistleton had thrown out a conjecture to that effect in conversation with me once. As the father of a family of eight, Thistleton could not neglect such a circumstance. And Charley was a good-looking fellow. The frown on Miss Bessie’s brow set all this train of thought moving in my mind. The fact that, the next moment, Miss Bessie swung round and marched off into the house served to accelerate its progress.

Mrs Thistleton cast a glance at the couple under the tree—Charley Miles and Fräulein—and then suggested that I should go with her and see the chrysanthemums. We went to see the chrysanthemums accordingly, but I think we were both too preoccupied to appreciate them properly.

“It’s a very difficult position in some ways,” said Mrs Thistleton suddenly.

It was so difficult as to be almost impossible. I paid my compliment with absolute sincerity. “You’ve overcome the difficulties wonderfully,” I remarked. “I never admired your tact more. Nobody thinks of her at all now, except just as Fräulein.”

“I have been anxious to do the right thing, and she has improved the children’s French.” She did not add that the liquidation of Thistleton’s bill by services rendered was a further benefit. We cannot be expected always to remember every aspect of our conduct.

“But it is difficult,” Mrs Thistleton went on. “And the worst of it is that Bessie and she aren’t very congenial. With an ordinary governess—— Well, the only thing is to treat her like one, isn’t it?”

“Does she object?”

“Oh no, never. But I can’t quite make her out. After all, she’s not English, you see, and one can’t be sure of her moral influence. I sometimes think I must make a change. Oh, I shouldn’t do anything unkind. I should ask her to stay till she was suited, and, of course, do all I could to recommend her. But Bessie doesn’t like her, I’m sorry to say.”

By this time we had walked past all the chrysanthemums twice, and I said that it was time for me to go. Mrs Thistleton gave me her hand.

“You don’t think me unkind?”

“Honestly, I think you have been kind all through, and I don’t think you’ll be unkind now. The situation is so very——”

“Difficult? Yes,” she sighed.

I had been going to say “absurd,” but I accepted “difficult.” I would have accepted anything, because I wanted to end the conversation and get away. I was surfeited with incongruities—Mrs Thistleton, Bessie, Charley Miles, and, above all, Fräulein—set in contrast with the picture in the big book—with the castle of Friedenburg frowning above the great river, waiting for its mistress, Princess Vera; the mistress who came not because—I couldn’t get away from my own folly—because there were no men in Boravia! “Absurd” was the right word, however.

V

THE next few weeks developed the situation along the lines I had foreseen, but endowed it with a new wealth of irony, so that it became harder than ever to say whether we were dealing with tragedy or with farce. The women of the village took arms against Fräulein. Mrs Marsfold, Miss Dunlop (of the Elms), even the Rector’s gentle wife, became partisans of Bessie Thistleton and demanded the expulsion of Fräulein. Only Mrs Thistleton herself still resisted, still sought after the kind thing, still tried to reconcile the interests of her family with the duty she had undertaken towards the stranger within her gates. But even she grew weaker. They were all against her, and Bessie had the preponderating word with her father now. In fine, there was every prospect that, even as the Princess Vera was banished from Boravia, so Fräulein Friedenburg would be expelled from Southam Parva.

And why? She had designs on Charley Miles! That was the accusation; and it was also, and immediately, the verdict. She wanted to catch Charley Miles—and that three or four thousand a year which, by plausible conjecture, he was making on the Stock Exchange! The Princess was now utterly forgotten—she might never have existed. There was only the designing governess, forgetful of her duty and her station, flying at game too high for her, at the most eligible match in the village, at the suitor (the destined suitor) of her employer’s daughter, at prosperous Charley Miles of the Stock Exchange! The human mind is highly adaptable, and the relativity of things is great. These two conclusions were strongly impressed on my mind by the history of Fräulein Friedenburg’s sojourn in the village of Southam Parva.

Charley had the instincts of a gentleman and was furious with “the old cats,” as he called the ladies I have named, with a warmth which for my part I find it easy to pardon. Yet his mind was as their minds; he was no whit less deeply and firmly rooted in present facts. He may have been a little afraid of Bessie, perhaps in a very little committed to her by previous attentions. But that was not the main difficulty. That he was in love with Fräulein I believed then and believe now; indeed, he came very near to admitting the fact to me on more than one occasion. But he was a young man of social ambitions, and the Thistletons stood high among us. (I began by admitting that we do not dwell on the highest peaks.) Mr Thistleton’s daughter was one thing, Mr Thistleton’s governess another. That was Charley’s point of view, so that he wrestled with erring inclination and overthrew it. He did not offer marriage to Fräulein Friedenburg. He contented himself with denouncing the attempt to banish her, for which, after all, his own conduct was primarily responsible. But I found no time to blame him; he filled me

with a wonder which became no less overwhelming because, in regard to present facts, it was in a large measure unreasonable. In truth, I couldn't stand firm on present facts. The walls, the towers, the dungeons of Friedensburg, and the broad river running down below—these things would not leave the visions of my mind. They stood in obstinate contrast to Charley Miles and three or four thousand on the Stock Exchange.

One evening—it was a Monday, as I remember—Charley came to see me after dinner, and brought with him a copy of *The Morning Post*, an excellent paper, but one which, owing to the political convictions to which I have already referred in connection with my feelings about the lack of men in Boravia, I do not take in. He pointed to a spot in the advertisement columns, and, without removing his hat from his head or his cigar from his mouth, sank into my arm-chair.

“Mrs Thistles has paid for six insertions, Treg,” he said.

I read the first “insertion.”

“A lady strongly recommends her German nursery governess. Good English. Fluent French. Music. Fond of children. Salary very moderate. A good home principal object. Well-connected.—Mrs T., The Manor House, Southam Parva.”

Well-connected! I looked over to Charley with some sort of a smile. “The good English is, of course, all right?” I said.

“Isn't it an infernal shame?” he broke out. “She won't stay a week after that!”

“It may bring an engagement,” said I.

“Look here, do you think it's my fault?”

“I'm glad she says Fräulein is well-connected.”

“Do you think it's my fault? I—I've tried to play square—by her as well as by myself.”

“I don't think we need discuss the Princess.”

“Hallo, Treg!”

“Good heavens!—I—I beg pardon! I mean—why need we talk about Fräulein's affairs?”

“I was talking about mine.”

“I see no connection.”

He was not angry with me, though (as will have been seen) I had lost my temper hopelessly and disastrously. He got up and stood in front of the fire.

“I hadn't the pluck, Treg, my boy,” he said. His voice sounded rather dreary, but I had no leisure to pity him.

“Good Heavens, do you suppose she'd have looked at you?” I cried. “Remember who she is!”

“That's all very well, but facts are facts,” said Charley Miles. “I didn't mean to make trouble, Treg, old boy. On my honour, I didn't.” He made a long pause. “I hope I shall be asking you to congratulate me soon, Treg,” he went on.

“Ask me in public, and I'll do it.”

“That's just being vicious,” he complained, and with entire justice. “Bessie's a first-rate girl.”

“I'm very sorry, Charley. So she is. She'll suit you a mile better than—than Fräulein.”

He brightened up. "I'm awfully glad you do think me right in the end," he said. "But I'm a bit sorry for Fräulein. She'd have had to go soon, anyhow—when the children got a bit older. She'll get a berth, I expect."

"No doubt," said I. "And I'll congratulate you even in private, Charley."

"You're a decent old chap, but you've got a queer temper. I don't above half understand you, Treg." He hesitated a little. "I say, you might go and have a talk with Fräulein some day. She likes you, you know."

"Does she?" The eager words leapt from my lips before I could stop them.

"Rather! Will you go?"

"Yes. I'll have a talk with Fräulein."

"Before she goes?"

"She'll go soon?"

"I think so."

"Yes, before she goes, Charley."

With that, or, rather, after a little idle talk which added nothing to that, he left me—left me wondering still. He was sorry for Fräulein, and not only because she must go forth into the world; also because she had not been invited to become Mrs Charley Miles! He conceived that he had made a conquest, and he didn't value it! His mistake of fact was great, but it shrank to nothing before the immensity of his blunder in estimation. I could account for it only in one way—a way so pleasing to my own vanity that I adopted it forthwith. And I'm not sure I was wrong. The veil had not been lifted for him, and he had no eyes to see through it. For me it had been raised once, and henceforth eternally hung transparent.

"That's my home." She had looked in that moment as if no other place could be.

Now, however, she was advertising for a situation, and I speculated as to how much of the truth Mrs Thistleton would deem it wise to employ in justifying that sublime "Well-connected."

VI

I SAW her the next day but one—on the morning when the third "insertion" appeared in *The Morning Post*. Bessie Thistleton had told me, with obvious annoyance, that there had been no replies yet. "Governesses are really a drug, unless they have a degree, in these days," she had said. "'Where is she?' Oh, somewhere in the garden, I think, Mr Tregaskis."

So I went into the garden and found her again under the tree. But her big book was not with her now; she was sitting idle, looking straight ahead of her, with pondering and, perhaps, fear in her great dark eyes.

She gave me her hand to shake. I kissed it.

"Nobody will kiss my hand in my next place," she said.

"Why in heaven do you do it?"

"I can't beg; and if I did, I don't think I should receive." She leant forward, resting her hand on the arm of the chair. "We don't know who I'm to be," she went on, smiling. "Nobody but Mrs Thistleton could carry it off if I confessed to being myself! Who shall I be, Mr Tregaskis?"

I made no answer, and she gave a little laugh.

"You like to go?" I asked.

"No. I'm frightened. And suppose there's another Mr Miles?"

"The infernal idiot!"

"He's wise. Only—I'm amused. They're right to send me away, though. I'm such an absurdity."

"Yes," I assented mournfully. "I'm afraid you are."

She leant nearer still to me, half whispering in her talk. "I should never have liked him, but yet it hardly seemed strange that he should think of it. I'm forgetting myself, I think. In my next place I wonder if I shall remember at all!"

"You have your book and the picture."

"Yes, but they seem dim now. I suppose it would be best to forget, as everybody else does."

"Not everybody," I said very low.

"No, you don't forget. I've noticed that. It's foolish, but I like someone to remember. Suppose you forgot too!"

One of her rare smiles lit up her face. But I did not tell her what would happen if I forgot too. I knew very well in my own mind, though. I was not trammelled by previous attentions, nor was I making three or four thousand a year.

"You'll tell me when you go—and where?" I asked.

"Yes, if you like to know."

"And will 'they' know too?"

She looked at me with searching eyes. "Are you laughing?" she asked, and it seemed to me that there was a break in her voice.

"God forbid, madam!" said I.

"Ah, but I think you should be. How the present can make the past ridiculous!"

"Neither the past ridiculous nor the future impossible," I said.

She laid her hand on my arm for a moment with a gentle pressure.

"We have an Order at home called The Knights of Faith. Shall I send you the Cross some day—in that impossible future?"

"No. Send me your big book, with the picture of the great castle and the broad river flowing by its base."

She looked at me a moment, flushed but the slightest, and answered: "Yes." Then, as I remember, we sat silent for a while.

That silence was waste of time, as it proved. For, before it ended, Mrs Thistleton came bounding (really the expression is excusable in view of her unrestrained elation) out of the house, holding a letter in her hand.

"Fräulein, an answer!" she cried.

We both rose, and she came up to us.

“And it sounds most suitable. I do hope you don’t mind London—though really it doesn’t do to be fussy. A Mrs Perkyns, on Maida Hill—nice and high! Only two little children, and she offers—— Oh, well, we can talk about the salary presently.”

That last remark constituted an evident hint to me. I grasped my hat and gave my hand to Mrs Thistleton.

“Good news, isn’t it?” said she. “And Mrs Perkyns says she has such confidence in me—it appears she knew my sister Mary at Cheltenham—that she waives any other references. Isn’t that convenient?”

“Very,” I agreed.

“You’re to go the day after to-morrow if you can be ready. Can you?” asked Mrs Thistleton.

“I can be ready,” Fräulein said.

“In the morning, Mrs Perkyns suggested.”

“I can be ready in the morning.” Then she turned to me. “This is good-bye, then, I’m afraid, Mr Tregaskis.”

“I shall come and see you off,” said I, taking her hand.

Mrs Thistleton raised her brows for a moment, but her words were gracious.

“We shall all be down to wish her a good journey and a happy home.”

I made up my mind to say my farewell at the station—and I took my leave. As I walked out of the front gate I met Thistleton coming from the station. I took upon myself to tell him the news.

“Good,” said Thistleton. “It ends what was always a false, and has become an impossible, situation.”

How about poor Mrs Perkyns, then? But I did not put that point to him. She was forewarned by that “Well-connected.” As I walked home I pictured Thistleton putting up a board before his residence: “Princesses, beware!”

VII

IT was no use telling me—as the Rector had told me more than once—that the same sort of thing had happened before in history, that a French *marquis* of the old *régime* was at least as good as a Boravian princess, and that if the one had taught dancing as an *émigré* the other might teach French verbs in her banishment. The consideration was no doubt just, and even assuaged to some degree the absurdity of the situation—since absurd things that have happened before seem rather less absurd somehow—but it did not console my feelings, nor reconcile my imagination to Mrs Perkyns of Maida Hill, “nice and high” though Maida Hill might be. On the morning of Fräulein’s departure I rose out of temper with the world.

Then I opened the morning paper, and there it was! In a moment it seemed neither strange nor unexpected. It was bound to be there some morning. It chanced to be there this morning by happy fortune, because this was the last morning in which I could help, the last morning when I could see her eyes. But it was glorious. I am afraid it sent me half mad; yet I was very practical. In a minute I had made up my mind what she would want to do and what I could do. In another five minutes I was on my bicycle, “scorching” to Beechington with that paper in one pocket, and a cheque on the local branch of the London and County Bank in the other. And humming in my ears was “Rising in Boravia!” “Rumoured Abdication of the King!” “An Appeal to the Pretender!” Then, in smaller print: “Something about Princess Vera of Friedenburg.”

I hoped she would get away before the Thistletons knew! Very likely she would, for by now Thistleton was in the train for town, and he picked up his *Times* at the station; the family waited for it till the evening.

From the bank I raced to the station, and reached it ten minutes before her train was due to leave Beechington. There she was, sitting on a bench, all alone. She was dressed in plain black and looked very small and forlorn. She seemed deep in thought, and she did not see me till I was close to her. Then she looked up with a start. I suppose she read my face, for she smiled, held out her hand, and said—

“Yes, I had a telegram late last night.”

“You’ve told them?” I jerked my thumb in the direction of the Manor.

“No,” she said rather brusquely.

“You’re going, of course?”

“To Mrs Perkyns’,” she answered, smiling still. “What else can I do?”

“Wire them that you’re starting for Vienna, and that they must communicate with you there. Ah, there are men in Boravia!”

“And Mrs Perkyns? I should never get another character!”

“You’ll go, surely? It might make all the difference. Let them see you, let them see you!”

She shook her head, giving at the same time a short nervous laugh. I sat down by her. Her purse lay in her lap. I took it up; the Princess made no movement; her eyes were fixed on mine. I opened the purse and slipped in the notes I had procured at the bank. Her eyes did not forbid me. I snapped the purse to and laid it down again.

“I had a third-class to London, and eight shillings and threepence,” she said.

“You’ll go now?”

“Yes,” she whispered, rising to her feet.

We stood side by side now, waiting for the train. It was very hard to speak. Presently she passed her hand through my arm and let it rest there. She said no more about the money, which I was glad of. Not that I was thinking much of that. I was still rather mad, and my thoughts were full of one insane idea; it was—though I am ashamed to write it—that just as the train was starting, at the last moment, at the moment of her going, she might say: “Come with me.”

“Did it surprise you?” I said at last, breaking the silence at the cost of asking a very stupid question.

“I had given up all hope. Yet somehow I wasn’t very surprised. You were?”

“No. I had always believed in it.”

“Not at first?”

“No; of late.”

She looked away from me now, but I saw her lips curve in a reluctant little smile. I laughed.

“I don’t think my ideas about it had any particular relation to external facts,” I confessed. “I had become a Legitimist, and Legitimists are always allowed to dream.”

She gave my arm a little pat and then drew her hand gently away.

“If it all comes to nothing, I shall have one friend still,” she said.

“And one faithful hopeful adherent. And there’s your train.”

When I put her in the carriage, my madness came back to me. I actually watched her eyes as though to see the invitation I waited for take its birth there. Of course I saw no such thing. But I seemed to see a great friendliness for me. At the last, when I had pressed her hand and then shut the door, I whispered—

“Are you afraid?”

She smiled. “No. Boravia isn’t Southam Parva. I am not afraid.”

Then—well, she went away.

VIII

MRS THISTLETON is great. I said so before, and I remain firmly of that opinion. The last time I called at the Manor, I found her in the drawing-room with Molly, the youngest daughter, a pretty and intelligent child. After some conversation, Mrs Thistleton said to me—

“A little while ago I had an idea, which my husband thought so graceful that he insisted on carrying it out. I wonder if you’ll like it! I should really like to show it to you.”

I expressed a polite interest and a proper desire to see it, whatever it was.

“Then I’ll take you upstairs,” said she, rising with a gracious smile.

Upstairs we went, accompanied by Molly, who is rather a friend of mine and who was hanging on to my arm. Reaching the first floor, we turned to the left, and Mrs Thistleton ushered me into an exceedingly pleasant and handsome bedroom, with a delightful view of the garden. Not conceiving that I could be privileged to view Mrs Thistleton’s own chamber, I concluded that this desirable apartment must be the best or principal guest-room of the house.

“There!” said Mrs Thistleton, pointing with her finger towards the mantelpiece.

Advancing in that direction, I perceived, affixed to the wall over the mantelpiece, a small gilt frame, elaborately wrought and ornamented with a Royal Crown. Enclosed in the frame, and protected by glass, was a square of parchment, illuminated in blue and gold letters. I read the inscription:

This Room was Occupied by Her Majesty the Queen of Boravia on the Occasion of Her Visit to the Manor House, Southam Parva,

27th of June, 1902.

"It's a very pretty idea, indeed! I congratulate you on it, Mrs Thistleton," said I.

"I do like it; and 'the Queen's Room' sounds such a nice name for it."

"Charming!" I declared.

"Why didn't you put one in the little room upstairs too—the room she slept in all the last part of the time, mamma?" asked Molly.

Well, well, children will make these mistakes. I think it was very creditable to Mrs Thistleton that she merely told Molly to think before she spoke, in which case (Mrs Thistleton intimated) she would not ask such a large number of foolish questions.

So Mrs Thistleton has a very pleasant memento of her Princess. I have one of her too—a big book, with a picture of the great castle and the broad river flowing below. And in the beginning of the book is written: "To him who did not forget—VERA."

The description still applies.

THE NECESSARY RESOURCES

THE affair had three obvious results: the marriage of Prince Julian, Sir Henry Shum's baronetcy, and the complete renovation of Lady Craigennoch's town house. Its other effects, if any, were more obscure.

By accident of birth and of political events Prince Julian was a Pretender, one of several gentlemen who occupied that position in regard to the throne of an important European country: by a necessity of their natures Messrs Shum & Byers were financiers: thanks to a fall in rents and a taste for speculation Lady Craigennoch was hard put to it for money and had become a good friend and ally of Mr Shum; sometimes he allowed her to put a finger into one of his pies and draw out a little plum for herself. Byers, hearing one day of his partner's acquaintance with Lady Craigennoch, observed, "She might introduce us to Prince Julian." Shum asked no questions, but obeyed; that was the way to be comfortable and to grow rich if you were Mr Byers' partner. The introduction was duly effected; the Prince wondered vaguely, almost ruefully, what these men expected to get out of him. Byers asked himself quite as dolefully whether anything could be made out of an indolent, artistic, lazy young man like the Prince; Pretenders such as he served only to buttress existing Governments.

"Yes," agreed Shum. "Besides, he's entangled with that woman."

"Is there a woman?" asked Byers. "I should like to know her."

So, on his second visit to Palace Gate, Mr Byers was introduced to the lady who was an inmate in Prince Julian's house, but was not received in society. Lady Craigennoch however, opining, justly enough, that since she had no girls she might know whom she pleased, had called on the lady and was on friendly terms with her. The lady was named Mrs Rivers, and was understood to be a widow. "And surely one needn't ask for his death certificate!" pleaded Lady Craigennoch. Byers, as he took tea in Mrs Rivers' boudoir, was quite of the same mind. He nursed his square chin in his lean hand, and regarded his hostess with marked attention.

She was handsome; that fact concerned Byers very little; she was also magnificently self-confident; this trait roused his interest in a moment. He came to see her more than once again; for now an idea had begun to shape itself in his brain. He mentioned it to nobody, least of all to Mrs Rivers. But one day she said to him, with the careless contempt that he admired,

“If I had all your money, I should do something with it.”

“Don’t I?” he asked, half-liking, half-resenting her manner.

“Oh, you make more money with it, I suppose.”

She paused for a moment, and then, leaning forward, began to discuss European politics, with especial reference to the condition of affairs in Prince Julian’s country. Byers listened in silence; she told him much that he knew, a few things which had escaped him. She told him also one thing which he did not believe—that Prince Julian’s indolent airs covered a character of rare resolution and tenacity. She repeated this twice, thereby betraying that she was not sure her first statement had carried conviction. Then she showed that the existing Government in the Prince’s country was weak, divided, unpopular, and poor; and then she ran over the list of rival Pretenders, and proved how deficient all of them were in the qualities necessary to gain or keep a throne. At this point she stopped, and asked Mr Byers to take a second cup of tea. He looked at her with interest and amusement in his shrewd eyes; she had all the genius, the native power, with none of the training, none of the knowledge of men. He read her so easily; but there was a good deal to read. In one point, however, he read her wrongly; almost the only mistakes he made were due to forgetting the possible existence of unselfish emotion.

Prince Julian had plenty of imagination; without any difficulty he imagined himself regaining his ancestral throne, sitting on it in majesty, and establishing it in power. This vision Mrs Rivers called up before his receptive mind by detailing her conversation with Mr Byers. “You want nothing but money to do it,” she said. And Byers had money in great heaps; Shum had it too, and Shum was for present purposes Byers; so were a number of other persons, all with money. “I believe the people are devoted to me in their hearts,” said Prince Julian; then he caught Mrs Rivers by both her hands and cried, “And then you shall be my Queen!”

“Indeed I won’t,” said she; and she added almost fiercely, “Why do you bring that up again now? It would spoil it all.” For, contrary to what the world thought, Prince Julian had offered several times to marry the lady who was not received nor visited (except, of course, by Lady Craigennoch). Stranger still, this marriage was the thing which the Prince desired above all things, for, failing it, he feared that some day (owing to a conscience and other considerations) Mrs Rivers would leave him, and he really did not know what he should do then. When he imagined himself on his ancestral throne, Mrs Rivers was always very near at hand; whether actually on the throne beside him or just behind it was a point which he was prone to shirk; at any cost, though, she must be very near.

As time went on there were many meetings at Palace Gate; the Prince, Mr Shum, and Lady Craigennoch were present sometimes; Mrs Rivers and Byers were never wanting. The Prince’s imagination was immensely stimulated in those days; Lady Craigennoch’s love for a speculation was splendidly indulged; Mr Shum’s cautious disposition received terrible shocks. Mrs Rivers discussed European politics, the attitude of the Church, and the secret quarrels of the Cabinet in Prince Julian’s country; and Byers silently gathered together all the money of his own and other people’s on which he could lay hands. He was meditating a great *coup*; and just now and then he felt a queer touch of remorse when he reflected that his *coup* was so very different from the *coup* to which Mrs Rivers’ disquisitions and the Prince’s vivid imagination

invited him. But he believed in the survival of the fittest; and, although Mrs Rivers was very fit, he himself was just by a little bit fitter still. Meanwhile the Government in the Prince's country faced its many difficulties with much boldness, and seemed on the whole safe enough.

The birth and attributes of Rumour have often engaged the attention of poets; who can doubt that their rhetoric would have been embellished and their metaphors multiplied had they possessed more intimate acquaintance with the places where money is bought and sold? For in respect of awakening widespread interest and affecting the happiness of homes, what is the character of any lady, however high-born, conspicuous, or beautiful, compared with the character of a Stock? Here indeed is a field for calumny, for innuendo, for hints of frailty, for whispers of intrigue; the scandalmongers have their turn to serve, and the holders are swift to distrust. When somebody writes Sheridan's comedy anew, let him lay the scene of it in a Bourse; between his slandered Stock and his slandered dame he may work out a very pretty and fanciful parallel.

Here, however, the facts can be set down only plainly and prosaically. On all the Exchanges there arose a feeling of uneasiness respecting the Stock of the Government of Prince Julian's country; selling was going on, not in large blocks, but cautiously, continually, in unending dribblets; surely on a system and with a purpose? Then came paragraphs in the papers (like whispers behind fans), discussing the state of the Government and the country much in the vein which had marked Mrs Rivers' dissertations. By now the Stock was down three points; by pure luck it fell another, in mysterious sympathy with the South African mining market. Next there was a riot in a provincial town in the Prince's country; then a Minister resigned and made a damaging statement in the Chamber. Upon this it seemed no more than natural that attention should be turned to Prince Julian, his habits, his *entourage*, his visitors. And now there were visitors; nobles and gentlemen crossed the Channel to see him; they came stealthily, yet not so secretly but that there was a paragraph; these great folk had heard the rumours, and hope had revived in their breasts. They talked to Mrs Rivers; Mrs Rivers had talked previously to Mr Byers. A day later a weekly paper, which possessed good, and claimed universal, information, announced that great activity reigned among Prince Julian's party, and that His Royal Highness was considering the desirability of issuing a Manifesto. "Certain ulterior steps," the writer continued, "are in contemplation, but of these it would be premature to speak." There was not very much in all this, but it made the friends of the Stock rather uncomfortable; and they were no more happy when a leading article in a leading paper demonstrated beyond possibility of cavil that Prince Julian had a fair chance of success, but that, if he regained the throne, he could look to hold it only by seeking glory in an aggressive attitude towards his neighbours. On the appearance of this luminous forecast the poor Stock fell two points more: there had been a *sauve qui peut* of the timid holders.

Then actually came the Manifesto; and it was admitted on all hands to be such an excellent Manifesto as to amount to an event of importance. Whoever had drawn it up—and this question was never settled—knew how to lay his finger on all the weak spots of the existing Government, how to touch on the glories of Prince Julian's House, what tone to adopt on vexed questions, how to rouse the enthusiasm of all the discontented. "Given that the Prince's party possess the necessary resources," observed the same leading journal, "it cannot be denied that the situation has assumed an aspect of gravity." And the poor Stock fell yet a little more; upon which Mr Shum, who had a liking for taking a profit when he saw it, ventured to ask his partner how long he meant "to keep it up."

“We’ll talk about that to-morrow,” said Mr Byers. “I’m going to call in Palace Gate this afternoon.” He looked very thoughtful as he brushed his hat and sent for a hansom. But, as he drove along, his brow cleared and he smiled triumphantly. If the Prince’s party had not the necessary resources they could do nothing; if they did nothing, would not the drooping Stock lift up her head again? Now nobody was in a position to solve that problem about the necessary resources so surely or so swiftly as Mr Byers.

A hundred yards from Prince Julian’s house he saw Lady Craigennoch walking along the pavement, and got out of his cab to join her. She was full of the visit she had just paid, above all of Ellen Rivers.

“Because she’s the whole thing, you know,” she said. “The adherents—good gracious, what helpless creatures! I don’t wonder the Republicans upset them if that’s what they’re all like. Oh, they’re gentlemen, of course, and you’re not, Byers”—(Mr Byers bowed slightly and smiled acquiescently)—“but I’d rather have you than a thousand of them. And the Prince, poor dear, is hardly better. Always talking of what he’ll do when he’s there, never thinking how he’s going to get there!”

Byers let her run on; she was giving him both instruction and amusement.

“And then he’s afraid—oh, not of the bullets or the guillotine or whatever it is—because he’s a gentleman too, you know. (Or perhaps you don’t know! I wonder if you do? Shum doesn’t; perhaps you do.) But he’s afraid of losing her. If he goes, she won’t go with him. I don’t mean as—as she is now, you know. She won’t go anyhow, not as his wife even. Well, of course, if he married her he’d wreck the whole thing. But one would hardly expect her to see that; or even to care, if she did. She’s very odd.” Lady Craigennoch paused a moment. “She’s fond of him too,” she added. “She’s a very queer woman.”

“A lady?” asked Mr Byers with a touch of satire.

“Oh yes,” said Lady Craigennoch, scornful that he needed to ask. “But so odd. Well, you’ve seen her with him—just like a mother with her pet boy! How hard she’s worked, to be sure! She told me how she’d got him to sign the what’s-its-name. He almost cried, because he’d have to go without her, you know. But she says it’s all right now; he won’t go back now, because he’s given his word. And she’s simply triumphant, though she’s fond of him, and though she won’t go with him.” Again Lady Craigennoch paused. “People won’t call on that woman, you know,” she remarked after her pause. Then she added, “Of course that’s right, except for a reprobate like me. But still——”

“She’s an interesting woman,” said Byers in a perfunctory sympathy with his companion’s enthusiasm.

Lady Craigennoch cooled down, and fixed a cold and penetrating glance on him.

“Yes, and you’re an interesting man,” she said. “What are you doing, Mr Byers?”

“Vindicating Right Divine,” he answered.

Lady Craigennoch smiled. “Well, whatever it is,” she said, “Shum has promised that I shall stand in.” Again she paused. “Only,” she resumed, “if you’re making a fool of that woman——” She seemed unable to finish the sentence; there had been genuine indignation in her eyes for a moment; it faded away; but there came a slight flush on her cheeks as she added, “But that doesn’t matter if it’s in the way of business, does it?”

“And Shum has promised that you shall stand in,” Byers reminded her gravely.

Lady Craigennoch dug her parasol into the streak of earth that showed between pavement and curbstone.

“Anyhow I’m glad I called on her,” she said. “I’m not much, Heaven knows, but I’m a woman to speak to.”

“To cry to?” he hazarded.

“How do you know she cried? Think what she’d been through, poor thing! Oh, you won’t find her crying.”

“I hope not,” said Mr Byers with a perfect seriousness in his slightly nasal tones; and when they parted he said to himself, “That woman hates having to know me.” But there were many people in that position; and he spent much time in increasing the number; so the reflection caused him no pain, but rather a sense of self-complacency; when people know you who hate having to know you, you are somebody. The thought passed, and the next moment he found himself being glad that Ellen Rivers had a woman to speak to—or to cry to—even though it were only Lady Craigennoch.

She was not crying when she received Mr Byers. She was radiant. She told him that her part was done; now he must do his part; then the Prince would do his: thus the great enterprise would be accomplished. That odd pang struck Byers again as he listened; he recollected the beginning of Lady Craigennoch’s unfinished sentence, “If you’re making a fool of that woman——” That was just what he was doing. He escaped from the thought and gratified his curiosity by turning the talk to Mrs Rivers herself.

“Accomplished, eh?” said he. “And it’s a crown for the Prince!”

“Yes, and great influence for you.”

“And you’ll be——”

“I shall be nothing. I shall go away.” She spoke quickly and decisively; the resolution was there, but to dwell on it was dangerous.

“Where to?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. Anywhere.”

“Back to your people?”

She looked at him for a moment. He had allowed himself to sneer. Her manner, as she went on without taking any notice of his question, proved that Lady Craigennoch had been right in saying that she was a lady.

“My work will be done,” she said. “From the first moment I knew the Prince I determined to use my influence in this way. He only—he only needed a little encouragement.”

“And a little money?”

“I gave him one, you’re giving him the other. We shall both be repaid by his success.”

“You’re a very strange woman,” he said. Probably he did not know how straight and hard his eyes were set on her; they could not leave her. What a pity it was that she would not go with the Prince—as his wife, or even (to use Lady Craigennoch’s charitably evasive phrase) as she was now. To set the Prince on the seat of his ancestors was not an exploit that appealed to Mr Byers; but to set this woman on a throne would be worth—well, how much? Mr Byers detected this question in his own heart; he could not help reducing things to figures. “Why don’t you go with him?” he asked bluntly.

“It would prejudice him,” she answered simply, folding her hands in her lap.

Then she stretched out a hand towards him and said suddenly, with a sudden quiver in her voice, "I talk to you like this, and all the time I'm wanting to go down on my knees and kiss your hands, because you're doing this."

The lean hand held the square jaw; the attitude was a favourite one with Mr Byers; and his eyes were still on her.

"Yes, that's what I want to do," she said with a nervous laugh. "It's so splendid of you." Her breath came fast; her eyes were very bright. At that moment Mr Byers wished that the quick breath and the bright eyes were for him himself, not for the helper of the Prince; and for that moment he forgot Mrs Byers and the babies in Portland Place; it was years since he had had any such wish about any woman; he felt a sympathy with Prince Julian, who had almost cried when he signed the Manifesto, because, if he mounted the throne, Ellen Rivers would leave him.

"We want money now, directly," she went on. "We want the Manifesto in every house. I can manage the distribution. And we must pay people—bribe them. We must sow seed. It'll soon come up. And the Prince will act at the proper time."

"How much do you want now?" he asked.

"Half-a-million now, and another next month," she said.

"And more before the end?"

"Yes, most likely. You can get it, you know."

"And shall I ever get it back?"

"The Prince has given his word." Mr Byers assumed a doubtful air. "Oh, you're not as stupid as that; you believe him," she added almost contemptuously. "Do you mean it's a speculation? Of course it is. I thought you had courage!"

"So I have," said Byers. And he added, "I may want it all too." What he would want it for was in his mind, but he did not tell her.

He thought a great deal about the matter that evening as he sat by the fire opposite to Mrs Byers, who knitted a stocking and said nothing; she never broke in upon his thoughts, believing that a careless interruption might cost a million. Millions were in his mind now, and other things than millions. There was his faith with his associates; they were all waiting his word; when he gave it, rumours would die away, reports be contradicted, the Manifesto pooh-poohed; there would be buyings, the Stock would lift up her head again, confidence would revive; and the first to buy, the first to return to faith in the Stock, would be Mr Byers and his associates; the public would come in afterwards, and when the public came in he and his associates would go out again, richer by vast sums. The money and his good faith—his honour among financiers—bound him; and the triumph of his brains, the beauty of his *coup*, the admiration of his fellows, the unwilling applause of the hard-hit—all these allured him mightily. On the other side there was nothing except the necessity of disappointing Mrs Rivers, of telling her that the necessary resources were not forthcoming, that the agitation and the Manifesto had served their turn, that the Prince had been made a fool of, that she herself had been made a fool of too. Many such a revelation had he made to defeated opponents, calmly, jestingly perhaps, between the puffs of his cigar, not minding what they thought. Why should he mind what Mrs Rivers thought? She would no longer wish to kiss that lean strong hand of his; she might cry (she had Lady Craigennoch to cry to). He looked across at his wife who was knitting; he would not have minded telling anything to her. But so intensely did he

mind telling what he had to tell to Ellen Rivers that the millions, his good faith, the joy of winning, and the beauty of the *coup*, all hung doubtful in the balance against the look in the eyes of the lady at Prince Julian's. "What an infernal fool I am!" he groaned. Mrs Byers glanced up for a moment, smiled sympathetically, and went on with her knitting; she supposed that there must be some temporary hitch about the latest million; or perhaps Shum had been troublesome; that was sometimes what was upsetting Mr Byers.

The next morning Mr Shum was troublesome; he thought that the moment for action had come; the poor Stock had been blown upon enough, the process of rehabilitation should begin. Various other gentlemen, weighty with money, dropped in with their hats on the back of their heads and expressed the same views. Byers fenced with them, discussed the question rather inconclusively, took now this side and now that, hesitated, vacillated, shilly-shallied. The men wondered at him; they knew they were right; and, right or wrong, Byers had been wont to know his own mind; their money was at stake; they looked at one another uncomfortably. Then the youngest of them, a fair boy, great at dances and late suppers, but with a brain for figures and a cool boldness which made him already rich and respected in the City, tilted his shining hat still further back and drawled out, "If you've lost your nerve, Byers, you'd better let somebody else engineer the thing."

What her fair fame is to a proud woman the prestige of his nerve was to Mr Byers. The boy had spoken the decisive word, by chance, by the unerring instinct which in any sphere of thought is genius. In half-an-hour all was planned, the Government of the Prince's country saved, and the agitation at an end. The necessary resources would not be forthcoming; confidence would revive, the millions would be made, the *coup* brought off, the triumph won.

So in the next fortnight it happened. Prince Julian looked on with vague bewilderment, reading the articles and paragraphs which told him that he had abandoned all thought of action, had resigned himself to wait for a spontaneous recall from his loving subjects (which might be expected to assail his ears on the Greek Kalends), that in fact he would do nothing. Mrs Rivers read the paragraphs too, and waited and waited and waited for the coming of Mr Byers and the necessary resources; she smiled at what she read, for she had confidence in the Cause, or at least in herself and in Mr Byers. But the days went on; slowly the Stock rose; then in went the public with a rush. The paragraphs and the articles dwindled and ceased; there was a commotion somewhere else in Europe; Prince Julian and his Manifesto were forgotten. What did it mean? She wrote a note, asking Mr Byers to call.

It was just at this time also that Mr Henry Shum accepted the invitation of the Conservative Association of the Hatton Garden Division of Holborn Bars to contest the seat at the approaching General Election, and that Lady Craigennoch gave orders for the complete renovation of her town house. Both these actions involved, of course, some expense; how much it is hard to say precisely. The house was rather large, and the seat was very safe.

Prince Julian sat in his library in Palace Gate and Mrs Rivers stood beside him, her hand resting on the arm of his chair. Now and then the Prince glanced up at her face rather timidly. They had agreed that matters showed no progress; then Mrs Rivers had become silent.

"Has Byers thrown us over?" the Prince asked at last.

"Hush, hush," she answered in a low voice. "Wait till he's been; he's coming to-day." Her voice sank lower still as she whispered, "He can't have; oh, he can't!"

There was silence again. A few minutes passed before the Prince broke out fretfully, "I'm sick of the whole thing. I'm very well as I am. If they want me, let them send for me. I can't force myself on them."

She looked down for a moment and touched his hair with her hand.

"If this has come to nothing I'll never try again. I don't like being made a fool of."

Her hand rested a moment on his forehead; he looked up, smiling.

"We can be happy together," he murmured. "Let's throw up the whole thing and be happy together." He caught her hand in his. "You'll stay with me anyhow?"

"You want me still?"

"You'll do what I ask?" he whispered.

"That would put an end to it, indeed," she said smiling.

"Thank Heaven for it!" he exclaimed peevishly.

A servant came in and announced that Mr Byers was in the drawing-room.

"Shall I come too?" asked the Prince.

"Oh no," she answered with a strange little laugh. "What's the use of bothering you? I'll see him."

"Make him say something definite," urged Prince Julian. "Let's have an end of it one way or the other."

"Very well." She bent down and kissed him, and then went off to talk to Mr Byers.

The fair boy with the business brains might have been seriously of opinion that there was something wrong with Byers' nerve had he seen him waiting for Mrs Rivers in the drawing-room, waiting to tell her that the necessary resources were not forthcoming; he hoped that he need tell her no more than that; he wished that he had not come, but he could not endure the self-contempt which the thought of running away had brought with it; he must face her; the woman could do no more than abuse him. One other thought he had for a moment entertained—of offering to let her stand in, as Mr Shum had let Lady Craigennoch; there was hardly any sum which he would not have been glad to give her. But long before he reached the house he had decided that she would not stand in. "By God, I should think not," he said to himself indignantly.

But he had one phrase ready for her. He reminded her of the paragraphs, the rumours, and the Manifesto. "We have by these means felt the pulse of the public," he said. He paused, she said nothing. "The result is not—er—encouraging," he went on. "The moment is not propitious."

"You promised the money if the Prince signed the Manifesto," she said.

"Promised? Oh, well, I said I'd——"

"You promised," said Mrs Rivers. "What's the difficulty now?"

"The state of public feeling——" he began.

"I know that. We want the money to change it. She smiled slightly. "If the feeling had been with us already we shouldn't have wanted the money." She leant forward and asked, "Haven't you got the money? You said you had."

"Yes, I've got it—or I could get it."

"Yes. Well then—! Why have you changed your mind?"

He made no answer, and for a while she sat looking at him thoughtfully. She did not abuse him, and she did not cry.

"I want to understand," she said presently. "Did you ever mean to give us the money?"

"Yes, upon my honour I——"

"Are you sure?" She forced him to look her in the face; he was silent. She rose, took a Japanese fan from a side table, and sat down again; the lower part of her face was now hidden by the fan; Byers saw nothing but her eyes. "What did you mean?" she asked. "You've made us all—the Prince, and his friends, and me—look very silly. How did that help you? I don't see what you could get out of that."

She was looking at him now as though she thought him mad; she could not see what he had got out of it; it had not yet crossed her mind that there had been money to be got out of it; so ignorant was she, with all her shrewdness, with all her resolution.

"And I understood that you were such a clever far-seeing man," she went on. "Lady Craigennoch always told me so; she said I could trust you in anything. Do tell me about it, Mr Byers."

"I can't explain it to you," he began. "You—you wouldn't——"

"Yes, I should understand it if you told me," she insisted.

If he told her he was a liar and a thief, she would understand. Probably she would. But he did not think that she would understand the transaction if he used any less plain language about it. And that language was not only hard to use to her, but struck strangely on his own head and his own heart. Surely there must be other terms in which to describe his part in the transaction? There were plenty such in the City; were there none in Palace Gate?

"It's a matter of business——" again he began.

She stopped him with an imperious wave of the fan. Her eyes grew animated with a sudden enlightenment; she looked at him for a moment or two, and then asked, "Have you been making money out of it somehow?" He did not answer. "How, please?" she asked.

"What does that matter?" His voice was low.

"I should like to hear, please. You don't want to tell me? But I want to know. It—it'll be useful to me to understand things like this."

It seemed to Mr Byers that he had to tell her, that this was the one thing left that he could do, the one obligation which he could perform. So he began to tell her, and as he told her, naturally (or curiously, since natures are curious) his pride in the great *coup* revived—his professional pride. He went into it all thoroughly; she followed him very intelligently; he made her understand what an "option" was, what "differences," what the "put," and what the "call." He pointed out how the changes in public affairs might make welcome changes in private pockets, and would have her know that the secret centre of great movements must be sought in the Bourses, not in the Cabinets, of Europe; perhaps he exaggerated here a little, as a man will in praising what he loves. Finally, carried away by enthusiasm, he gave her the means of guessing with fair accuracy the profit that he and his friends had made out of the transaction. Thus ending, he heaved a sigh of relief; she understood, and there had been no need of those uncivil terms which lately had pressed themselves forward to the tip of his tongue so rudely.

"I think I'd better not try to have anything more to do with politics," she said. "I—I'm too ignorant." There was a little break in her tones. Byers glanced at her sharply and

apprehensively. Now that his story was ended, his enthusiasm died away; he expected abuse now. Well, he would bear it; she was entitled to relieve her mind.

“What a fool I’ve been! How you must have been laughing at me—at my poor Prince and me!” She looked across to him, smiling faintly. He sat twisting his hat in his hands. Then she turned her eyes towards the fireplace. Byers had nothing to say; he was wondering whether he might go now. Glancing at her for permission, he saw that her clear bright eyes had grown dim; presently a tear formed and rolled down her cheek. Then she began to sob, softly at first, presently with growing and rising passion. She seemed quite forgetful of him, heedless of what he thought and of how she looked. All that was in her, the pang of her dead hopes, the woe for her poor Prince, the bitter shame of her own crushed pride and helpless folly, came out in her sobs as she abandoned herself to weeping. Byers sat by, listening always, looking sometimes. He tried to defend himself to himself; was it decent of her, was it becoming, wasn’t it characteristic of the lack of self-control and self-respect that marks the sort of woman she was? It might be open to all these reproaches. She seemed not to care; she cried on. He could not help looking at her now; at last she saw him looking, and with a little stifled exclamation—whether of apology or of irritation he could not tell—she turned sideways and hid her face in the cushions of the sofa. Byers rose slowly, almost unsteadily, to his feet. “My God!” he whispered to himself, as he stood for a moment and looked at her. Then he walked over to where she lay, her head buried in the cushions.

“It doesn’t make all that difference to you,” he said roughly. “You wouldn’t have gone with him.”

She turned her face to him for a moment. She did not look her best; how could she? But Mr Byers did not notice that.

“I love him; and I wanted to do it.”

Byers had “wanted to do it” too, and their desires had clashed. But in his desire there had been no alloy of love; it was all true metal, true metal of self. He stood over her for a minute without speaking. A strange feeling seized him then; he had felt it once before with regard to this woman.

“If it had been for you I’d have damned the money and gone ahead,” he blurted out in an indistinct impetuous utterance.

Again she looked up; there was no surprise, no resentment in her face, only a heart-breaking plaintiveness. “Oh, why couldn’t you be honest with me?” she moaned. But she stopped sobbing and sat straight on the sofa again. “You’ll think me still more of a fool for doing this,” she said.

Was the abuse never coming? Mr Byers began to long for it. If he were abused enough, he thought that he might be able to find something to say for himself.

“You think that because—because I live as I do, I know the world and—and so on. I don’t a bit. It doesn’t follow really, you know. Fancy my thinking I could do anything for Julian! What do I know of business? Well, you’ve told me now!”

“If it had been for you I’d have risked it and gone ahead,” said Byers again.

“I don’t know what you mean by that,” she murmured vaguely. Byers did not try to describe to her the odd strong impulse which had inspired his speech. “I must go and tell the Prince about it,” she said.

“What are you going to do?” he demanded.

“Do? What is there to do? Nothing, I suppose. What can we do?”

“I wish to God I’d—I’d met a woman like you. Shall you marry him now?”

She looked up; a faint smile appeared on her face.

“Yes,” she said. “It doesn’t matter now; and he’ll like it. Yes, I’ll marry him now.”

Two visions—one was of Mrs Byers and the babies in Portland Place—rose before Byers’ thoughts.

“He hasn’t lost much then,” he said. “And you? You’ll be just as happy.”

“It was the whole world to me,” said she, and for the last time she put her handkerchief to her eyes. Then she stowed it away in her pocket and looked expectantly at her visitor; here was the permission to go.

“Will you take the money?” said he.

“What money?”

“What I’ve made. My share of it.”

“Oh, don’t be silly! What do I care what money you’ve made?”

He spoke lower as he put his second question.

“Will you forgive me?” he asked.

“Forgive you?” She laughed a little, yet looked puzzled. “I don’t think about you like that,” she explained. “You’re not a man to me.”

“You’re a woman to me. What am I to you then?”

“I don’t know. Things in general—the world—business—the truth about myself. Yes, you’re the truth about myself to me.” She laughed again, nervously, tentatively, almost appealingly, as though she wanted him to understand how he seemed to her. He drew in his breath and buttoned his coat.

“And you’re the truth about myself to me,” he said. “And the truth is that I’m a damned scoundrel.”

“Are you?” she asked, as it seemed half in surprise, half in indifference. “Oh, I suppose you’re no worse than other people. Only I was such a fool. Good-bye, Mr Byers.” She held out her hand. He had not meant to offer his. But he took hers and pressed it. He had a vague desire to tell her that he was not a type of all humanity, that other men were better than he was, that there were unselfish men, true men, men who did not make fools of women for money’s sake; yes, of women whose shoes they were not worthy to black. But he could not say anything of all this, and he left her without another word. And the next morning he bought the “call” of a big block of the Stock; for the news of Prince Julian’s marriage with Mrs Rivers would send it up a point or two. Habit is very strong.

When he was gone, Mrs Rivers went upstairs to her room and bathed her face. Then she rejoined Prince Julian in the library. Weary of waiting, he had gone to sleep; but he woke up and was rejoiced to see her. He listened to her story, called Mr Byers an infernal rogue, and, with an expression of relief on his face, said:

“There’s the end of that! And now, darling——?”

“Yes, I’ll marry you now,” she said. “It doesn’t matter now.”

Thus, as has been said, the whole affair had only three obvious effects—the renovation of Lady Craigennoch’s town house, a baronetcy for Sir Henry Shum (services to the Party are a recognised claim on the favour of His Majesty), and the marriage of Prince Julian. But from it

both Mrs Rivers and Mr Byers derived some new ideas of the world and of themselves. Shall woman weep and hard men curse their own work without result? The Temple of Truth is not a National Institution. So, of course, one pays to go in. Even when you are in, it is difficult to look at more than one side of it at once. Perhaps Mrs Rivers did not realise this; and Mr Byers could not while he seemed still to hear her crying; he heard the sobs for so many evenings, mingling oddly with the click of his wife's knitting-needles.

MISS GLADWIN'S CHANCE

I

OLD Tom Gladwin was not a man to whom you volunteered advice. He had made an immense deal of money for himself, and people who have done that generally like also to manufacture their own advice on their own premises; perhaps it is better done that way, perhaps there's just a prejudice in favour of the home trade-mark. Anyhow, old Tom needed no suggestions from outside. You said, "Yes, Sir Thomas," or "Of course not, Sir Thomas," or "Certainly, Sir Thomas." At all events, you limited your remarks to something like that if you were—as I was—a young solicitor trying to keep his father's connection together, of which Sir Thomas's affairs and the business of the Worldstone Park estate formed a considerable and lucrative portion. But everybody was in the same story about him—secretary, bailiff, stud-groom, gardener, butler—yes, butler, although Sir Thomas had confessedly never tasted champagne till he was forty, whereas Gilson had certainly been weaned on it. Even Miss Nettie Tyler, when she came on the scene, had the good sense to accept Sir Thomas's version of her heart's desire; neither had she much cause to quarrel with his reading, since it embraced Sir Thomas himself and virtually the whole of his worldly possessions. He was worth perhaps half-a-million pounds in money, and the net rent-roll of Worldstone was ten thousand, even after you had dressed it up and curled its hair, for all the world as if it were a suburban villa instead of an honest, self-respecting country gentleman's estate, which ought to have been run to pay three per cent. But the new-comers will not take land seriously; they leave that as a prospect for their descendants when the ready money, the city-made money, has melted away.

So I took his instructions for his marriage settlement and his new will without a word, although they seemed to me to be, under the circumstances, pretty stiff documents. The old gentleman—he was not really old, fifty-eight or-nine, I should say, but he looked like a granite block that has defied centuries—had, of course, two excuses. In the first place, he was fairly crazy about Nettie Tyler, orphan daughter of the old vicar of Worldstone, an acquaintance of two months' standing and (I will say for her) one of the prettiest little figures on a horse that I ever saw. In the second, he wanted—yes, inevitably he wanted—to found a family and to hand on the baronetcy which had properly rewarded his strenuous and successful efforts on his own behalf; it was the sort of baronetcy which is obviously pregnant with a peerage—a step, not a

crown; one learns to distinguish these varieties. Accordingly, to cut details short, the effect of the new will and of the marriage settlement was that, given issue of the said intended marriage (and intended it was for the following Tuesday), Miss Beatrice Gladwin was to have five hundred a year on her father's death, and the rest went to what, for convenience's sake, I may call the new undertaking—to the Gladwin-Tyler establishment and what might spring therefrom. Even the five hundred was by the will only, therefore revocable. Five hundred a year is not despicable, and is good, like other boons, until revoked. But think what Beatrice Gladwin had been two months before—the greatest heiress in the county, mistress of all! So the old will had made her—the old will in my office safe, which, come next Tuesday, would be so much waste paper. I have always found something pathetic about a superseded will. It is like a royal family in exile.

Sir Thomas read over the documents and looked up at me as he took off his spectacles.

"One great advantage of having made your own way, Foulkes," he observed, "is that you're not trammelled by settlements made in early life. I can do what I like with my own."

And I, as I have foreshadowed, observed merely, "Certainly, Sir Thomas."

He eyed me for a moment with an air of some suspicion. He was very acute and recognised criticism, however inarticulate; an obstinacy in the bend of one's back was enough for him. But I gave him no more opening, and, after all, he could not found an explicit reproach on the curve of my spine. After a moment he went on, rasping the short grey hair that sprouted on his chin:

"I think you'd better have a few minutes with my daughter. Put the effect of these documents into plain language for her." I believe he half suspected me again, for he added quickly: "Free of technicalities, I mean. She knows the general nature of my wishes. I've made that quite clear to her myself." No doubt he had. I bowed, and he rose, glancing at the clock. "The horses must be round," he said; "I'm going for a ride with Miss Tyler. Ask if my daughter can see you now; and I hope you'll stay to lunch, Foulkes." He went to the door, but turned again. "I'll send Beatrice to you myself," he called, "and you can get the business over before we come back." He went off, opening his cigar-case and humming a tune, in excellent spirits with himself and the world, I fancied. He had reason to be, so far as one could see at the minute.

I went to the window and watched them mounting—the strong solid frame of the man, the springy figure of the pretty girl. She was chattering gleefully: he laughed in a most contented approval of her, and, probably, with an attention none too deep to the precise purport of her merry words. Besides the two grooms there was another member of the party—one who stood rather aloof on the steps that led up to the hall door. Here was the lady for whom I waited, Beatrice Gladwin, his daughter, who was to have the five hundred a year when he died—who was to have had everything, to have been mistress of all. She stood there in her calm composed handsomeness. Neither pretty nor beautiful would you call her, but, without question, remarkably handsome. She was also perfectly tranquil. As I looked she spoke once; I heard the words through the open window.

"You must have your own way, then," she said, with a smile and a slight shrug of her shoulders. "But the horse isn't safe for you, you know."

"Ay, ay," he answered, laughing again, not at his daughter but round to the pretty girl beside him. "I'll have my way for four days more." He and his *fiancée* enjoyed the joke between them; it went no further, I think.

Beatrice stood watching them for a little while, then turned into the house. I watched them a moment longer, and saw them take to the grass and break into a canter. It was a beautiful sunny morning; they and their fine horses made a good moving bit of life on the face of the smiling earth. Was that how it would strike Beatrice, once the heiress, now—well, it sounds rather strong, but shall we say the survival of an experiment that had failed? Once the patroness of the vicar's little daughter—I had often seen them when that attitude obviously and inevitably dominated their intercourse; then for a brief space, by choice or parental will, the friend; now and for the future—my vocabulary or my imagination failed to supply the exact description of their future relations. It was, however, plain that the change to Miss Beatrice Gladwin must be very considerable. There came back into my mind what my friend, neighbour, and client, Captain Spencer Fullard of Gatworth Hall, impecunious scion of an ancient stock, had said in the club at Bittleton (for we have a club at Bittleton, and a very good one, too) when the news of Sir Thomas's engagement came out. "Rough on Miss Beatrice," said he; "but she'll show nothing. She's hard, you know, but a sportsman." A sportsman she was, as events proved; and none was to know it better than Spencer Fullard himself, who was, by the way, supposed to feel, or at least to have exhibited, even greater admiration for the lady than the terms of the quoted remark imply. At the time he had not seen Miss Tyler.

One thing more came into my head while I waited. Did pretty Nettie Tyler know the purport of the new documents? If so, what did she think of it? But the suggestion which this idea carries with it probably asked altogether too much of triumphant youth. It is later in life that one is able to look from other people's points of view—one's own not being so dazzlingly pleasant, I suppose. So I made allowances for Nettie; it was not perhaps so easy for Beatrice Gladwin to do the same.

II

OF course the one thing I had to avoid was any show of sympathy; she would have resented bitterly such an impertinence. If I knew her at all—and I had been an interested observer of her growth from childhood to woman's estate—the sympathy of the county, unheard but infallibly divined, was a sore aggravation of her fate. As I read extracts from the documents and explained their effect, freeing them from technicalities, as Sir Thomas had thoughtfully charged me, my impassivity equalled hers. I might have been telling her the price of bloaters at Great Yarmouth that morning, and she considering the purchase of half-a-dozen. In fact, we overdid it between us; we were both grotesquely uninterested in the documents; our artificial calm made a poor contrast to the primitive and disguise-scorning exultation of the pair who had gone riding over the turf in the sunshine. I could not help it; I had to take my cue from her. My old father had loved her; perhaps he would have patted her hand, perhaps he would even have kissed her cheek: what would have happened to her composure then? On the other hand, he would have been much more on Sir Thomas's side than I was. He used often to quote to me a saying of his uncle's, the venerable founder of the fine business we enjoyed: "Every other

generation, the heir ought to lay an egg and then die.” The long minority which he contemplated as resulting from a family bereavement *prima facie* so sad would reestablish the family finances. The Chinese and Japanese, I am told, worship their ancestors. English landed gentry worship their descendants, and of this cult the family lawyer is high priest. My father would have patted Beatrice Gladwin’s cheek, but he would not have invoked a curse on Sir Thomas, as I was doing behind my indifferent face and with the silent end of my drily droning tongue. I was very glad when we got to the end of the documents.

She gave me a nod and a smile, saying, “I quite understand,” then rose and went to the window. I began to tie my papers up in their tapes. The drafts were to go back to be engrossed. She stood looking out on the park. The absurd impulse to say that I was very sorry, but that I really couldn’t help it, assailed me again. I resisted, and tied the tapes in particularly neat bows, admiring the while her straight, slim, flat-shouldered figure. She looked remarkably efficient; I found myself regretting that she was not to have the management of the estate. Was that in her mind, too, as she surveyed it from the window? I do not know, but I do know that the next moment she asked me if Spencer Fullard were ill; she had not seen him about lately. I said that he was, I believed, in robust health, but had been up in town on business. (He had gone to raise a loan, if that’s material.) The subject then dropped. I did not, at the time, see any reason why it had cropped up at all at that particular and somewhat uncomfortable moment.

What had put Spencer Fullard into her head?

Suddenly she spoke again, to herself, in a low voice: “How funny!” She turned to me and beckoned: “Mr Foulkes!”

I left my papers on the table and joined her at the open window; it was just to the right of the hall door and commanded a wide view of the park, which, stretching in gentle undulations, with copses scattered here and there among the turf, gave a fine sense of spaciousness and elbow-room—the best things mere wealth can give, in my humble opinion.

“It must be Nettie,” she said; “but why—why is she riding like that?”

I followed with my eyes the direction in which she pointed.

“And where’s father?”

Still a mile or more away, visible now, but from moment to moment hidden by an intervening copse and once or twice by a deep dip in the ground, a horse came towards us at a gallop—a reckless gallop. The next instant the faintest echo of a cry, its purport indistinguishable, fell on our ears.

“It is Nettie,” said Beatrice Gladwin, her eyes suddenly meeting mine. We stood there for a moment, then she walked quickly into the adjoining hall, and out on to the steps in front of the door. I followed, leaving my papers to look after themselves on the table. When I came up to her she said nothing, but caught my wrist with her left hand and held it tightly.

Now we heard what Nettie’s cry was. The monotonous horror of it never ceased for an instant. “Help! Help! Help!” It was incessant, and now, as she reached the drive, sounded loud and shrill in our ears. The men in the stables heard it; two of them ran out at top speed to meet the galloping horse. But horse and rider were close up to us by now. I broke away from Miss Gladwin, who clung to me with a strong unconscious grip, and sprang forward. I was just in time to catch Nettie as she fell from the saddle, and the grooms brought her horse to a standstill. Even in my arms she still cried shrilly, “Help, help, help!”

No misunderstanding was possible. "Where? Where?" was all I asked, and at last she gasped, "By Toovey's farm."

One of the grooms was on her horse in a moment and made off for the spot. Nettie broke away from me, staggering to the steps, stumbling over her habit as she went, and sank down in a heap; she ceased now to cry for help, and began to sob convulsively. Beatrice seemed stunned. She said nothing; she looked at none of us; she stared after the man on horseback who had started for Toovey's farm. The second groom spoke to me in a low voice: "Where's the master's horse?"

Nettie heard him. She raised her eyes to his—the blue eyes a little while ago so radiant, now so full of horror. "They neither of them moved," she said.

So it was. They were found together under the hedgerow; the horse was alive, though its back was broken, and a shot the only mercy. Sir Thomas was quite dead.

That night I carried my papers back to the office, and satisfied myself, as my duty was, that the existing will lay in its place in the office safe; since the morning that document had, so to say, gone up in the world very much. So had Miss Gladwin. She was mistress of all.

III

AS may be imagined, the situation evoked a great deal of sympathy and occasioned an even greater quantity of talk. Killed four days before his wedding! The poor little bride! She had lost so much more than merely Sir Thomas! The general opinion of the Bittleton Club, which may be taken as representative of the views of the county, was that Miss Gladwin ought to "do something" for Miss Tyler. There was much difference as to the extent of this suggested generosity: almost every figure between five thousand and fifty thousand pounds had its supporters. I think that of the entire roll of members only two had no proposal to submit (hypothetically) to Miss Gladwin. One was myself, tongue-tied by my position as her lawyer; the other was Spencer Fullard, who did nothing but smoke and tap his leg with his walking-stick while the question was under discussion. I remembered his summary of the lady—"hard, but a sportsman." The hard side might indicate that she would leave the situation as fate had made it. What did the sportsman in her say? I found myself wondering what Captain Fullard's views were, supposing he had taken the trouble—which, however, seemed to be a pleasure to his fellow-members—to arrive at any.

To tell the truth, I resented the gossip about her all the more because I could not stifle an inward feeling that if they had known her as well as I did—or, perhaps I should say, had seen her as often as I had (which is a safer way of putting it when a woman's in the case)—they would have gossiped not less, but more. She was strange, and, I suppose, hard, in her total ignoring of the idea that there was any such question at all as that which kept the Bittleton clubmen—and of course their wives—so much on the go. Nettie Tyler did not leave Worldstone Park. It may be assumed that her bills were paid, and probably she had pocket-money. There the facts of the case came to a sudden stop. Had Beatrice Gladwin turned her into a "companion"? Anybody who chose to put it in that light was, on the apparent facts,

extremely hard to contradict or to blame, but, as I felt, not at all hard to be annoyed at. Well, I had always hated the Tyler project.

Meanwhile Miss Gladwin was exhibiting, as I had foreseen she would, extraordinary efficiency; and her efficiency gave me plenty of work, besides the routine and not small business incident on the transmission of so considerable an estate as Sir Thomas's. She was going in for building as soon as the death duties were out of the way; meanwhile she gathered the reins of her affairs into her own hands and regulated every detail very carefully. Sir Thomas, like many men successful in large concerns, had been easy-going about his private interests. I was constantly at Worldstone Park, often spending from Saturday to Monday there, and devoting the Sunday, less church time, to its mistress's service. She was good enough to treat me with great candour, and discussed all things very openly—except Miss Nettie Tyler.

And what of Miss Nettie Tyler? I do not consider—and I speak with no favourable prejudice—that that young lady's behaviour was open to very serious criticism. It surprised me favourably. I admit that she was meek; now and then I thought her rather obtrusively meek. But then she might naturally have been crushed; she might well have been an insupportably mournful companion. She was neither. I could not call her helpful, because she was one of the helpless so far as practical affairs go. But she was reasonably cheerful, and she put forward no claim of any sort whatsoever. She did not appear to think that Beatrice ought to “do anything” for her beyond what she was doing; and that, to my certain knowledge, did not include the gift of even the smallest of all the various sums suggested at the Bittleton Club. All you could say was that the lady who was to have been mistress of Worldstone Park still lived there, and made for the moment remarkably little difference. When one comes to think it over, this was really immensely to her credit. She might have made life there impossible. Or did she know that in such a case Miss Gladwin would send her away quite calmly? Let us give credit where credit is possible, and adopt the more favourable interpretation. Things went very well indeed in a very difficult situation—till Spencer Fullard made his entry on the stage.

His coming made a difference from the very first. I think that the two girls had been living in a kind of numbness which prevented them from feeling as acutely as they naturally might the position in which the freak of fate had placed them. Each lived in thought till he came—in the thought of what had been and would have been; to neither had the actual become the truly real. There had been a barrier between them. Nettie's excellent behaviour and Beatrice's remarkable efficiency had alike been masks, worn unconsciously, but none the less and by no less sufficient disguises. They had lived in the shadow of the death. Fullard brought back life—which is to say, he brought back conflict.

Nothing was further from his original idea. Like Sir Thomas, he was a descendant-worshipper—born to it, moreover, which Sir Thomas had not been. I was his high priest, so, of course, I knew what he was about. He came to woo the rich Miss Gladwin, picking up his wooing (he had excellently easy manners) just at the spot where he had dropped it when Sir Thomas Gladwin announced his engagement to Miss Nettie Tyler. “Dropped” is a word too definite. “Suspended” might do, or even “attenuated.” He was a captain—let us say that he had called a halt to reconnoitre his ground, but had not ordered a retreat. Events had cleared the way for him. He advanced again.

Should I blame him? My father would have blessed him, though he might have advised him to lay an egg and die. No; Worldstone was rich enough to warrant his living, but of Gatworth there was left an annual income of hardly eight hundred pounds. But three hundred

years in the county behind it! Three hundred years since the cadet branch migrated from Gloucestershire, where the Fullards had been since the Flood! It was my duty to bless his suit, and I did. It was no concern of mine that he had, in confidence, called Miss Gladwin “hard.” He had called her a “sportsman,” too. Set one off against the other, remembering his position and his cult.

Sir Thomas had been dead a year when Fullard and I first spent a Sunday together at Worldstone Park. He had been there before; so had I: but we had not chanced to coincide. It was May, and spring rioted about us. The girls, too, had doffed some of their funereal weeds; Nettie wore white and black, Beatrice black and white. Life was stirring in the place again. Nettie was almost gay, Beatrice no longer merely efficient. For the first time I found it possible to slip a dram of pleasure into the cup of a business visit. Curiously enough, the one person who was, as I supposed, there on the pleasantest errand, wore the most perturbed aspect. The fate of lovers? I am not sure. I have met men who took the position with the utmost serenity. But if one were uncertain to whom one was making love? The notion was a shock at first.

The girls went to church in the morning; Fullard and I walked round and round the garden, smoking our pipes. I expatiated on Miss Gladwin’s remarkable efficiency. “A splendid head!” I said with enthusiasm.

“A good-looking pair in their different ways,” was his somewhat unexpected reply.

“I meant intellectually,” I explained, with a laugh.

“Miss Tyler’s no fool, mind you,” remarked the captain.

I realised that his thoughts had not been with my conversation. Where had they been? In my capacity of high priest, I went on commending Miss Gladwin. He recalled himself to listen, but the sense of duty was obvious. Suddenly I recollected that he had not met Nettie Tyler before Sir Thomas died. He had been on service during the two years she had lived in Worldstone village.

IV

AFTER lunch we all sat together on the lawn. Yes, life was there, and the instinct for life, and for new life. Poor Sir Thomas’s brooding ghost had taken its departure. I was glad, but the evidence of my eyes made me also uneasy. The situation was not developing on easy lines.

With his ears Fullard listened to Beatrice Gladwin; with his eyes he watched the girl who was to have been her all-powerful stepmother, who was now her most humble dependant. I saw it—I, a man. Were the girls themselves unconscious? The idea is absurd. If anybody were unconscious, it was Fullard himself; or, at least, he thought his predicament undetected. I suggested to Nettie that she and I might take a walk: a high priest has occasionally to do things like that when there is no chaperon about. She refused, not meekly now, but almost pertly. Beatrice raised her eyes for a moment, looked at her, and coloured ever so slightly. I think we may date the declaration of war from that glance. The captain did not see it: he was lighting a

cigarette. None the less, the next moment he rose and proposed to accompany me himself. That did almost as well—how far I had got into the situation!—and I gladly acquiesced. We left the two ladies together, or, to be precise, just separating; they both, it appeared, had letters to write.

I should say at once that Spencer Fullard was one of the most honest men I have ever known (besides being one of the best-looking). If he came fortune-hunting, it was because he believed that pursuit to be his duty—duty to self, to ancestors, and, above all, to descendants. But, in truth, when he came first, it had not been in unwilling obedience to duty's spur. He had liked Miss Gladwin very much; he had paid her attentions, even flirted with her; and, in the end, he liked her very much still. But there is a thing different from liking—a thing violent, sudden, and obliterating. It makes liking cease to count.

We talked little on our visit to the home farm. I took occasion once more to point out Miss Gladwin's efficiency. Fullard fidgeted: he did not care about efficiency in women—that seemed plain. I ventured to observe that her investment of money on the estate was likely to pay well; he seemed positively uncomfortable. After these conversational failures, I waited for him. We were on our way back before he accepted the opening.

"I say, Foulkes," he broke out suddenly, "do you suppose Miss Tyler's going to stay here permanently?"

"I don't know. Why shouldn't she?"

He swished at the nettles as he made his next contribution to our meagre conversation. "But Beatrice Gladwin will marry some day soon, I expect."

"Well?"

I was saying little, but at this point Fullard went one better. He just cocked his eye at me, leaving me to read his meaning as I best could.

"In that case, of course, she'd be sent away," said I, smiling.

"Kicked out?" He grumbled the question, half under his breath.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Everything would be done kindly, no doubt."

"Not fair on the chap, either," he remarked after some moments. I think that my mind supplied the unspoken part of his conversation quite successfully: he was picturing the household *à trois*; he himself was, in his mind's eye, "the chap," and under the circumstances he thought "the chap" ought not to be exposed to temptation. I agreed, but kept my agreement, and my understanding, to myself.

"What appalling bad luck that poor little girl's had!"

"One of them had to have very bad luck," I reminded him. "Sir Thomas contrived that."

He started a little. He had forgotten the exceedingly bad luck which once had threatened Miss Gladwin, the girl he had come to woo. The captain's state of feeling was, in fact, fairly transparent. I was sorry for him—well, for all of them—because he certainly could not afford to offer his hand to Nettie Tyler.

Somewhere on the way back from the home farm I lost Captain Spencer Fullard. Miss Tyler's letters must have been concise; there was the gleam of a white frock, dashed here and there with splashes of black, in the park. Fullard said he wanted more exercise, and I arrived alone on the lawn, where my hostess sat beside the tea-table. Feeling guilty for another's sin, as one often does, I approached shamefacedly.

She gave me tea, and asked, with a businesslike abruptness which I recognised as inherited, "What are they saying about me?"

That was Gladwin all over! To say not a word for twelve months, because for twelve months she had not cared; then to blurt it out! Because she wanted light? Obviously that was the reason—the sole reason. She had not cared before; now something had occurred to make her think, to make her care, to make the question of her dealings with Miss Tyler important. I might have pretended not to understand, but there was a luxury in dealing plainly with so fine a plain-dealer; I told her the truth without shuffling.

"On the whole, it's considered that you would be doing the handsome thing in giving her something," I answered, sipping my tea.

She appreciated the line I took. She had expected surprise and fencing; it amused and pleased her to meet with neither. She was in the mood (by the way, we could see the black-dashed white frock and Fullard's manly figure a quarter of a mile away) to meet frankness with its fellow.

"She never put in a word for me," she said, smiling. "With father, I mean."

"She doesn't understand business," I pleaded.

"I've been expected to sympathise with her bad luck!"

So had I—by the captain, half-an-hour before. But I did not mention it.

"The Bittleton Club thinks I ought to—to do something?"

I laughed at her taking our club as the arbiter. She had infused a pretty irony into her question.

"It does, Miss Gladwin." My answer maintained the ironical note.

"Then I will," said she, with a highly delusive appearance of simplicity.

I could not quite make her out, but it came home to me that her secret resentment against Nettie Tyler was very bitter.

She spoke again in a moment: "A word from her would have gone a long way with father."

"That's all in the past, isn't it?" I murmured soothingly.

"The past!" She seemed to throw doubt on the existence of such a thing.

The captain's manly figure and the neat little shape in white and black were approaching us. The stress of feeling has to be great before it prevents sufferers from turning up to tea. Miss Gladwin glanced toward her advancing guests, smiled, and relighted the spirit-lamp under the kettle. I suppose I was looking thoughtful, for the next moment she said, "Rather late in the day to do anything? Is that what's in your mind? Will they say that?"

"How can I tell? Your adherents say you've been like sisters."

"I never had a sister younger and prettier than myself," said she. She waved her hand to the new arrivals, now close on us. "I nearly had a stepmother like that, though," she added.

I did not like her at that moment; but is anybody attractive when he is fighting hard for his own? Renunciation is so much more picturesque. She was fighting—or preparing to fight. I had suddenly realised the position, for all that the garden was so peaceful, and spring was on us, and Nettie's new-born laugh rang light across the grass, so different from the cry we once had heard from her lips in that place.

Beatrice Gladwin looked at me with a suddenly visible mockery in her dark eyes. She had read my thoughts, and she was admitting that she had. She was very “hard.” Fullard was perfectly right. Yet I think that if she had been alone at that moment she might have cried. That was just an impression of mine; really she gave no tangible ground for it, save in an odd constraint of her mouth. The next moment she laughed.

“I like a fight to be a fair fight,” she said, and looked steadily at me for a moment. She raised her voice and called to them: “Come along; the tea’s getting cold.” She added to me, “Come to my room at ten to-morrow, please.”

The rest of the evening she was as much like velvet as it was in a Gladwin to be. But I waited. I wanted to know how she meant to arrange her fair fight. She wanted one. A sportsman, after all, you see.

V

SHE was not like velvet when we met the next morning after breakfast in her study: her own room was emphatically a study, and in no sense a boudoir. She was like iron, or like the late Sir Thomas when he gave me instructions for his new will and for the settlement on his intended marriage with Miss Nettie Tyler. There was in her manner the same clean-cut intimation that what she wanted from me was not advice, but the promptest obedience. I suppose that she had really made up her mind the day before—even while we talked on the lawn, in all probability.

“I wish you, Mr Foulkes,” she said, “to be so good as to make arrangements to place one hundred thousand pounds at my disposal at the bank as soon as possible.”

I knew it would be no use, but my profession demanded a show of demur. “A very large sum just now—with the duties—and your schemes for the future.”

“I’ve considered the amount carefully; it’s just what appears to me proper and sufficient.”

“Then I suppose there’s no more to be said,” I sighed resignedly.

She looked at me with a slight smile. “Of course you guess what I’m going to do with it?” she asked.

“Yes, I think so. You ought to have it properly settled on her, you know. It should be carefully tied up.”

The suggestion seemed to annoy her.

“No,” she said sharply. “What she does with it, and what becomes of it, have nothing to do with me. I shall have done my part. I shall be—free.”

“I wish you would take the advice of somebody you trust.”

That softened her suddenly. She put her hand out across the table and pressed mine for a moment. “I trust you very much. I have no other friend I trust so much. Believe that, please. But I must act for myself here.” She smiled again, and with the old touch of irony added, “It will satisfy your friends at the Bittleton Club?”

"It's a great deal too much," I protested, with a shake of the head. "Thirty would have been adequate; fifty, generous; a hundred thousand is quixotic."

"I've chosen the precise sum most carefully," Miss Gladwin assured me. "And it's anything but quixotic," she added, with a smile.

A queer little calculation was going on in my brain. Wisdom (or interest, which you will) and twenty-five thousand a year against love and three thousand—was that, in her eyes, a fair fight? Perhaps the reckoning was not so far out. At any rate, love had a chance—with three thousand pounds a year. There is more difference between three thousand pounds and nothing than exists between three thousand and all the rest of the money in the world.

"Is Miss Tyler aware of your intentions?"

"Not yet, Mr Foulkes."

"She'll be overwhelmed," said I. It seemed the right observation to offer.

For the first time, Miss Gladwin laughed openly. "Will she?" she retorted, with a scorn that was hardly civil. "She'll think it less than I owe her."

"You owe her nothing. What you may choose to give——"

Miss Gladwin interrupted me without ceremony "She confuses me with fate—with what happened—with her loss—and—and disappointment. She identifies me with all that."

"Then she's very unreasonable."

"I daresay; but I can understand." She smiled. "I can understand very well how one girl can seem like that to another, Mr Foulkes—how she can embody everything of that sort." She paused and then added: "If I thought for a moment that she'd be—what was your foolish word?—oh yes, 'overwhelmed,' I wouldn't do it. But I know her much too well. You remember that my adherents say we've been like sisters? Don't sisters understand each other?"

"You're hard on her—hard and unfair," I said. Her bitterness was not good to witness.

"Perhaps I'm hard; I'm not unfair." Her voice trembled a little; her composure was not what it had been at the beginning of our interview. "At any rate, I'm trying to be fair now; only you mustn't—you must not—think that she'll be overwhelmed."

"Very well," said I. "I won't think that. And I'll put matters in train about the money. You'll have to go gently for a bit afterwards, you know. Even you are not a gold mine." She nodded, and I rose from my chair. "Is that all for to-day?" I asked.

"Yes, I think so," she said. "You're going away?"

"Yes, I must get back to Bittleton. The office waits."

She gave me her hand. "I shall see you again before long," she said. "Remember, I'm trying to be fair—fair to everybody. Yes, fair to myself too. I think I've a right to fair treatment. I'm giving myself a chance too, Mr Foulkes. Good-bye."

Her dismissal was not to be questioned, but I should have liked more light on her last words. I had seen enough to understand her impulse to give Nettie Tyler a fair field, to rid her of the handicap of penury, to do the handsome thing, just when it seemed most against her own interest. That was the sportsmanlike side of her, working all the more strongly because she disliked her rival. I saw too, though not at the time quite so clearly, in what sense she was trying to be fair to Captain Spencer Fullard: she thought the scales were weighted too heavily against the disinterested—shall I say the romantic?—side of that gentleman's disposition. But

that surely was quixotic, and she had denied quixotism. Yet it was difficult to perceive how she was giving herself a chance, as she had declared. She seemed to be throwing her best chance away; so it appeared in my matter-of-fact eyes. Or was she hoping to dazzle Fullard with the splendour of her generosity? She had too much penetration to harbour any such idea. He would think the gift handsome, even very handsome, but he would be no more overwhelmed than Nettie Tyler herself. Even impartial observers at Bittleton had talked of fifty thousand pounds as the really proper thing. If Fullard were in love with Nettie, he would think double the amount none too much; and if he were not—well, then, where was Beatrice Gladwin's need for fair treatment—her need to be given a chance at all? For, saving love, she held every card in the game.

I went back to Bittleton, kept my own counsel, set the business of the money on foot, and waited for the issue of the fair fight. No whisper about the money leaked through to the Bittleton Club; but I heard of a small party at Worldstone Park, and Spencer Fullard was one of the guests. Therefore battle was joined.

VI

THE following Saturday fortnight the *Bittleton Press* scored what journalists call a “scoop” at the expense of the rival and Radical organ, the *Advertiser*. Such is the reward of sound political principle! Here is the paragraph—“exclusive,” the editor was careful to make you understand:

We are privileged to announce that a marriage has been arranged and will shortly be solemnised between Captain Spencer Fullard, D.S.O., of Gatworth Hall, and Henrietta, daughter of the late Rev. F. E. Tyler, Vicar of Worldstone. We extend, in the name of the county, our cordial congratulations to the happy pair. Captain Fullard is the representative of a name ancient and respected in the county, and has done good service to his King and country. The romantic story of the lady whose affections he has been so fortunate as to win will be fresh in the minds of our readers. As we sympathised with her sorrow, so now we may with her joy. We understand that Miss Gladwin of Worldstone Park, following what she is confident would have been the wish of her lamented father, the late much-respected Sir Thomas Gladwin, Bart., M.P., D.L., J.P., C.A., is presenting the prospective bride with a wedding present which in itself amounts to a fortune. Happy they who are in a position to exercise such graceful munificence and to display filial affection in so gracious a form! It would be indiscreet to mention figures, but rumour has not hesitated to speak of what our gay forefathers used to call “a plum.” We are not at liberty to say more than that this in no way overstates the amount.

Whereupon, of course, the Bittleton Club at once doubled it, and Miss Gladwin's fame filled the air.

This was all very pretty, and it must be admitted that Beatrice Gladwin had performed her task in a most tactful way. For reasons connected with the known condition of the finances of the Gatworth Hall estate, it sounded so much better that Miss Gladwin's present should come as a result of the engagement than—well, the other way round. The other way round would have given occasion for gossip to the clubmen of Bittleton. But now—Love against the World, and an entirely unlooked-for bonus of—“a plum,” as the editor, with a charming eighteenth-century touch, chose to describe the benefaction. That was really ideal.

Really ideal; and, of course, in no way at all correspondent to the facts of the case. The truth was that Miss Beatrice Gladwin had secured her “fair fight”—and, it seemed, had lost it very decisively and very speedily. As soon as it was reasonably possible—and made so by Miss Gladwin’s action—for Fullard to think of marrying Nettie Tyler, he had asked her to be his wife. To which question there could be only one answer. Miss Gladwin had given away too much weight; she should have quartered that “plum,” I thought.

But that would not have made a “fair fight”? Perhaps not. Perhaps a fair fight was not to be made at all under the circumstances. But the one thing which, above all, I could not see was the old point that had puzzled me before. It might be fair to soften the conflict between Captain Fullard’s love and Captain Fullard’s duty as a man of ancient stock. It might be fair to undo some of fate’s work and give Nettie Tyler a chance of the man she wanted—freedom to fight for him—just that, you understand. But where came in the chance for herself of which Beatrice Gladwin had spoken?

As I have said, I was Captain Fullard’s lawyer as well as Miss Gladwin’s, and he naturally came to me to transact the business incident on his marriage. Beatrice Gladwin proved right: he was not overwhelmed, nor, from his words, did I gather that Miss Tyler was. But they were both highly appreciative.

The captain was also inclined to congratulate himself on his knowledge of character, his power of reading the human heart.

“Hard, if you like,” he said, sitting in my office arm-chair; “but a sportsman in the end, as I told you she was. I knew one could rely on her doing the right thing in the end.”

“At considerable cost,” I remarked, sharpening a pencil.

“It’s liberal—very liberal. Oh, we feel that. But, of course, the circumstances pointed to liberality.” He paused, then added:

“And I don’t know that we ought to blame her for taking time to think it over. Of course it made all the difference to me, Foulkes.”

There came in the captain’s admirable candour. Between him and me there was no need—and, I may add, no room—for the romantic turn which the *Bittleton Press* had given to the course of events; that was for public consumption only.

“But for it I couldn’t possibly have come forward—whatever I felt.”

“As a suitor for Miss Tyler’s hand?” said I.

The captain looked at me; gradually a smile came on his remarkably comely face.

“Look here, Foulkes,” said he very good-humouredly, “just you congratulate me on being able to do as I like. Never mind what you may happen to be thinking behind that sallow old fiddle-head of yours.”

“And Miss Tyler is, I’m sure, radiantly happy?”

Captain Fullard’s candour abode till the end. “Well, Nettie hasn’t done badly for herself, looking at it all round, you know.”

With all respect to the late Sir Thomas, and even allowing for a terrible shock and a trying interval, I did not think she had.

Miss Gladwin gave them a splendid wedding at Worldstone. Her manner to them both was most cordial, and she was gay beyond the wont of her staid demeanour. I do not think there was affectation in this.

When the bride and bridegroom—on this occasion again by no means overwhelmed—had departed amidst cheers, when the rout of guests had gone, when the triumphal arch was being demolished and the rustics were finishing the beer, she walked with me in the garden while I smoked a cigar. (There's nothing like a wedding for making you want a cigar.)

After we had finished our gossiping about how well everything had gone off—and that things in her house should go off well was very near to Beatrice Gladwin's heart—we were silent for a while. Then she turned to me and said: "I'm very content, Mr Foulkes." Her face was calm and peaceful; she did not look so hard.

"I'm glad that doing the handsome thing brings content. I wonder if you know how glad I am?"

"Yes, I know. You're a good friend. But you're making your old mistake. I wasn't thinking just then of what you call the handsome thing. I was thinking of the chance that I gave myself."

"I never quite understood that," said I.

She gave a little laugh. "But for that 'handsome thing,' he'd certainly have asked me—he'd have had to, poor man—me, and not her. And he'd have done it very soon."

I assented—not in words, just in silence and cigar smoke.

She looked at me without embarrassment, though she was about to say something that she might well have refused to say to any living being. She seemed to have a sort of pleasure in the confession—at least an impulse to make it that was irresistible. She smiled as she spoke—amused at herself, or, perhaps, at the new idea she would give me of herself.

"If he had," she went on—"if he had made love to me, I couldn't have refused him—I couldn't, indeed. And yet I shouldn't have believed a word he was saying—not a word of love he said. I should have been a very unhappy woman if I hadn't given myself that chance. You've been a little behind the scenes. Nobody else has. I want you to know that I'm content." She put her hand in mine and gave me a friendly squeeze. "And to-morrow we'll get back to business, you and I," she said.

THE PRINCE CONSORT

I HAD known her for some considerable time before I came to know him. Most of their acquaintance were in the same case; for to know him was among the less noticeable and the less immediate results of knowing her. You might go to the house three or four times and not happen upon him. He was there always, but he did not attract attention. You joined Mrs Clinton's circle, or, if she were in a confidential mood, you sat with her on the sofa. She would point out her daughter, and Muriel, attired in a wonderful elaboration of some old-fashioned mode, would talk to you about "Mamma's books," while Mrs Clinton declared that, do what she would, she could not prevent the darling from reading them. Perhaps, when you had paid half-a-dozen visits, Mr Clinton would cross your path. He was very polite, active for your comfort, ready to carry out his wife's directions, determined to be useful. Mrs Clinton

recognised his virtues. She called him an “old dear,” with a fond pitying smile on her lips, and would tell you, with an arch glance and the slightest of shrugs, that “he wrote too.” If you asked what he wrote, she said that it was “something musty,” but that it kept him happy, and that he never minded being interrupted, or even having nowhere to write, because Muriel’s dancing lesson occupied the dining-room, “and I really couldn’t have him in my study. One must be *alone* to work, mustn’t one?” She could not be blamed for holding her work above his; there was nothing at all to show for his; whereas hers not only brought her a measure of fame, as fame is counted, but also doubled the moderate private income on which they had started housekeeping—and writing—thirteen or fourteen years before. Mr Clinton himself would have been the last to demur to her assumption; he accepted his inferiority with an acquiescence that was almost eagerness. He threw himself into the task of helping his wife, not of course in the writing, but by relieving her of family and social cares. He walked with Muriel, and was sent to parties when his wife was too busy to come. I recollect that he told me, when we had become friendly, that these offices made considerable inroads on his time. “If,” he said apologetically, “I had not acquired the habit of sitting up late, I should have difficulty in getting forward with my work. As it happens, Millie doesn’t work at night—the brain must be fresh for *her* work—and so I can have the study then; and I am not so liable to—I mean, I have not so many other calls then.”

I liked Clinton, and I do not mean by that that I disliked Mrs Clinton. Indeed I admired her very much, and her husband’s position in the household seemed just as natural to me as it did to himself and to everybody else. Young Gregory Dulcet, who is a poet and a handsome impudent young dog, was felt by us all to have put the matter in a shape that was at once true in regard to our host, and pretty in regard to our hostess, when he referred, apparently in a casual way, to Mr Clinton as “the Prince Consort.” Mrs Clinton laughed and blushed; Muriel clapped her hands and ran off to tell her father. She came back saying that he was very pleased with the name, and I believe that very possibly he really was. Anyhow, young Dulcet was immensely pleased with it; he repeated it, and it “caught on.” I heard Mrs Clinton herself, with a half-daring, half-modest air, use it more than once. Thus Mrs Clinton was led to believe herself great: so that she once asked me if I thought that there was any prospect of *The Quarterly* “doing her.” I said that I did not see why not. Yet it was not a probable literary event.

Thus Mr Clinton passed the days of an obscure useful life, helping his wife, using the dining-room when dancing lessons did not interfere, and enjoying the luxury of the study in the small hours of the morning. And Mrs Clinton grew more and more pitiful to him; and Muriel more and more patronising; and the world more and more forgetful. And then, one fine morning, as I was going to my office, the Prince Consort overtook me. He was walking fast, and he carried a large, untidy, brown-paper parcel. I quickened my pace to keep up with his.

“Sorry to hurry you, old fellow,” said he, “but I must be back in an hour. A fellow’s coming to interview Millie, and I promised to be back and show him over the house. She doesn’t want to lose more of her time than is absolutely necessary: she’s in the thick of a new story, you see. And Muriel’s got her fiddle lesson, so she can’t do it.”

“And what’s brought you out with the family wash?” I asked in pleasantry, pointing to the parcel.

The Prince Consort blushed (though he must have been forty at least at this date), pulled his beard, and said:

“This? Do you mean this? Oh, this is—well, it’s a little thing of my own.”

“Of your own? What do you mean?” I asked.

“Didn’t Millie ever tell you that I write too? Well, I do when I can get a few hours. And this is it. I’ve managed to get a fellow to look at it. Millie spoke a word for me, you know.”

I do not know whether my expression was sceptical or offensive, but I suppose it must have been one or the other, for the Prince Consort went on hastily:

“Oh, I’m not going to be such an ass as to pay anything for having it brought out, you know. They must do it on spec. or leave it alone. Besides, they really like to oblige Millie, you see.”

“It doesn’t look very little,” I observed.

“Er—no. I’m afraid it’s rather long,” he admitted.

“What’s it about?”

“Oh, it’s dull, heavy stuff. I can’t do what Millie does, you see. It’s not a novel.”

We parted at the door of the publisher who had been ready to oblige Mrs Clinton, and would, I thought, soon regret his complaisance; and I went on to my office, dismissing the Prince Consort and his “little thing” from my mind.

I went to the Clintons’ about three months’ later, in order to bid them farewell before starting for a holiday on the Continent. They were, for a wonder, without other visitors, and when we had talked over Mrs Clinton’s last production, she stretched out her hand and pointed to the table.

“And there,” she said, with a little laugh, “is Thompson’s” (the Prince Consort’s Christian name is Thompson) “*magnum opus*. Vincents’ have just sent him his advance copies.”

The Prince Consort laughed nervously as I rose and walked to the table.

“Never mind, papa,” I heard Muriel say encouragingly. “You know Mr George Vincent says it’s very good.”

“Oh, he thought that would please your mother,” protested the Prince Consort.

I examined the two large thick volumes that lay on the table. I glanced at the title page: and I felt sorry for the poor Prince Consort. It must have been a terrible “grind” to write such a book—almost as bad as reading it. But I said something civil about the importance and interest of the subject.

“If you really don’t mind looking at it,” said the Prince Consort, “I should like awfully to send you a copy.”

“Oh yes! You must read it,” said Mrs Clinton. “Why, *I’m* going to read—well, some of it! I’ve promised!”

“So am I,” said little Muriel, while the Prince Consort rubbed his hands together with a sort of pride which was, on its other side, the profoundest humility. He was wondering, I think, that he should have been able to produce any book at all—even the worst of books—and admiring a talent which he had not considered himself to possess.

“I’m going to worry everybody who comes here to buy it—or to order it at Mudie’s, anyhow,” pursued Mrs Clinton. “What’s written in this house must be read.”

“I hope Vincents’ won’t lose a lot over it,” said the Prince Consort, shaking his head.

“Oh well, they’ve made a good deal out of me before now,” laughed his wife lightly.

I did not take the Prince Consort's book away with me to the Continent. Whatever else it might be, it was certainly not holiday reading, and it would have needed a portmanteau to itself. But the reverberation of the extraordinary and almost unequalled "boom" which the book made reached me in the recesses of Switzerland. I came on *The Times* of three days before in my hotel, and it had three columns and a half on Mr Thompson Clinton's work. The weekly *Budget* which my sister sent to me at Andermatt contained, besides a long review, a portrait of the Prince Consort (he must have sat to them on purpose) and a biographical sketch of him, quite accurate as to the remarkably few incidents which his previous life contained. It was this sketch which first caused me to begin to realise what was happening. For the sketch, after a series of eulogies (which to my prepossessed mind seemed absurdly extravagant) on the Prince Consort, reached its conclusion with the following remark:—"Mr Thompson Clinton's wife is also a writer, and is known in the literary world as the author of more than one clever and amusing novel." I laid down the *Budget* with a vague feeling that a revolution had occurred. It was now Mrs Clinton who "wrote too."

I was right in my feeling, yet my feeling was inadequate to the reality with which I was faced on my return to England. The Prince Consort was the hero of the hour. I had written him a line of warm congratulation, and I settled at once to the book, not only in order to be able to talk about it, but also because I could not, without personal investigation, believe that he had done all they said. But he had. It was a wonderful book—full of learning and research, acute and profound in argument, and (greatest of all surprises) eminently lucid, polished, and even brilliant in style; irony, pathos, wit—the Prince Consort had them all. I laid the second volume down, wondering no longer that he had become an authority, that his name appeared in the lists of public banquets, that he was quoted now by one, now by the other, political party, and that translations into French and German were to be undertaken by distinguished *savants*.

And of course both *The Quarterly* and *The Edinburgh* had articles—"did him," as his wife had phrased it. Upon which, being invited by Mrs Clinton to an evening party, I made a point of going.

There were a great many people there that night. A large group was on the hearthrug. I am tall, and looking over the heads of the assembly I saw the Prince Consort standing there. He was smiling, still rather nervously, and was talking in quick eager tones. Everyone listened in deferential silence, broken by murmurs of "Yes, yes," or "How true!" or "I never thought of that!" And Muriel held the Prince Consort's hand, and looked up at him with adoration in her young eyes. I rejoiced with the Prince Consort in his hour of deserved triumph, but I did not, somehow, find Muriel as "pretty a picture" as a lady told me later on that she was. Indeed, I thought that the child would have been as well—or better—in bed. I turned round and looked for Mrs Clinton. Ah, there she was, on her usual sofa. By her side sat Lady Troughton; nobody else was near. Mrs Clinton was talking very quickly and vivaciously to her companion, who rose as I approached, gave me her hand, and then passed on to join the group on the hearthrug. I sat down by Mrs Clinton, and began to congratulate her on her husband's marvellous triumph.

"Yes," said she, "do you see he's in both the quarterlies?"

I said that such a tribute was only natural.

"And it's selling wonderfully too," she went on. "You may imagine how much obliged Vincents' are to me for sending him there!"

"Did you know he was doing it?" I asked.

“Oh, I knew he was working at something. Muriel used to be always chaffing him about it.”

“She doesn’t chaff him now, I should think.”

“No,” said Mrs Clinton, twisting a ring on her finger round and round. Suddenly the group opened, and the Prince Consort came through, leading Muriel by the hand. He marched across the room, followed by his admirers. I rose, and he stood close by his wife, and began to talk about her last novel. He said that it was wonderfully clever, and told us all to get it and read it. Everybody murmured that such was their intention, and a lady observed:

“How charming for you to be able to provide your husband with recreation, Mrs Clinton!”

“Papa doesn’t care about novels much, really,” said Muriel.

“You do, I suppose, young lady?” asked someone.

“I like papa’s book better,” the child answered, and we all laughed, Mrs Clinton leading the chorus with almost exaggerated heartiness.

And then an enthusiastic woman must needs see where Mr Thompson Clinton (the Prince Consort bid fair to be double-barrelled before long) worked. She would take no denial, and at last Mrs Clinton rose, and, in spite of her husband’s protests, led the way to the study. I had been in the room a little while before I went abroad. It was much changed now. A row of Mrs Clinton’s novels, indeed, still stood on the top of the whatnot, but her “litter” (it had been her own playful name for her manuscripts and other properties) had vanished. Large, fat, solemn books, Blue-books, books of science, of statistics, and other horrors dominated the scene.

“And to think that the great book was actually written in this very room!” mused the enthusiastic woman in awestruck accents. “I shall always be glad to have seen it.”

Again we murmured assent; and the enthusiastic woman, with an obviously sudden remembrance of Mrs Clinton, turned to her, and said:

“Of course you don’t work in the same room?”

“Oh, I do my little writing anywhere,” smiled Mrs Clinton.

“In the dining-room, generally,” added Muriel “when it’s not wanted you know.”

“Ah, well, you don’t need such complete quiet as Mr Thompson Clinton must have to think out his books, do you?” asked the enthusiastic woman, with a most amiable smile.

“There’s plenty of thought in my wife’s books,” said the Prince Consort.

“Oh yes, of that *sort*,” conceded the enthusiastic woman.

Then we went back to the drawing-room, and the worshippers gradually took their leave, till only Lady Troughton and I were left. The child Muriel looked at her watch.

“Papa’s got to go on to a party at the——,” she begun.

“There’s no hurry, my dear; no hurry at all,” interposed the Prince Consort.

“And, anyhow, I’m not going out, Muriel,” said Mrs Clinton. “I’m not asked there, you know.”

Yet Lady Troughton and I said “Good-bye.” The Prince Consort came downstairs with us, and made us renew our promises to procure his wife’s novel. “It’s really a striking book,” said he. “And, look here, Tom; just write her a line, and tell her how much you like it, will you? You’re sure to like it, you know.”

Lady Troughton stopped on the doorstep, and looked him full in the face. She said nothing; neither did he. But when they shook hands I saw her squeeze his. Then she was good

enough to offer me a lift in her carriage, and I handed her in and followed myself. We drove a quarter of a mile or so in silence, and when we had gone thus far Lady Troughton made what appeared to me to be the only remark that could possibly be made.

“Poor little goose!” said Lady Troughton.

WHAT WAS EXPECTED OF MISS CONSTANTINE

I

“DO remember what’s expected of her!” cried my sister Jane.

It was not the first time that she had uttered this appeal; I daresay she had good cause for making it. I had started with the rude masculine idea that there was nothing expected—and nothing in particular to be expected—of the girl, except that she should please herself and, when the proper time came, invite the rest of us to congratulate her on this achievement.

Jane had seen the matter very differently from the first. She was in close touch with the Lexingtons and all their female friends and relatives; she was imbued with their views and feelings, and was unremitting in her efforts to pass them on to me. At least she made me understand, even if I could not entirely share, what was felt at female headquarters; but I was not going to let her see that. I did not want to take sides in the matter, and had no intention of saying anything that Jane could quote either to Lady Lexington or to Miss Constantine herself.

“What is expected of her?” I asked carelessly, taking my pipe out of my mouth.

“Nobody exactly presses her—well, there’s nobody who has the right—but of course she feels it herself,” Jane explained. She knitted her brows and added, “It must be overwhelming.”

“Then why in the world doesn’t she do it?” I asked. Here I was, I admit, being aggravating, in the vulgar sense of that word. For Jane’s demeanour hinted at the weightiest, the most disturbing reasons, and I had in my heart very little doubt about what they were.

“Can’t you see for yourself?” she snapped back pettishly. “You were dining there last night—have you no eyes?”

Thus adjured—and really Jane’s scorn is sometimes a little hard to bear—I set myself to recover the impressions of the dinner-party. The scene came back easily enough. I remembered that Katharine Constantine and Valentine Hare had once more been sent in together, and had once more sat side by side. I remembered also that Lady Lexington had once more whispered to me, when I arrived, that the affair was “all but settled,” and had once more said nothing about it when I left. I remembered watching the pair closely.

True, I was placed, as a friend of the family, between Miss Boots, the Lexingtons’ ex-governess, and Mr Sharples, Lady Lexington’s latest curate (she always has one in tow; some of the earlier ones are now in a fair way to achieve gaiters), so that there was nothing very

likely to distract my attention from the centre of interest. But I should have watched them, anyhow. Who could be better to watch? Katharine, with her positive incisive beauty (there was nothing of the elusive about her; some may prefer a touch of it); the assurance of manner which her beauty gave, and the consciousness of her thousands enhanced; her instinctive assumption of being, of being most indisputably, Somebody; and to-night, as it seemed, a new air about her, watchful, expectant, and telling of excitement, even if it stopped short of nervousness—Katharine, with all this, had a claim to attention not seriously challenged by Miss Boots' schoolroom reminiscences, or Mr Sharples' views on Church questions of the day.

And Valentine too, the incomparable Val! Of course I watched him, as I always have, when fortunate enough to be thrown into his company, with a fascinated inquiring interest, asking myself always whether I was a believer or whether scepticism crept into my estimate. Val, however, demands, as the old writers were fond of saying, a fresh chapter to himself. He shall have it, or at least a section.

But before ending this one, for the sake of symmetry and of my reputation for stage management, also in order to justify at the earliest possible moment the importance which Jane attached to the events of the evening, let me add that just beyond me, on the other side of Miss Boots, and consequently quite remote from Miss Constantine, sat a short young man with a big round bullet of a head: it looked as if it might be fired out of a cannon at a stone wall, with excellent results from the besiegers' point of view. This was Oliver Kirby, and I have to own at once that the more than occasional glances which Miss Constantine directed, or allowed to stray, towards our end of the table were meant, as my observation suggested before the evening was out, for Kirby, and not, as I had for some happy moments supposed, for me. I am never ashamed of confessing to an amiable sort of mistake like that.

II

WITHOUT present prejudice to the question of his innermost personality, Val was at least a triumph of externals. Perhaps I should say of non-essentials—of things which a man might not have, and yet be intrinsically as good a man—but, having which, he was, for all outside and foreign purposes, a man far more efficient. Val was, as I shall indicate in a moment, a bit of a philosopher himself, so he could not with reason object to being thus philosophically considered. Birth had been his discreet friend—a friend in setting him in the inner ring, among the families which survive, peaks of aristocracy, above the flood of democracy, and are more successful than Canute was in cajoling the waves; discreet in so ordering descent that, unless a robust earl, his uncle, died prematurely, Val had time to lead the House of Commons (or anything of that sort) before suffering an involuntary ascension, which might or might not be, at the political moment, convenient. He had money, too—a competence without waiting for his uncle's shoes. He had no need to hunt a fortune: it was merely advisable for him, and natural too, to annex one under temptations not necessarily unromantic. Nobody could call Miss Constantine necessarily unromantic.

So much for birth, with all the extraordinary start it gives—a handicap of no less than fifteen years, one might be inclined to say, roughly generalising on a comparison of the chances of the “born” and of the bourgeois. Now, about brains. If you come to think of it, brains were really a concession on Val’s part; he could have achieved the Cabinet without them—given a clever Prime Minister, at least. But he had them—just as splendid shop-window brains as his birth was flawless under the most minute Heralds’ College inspection. There was, indeed, a lavishness about his mental endowment. He ventured to have more than one subject—a dangerous extravagance in a rising statesman. North Africa was his professional subject—his foreign affairs subject. But he was also a linguist, an authority on French plays, and a specialist on the Duc de Reichstadt. Also he had written a volume of literary essays; and, finally, to add a sense of solidity to his intellectual equipment, he was a philosopher. He had written, and Mr Murray had published, a short book called “The Religion of Primitive Man.” This work he evolved on quiet evenings in his flat off Berkeley Square in two months of an early winter in London. All that can be said about it is that it sounded very probable, and set forth in exceedingly eloquent language what primitive man ought to have believed, even if he did not, because it led to a most orthodox, if remote, conclusion. Whether he did or not, Val, and most other people, had neither time nor inclination to discover. That would, in fact, have needed a lot of reading. After all, Val might plead the example of some eminent metaphysicians.

Birth, brains—now comes the rarest of Val’s possessions, one that must be handled most delicately by one who would do Val justice at any cost. I mean Val’s beauty. Val himself bore it lightly, with a debonair depreciation which stopped only, but definitely, short of unconsciousness. He had hereditary claims to it; a grandmother had attracted—and by a rarer touch of distinction repelled—royalty. But Val made it all his own. A slim figure, bordering on six feet; aquiline features, a trifle ruddy in hue; hands long and slender; above all, perhaps, a mass of black hair touched with white—ever so lightly silver-clad. The greyness proclaimed itself premature, and brought contrast to bear on the youthfulness of the face beneath—a face the juvenility of which survived the problems of North Africa and his triumphs in the *à priori*. Add to this, a fine tradition of schoolboy and university athletics, and—well, a way with him of which women would talk in moments of confidence.

Speaking quite seriously, I cannot suppose that such a fascinating person has often appeared; never, surely, a more decorative? And it was “all but settled”! Why, then, those glances toward our end of the table? Because they were not for me, as I have already acknowledged. Kirby? The bullet-head, with its close-cropped wire-thick hair? Could that draw her eyes from the glories of Val’s sable-silver crown? These things are unaccountable; such really appeared to be the case.

III

AFTER dinner I used the freedom of old acquaintance to ask Lady Lexington precisely what she meant by saying that it—the alliance between Miss Constantine and Valentine

Hare—was “all but settled.” We chanced to be alone in the small drawing-room; through the curtained archway we could see the rest of the company formed into groups. Val was again by Miss Constantine’s side; Kirby was now standing facing them, and apparently doing most of the talking.

“He hasn’t asked her in so many words yet,” said Lady Lexington; “but he will soon, of course. It’s been practically settled ever since she came to stay here—after her father’s death, you know. And it’s an ideal arrangement.”

“Suppose she refuses him?”

“I sha’n’t suppose anything so ridiculous, George,” said my friend sharply. “I hope I have more sense! What girl would refuse Valentine?”

“It would be heterodox,” I admitted.

“It would be lunacy, stark lunacy. Even for her—I admit she has a right to look high—but even for her it will be a fine match. He’s got everything before him. And then look how handsome, how fascinating he is!” She laughed. “Old as I am, I wouldn’t trust myself with him, George!”

“I haven’t met Kirby here before,” I observed, perhaps rather abruptly.

“Mr Kirby? Oh, he’s quite a *protégé* of Frank’s. We met him in Switzerland last winter, and Frank and he did all sorts of unsafe things together—things you oughtn’t to do in winter.”

“He probably stops the avalanches with his head.”

“I really don’t know where he comes from or who he is, but he’s in the Colonial Office, and Frank says they think enormous things of him there. I like him, but, do you know, he’s rather hard to keep up a conversation with. He always seems to say the last thing about a subject first.”

“Very bad economy,” I agreed.

“Some people—well, I have heard people say it’s hardly polite—when they’re just thinking of something to say themselves, you know——”

“He probably can’t help it,” I pleaded.

“Katharine seems to like him, though, and I daresay she’ll get Val to give him a lift in the future.”

“You’re treating it as quite settled.”

“Well, it really is; I feel sure of that. It might happen any—— Why, look there, George! Suppose it happened to-night!”

Lady Lexington’s air of pleasurable flutter was occasioned by a movement in the next room. Miss Constantine was passing from the drawing-room into the library beyond, Val holding the door for her. Kirby had not moved, but now stood looking at her with a smile. Just as she passed through the door she turned, looked at him, and made the slightest little grimace. I read it as defiance—playful defiance. Whether I was right in that or not, it was, beyond all doubt, a confidential communication of some sort. If “it” were indeed going to be “settled,” the moment seemed an odd one for the exchange of that secret signal with Mr Kirby; for her grimace was in answer to his smile, his smile the challenge that elicited her grimace. Yes, they were in communication. What about? I got no further than an impression that it was about Valentine Hare. I remembered the glances at dinner, and mentally corrected the little

misapprehension which I have already acknowledged. But had the signals been going on all the evening? About Valentine Hare?

"I shall wait for news with great interest," I said to Lady Lexington.

She made no direct answer. Looking at her, I perceived that she was frowning; she appeared, indeed, decidedly put out.

"After all," she said reflectively, "I'm not sure I do like Mr Kirby. He's rather familiar. I wonder why Frank brings him here so much."

From which I could not help concluding that she, too, had perceived the glances toward my end of the table, Kirby's smile, and Katharine Constantine's answering grimace. From that moment, I believe, a horrible doubt, an apprehension of almost incredible danger, began to stir in her mind. This, confided to Jane, had inspired my sister's gloomily significant manner.

IV

A WEEK passed by without my getting any news from Lady Lexington. My next advices came, in fact, from Jane. One morning she burst into my room when I was reading the paper after breakfast. I had been out late the night before, and had not seen her since yesterday at lunch. Her present state of excitement was obvious.

"She's asked for time to consider!" she cried. "Imagine!"

"The dickens she has!" I exclaimed. Of course I guessed to whom she was referring.

"Ah, I thought that would startle you!" Jane remarked, with much gratification. "I was at the Lexingtons' yesterday. She is queer."

I saw that Jane wanted me to ask questions, but I always prefer having gossip volunteered to me; it seems more dignified, and one very seldom loses anything in the end. So I just nodded, and relighted my pipe. Jane smiled scornfully.

"You'll go there yourself to-day," she said. "I know you."

"I was going, anyhow—to pay my dinner call."

"Of course!" She was satisfied with the effect of her sarcasm—I think I had betrayed signs of confusion—and went on gravely: "You can imagine how upset they all are."

"But she only proposes to consider."

"Well, it's not very flattering to be *considered*, is it? 'I'll consider'—that's what one says to get out of the shop when a thing costs too much."

I had to ask one question. I did it as carelessly as possible. "Did you happen to see Miss Constantine herself?"

"Oh yes; I saw Katharine. I *saw* her, because she was in the room part of the time, and I'm not blind," said Jane crossly.

"I gather that she hardly took you into her full—her inner—confidence?"

Jane's reply was impolite in form, but answered my question substantially in the affirmative. She added: "Lady Lexington told me that she won't say a word about her reasons. You won't find it a cheerful household."

I did not. Jane was right there. I daresay my own cheerfulness was artificial and spasmodic: the atmosphere of a family crisis is apt to communicate itself to guests. It must not be understood that the Lexingtons, or Miss Boots, or Mr Sharples, who was there again, were other than perfectly kind to Katharine. On the contrary, they overdid their kindness—overdid it portentously, in my opinion. They treated her as though she were afflicted with a disease of the nerves, and must on no account be worried or thwarted. If she had said that the moon was made of green cheese they would have evaded a direct contradiction—they might just have hinted at a shade of blue. She saw this; I can quite understand that it annoyed her very much. For the rest, Lady Lexington's demeanour set the cue: "It must end all right; meanwhile we must bear it."

She and Mr Sharples and Miss Boots were all going to an afternoon drawing-room meeting, but I was asked to stay and have tea. "You'll give him a cup of tea, won't you, Katharine?" And did my ears deceive me, or did Lady Lexington breathe into my ear, as she shook hands, the words, "If you could say a word—tactfully!"? I believe she did; but Jane says I dreamed it—or made it up, more likely. If she did say it, it argued powerfully for her distress.

I had known Katharine Constantine pretty well for three or four years; I had, indeed, some claim to call myself her friend. All the same, I did not see my way to broach the engrossing subject to her, and I hardly expected her to touch on it in talk with me. My idea was to prattle, to distract her mind with gossip about other people. But she was, I think, at the end of her patience both with herself and with her friends. Her laugh was defiant as she said:

"Of course you know all about it? Jane has told you? And of course you're dying to tell me I'm a fool—as all the rest of them do! At any rate, they let me see they think it."

"I don't want to talk about it. Let's talk of anything else. I've got no right——"

"I give you the right. You're interested?"

"Oh, I can't deny that. I'm human."

She was looking very attractive to-day; her perplexity and worry seemed to soften her; an unwonted air of appeal mitigated her assurance of manner; she was pleasanter when she was not so confident of herself.

"Well, I should rather like to put the case to a sensible man—and we'll suppose you to be one for the moment." She laughed more gently as I bowed my thanks. "On the one side is what's expected of me——"

"Jane's phrase!" I thought to myself.

"What all the world thinks, what I've thought for a long while myself, what he thinks—in fact, everything. And, I tell you, it's a good deal. It is even with men, isn't it?"

"What's expected of us? Yes. Only unusual men can disregard that."

"It's worse with women—the weight of it is much heavier with women. And am I to consider myself unusual? Besides, I do like him enormously."

"I was wondering when you would touch on that point. It seems to me important."

"Enormously. Who wouldn't? Everybody must. Not for his looks or his charm only. He's a real good sort too, Mr Wynne. A woman could trust her heart with him."

"I've always believed he was a good sort—and, of course, very brilliant—a great career before him—and all that." She said nothing for a moment, and I repeated thoughtfully: "Astonishingly brilliant, to be sure, isn't he?"

She nodded at me, smiling. "Yes, that's the word—brilliant." She was looking at me very intently. "What more have you to say?" she asked.

"A good heart—a great position—a brilliant intellect—well, what more is there to say? Unless you permit me to say that ladies are sometimes—as they have a perfect right to be—hard to please."

"Yes, I'm hard to please." Her smile came again, this time thoughtful, reminiscent, amused, almost, I could fancy, tender. "I've been spoilt lately," she said. Then she stole a quick glance at me, flushing a little.

I grew more interested in her; I think I may say more worthily interested. I knew what she meant—whom she was thinking of. I passed the narrow yet significant line that divides gossip about people from an interest in one's friends or a curiosity about the human mind. Or so I liked to put it to myself.

"I must talk," she said. "Is it very strange of me to talk?"

"Talk away. I hear, or I don't hear, just as you wish. Anyhow, I don't repeat."

"That is your point, you men! Well, if it were between a great man and a nobody?"

"The great man I know—we all do. But the nobody? I don't know him."

"Don't you? I think you do; or perhaps you know neither? If the world and I meant just the opposite?"

She was standing now, very erect, proud, excited.

"It's a bad thing to mean just the opposite from what the world means," I said.

"Bad? Or only hard?" she asked. "God knows it's hard enough."

"There's the consolation of the—spoiling," I suggested. "Who spoils you, the great man or the nobody?"

She paid no visible heed to my question. Indeed she seemed for the moment unconscious of me. It was October; a small bright fire burned on the hearth. She turned to it, stretching out her hands to the warmth. She spoke, and I listened. "It would be a fine thing," she said, "to be the first to believe—the first to give evidence of belief—perhaps the finest thing to be the first and last—to be the only one to give everything one had in evidence." She faced round on me suddenly. "Everything—if one dared!"

"If you were very sure——" I began.

"No!" she interrupted. "Say, if I had courage—courage to defy, courage for a great venture!"

"Yes, it's better put like that."

"But people don't realise—indeed they don't—how much it needs."

"I think I realise it a little better." She made no comment on that, and I held out my hand. "I should like to help, you know," I said, "but I expect you've got to fight it out alone."

She pressed my hand in a very friendly way, saying, "Any single human being's sympathy helps."

That was not, perhaps, a very flattering remark, but it seemed to me pathetic, coming from the proud, the rich, the beautiful Miss Constantine. To this she was reduced in her

struggle against her mighty foe. Any ally, however humble, was precious in her fight against what was expected of her.

V

MISS CONSTANTINE'S suppression of names, and her studious use of the hypothetical mood in putting her case, forbade me saying she had told me that in her opinion Valentine Hare was a nobody and Oliver Kirby a great man, although the world might be pleased to hold just the opposite view. Still less had she told me that, in consequence of this opinion of hers, she would let the nobody go and cling to the great man; she had merely discerned and pictured that course of action as being a very splendid and a very brave thing—more splendid and brave, just in proportion to the world's lack of understanding. Whether she would do it remained exceedingly doubtful; there was that heavy weight of what was expected of her. But what she had done, by the revelation of her feelings, was to render the problem of whether she would embrace her great venture or forgo it one of much interest to me. The question of her moral courage remained open; but there was now no question as to her intellectual courage. Her brain could see and dared to see—whether or not she would dare to be guided by its eyes. Her achievement was really considerable—to look so plainly, so clearly and straight, through all externals; to pierce behind incomparable Val's shop-window accomplishments, his North Africa, his linguistic accomplishments, Duc de Reichstadt, French plays, literary essays, even his supremely plausible and persuasive "Religion of Primitive Man" (which did look so solid on a first consideration)—to go right by all these, and ask what was the real value of the stock in the recesses of the shop! And, conversely, to pick up bullet-headed Kirby from the roadside, so to speak, to find in him greatness, to be "spoilt" (she, the rich, courted beauty) by being allowed to hear the thuds of his sledge-hammer mind, to dream of giving "everything" to his plain form and face because of the mind they clothed, to think that thing the great thing to do, if she dared—yes, she herself stood revealed as a somewhat uncommon young woman.

Her appraisal of Val I was not inclined to dispute; it coincided with certain suspicions which I myself had shamefacedly entertained, but had never found courage to express openly. But was she right about Kirby? Had we here the rare "great man"? Concede to her that we had, her case was still a hard one. Kirby had no start; he was in a rut, if I may say so with unfeigned respect to the distinguished service to which he belonged—an honourable useful rut, but, so far as personal glory or the prospects of it went, a rut, all the same. Unless some rare chance came—they do come now and then, but it was ill to gamble on one here—his main function would be to do the work, to supply the knowledge secretly, perhaps to shape a policy some day in the future; but *tulit alter honores*. Not to him would the public raise their cheers, and posterity a statue. Her worship of him must be, in all likelihood, solitary, despised, and without reward. Would it be appreciated as it ought to be by her hero himself? But here, perhaps, I could not get thoroughly into the skin of the devotee; the god is not expected to be overwhelmed by his altars and his sacrifices—his divinityship is merely satisfied.

“Mr Hare is behaving splendidly,” Jane reported to me. She had a constant—apparently a daily—report of him from Lady Lexington, his unremitting champion. Indeed the women were all on his side, and it was surprising how many of them seemed to know his position; I cannot help thinking that Val, in his turn, had succumbed to the temptations of sympathy. They spoke of him as of a man patient under wrong, amiable and forgiving through it all, puzzled, bewildered, inevitably hurt, yet with his love unimpaired and his forgiveness ready.

“Do you suppose,” I asked Jane, “that he’s got any theory why she hesitates?”

“Theory! Who wants a theory? We all know why.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” My “exclusive information” seemed a good deal cheapened. “Has she told you, may I ask?”

“Not she; but she goes every afternoon, just after lunch, to Mrs Something Simpson’s—that’s the man’s aunt. She lives in a flat in Westminster, and he goes from his office to lunch at his aunt’s every day, now.”

While I had been musing, Jane had been getting at the facts.

“Val knows that?”

“Of course Lady Lexington told him. Let’s have fair play, anyhow!” said Jane rather hotly.

“What does he say about it?”

“He’s perfectly kind and sweet; but he can’t, of course, quite conceal that he’s”—Jane paused, seeking a word. She flung her hands out in an expressive gesture, and let me have it—“Stupefied!” A moment later she added, “So are we all, if it comes to that.”

“If one dared!” Katharine Constantine’s words came back. They were all stupefied at the idea. Would she dare to pile stupefaction on stupefaction by confronting them with the fact?

In the course of the next few days the Powers That Be in the land took a hand—doubtless an entirely unconscious one—in the game. A peer died; his son, going up to the House of Lords, vacated the post of Under-Secretary for the Colonies. Amid a chorus of applause and of flattering prophecies Valentine Hare was appointed in his place. I met, at one of my clubs, a young friend who had recently entered the Colonial Office, and he told me that the new member of Administration’s secretary would in all probability be Oliver Kirby. “And it’ll give him a bit of a chance to show what’s he’s made of,” said my young friend, with the kindly patronage of youth.

But, under present circumstances, it might create a slight awkwardness, say, about lunch-time, mightn’t it? I doubted whether that appointment would be made.

VI

NOW I come to my share in this history. I confess that I approach it with doubt and trembling; but it has to be told here. It will never be told anywhere else—certainly not at the Lexingtons’, nor above all, for my peace’ sake, to my sister Jane.

The following day was a Sunday, and, according to a not infrequent practice of mine, I took a walk in Hyde Park in the morning—in the early hours before the crowd turned out. The place was almost deserted, for the weather was raw and chilly; but there, by some supernatural interposition as I am convinced, whether benign or malignant only the passage of years can show, in a chair at the corner of the Row sat Oliver Kirby. I stopped before him and said “Hallo!”

I had forgotten how entirely formal our previous acquaintance had been, perhaps because I had been thinking about him so much.

He greeted me cordially, indeed gladly, as I fancied, and, when I objected to sitting in the chilly air, he proposed to share my walk. I mentioned the secretaryship, remarking that I understood it was a good thing for a man to get. He shrugged his shoulders, then turned to me, and said, with a sudden twinkle lighting up his eyes, “One might be able to keep our friend straight, perhaps.”

“You think he needs it?”

“It’s only a matter of time for that man to come a cropper. The first big affair he gets to handle, look out! I’m not prejudiced. He’s a very good fellow, and I like him—besides being amused at him. But what I say is true.” He spoke with an uncanny certainty.

“What makes you say it?”

Kirby took my arm. “The man is constitutionally incapable of thinking in the right order. It’s always the same with him, I don’t care whether it’s an article about North Africa or that book of his about primitive man. He always—not occasionally, but always—starts with his conclusion and works backwards to the premises. North Africa ought to be that shape—it is! Primitive man ought to have thought that—he did! You see? The result is that the facts have to adapt themselves to these conclusions of his. Now that habit of mind, Wynne, makes a man who has to do with public affairs a dangerous and pernicious fool. He oughtn’t to be allowed about. What, I should like to know, does he think the Almighty made facts for! Not to be looked at, evidently!”

I was much refreshed by this lively indignation of the intellect. But, “You’re quite sure you’re not prejudiced?” said I.

“I said it all in a review of his book before I ever met him, or came into——”

“Conflict with him?” I ventured to interpose.

He looked at me gravely. I thought he was going to tell me to mind my own business. I have so little that I never welcome that injunction. Then he smiled.

“I forgot that I’d met you at the Lexingtons’,” he said.

“I don’t think you need have told me that you’d forgotten.”

“Well, I had,” said he, staring a little.

“But you needn’t have said so—needn’t have put it that way.”

“Oh!” He seemed to be considering quite a new point of view.

“Not that I’m offended. I only point it out for your good. You expect people to be too much like you. The rest of us have feelings——”

“I’ve feelings, Wynne,” he interrupted quickly.

“Fancies——”

“Ah, well—perhaps those too, sometimes.”

“Fears——”

He squeezed my arm. “You’ve struck me the right morning,” he said.

“Think what you’re asking of—the person we mean.”

“She’s to give me her answer after lunch to-day.”

“I believe it will be ‘No’—unless you can do something.”

He looked at me searchingly, “What’s in your mind?” he asked. “Out with it! This is a big thing to me, you know.”

“It’s a big thing to her. I know it is. Yes, she has said something to me. But I think she’ll say ‘No,’ unless—well, unless you treat her as you want Val Hare to treat North Africa and primitive man. Apply your own rules, my friend. Reason in the right order!”

He smiled grimly. “Develop that a little,” he requested, or, rather, ordered.

“It’s not your feelings, or your traditions, or your surroundings, that count now. And it’s not what you think she ought to feel, nor what she ought as a fact to feel, nor even what’s she’s telling herself she ought to be brave enough and strong enough to feel. It’s what she must feel, has been bred to feel, and in the end does feel. What she does feel will beat you unless you find a way out.”

“What does she feel?”

“That it’s failure, and that all the other girls will say so—failure in the one great opportunity of her life, in the one great thing that’s expected of her; that it’s final; that she must live all her life a failure among those who looked to her for a great success. And the others will make successes! Would it be a small thing for a man? What is it to a girl?”

“A failure, to marry me? You mean she feels that?”

“Facts, please! Again facts! Not what you think you are, or are sure you are, or are convinced you could be; just what you are—Mr Kirby of the Colonial Office, lately promoted—it is promotion, isn’t it?—to be secretary to——”

“Stop! I just want to run over all that,” he said.

At, and from, this point I limit my liability. I had managed to point out—it really was not easy to set up to tell him things—where I thought he was wrong. Somehow, amid my trepidation, I was aware of a pleasure in talking to a splendidly open and candid mind. He was surprised that he had been wrong—that touch of a somewhat attractive arrogance there was about him—but the mere suspicion of being wrong made him attentive to the uttermost. Tell him he hadn’t observed his facts, and he wouldn’t, he couldn’t, rest till he had substantiated, or you had withdrawn, the imputation. But, as I say, to suggest the mistake was all I did. I had no precise remedy ready; I believe I had only a hazy idea of what might be done by a more sympathetic demeanour, a more ample acknowledgment of Miss Constantine’s sacrifice—a notion that she might do the big thing if he made her think it the enormous thing; aren’t even girls like that sometimes? The sower of the seed is entitled to some credit for the crop; after all, though, the ground does more. I take none too much credit for my hint, nor desire to take too much responsibility.

He caught me by the arm and pulled me down on to a bench—a free seat just by the east end of the Serpentine.

“Yes, I see,” he said. “I’ve been an ass. Just since you spoke, it’s all come before me—in a sort of way it grew up in my mind. I know how she feels now—both ways. I only knew how

she felt about my end of the thing before. I was antagonistic to the other thing. I couldn't see Val as a sort of Westminster Abbey for the living—that's the truth. Never be antagonistic to facts—you've taught me that lesson once more, Wynne." He broke into a sudden amused smile. "I say, if your meddling is generally as useful as it has been to me, I don't see why you shouldn't go on meddling, old chap."

I let that pass, though I should have preferred some such word as "interpose" or "intervene," or "act as an intermediary." I still consider that I had been in some sense invited—well, at any rate, tempted—to—well, as I have suggested, intervene.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Settle it," replied Mr Oliver Kirby, rising from the bench.

He might have been a little more communicative. It is possible to suggest that. As a matter of fact, he was the best part of the way to Hyde Park Corner before I realised that I was sitting alone on the bench.

VII

HAD Kirby been at my elbow, his bullet head almost audibly pricing my actions, relentlessly assessing them, even while he admitted that they had done him good, I imagine that I should not have gone. His epithet rankled. I a meddler! I can only say that it is a fortunate circumstance that he never knew Jane.

However, I did call on Lady Lexington that afternoon, and found just a snug family party—that was what my hostess called it. In fact, besides myself, the only outsider was Valentine Hare; and could he be called an outsider? His precise appellation hung in suspense. Talk was intimate and bright.

In view of Val's appointment, it was natural that it should turn on the Colonies. Val himself hinted that the Foreign Office would have given more scope for his specialty (he meant North Africa, not the "Religion of Primitive Man"); but Miss Constantine was hot on the Colonies, going so far, indeed, as to get out an atlas and discuss thousands of square miles, and wheat belts, and things like that. Once or twice I fancied that the new Under-Secretary would have been glad not to be quite so new; a few days of coaching from, say, Kirby (Had she had—? At lunch? No; it was hardly thinkable; he couldn't have taken that moment to instruct her) would have equipped him better for her excellently informed conversation. As for poor Lexington, he broke down entirely when she got out to Assiniboia and Saskatchewan, and said frankly that in his opinion there was more of Canada than any man could be expected to know about. That did not seem to be at all Miss Constantine's view. She was stopped only by the ocean. I am not sure that a vaulting ambition did not confederate Japan.

Val was delighted. Miss Constantine was so cordial, so interested, so congratulatory on his appointment. There was, as it seemed to me, a serenity in her manner which had recently been lacking—a return of her old assurance, softened still, but not now by the air of appeal; it was rather by an extreme friendliness. Val must have felt the friendliness too, I think, for he

expanded wonderfully, discoursing with marvellous fecundity, and with a knowledge as extensive as it was indefinite, of the British possessions beyond the seas. All said and done, he knew a lot more than I did; but, then, I was not his competitor.

So we got on splendidly together. Lady Lexington beamed, her lord warmed himself happily, Miss Constantine was graciousness itself, Val basked and blossomed—and I wondered what the deuce had happened at Mrs Something Simpson's flat in Westminster. (Her real name was Whitaker Simpson, and I believe Jane knew it quite well.)

Yes, she was monstrously friendly—distrust that in your mistress whether wooed or won. She would do everything for Val that afternoon, except be left alone with him. The Lexingtons went—you can hardly stop people going in their own house; Miss Boots and Mr Sharpies, who were both there, went—to church. I tried to go, but she wouldn't let me. Her refusal was quite obvious: Val—he was impeccable in manners—saw it. After precisely the right interval he rose and took his leave. I had the atlas on my knees then (we had got back to Assiniboia), and I studied it hard; but, honestly, I couldn't help hearing. The tones of her voice, at least, hinted at no desire for privacy.

“Once more a thousand congratulations—a thousand hopes for your success,” she said, giving him her hand, as I suppose—my eyes were on the atlas.

“After that, I shall feel I'm working for you,” he replied gallantly. No doubt his very fine eyes pointed the remark.

“Shall you?” she said, and laughed a little. “Oh, you'll—I'll write you a note quite soon—to-morrow or Tuesday. I won't forget. And—good-bye!”

“To-morrow or Tuesday? That's certain?” His voice had an eagerness in it now.

“Yes, certain. I won't forget. And—good-bye!”

“Good-bye!” he said, and I heard the door open.

“A thousand hopes!” she said again.

I suppose he made some response, but in words he made none. The door closed behind him.

I put the atlas on the sofa by me, got up, and went to her.

“I suppose I may go now, too?” I said.

“How clever you're growing, Mr Wynne! But just let him get out of the house. We mustn't give it away.”

A moment or two we stood in silence. Then she said: “You understand things. You shall have a note too—and a thousand hopes. And—good-bye!”

Not a suspicion of the meaning of this afternoon's scene crossed my mind, which fact proved me, I daresay, to be very stupid. But Val was hardly likely to see more clearly, and I can't altogether justify the play she made with the atlas and Assiniboia. As an exercise in irony, however, it had its point.

VIII

I DO not know what was in Val's note: more of good-bye, and more than a thousand hopes, I imagine. Is it fanciful to mark that she had always said "hope" and never "confidence"? Mine bade me be at a certain corner of a certain street at eleven-thirty. "Where you will find me. Say nothing about it." It was a little hard to say nothing whatever to Jane.

I went and met them at the corner—Mrs Something Simpson, Kirby, and Miss Constantine. Thence we repaired to a registry office, and they (I do not include Mrs Simpson) were married. They were to sail from Liverpool that afternoon, and we went straight from the office to Euston. I think it was only when the question of luggage arose that I gasped out, "Where are you going?"

"To Canada," said Kirby briskly.

"For your trip?"

"For good and all," he answered. "I've got leave—and sent in my resignation."

"And I've sent in my resignation too," she said. "Mr Wynne, try to think of me as only half a coward."

"I—I don't understand," I stammered.

"But it's your own doing," he said. "Over there she won't be a failure all her life!"

"Not because I've married him, at any rate," Katharine said, looking very happy.

"I told you I should settle it—and so I did," Kirby added. "And I'm grateful to you. I'm always grateful to a fellow who makes me understand."

"Good heavens!" I cried. "You're not making me responsible?"

"For all that follows!" she answered, with a merry laugh. "Yes!"

That's all very well, but suppose he gets to the top of the tree, as the fellow will, and issues a Declaration of Independence? At least he'll be Premier, and come over to a conference some day. Val will be Secretary for the Colonies, probably (unless he has come that cropper). There's a situation for you! Well, I shall just leave town. I daresay I sha'n't be missed.

Lady Lexington carried it off well. She said that, from a strain of romance she had observed in the girl, the marriage was just what was to be expected of Katharine Constantine.

SLIM-FINGERED JIM

I

“WHAT did he get? “I asked. I had been working in my own room all the morning and had not seen the papers—they arrived from London about half-past eleven.

“Seven years’ penal servitude,” said our host the Major with grim satisfaction.

“Stiff!” I commented.

“Not a bit too much,” asserted the Major, helping himself to game pie again—he is a good luncher. “He’s a thoroughly bad lot—a professional thief, and a deuced clever one. It’s his first conviction, but it ought to have been his tenth, I should say.”

“He was certainly in that big American bond robbery,” said Crookes, “though he got off that time. Oxford man, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. In fact, I believe I was up one term with him,” said Millington. “I must have seen him, I think, but I can’t remember him.”

“Dear, dear!” our hostess observed, shocked apparently at this close proximity to the criminal classes.

“Rather good what the chap said when he’d been sentenced,” drawled Charlie Pryce. “See it? Well, he bowed to the judge, and then he bowed to the jury, and smiled, and shrugged his shoulders, and said: ‘The risks of the profession, gentlemen! *Au revoir!*’ Jolly good cheek!” Charlie’s round red face—he is very well nourished, as they say at inquests—beamed almost sympathetically.

“I suppose he owes his nickname to his professional dexterity?” said I.

“Suppose so,” agreed Charlie.

“No,” said Mrs Pryce, who was at the other end of the table. “His name is James——”

“Yes, James Painter Walsh,” interposed the Major, accurate always.

“But he was called ‘Slim-Fingered’ because he had beautiful hands with very slender tapering fingers.”

“Hallo, Minnie!” cried Pryce. “How do you know that?”

“He told me himself,” she answered with a smile and the hint of a blush. “I crossed from America with him the time he was arrested at Queenstown for the bond robbery, and—well, we got acquainted. Of course, nobody knew who he was.”

A torrent of questions overwhelmed Mrs Pryce. She had achieved fame—she had known the hero of the last great jewel robbery. She spoke of him from first-hand knowledge. The unrivalled attraction of crime—crime in the grand manner—fascinates us all. But she wouldn’t say much.

“He was just an acquaintance for the voyage,” she told us; “though, of course, it was rather a shock when he was arrested at Queenstown.”

“Oh, what a surprise!” exclaimed Charlie Pryce jovially.

“A surprise?” She seemed to me to start ever so little. “Oh yes, of course—terrible!” she went on the next instant.

“Was he nice?” asked our hostess.

“Yes, he was very—very attractive,” she answered. And somehow I fancy her glance rested for a moment on her husband—indeed on a particular portion of him. Charlie was just lighting the after-lunch cigarette. Charlie’s hands—he is a very good fellow and well off—are decidedly red and particularly podgy.

II

I LIKED Mrs Pryce very much. She was pretty, dainty, bright, and—well, bachelors are so apt to think that pretty married women have a dull time at home that I will lay no stress on my own private opinion as to her domestic lot. Enough that I was always glad to talk with her, and that it was pleasant to walk with her in the Major's quiet old garden on a fine night when the wind stirred the boughs and the moon shone. Inside they had taken to pool—and whisky-and-soda. I play the former badly, and take the latter when the evening is more advanced.

"Beautiful moon!" I observed, enjoying Nature, my company, and my cigar.

She was silent a moment. Then she said: "It shone just like that the third night out from New York."

"Your last trip?" She crosses pretty often, as Charlie has business connections on the other side.

"No. The one when—the one we were talking about at lunch."

"Ah! When our friend of the slim fingers——?"

"Yes."

"Let's sit down," I suggested. We were just passing a garden seat.

She smiled at me half sadly, half mockingly. She saw through me; she knew I wanted to hear more about it. By some sort of sympathy I knew that she wanted to talk about it. It was queer, too, to consider through what window that moon was shining on Slim-Fingered Jim. Did it—and his other surroundings—remind him of the broad Atlantic? "The risks of the profession, gentlemen!"

"Yes, he had beautiful hands," she murmured.

"What'll they look like when——?"

She caught my hand sharply in hers. "Hush, hush!" she whispered. I felt ashamed of myself, but of course I couldn't have known that—well, that she'd feel it like that.

"I was quite a girl," she went on presently. "Yes, it's six years ago—and the first two days of that voyage were like days in heaven. You know what it can be when it's fine? You seem never to have known what space was before—and bigness—and blueness. Do you know what I mean?"

"It's very exhilarating."

"Oh, don't be silly! Of course nobody was ill—anyhow only the people who meant to be before they started—and we had an awfully jolly table."

"Mr Walsh one of your party?"

"Yes, he was at our table. I—sat next to him."

I turned half round and looked at her. The moon was strong, I could see her eyes.

"Look here, do you want to go on with this story?" I asked.

"Yes, I think so—I've never told it before. But perhaps I'll skip a little of it."

"At the beginning?"

"Yes. Will you imagine the sun shining by day and the moon by night?"

"Yes. And a sparkling sea? And nothing to do?"

“Yes. And a young girl—quite a young girl.”

“Yes. And beautiful hands—and the rest to match?”

“Yes—including a voice.”

“Yes. Let’s skip to the second evening, shall we, Mrs Pryce?”

“Will you be a little more imaginative and skip to the third afternoon?”

“The third afternoon be it. What’s happening when we begin the story again?”

“I’m in my mother’s state-room, getting a tremendous lecture. I’m not sure you ought to hear it.”

“Oh, I know all about it. You meant no harm, probably, but really it was time you learnt to be more careful. Attractive girls couldn’t be too careful. Men were so ready to think this and that—and say this and that—and then go and boast about it in the smoking-room. And what did you or your mother know about him? Nothing! Absolutely nothing! No doubt he was a gentleman, and very pleasant and amusing—but really you knew nothing. He was probably an adventurer. And anyhow—well, really it wasn’t quite—not *quite*—ladylike to—to——”

“Yes, that’s not a bad imagination,” interrupted Mrs Pryce. “Add mamma’s pince-nez, and it’s quite life-like.”

“And the result?”

“Great constraint in my manner towards Mr Walsh at dinner that evening.”

“And—further result—a melancholy walk by you on the deck after dinner—a walk at first solitary—subsequently shared by a puzzled and humble Mr Walsh?”

“I begin to think you have more experience than you always admit,” said Mrs Pryce. “But I think you’ll go wrong if you try to guess any more.”

“Then I won’t guess any more. Take up the thread. It’s now the third night out, and the moon is shining like that.” I pointed to the orb which was illuminating the Major’s garden—among other places where sundry of that liner’s former passengers might chance to be.

“I’ll go on,” she said, “and don’t interrupt me for a little while. There was a very light wind—you hardly felt it aft—and I was standing looking over the sea. He came up to me and began to talk about some trifle—I forget what it was, but it doesn’t matter. But I was afraid mamma would come up and look for me, so I said I was going down to read. But I waited for just a minute more—I suppose I expected him to ask me not to go. He said nothing, but took one big pull at his cigar, gave one big big puff of smoke out of his mouth and nose, and then threw the cigar overboard. ‘Good-night, Mr Walsh,’ I said. He looked at me—it was as light as it is now—and said: ‘Will you give me one minute, Miss Cochrane?’ ‘Well, only a minute,’ I said, smiling. I was really afraid about mamma. ‘I want to tell you something,’ he said. I wonder if I blushed—and whether he could see if I did. I expect I did, and that he saw, because he went on very quickly: ‘Something that doesn’t matter much to you, but matters a bit to me.’ ‘Go on,’ I said. I was quite calm again now, because—well, because I saw he was going to say something serious—I mean, not of the sort I—I had thought he might be going to say before.”

“You saw he wasn’t making love to you, you mean?”

“I told you not to interrupt—but I daresay that’s putting it as nearly right as you can understand.”

I murmured thanks for this rather contemptuous forgiveness.

“Then he told me,” Mrs Pryce went on, “just simply told me—and said he was going to make some excuse for asking the purser to put him at another table.”

“But you can’t leave it like that!” I expostulated. “You’re throwing away all your dramatic effect. What did he say? His words, his words, Mrs Pryce!”

“He didn’t use any—not in the sense you mean. He just told me. He didn’t even put me on my honour not to tell anybody else. He said he didn’t care a hang about anybody else on board, but that he wanted to spare me any possible shock, and that he’d been concerned in the bond robbery and would probably be arrested at Queenstown, but that he expected to get off this time. I think I repeated ‘This time!’ because I remember he said then that he was a thief by profession, and couldn’t expect good luck every time. That was like what he said yesterday, wasn’t it?”

“And what did you say? It must have been a bad quarter of an hour for you. Because you’d liked him a good deal, hadn’t you?”

“Yes, a lot. But”—she turned to me, smiling now—“it wasn’t bad at all, really.”

She gave a little laugh—a laugh with pleasant reminiscence in it.

“You were a cool hand for your age,” I ventured to observe.

“It was the way he did it,” she said. “Somehow I felt he was paying me a very high compliment.”

“Oh, I agree!” I laughed.

“And one I was glad to have. It must have been the way he did it. There are some people who abolish one’s moral scruples, aren’t there? He was very quiet generally, but he had a way of just moving those hands of his with a little waving gesture. And when he said that of course it wasn’t right——”

“Oh, he admitted that?”

“Yes, but that little wave of those hands seemed to wave right and wrong right out of the way.”

“Overboard?”

“Absolutely overboard. Then he looked at me a moment and said: ‘That’s all I had to say. Thanks for listening to me, Miss Cochrane. Good-night.’ ”

“And what did you say?”

She rested her chin in her hand, looking sideways at me.

“I said: ‘Good-night, Mr Walsh. We meet at breakfast to-morrow as usual?’ ”

“The deuce you did!”

“‘At our table?’ he asked. And I said ‘Yes.’ He gave a little laugh, and so did I, and I held out my hand. He shook hands and left me, and I went down and read with mamma.”

“Nothing else said?”

“He said nothing else. I believe I whispered: ‘It’ll be rather fun—because you *will* get off!’ But I know I didn’t say anything more than that.”

There was a pause. I lit another cigarette, snatching a mean advantage by stealing a look at my friend in the light of the match. She was not looking at me, but straight ahead of her: there was a pensive smile on her lips.

“And what happened afterwards?” I asked.

“I suppose you’ll be shocked?”

“Being shocked is an emotion hostile to art—I never have it.”

“Well, then, I never had such fun. Of course we were careful, because of mamma (mamma’s idea became funny too!), and because we knew what was going to happen. But we managed to get no end of talks in quiet places—the library’s very good in fine weather—and he told me all sorts of wonderful things. It was like reading the very best detective stories, only ever so much better—so much more vivid, you know.”

“More personal interest?”

“A thousand times! And it was fun, too, at meals, and when there was a concert, and so on. I used to find him looking at me, with his eyes all full of laughter; and I looked back at him, enjoying the secret and the way he was making fools of all the rest. We were just like two children with some game that the grown-up people know nothing about.”

“He had waved your morality overboard with a vengeance,” said I.

“It was the jolliest time I ever had in my life,” said Mrs Pryce. “He recited beautifully at the concert—‘The Ballad of Beau Brocade.’ ”

“Well done him!” I said approvingly. I began rather to like the fellow myself.

“And at the end he made a little speech, thanking the captain, and saying how sorry we should all be when the voyage ended. ‘And nobody sorrier than myself,’ he said, with one of his looks at me—such a twinkling look—and a tiny wave of those hands.”

“He must have been the most popular man on board?”

“Well, the men thought him rather standoffish; he snubbed some of them, I think. Well, you do meet some queer men on a liner, don’t you? And Mr Walsh said that out of business hours he claimed to choose his acquaintance. But the women all worshipped him—not that he ran after them, but his manner was always just right to them.”

“It’s really a pity his manner of life was so—well, so unconventional.”

“Yes, wasn’t it?” she said, welcoming my sympathy. “Because, of course, it meant that our acquaintance had to end with the voyage.”

I had, perhaps, been thinking of somewhat broader considerations, but I refrained from advancing them. In fact, we had somehow got away from ordinary standards and restraints; the memory of Slim-Fingered Jim had waved them away. We fell into silence for a moment or two, until I asked—

“And the manner of the end? Tell me that.”

“I didn’t believe in the end. I had got not to believe in it at all. I thought we might go on sailing for ever over that beautiful sea and having the most splendid fun. He could make you feel that everything was just splendid fun—that there was nothing else in the world. He made me feel that—I suppose he knew he could, or he’d never have told me his secret at all. But, of course, the end had to come.” She sighed and gave a little shiver—not that it was cold in the Major’s garden. Then she turned to me again. “I’ve told you a good deal,” she said, “and you’re not a chicken, are you?”

I ruefully admitted that I was no chicken.

“Then I needn’t say anything more about myself,” said she.

“And what about him?”

“I think he liked me tremendously; but he wasn’t in love.”

“Not at all?”

“I don’t think so. He was just the most perfect of good comrades to me—and in that way the finest gentleman I’ve ever met. Because, you know, I can see now that I gave him opportunities of being something else. Well, I was only nineteen, and——”

“Quite so. The hands, of course!”

“It seems possible to be good and bad in—in compartments, doesn’t it? That’s rather curious!”

“If true!”

“Oh, you know it’s true!”

“Perhaps I do; but I never contradict the preacher.”

She laughed again, but now a trifle fretfully.

“In his own business I believe he’s thoroughly bad.”

“Not even the chivalrous highwayman?”

“No. Just bad—bad—bad.”

“Ah, well, business is one thing and charity another, as somebody once observed. And now for the end, please—because ends do come, even though we don’t believe in them.”

“Yes, they do; and this one came,” she said. But for an instant or two she did not begin to tell me about it; and in the silence I heard Charlie Pryce assert loudly that he had made a good shot.

III

“**A**T lunch on Friday,” Mrs Pryce resumed, “the steward told us that we were expected to reach Queenstown about one o’clock in the morning, and we all began discussing whether we should sit up. The old travellers scoffed at the idea, and mamma, though she wasn’t an old traveller, said she would never think of being so silly. But I and the two other girls at the table—they were Americans on their first trip over—said that we certainly should, and one of them asked Mr Walsh if he meant to. ‘I must,’ he said, smiling. ‘In fact, I expect to land there—that is, if I get the telegram I expect to get. Of course he glanced at me as he spoke, so that I knew what he meant, though the others hadn’t the least idea. What would they have said?’”

“I suppose they did say they were very sorry he wasn’t going on to Liverpool?”

“Yes, and even mamma said how sorry we were to part from him. Fancy mamma saying that! It was fun! Only after lunch she was terribly aggravating; she kept me down in the writing-room all the afternoon, writing letters for her to all sorts of stupid people in America and at home, saying we’d arrived safely. Of course we’d arrived safely! But if mamma so much as crosses the Channel without sinking, she writes to all her friends as if she’d come back from the North Pole. Some people are like that, aren’t they?”

“Yes; and they’re generally considered attentive. You may get a great reputation for good manners by writing unnecessary letters.”

“Yes. So I didn’t see him again till dinner. Nothing much happened then—at least I don’t remember much. The end had begun, I think, and I wasn’t feeling so jolly as I had been all the way across. But everybody else was in high spirits, and he was the gayest of all of us. I expect he saw that I was rather blue, and he followed me on deck soon after dinner, and there we had our last little talk. He told me that he thought everything would be done quite quietly; he meant to tell the purser where to find him in case of inquiry, and to be ready to go ashore at once. He was sure they’d take him ashore; but if by chance they didn’t, he would stay in his cabin, so that, anyhow, this was ‘Good-bye.’ So I said ‘Good-bye’ and wished him good luck. ‘Are you going to sit up?’ he said. I looked at him for a moment and then said ‘No.’ He smiled in an apologetic sort of way and gave that little wave of his hands. ‘It’s foolish of me to care, I suppose, but—thank you for that.’ I was a little surprised, because I really hadn’t thought he would mind me seeing; but I was pleased too. He held out both his hands, and I took them and pressed them. Then I opened my hands and looked at his as they lay there. He was smiling at me with his lips and his eyes. ‘Slim-Fingered Jim!’ he whispered. ‘Don’t quite forget him, little friend.’ ‘I suppose I shall never see you again?’ I said. ‘Better not,’ he told me. ‘But let’s remember this voyage. We’ll put a little fence round it, won’t we? and keep all the rest of life out, and just let this stand by itself—on its own merits. Shall we, dear little friend?’ ”

Mrs Pryce stayed her narrative for a moment. But my curiosity was merciless.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I think I murmured something like ‘Oh, my dear, my dear!’ and then I let go of his hands and turned away to the sea; and when I looked round again, he was gone.”

“And that was the end?”

“No. The end was lying in the berth above mamma, who was sound asleep, and—well, snoring rather—lying there and feeling the ship slowing down and then stopping, and hearing the mail-boat come alongside, and all the noise and the shouting and the bustle. I knew I could hear nothing—there would be nothing to hear—but I couldn’t help listening. I listened very hard all the time, but of course I heard nothing; and at last—after hours and hours, as it seemed—we began to move again. That was the real end. I knew it had happened then; and so it had. He wasn’t at breakfast. But luckily nobody on the ship—none of the passengers, I mean—found out about it till we got to Liverpool; and as mamma and I weren’t going on to London, it didn’t matter.”

“And he got off?”

“Yes, he got off—that time.”

“I’m afraid this great man had one foible,” I observed. “He was proud of those hands! Well, Cæsar didn’t like getting bald, so I learnt at school.”

“I always remember them as they lay in mine,” she said. “His hands and his eyes—that’s what I remember.”

“Ever seen him again?”

“Of course not.” She sat where she was for a moment longer, then rose. “Shall we go in?”

“I think we may as well,” said I.

So we went into the billiard-room. They were still playing pool. I made for the whisky-and-soda and mixed myself a tumbler and drank thereof. When I set the tumbler down and

turned round to the table Charlie Pryce was engaged in making a shot of critical importance. Everybody was looking at him. His wife was standing at the end of the table and looking at him too. She seemed as much interested in the shot as any of them. But was she? For before he played she raised her eyes and looked across at me with a queer little smile. I couldn't help returning it. I knew what she was thinking. The billiard-table is a high trial.

When Charlie had brought off his shot—which he did triumphantly—his wife came and kissed him. This pleased him very much. He did not recognise the Kiss Penitential, which is, however, a well-ascertained variety.

I'm afraid that the magnetic current of immorality which seemed to emanate from Mr James Painter Walsh passed through the sympathetic medium of Mrs Pryce's memory and infected, in some small degree, my more hardened intellect; for even now I can't help hoping that Slim-Fingered Jim is being put to some light form of labour. But it's a difficult business! Even the laundry—a most coveted department, as I am given to understand—would spoil them hopelessly.

THE GREY FROCK

THE rights and wrongs of the matter are perhaps a little obscure, and it is possible to take his side as well as hers. Or perhaps there is really no question of sides at all—no need to condemn anybody; only another instance of the difficulty people have in understanding one another's point of view. But here, with a few lines added by way of introduction, are the facts as related in her obviously candid and sincere narrative.

Miss Winifred Petheram's father had an income from landed estate of about five thousand a year, and spent, say, six or thereabouts; his manor house was old and beautiful, the gardens delightful, the stables handsome and handsomely maintained, the housekeeping liberal, hospitable, almost lavish. Mr Petheram had three sons and four daughters; but the sons were still young, and not the cause of any great expense. Mrs Petheram was a quiet body, the two girls in the schoolroom were no serious matter; in fact, apart from the horses, Mildred and Winifred were, in a pecuniary point of view, the most serious burden on the family purse. For both were pretty girls, gay and fond of society, given to paying frequent visits in town and country, and in consequence needing many frocks and a considerable supply of downright hard cash. But everybody was very comfortable; only it was understood that at a period generally referred to as "some day" there would be very little for anybody except the eldest son. "Some day," meant, of course, when Mr Petheram reluctantly died, and thereby brought his family into less favourable worldly circumstances.

From this brief summary of the family's position the duty of Mildred and Winifred (and, in due course of time, of the two girls in the schoolroom also) stands forth salient and unmistakable. Mildred performed it promptly at the age of nineteen years. He was the second son of a baronet, and his elder brother was sickly and unmarried; but, like a wise young man, he took no chances, went on the Stock Exchange, and became exceedingly well-to-do in an exceedingly brief space of time—something, in fact, "came off" in South Africa, and when

that happens ordinary limits of time and probability are suspended. So with Mildred all was very well; and it was odds that one of the boys would be provided for by his brother-in-law. Winifred had just as good chances—nay, better; for her sensitive face and wondering eyes had an attraction that Mildred's self-possessed good looks could not exert. But Winifred shilly-shallied (it was her father's confidential after-dinner word) till she was twenty-one, then refused Sir Barton Amesbury (in itself a step of doubtful sanity, as was generally observed), and engaged herself to Harold Jackson, who made two hundred a year and had no prospects except the doubtful one of maintaining his income at that level—unless, that is, he turned out a genius, when it was even betting whether a mansion or the workhouse awaited him; for that depends on the variety of genius. Having taken this amazing course, Winifred was resolute and radiantly happy; her relatives, after the necessary amount of argument, shrugged their shoulders—the very inadequate *ultima ratio* to which a softening civilisation seems to have reduced relatives in such cases.

"I can manage two hundred a year for her while I live," said Mr Petheram, wiping his brow and then dusting his boots; he was just back from his ride. "After that——"

"The insurance, my dear?" Mrs Petheram suggested. But her husband shook his head; that little discrepancy above noted, between five and six thousand a year, had before this caused the insurance to be a very badly broken reed.

Harold Jackson—for in him the explanation of Winifred's action must be sought—was tall, good-looking, ready of speech, and decidedly agreeable. There was no aggressiveness about him, and his quiet manners repelled any suspicion of bumptiousness. But it cannot be denied that to him Winifred's action did not seem extraordinary; he himself accounted for this by saying that she, like himself, was an Idealist, the boys by saying that he was "stuck-up," Mr Petheram by a fretful exclamation that in all worldly matters he was as blind as a new-born puppy. Whatever the truth of these respective theories, he was as convinced that Winifred had chosen for her own happiness as that she had given him his. And in this she most fully agreed. Of course, then, all the shrugging of shoulders in the universe could not affect the radiant contentment of the lovers, nor could it avert the swift passage of months which soon brought the wedding-day in sight, and made preparations for it urgent and indispensable.

Married couples, even though they have only a precarious four hundred a year, must live somewhere—no idealism is independent of a roof; on the contrary, it centres round the home, so Harold said, and the word "home" seemed already sacred to Winifred as her glance answered his. It was the happiest day of her life when she put on her dainty new costume of delicate grey, took her parasol and gloves, matched to a shade with her gown, and mounted into the smart dog-cart which Jennie, the new chestnut mare, was to draw to the station. A letter had come from Harold to say that, after long search, he had found a house which would suit them, and was only just a trifle more expensive than the maximum sum they had decided to give for rent. Winifred knew that the delicate grey became her well, and that Harold would think her looking very pretty; and she was going to see her home and his. Her face was bright as she kissed her father and jumped down from the dog-cart; but he sighed when she had left him, and his brow was wrinkled as he drove Jennie back. He felt himself growing rather old; "some day" did not seem quite as remote as it used, and pretty Winnie—well, there was no use in crying over it now. Wilful girls must have their way; and it was not his fault that confounded agitators had played the deuce with the landed interest. The matter passed from his thoughts as he began to notice how satisfactorily Jennie moved.

Winifred's lover met her in London, and found her eyes still bright from the reveries of her journey. To-day was a gala day—they drove off in a hansom to a smart restaurant in Piccadilly, joking about their extravagance. Everything was perfect to Winifred, except (a small exception, surely!) that Harold failed to praise, seemed almost not to notice, the grey costume; it must have been that he looked at her face only!

"It's not a large house, you know," he said at lunch, smiling at her over a glass of Graves.

"Well, I sha'n't be wanting to get away from you," she answered, smiling. "Not very far, Harold!"

"Are your people still abusing me?"

He put the question with a laugh.

"They never abused you, only me." Then came the irrepressible question: "Do you like my new frock? I put it on on purpose—for the house, you know."

"Our home!" he murmured, rather sentimentally, it must be confessed. The question about the frock he did not answer; he was thinking of the home. Winifred was momentarily grateful to a stout lady at the next table, who put up her glass, looked at the frock, and with a nod of approval called her companion's attention to it. This was while Harold paid the bill.

Then they took another cab, and headed north—through Berkeley Square, where Winifred would have liked, but did not expect, to stop, and so up to Oxford Street. Here they bore considerably to the east, then plunged north again and drove through one or two long streets. Harold, who had made the journey before, paid no heed to the route, but talked freely of delightful hours which they were to enjoy together, of books to read and thoughts to think, and of an intimate sympathy which, near as they were already to one another, the home and the home life alone could enable them fully to realise. Winifred listened; but far down in her mind now was another question, hardly easier to stifle than that about the frock. "Where are we going to?" would have been its naked form; but she yielded no more to her impulse than to look about her and mark and wonder. At last they turned by a sharp twist from a long narrow street into a short narrower street, where a waggon by the curbstone forced the cab to a walk, and shrill boys were playing an unintelligible noisy game.

"What queer places we pass through!" she cried with a laugh, as she laid her hand on his arm and turned her face to his.

"Pass through! We're at home," he answered, returning her laugh. "At home, Winnie!" He pointed at a house on the right-hand side, and, immediately after, the cab stopped. Winifred got out, holding her skirt back from contact with the wheel. Harold, in his eagerness to ring the door bell, had forgotten to render her this service. She stood on the pavement for a moment looking about her. One of the boys cried: "Crikey, there's a swell!" and she liked the boy for it. Then she turned to the house.

"It wants a lick of paint," said Harold cheerfully, as he rang the bell again.

"It certainly does," she admitted, looking up at the dirty walls.

An old woman opened the door; she might be said, by way of metaphor, to need the same process as the walls; a very narrow passage was disclosed behind her.

"Welcome!" said Harold, giving Winifred his hand and then presenting her to the old woman. "This is my future wife," he explained. "We've come to look at the house. But we won't bother you, Mrs Blidgett, we'd rather run over it by ourselves. We shall enjoy that, sha'n't we, Winnie?"

Winnie's answer was a little scream and a hasty clutch at her gown; a pail of dirty water, standing in the passage, had threatened ruin; she recoiled violently from this peril against the opposite wall and drew away again, silently exhibiting a long trail of dark dust on her new grey frock. Harold laughed as he led the way into a small square room that opened from the passage.

"That's the parlour," said the old woman, wiping her arms with her apron. "You can find your way upstairs; nothing's locked." And with this remark she withdrew by a steep staircase leading underground.

"She's the caretaker," Harold explained.

"She doesn't seem to have taken much care," observed Winifred, still indignant about her gown and holding it round her as closely as drapery clings to an antique statue.

Miss Petheram's account of the house, its actual dimensions, accommodation, and characteristics, has always been very vague, and since she refused information as to its number in the street, verification of these details has remained impossible. Perhaps it was a reasonably capacious, although doubtless not extensive, dwelling; perhaps, again, it was a confined and well-nigh stifling den. She remembered two things—first, its all-pervading dirt; secondly, the remarkable quality which (as she alleged) distinguished its atmosphere. She thought there were seven "enclosures," this term being arrived at (after discussion) as a compromise between "rooms" and "pens"; and she knew that the windows of each of these enclosures were commanded by the windows of several other apparently similar and very neighbouring enclosures. Beyond this she could give no account of her first half-hour in the house; her exact recollection began when she was left alone in the enclosure on the first floor, which Harold asserted to be the drawing-room, Harold himself having gone downstairs to seek the old woman and elicit from her some information as to what were and what were not tenant's fixtures in the said enclosure. "You can look about you," he remarked cheerfully, as he left her, "and make up your mind where you're going to have your favourite seat. Then you shall tell me, and I shall have the picture of you sitting there in my mind." He pointed to a wooden chair, the only one then in the room. "Experiment with that chair," he added, laughing. "I won't be long, darling."

Mechanically, without considering things which she obviously ought to have considered, Winifred sank into the designated seat, laid her parasol on a small table, and leant her elbows on the same piece of furniture as she held her face between her gloved hands. The atmosphere again asserted its peculiar quality; she rose for a moment and opened the window; fresh air was gained at the expense of spoilt gloves, and was weighted with the drawbacks of a baby's cries and an inquisitive woman's stare from over the way. Shutting the window again, she returned to her chair—the symbol of what was to be her favourite seat in days to come, her chosen corner in the house which had been the subject of so many talks and so many dreams. There were a great many flies in the room; the noise of adjacent humanity in street and houses was miscellaneous and penetrating; the air was very close. And this house was rather more expensive than their calculations had allowed. They had immensely enjoyed making those calculations down there in the country, under the old yew hedge and in sight of the flower beds beneath the library window. She remembered the day they did it. There was a cricket match in the meadow. Mildred and her husband brought the drag over, and Sir Barton came in his tandem. It was almost too hot in the sun, but simply delightful in the shade. She and Harold had had great fun over mapping out their four hundred a year and proving how much

might be done with it—at least compared with anything they could want when once they had the great thing that they wanted.

The vision vanished; she was back in the dirty little room again; she caught up her parasol; a streak across the dust marked where it had lain on the table; she sprang up and twisted her frock round, craning her neck back; ah, that she had reconnoitred that chair! She looked at her gloves; then with a cry of horror she dived for her handkerchief, put it to her lips, and scrubbed her cheeks; the handkerchief came away soiled, dingy, almost black. This last outrage overcame her; the parasol dropped on the floor, she rested her arms on the table and laid her face on them, and she burst into sobs, just as she used to in childhood when her brothers crumpled a clean frock or somebody spoke to her roughly. And between her sobs she cried, almost loudly, very bitterly: “Oh, it’s too mean and dirty and horrid!”

Harold had stolen softly upstairs, meaning to surprise the girl he loved, perhaps to let a snatched kiss be her first knowledge of his return. He flushed red, and his lips set sternly; he walked across the room to her with a heavy tread. She looked up, saw him, and knew that her exclamation had been overheard.

“What in the world is the matter?” he asked in a tone of cold surprise.

It was very absurd—she couldn’t stop crying; and from amid her weeping nothing more reasonable, nothing more adequate, nothing less trivial would come than confused murmurs of “My frock, Harold!” “My parasol!” “Oh, my face, my gloves!” He smiled contemptuously. “Don’t you see?” she exclaimed, exhibiting the gloves and parasol.

“See what? Are you crying because the room’s dirty?” He paused and then added, “I’m sorry you think it mean and horrid. Very sorry, Winifred.”

Offence was deep and bitter in his voice; he looked at her with a sort of disgust; she stopped sobbing and regarded him with a gaze in which fright and expectation seemed mingled, as though there were a great peril, and just one thing that might narrowly avert it. But his eyes were very hard. She dried her tears, and then forlornly scrubbed her cheeks again. He watched her with hostile curiosity, appearing to think her a very strange spectacle. Presently he spoke. “I thought you loved me. Oh, I daresay you thought so too till I came into competition with your new frock. I beg pardon—I must add your gloves and your parasol. As for the house, it’s no doubt mean and horrid; we were going to be poor, you see.” He laughed scornfully, as he added, “You might even have had to do a little dusting yourself now and then! Horrible!”

“I just sat there and looked at him.” That was Winifred’s own account of her behaviour. It is not very explicit and leaves room for much conjecture as to what her look said or tried to say. But whatever the message was he did not read it. He was engrossed in his own indignation, readier to hurt than to understand, full of his own wrong, of the mistake he had made, of her extraordinary want of love, of courage, of the high soul. Very likely all this was a natural enough state of mind for him to be in. Justice admits his provocation; the triviality of her spoken excuses gave his anger only too fine an opportunity. He easily persuaded himself that here was a revelation of the real woman, a flash of light that showed her true nature, showing, too, the folly of his delusion about her. Against all this her look and what it asked for had very little chance, and she could find no words that did not aggravate her offence.

“This is really rather a ludicrous scene,” he went on. “Is there any use in prolonging it?” He waited for her to speak, but she was still tongue-tied. “The caretaker needn’t be distressed

by seeing the awful effects of her omission to dust the room; but, if you're composed enough, we might as well go." He looked round the room. "You'll be glad to be out of this," he ended.

"I know what you must think of me," she burst out, "but—but you don't understand—you don't see——"

"No doubt I'm stupid, but I confess I don't. At least there's only one thing I see." He bowed and waved his hand towards the door. "Shall we go?" he asked.

She led the way downstairs, her skirt again held close and raised clear of her ankles; her care for it was not lost on Harold as he followed her, for she heard him laugh again with an obtrusive bitterness that made his mirth a taunt. The old caretaker waited for them in the passage.

"When'll you be coming, sir?" she asked.

"I don't know. It's not certain we shall come," said he. "The lady is not much taken with the house."

"Ah, well!" sighed the old woman resignedly.

For an account of their drive back to the station materials are, again, sadly wanting. "He hardly said a word, and I did nothing but try to get my face clean and my gloves presentable," was Winifred's history of their journey. But she remembered—or chose to relate—a little more of what passed while they waited for the train on the platform at Euston. He left her for a few minutes on pretext of smoking a cigarette, and she saw him walking up and down, apparently in thought. Then he came back and sat down beside her. His manner was grave now; to judge by his recorded words, perhaps it was even a little pompous; but when may young men be pompous, if not at such crises as these?

"It's no use pretending that nothing has happened, Winifred," he said. "That would be the hollowest pretence, not worthy, I think, of either of us. Perhaps we had better take time to consider our course and—er—our relations to one another."

"You don't want to marry me now?" she asked simply.

"I want to do what is best for our happiness," he replied. "We cannot forget what has happened to-day."

"I know you would never forget it," she said.

He did not contradict her; he looked first at his watch, then along the platform for the approach of her train. To admit that he might forget it was impossible to him; in such a case forgetfulness would be a negation of his principles and a slur on his perception. It would also be such a triumph over his vanity and his pride as it did not lie in him to achieve, such a forgiveness as his faults and virtues combined to put beyond the power of his nature. She looked at him; and "I smiled," she said, not seeming herself to know why she had smiled, but conscious that, in the midst of her woe, some subtly amusing thought about him had come into her mind. She had never been amused at him before; so she, too, was getting some glimmer of a revelation out of the day's experience—not the awful blaze of light that had flashed on Harold's eyes, but a dim ray, just enough to give cause to that puzzled smile for which she could not explicitly account.

So they parted, and for persons who have followed the affair at all closely it is hardly necessary to add that they never came together again. This issue was obvious, and Winifred seems to have made up her mind to it that very same evening, for she called her mother into

her room (as the good lady passed on the way to bed) and looked up from the task of brushing the grey frock which she had spread out on the sofa.

“I don’t think I shall marry Mr Jackson now, mother,” she said.

Mrs Petheram looked at her daughter and at her daughter’s gown.

“You’d better tell me more about it to-morrow. You look tired to-night, dear,” she replied.

But Winifred never told her any more—in the first place, because the family was too delighted with the fact to care one straw about how it had come to pass, and, in the second place, on the more important ground that the thing was really too small, too trivial, and too absurd to bear telling—at least to the family. To me, for some reason or other, Winifred did tell it, or some of it—enough, anyhow, to enable me, with the help of a few touches of imagination, to conjecture how it occurred.

“Don’t you think it was very absurd?” she asked at the end of her story. We were sitting by the yew hedge, near the library windows, looking across the flower beds to the meadow; it was a beautiful day, and the old place was charming. “Because,” she added, “I did love him, you know; and it seems a small thing to separate about, doesn’t it?”

“If he had behaved differently——” I began.

“I don’t see how he could be expected to,” she murmured.

“You expected him to,” I said firmly. She turned to me with an appearance of interest, as though I might be able to interpret to her something that had been causing her puzzle. “Or you wouldn’t have looked at him as you say you did—or smiled at him, as you admit you did. But you were wrong to expect him to, because he’s not that kind of man.”

“What kind of man?”

“The kind of man to catch you in his arms, smother you in kisses (allow me the old phrase), tell you that he understood all you felt, knew all you were giving up, realised the great thing you were doing for him.”

Winifred was listening. I went on with my imaginary scene of romantic fervour.

“That when he contrasted that mean little place with the beauties you were accustomed to, with the beauties which were right and proper for you, when he saw your daintiness soiled by that dust, that gown whose hem he would willingly——”

“He needn’t say quite as much as that,” interrupted Winifred, smiling a little.

“Well, or words to that effect,” said I. “That when he did all this and saw all this, you know, he loved you more, and knew that you loved him more than he had dared to dream, with a deeper love, a love that gave up for him all that you loved next best and second only to him; that after seeing your tears he would never doubt again that you would face all trials and all troubles with him at your side—Don’t you think, if he’d said something of that kind, accompanying his words with the appropriate actions——” I paused.

“Well?” asked Winifred.

“Don’t you think you might have been living in that horrid little house now, instead of being about to contract an alliance with Sir Barton Amesbury?”

“How do you know I shall do that?” she cried.

“It needs,” I observed modestly, “little skill to discern the approach of the inevitable.” I looked at her thoughtful face and at her eyes; they had their old look of wondering in them. “Don’t you think that if he’d treated the situation in that way——?” I asked.

“Perhaps,” she said softly. “But he wouldn’t think of all that. He was such an Idealist.”

I really do not know why she applied that term to him at that moment, except that he used to apply it to himself at many moments. But since it seemed to her to explain his conduct, there is no need to quarrel with the epithet.

“And I hope,” said I, “that the grey frock wasn’t irretrievably ruined?”

“I’ve never worn it again,” she murmured.

So I suppose it was ruined—unless she has some other reason. But she would be right to treat it differently from other frocks; it must mean a good deal to her, although it failed to mean anything except its own pretty self to Mr Jackson.

FOREORDAINED

“I DON’T say,” observed the Colonel, “that limited liability companies haven’t great advantages. In fact, I’m a director myself—it’s a big grocery—and draw three hundred a year—a very welcome addition to my half-pay—and, for all I know, I may supply some of you fellows with your morning bacon. If I do, it just exemplifies the point I was about to make; which is this—When it comes to limited companies, you never know who anybody is. I could tell you a little story to illustrate that; it’s rather a sad one, though.”

The club smoking-room was cheerfully lighted, the fire burned brightly, we each had a cigar and a drink. We intimated to the Colonel that we felt in a position to endure a touch of tragedy.

“It’s some years ago now,” he said, “but it affected me considerably at the time. Do any of you go to Stretchley’s for your clothes?”

Three of us shook our heads wistfully. The fourth—a young man, and a new member, whom none of us knew, but who had a legal look about him and wore admirable trousers of a delicate grey—answered the Colonel’s question in the affirmative.

“If I may say so, you and Stretchley do one another credit, sir,” said the Colonel, with an approving glance at the new member’s trousers. “And I needn’t tell you that Stretchley’s have few equals—and no superiors. When you say Stretchley’s, you say everything. I have never gone to them myself: partly because I couldn’t afford it, more perhaps from motives of delicacy—from consideration for poor George Langhorn’s feelings. He has always preferred not to act professionally for his personal friends, even though he lost money in consequence.”

“How does George Langhorn come in?” I ventured to ask.

“He is Stretchley’s, to all intents and purposes. It’s a small family company. The business was founded by George’s maternal grandfather, and carried to greatness by his mother’s brother, Fred Stretchley, whom I used to see at Brighton years ago. Fred made it into a company, but of course kept the bulk of the shares to himself, besides the entire control; and when he died he left all he had to George, on condition—mark you, on condition—that George remained in the business, and in active control of it. He did that because he knew that George hated it, and, at the same time, had a wonderful turn for it.”

“Rather odd, that!” the new member observed.

“I don’t think so, sir,” said the Colonel. “He had a knack for it, because it was in his blood; and he hated it, because he’d had it crammed down his throat all his life. He’d been right through the mill from a boy; the only holiday he’d ever had from it was a year at Bonn—and that was to learn German, with a view to business. It was at Bonn that I became acquainted with him, and a very nice fellow he was—quite a gentleman, and extremely well-informed. We became great friends. His only fault was his exaggerated dislike of his own occupation. On that subject he was morbid—and, I’m afraid I must add, a trifle snobbish. All the same, he was unmistakably proud of Stretchley’s. He was quite alive to the fact that, if he had to be a tailor, it was a fine thing to be Stretchley’s, and in moments of confidence he would thank Heaven that he hadn’t been born in the ready-made line—‘reach-me-downs,’ he called it. ‘It might have been worse,’ he would say manfully. At those times I felt a great respect for him.”

“They do know how to make a pair of breeches,” murmured the new member, regarding his own legs with pensive satisfaction.

“Nobody better, nobody better,” the Colonel agreed, with a solemn cordiality—and we all looked at the new member’s legs for some moments. “Well, as I was saying,” the Colonel then resumed, “George Langhorn and I became real friends; but I was abroad on service for two or three years after he came back from Bonn and got into harness in Savile Row, and so I lost sight of him for a bit. But after I’d been home a few months, I was passing through town on my way to the Riviera, on six weeks’ leave, and I dropped in at his place and saw him. I found him in a sad way—very depressed and down in the mouth, railing against the business, utterly sick of it. He told me he couldn’t endure the sight of a frock-coat, and spent all his time at home in pyjamas and a dressing-gown—just because those were portions of apparel not supplied by Stretchley’s. Morbid, of course, but sad, very sad! It looked to me as if he was on the verge of a breakdown, and I took a strong line with him. I told him that he owed it to himself to take a complete holiday—to get right away from the shop for a bit, to forget all about it, to put plenty of money in his pocket, and give himself a real holiday—he told me he hadn’t taken more than a week here and there for two years. I said: ‘I’m just off to Monte Carlo. You come with me. Sink the shop—dismiss it from your mind—and come along.’ Well, he saw how wise I was, made his arrangements, and joined me at Charing Cross three days later. Off we went, and a very good time we had of it. George was a handsome young fellow of four or five and twenty, with lots to say for himself, and a very taking way with women. Nobody knew who he was, but I and my friends gave him a good start, and he could take care of the rest for himself. In point of fact I received a great many compliments on the good taste I showed in choosing my travelling companion. Ah, yes, we had very good fun!” The Colonel leant back in his chair for a moment, with a smile of pleasant—possibly of roguish—reminiscence.

“No signs of the tragedy yet, Colonel,” said I.

“Wait a bit; I’m just coming to it. When we’d been there about a fortnight, a young lady appeared on the scene. She was one of the prettiest creatures I ever saw—and I’ve seen some in my day—and as merry as she was pretty. Besides that, she was evidently uncommonly well off; she travelled with a companion, a maid, and a toy-poodle, and threw away her money at the tables as if she were made of it. I needn’t tell you that such a girl didn’t want for attentions at Monte Carlo, of all places in the world. The fortune-hunters were hot on her track, besides

all the young fellows who were genuinely smitten with her. If I'd been ten years younger, I'd have had a shot myself. But it wouldn't have been any use. From the very first George was the favourite, just as from the first George had been drawn to her. There seemed really to be what they call an affinity between them. I never saw an affair go so quickly or so prosperously. Yes, there seemed to be an affinity. George was carried right off his feet, and I was intensely pleased to see it. He wasn't thinking of Stretchley's now, and he was putting on weight every day! My treatment was being a brilliant success, and I didn't mind admitting that more than half the credit was due to pretty Miss Minnie Welford—that was her name.

"I was only waiting to hear the happy news when one morning George came down looking decidedly pale and with a face as long as your arm. I made sure he'd received a telegram calling him back to Savile Row. But it wasn't that. This was it. In conversation, in the garden of the Casino the evening before, somebody had begun talking about *mésalliances* and that sort of thing. One took one side, and one another—the people who had nothing in particular to boast about in the family way being the loudest in declaring they'd never make a low marriage, as they generally are. Minnie, who was sitting next George, took the high romantic line. She said that if she loved a man (George told me she blushed adorably as she said this—you can believe that or not, as you like) neither family nor fortune would weigh for a minute with her. That made George happy, as you can imagine. Then some fellow said: 'You'd marry the chimney-sweep, would you, Miss Welford?' 'Yes, if I loved him,' says she. 'Absolutely nobody barred?' the man asked, laughing. She blushed again (or so George said) and laughed a little and said: 'Well, just one—just one class of man; but I won't tell you which it is.' And no more she would, though they all tried to guess, and chaffed her, and worried her to tell. When the talk had drifted off to something else, George seized his opportunity—he told me he had a horrid sort of presentiment—and whispered in her ear: 'Tell me!' She looked at him with eyes full of fun and said: 'Well, I'll tell you; but it's a secret. Swear to keep it!' George swore to keep it, and then she leant over to him, put her lips close to his ear, and whispered—— Well, of course, you've guessed what she whispered?"

"Tailors!" said the new member in a reflective tone.

"Yes, 'tailors,' " said the Colonel mournfully. "She just whispered 'Tailors!' and ran off with a merry glance (so George said)—a merry glance. And he hadn't had a wink of sleep all night, and came to tell me the first thing in the morning. I never saw a man so broken up."

"Had she found out about him?" I asked.

"No, no, sir; not a hint—not an idea. You'll see later on that she couldn't have had the least idea. But there it was—tailors! And what the dickens was poor George Langhorn to do? He took one view, I urged the other. His was the high-flying line. He must tell her the whole truth before he breathed as much as a word of love to her! Fatal, of course, but he said it was the only line an honourable man could take. I denied that. I said: 'Tell her you love her first. Get her consent—because you will get it. Let the matter rest for a week or two—let her love grow, let the thing become fully settled and accepted, so that to break it off would cause talk and so on. Then, when it's all settled, just casually observe, in a laughing kind of way, that you're sorry she has a prejudice against a certain estimable occupation, because you happen to be indirectly connected with it.' Machiavellian, you'll say, no doubt; but effective, very effective! 'Indirectly connected' I consider was justifiable. Yes, I do. I am, as I said a little while ago, a director of a grocery business, but I don't consider myself directly—not directly—connected with lard and sugar. No, I didn't go beyond the limits of honour, though

possibly I skirted them. In helping one's friends, one does. However, George wouldn't have it, and at last I had to be content with a compromise. He wasn't to speak of the business before he spoke of love, nor to speak of love before he spoke of the business. He was to speak of them both at once. That was what we decided."

"Rather difficult," commented the new member, with that reflective smile which I began to recognise as habitual.

"Pray, sir, would you expect such a thing to be easy?" demanded the Colonel, with an approach to warmth. "We did the best we could, sir, under exceptionally awkward and delicate circumstances." The Colonel leant back again and took a sip of barley-water. That is his tippie.

We all waited in silence for the Colonel to resume his narrative. I remember that, owing perhaps to the associations of the subject, my regard was fixed on the new member's grey trousers, to which he himself continued to pay a thoughtful attention. The Colonel took up the tale again in impressive tones.

"It has been my lot," he said, "to witness many instances of the perverse working of what we call fate or destiny, and of the cruel freaks which it plays with us poor human creatures. I may mention, just in passing, the case of my old friend Major Vincent, who, himself a vegetarian, married a woman whom he subsequently discovered to be constitutionally unable so much as to sit in the same room with a cabbage. But neither that case nor any other within my experience equals the story which I am now telling you. You will agree with me when you hear the *dénoûment*, which is of a nature impossible for any of you to anticipate."

"I think I know it," observed the new member.

"It's impossible that you should, sir," said the Colonel firmly, though courteously: "and when you have heard me out, you yourself will be the first to admit as much. Where was I? Ah, I remember. Well, George Langhorn left me in the condition which I have attempted to describe, and with the understanding which I have mentioned. How, precisely, he carried out that understanding, I am, of course, unable to say, as his interview with Miss Welford was naturally a private one, and he never volunteered any detailed account of it, while it would have been absolute cruelty to press him on the subject; for if his state of mind was lamentable when he left me, it was as nothing to the dismay and horror which held possession of him on his return some two hours later. He rushed into my room really like a man distraught—I am in the habit of measuring my words, and I don't use that one unadvisedly—plumped himself down on my sofa, and ejaculated: 'Merciful heavens, she owns half the Sky-high!' "

At this climax—for such his manner obviously indicated it to be—the Colonel looked round on us in sombre triumph. We were all gravely attentive (except the new member, who still smiled), and the Colonel continued, well satisfied with the effect which he had produced.

"There's fate for you, if you like!" he exclaimed, with uplifted forefinger. "There's the impossibility of evading destiny or escaping from a foreordained environment! Out of all the girls in the world, George had fixed his affections on that particular one; he had gone straight to her, as it were; and, for my part, I can't doubt that the very thing he hated, and she hated too, had, all the same, served in some mysterious way to bring them together. And there was the situation! Not only was George, as a man, forbidden the escape which he had prayed for, but Stretchley's was brought into contact with the 'Sky-high Tailoring Company'! No doubt you are all familiar with its advertisements—chubby boys in sailor suits, square-legged little girls in velveteen, dress-suits at thirty-seven and sixpence! I need not enlarge on the subject;

it's distasteful. It is enough to say that any connection between Stretchley's and the Sky-high was to George's mind almost unthinkable. Observe, then, the curious and distressing psychological situation. As a man, he hated Stretchley's; as Stretchley's, he loathed and despised the Sky-high. His love—his most unfortunate love—was in conflict at once with his personal feelings and with his professional pride. And what of her? When he grew calmer, George entered on that subject with some fulness. She had suffered, exactly as he had, from the obsession of the family business, in the shadow of which she had been bred, to a half-share in which she had succeeded on her father's death. In early days, before fortune came, she had even been dressed from the stock! Like George, she had looked to marriage for a complete change of life and associations. It was not to be. And, more than that, she was acutely conscious of what George must feel. Her training and the family atmosphere had not failed to teach her that. She knew only too well how Stretchley's would feel towards the Sky-high. And George was Stretchley's, and she was the Sky-high! One sometimes reads of *mésalliances* in the papers or meets them among one's acquaintance. Never have I met one like this. The very fact of the occupation being in essence the same intensified the discrepancy and the contrast. Which, gentlemen, would surprise and, I may say, shock you more—that a duke should marry oil or soap, or that a really first-class purveyor should take his bride from a fried fish shop? No man of perception can hesitate. It is within the bounds of the same occupation that the greatest contrasts, the greatest distance, the greatest gulfs of feeling are to be found. I value an otherwise painful experience because it exhibited that philosophic truth in so vivid and striking a manner. You would sooner ask the Commander-in-Chief to lend a hand with a wheelbarrow than propose to him to take command of a corporal's guard. Your *chef* would no doubt put on the coals to oblige a lady, but not to oblige a thousand ladies would he wash the dishes!"

"I daresay that's all true," I made bold to observe, "but, nevertheless, your pair of lovers seem to me rather ridiculous."

"Exactly, sir," said the Colonel—and I was relieved that he took my interruption so well. "They would seem to you ridiculous. Probably the *chef* seems ridiculous too? A man of another profession can't have the feeling in its full intensity. It seems ridiculous! But think—doesn't that very fact increase the tragedy? To suffer from a feeling deep and painful, and to be aware that it is in the eyes of the world at large ridiculous—can you imagine anything more distressing?"

"Your story illustrates more than one great truth, I perceive, Colonel."

"If it did not, sir, I should never have troubled you with it," he answered with lofty courtesy.

"And what happened? Did love triumph over all?"

"I hesitate to describe the issue in those terms," said he, with a slight frown. "They are conventional—designedly, no doubt—and I don't think that they fit this particular case. George and Miss Welford were, beyond question, deeply attached to one another, and they got married in due course—nor am I aware that the marriage has turned out otherwise than well in the ordinary sense. Mrs Langhorn is a very charming woman. But was it a triumph of love? I look deeper, gentlemen. In my view love was but an instrument in the hands of Fate. The triumph was the triumph of Fate, and I am persuaded that, when they went to the altar, resignation to destiny was the most prominent feeling in the minds of both of them. That is why I said at the beginning that the story was rather a sad one. The very night before the

wedding I found George poring over the Sky-high's illustrated catalogue! What does that fact carry to your minds?"

"It looks bad," I admitted, with a sigh.

"It speaks volumes," said the Colonel briefly, and he finished his barley-water.

The new member flung the end of his cigar into the grate and rose to his feet. His face still wore the reflective smile which had decorated it throughout the Colonel's story.

"And what," I asked the Colonel, "are the present relations between Stretchley's and the Sky-high?"

"It would be curious to know," he answered; "but as to that I have no information. I've never ventured to interrogate George Langhorn on the point."

"I think I can answer the question," said the new member, flicking an ash off his trousers. "The two companies were privately amalgamated last week. I drew the articles of association myself. Mr Langhorn is to be chairman of the joint concern."

The Colonel might plausibly have resented a silence so long maintained as to border on deceit. He showed no anger. He nodded his head gravely, as though to say: "Here is the Epilogue! Here is the Catastrophe complete!"

"Stretchley's and the Sky-high!" he murmured. "Poor George Langhorn! Poor George!"

I went home to dinner really quite depressed.

PRUDENCE AND THE BISHOP

MISS PRUDENCE was astonishingly pretty; it was far from tedious to lie on the bank of the stream and watch her, while her second brother—a lanky youth of fifteen—fished for non-existent trout with an entirely unplausible fly.

"So Clara Jenkins said that about me?"

I nodded. "Just let it fall, you know, Miss Prudence, in the give-and-take of conversation."

"If you weren't a stranger in our neighbourhood, you wouldn't pay any attention to what a girl like that says."

"Oh, but it was about you," I protested.

Prudence looked at me as if she were thinking that I might have been amusing when I was young.

"What was the word Clara used?" she asked.

"There were two words. 'Calculating' was one."

"Oh, was it?"

"Yes. The other was 'heartless.' "

"I like that! It's only what mamma tells me."

“Your mother tells you?” My tone indicated great surprise: her mother is the vicar’s wife, and the alleged counsel seemed unpastoral.

“Yes—and it’s quite right too,” Prudence maintained. “You know how poor we are. And there are eight of us!”

“Five and three?”

“Yes: Johnny at Oxford, Dick at school, and Clarence to go soon! And the girls—you know what girls cost, anyhow!”

“They vary, I suppose?”

“Just you talk to mamma about that!”

That didn’t seem urgent. “Another time,” I murmured, “I shall be pleased to exchange impressions.”

I don’t think Prudence heard. She was looking very thoughtful, a minute wrinkle ornamenting her brow.

“The boys must have their education; the girls must have justice done to them.”

“To be sure! And so——?”

“And why shouldn’t one fall in love with a man who—who——”

“Would be delighted to do all that?”

“Of course he’d be delighted. I mean a man who—who *could* do it.”

“Rich?”

“Papa says differences in worldly position are rightly ordained.”

“No doubt he’s correct. Your man would have to be quite rich, wouldn’t he? Seven besides you!”

“Oh, we aren’t accustomed to much,” said Prudence, with a smile at me which somehow made me wish for a cheque-book and an immense amount of tact; a balance at the bank we will presuppose.

“And may I ask,” I resumed, “why you are selected out of all the family for this—er—sacrifice?”

She blushed, but she was wary. “I’m the eldest girl, you see,” she said.

“Just so,” I agreed. “I was very stupid not to think of that.”

“The others are so young.”

“Of course. It would be waiting till it was too late?”

“Yes, Mr Wynne.”

I interpolate here a plain statement of fact. The other girls resemble their mother, and the vicar’s type, reproduced in Miss Prudence, is immeasurably the more refined—not to say picturesque.

“Oh, if you won’t be serious!” sighed Prudence—though, as has been seen, I had said nothing.

“It certainly is not a laughing matter,” I admitted.

“How difficult the world is! Was Sir John at the Jenkins’s?”

“Sir John?”

“Sir John Ffolliot—of Ascombe, you know.”

“Tall red-faced young man?”

“Yes, very—I mean, rather. Rather tall, anyhow.”

“Oh yes, he was there.”

“When Clara talked about me?”

“So far as I recollect, he was not in earshot at that moment, Miss Prudence. But then I wasn’t in earshot while she talked to him. So possibly——”

“Now she really is a cat, isn’t she?”

“I haven’t the smallest doubt of it. But you must make allowances.”

“I do. Still I can’t see why plain people are to say just what they like!”

“Nobody minds them,” I observed consolingly.

The conversation flagged for a moment or two. That didn’t matter; one can always look at the view.

“Is my hat crooked?” asked Miss Prudence with affected anxiety.

“I should say you’d get him, if you really want him,” I remarked.

My thoughts were switched off in another direction by Miss Prudence’s next utterance. I don’t complain of that; it was probably rightly ordained, as the vicar would have said; there’s something in a meadow and a river that resists middle age—and I don’t know that a blue frock, with eyes to match, and hair that——

“Do you happen to know how much a bishop gets?” asked Prudence.

“Not precisely, Miss Prudence. It varies, I believe—like what girls cost. All I know is that it’s never enough for the needs of his diocese.”

“Oh, isn’t it?” She looked rather troubled over this information.

“So the papers say—and the bishops too sometimes.”

“Still you wouldn’t call them exactly poor, would you?”

“I call them poor! Good Lord!” was my observation.

“You know our bishop’s Palace?”

“A charming residence, Miss Prudence—even stately.”

“And Sir John says he drives awfully good horses.”

“Let us rely on Sir John where we can.”

“And Mr Davenport says he gives away a lot.”

“Mr Davenport?”

“So he can’t be poor, can he?”

“Mr Davenport?”

“Oh, I beg pardon! But you’ve met him. How forgetful you are! Papa’s curate!”

“Dear me, dear me! Of course! You mean Frank?”

“Papa calls him Frank.”

“You all call him Frank.”

“I suppose we do—yes.”

“So I forgot his surname just for the minute. Does he call you Prudence?”

“What has that got to do with it?”

“Roughly speaking, it ranges from three to seven thousand a year. More for archbishops, according to scale, of course.”

“Well, that sounds plenty,” said Prudence.

(I have ascertained from *Crockford's Directory* that the value of the vicar's living is three hundred and twenty five pounds per annum.)

“Don't be calculating, Miss Prudence!”

“And heartless?” The little wrinkle was on her brow again.

“That remark of Miss Jenkins' seems to rankle!”

“I wasn't thinking—altogether—of Clara.”

It seemed hard if somebody else had been calling her heartless too—or even thinking it. And all for listening to her mother! I tried to administer consolation.

“The thing is,” I observed, “a judicious balancing of considerations. Here, on the one hand, is justice to be done to the girls—in the way of accomplishments and appearance, I may presume?—and education to be given to the boys—it would be no bad thing if someone taught Dick how to make a fly, for example; on the other hand lie what I may broadly term your inclinations and——”

I awoke to the fact that Miss Prudence had not been listening to the latter portion of my remark. She was rubbing the knuckles of one hand into the palm of the other, and frowning now quite heavily. Then she twisted one little hand round the other; and almost inaudibly she said: “How can one balance considerations”—(She infused a pleasant scorn into her intonation of these respectable words)—“How can one balance considerations when——?”

Primâ facie that “when——” admitted of various interpretations. But I chose one without hesitation.

“Then why this talk about how much a bishop gets, you calculating heartless girl?”

She darted at me a look of fearful merriment.

“And they make them quite young sometimes in these days,” I added. And I rounded off my period by remarking that Sir John Ffolliot seemed a stupid sort of dog.

“Yes, isn't he?”

“Might do for Clara Jenkins?”

“If I thought that——” Miss Prudence began hotly.

“But the idea is preposterous,” I added hastily. “One of your sisters now?”

“That's really not a bad idea,” she conceded graciously.

In fact, she had suddenly grown altogether very gracious—and I do not refer merely to the marked civility of her manner towards myself. The frown had vanished, the wrinkle was not: the hands were clasped in a comfortable repose. She looked across to me with a ridiculously contented smile.

“It's such a good thing to have a talk with a really sensible man,” she said.

I took off my hat—but I also rose to my feet. To present me as a future bishop was asking too much of the whirligig of time. Not a kaleidoscope could do it! Besides, I wasn't serious about it; it was just the meadow, the river—and the rest. In order to prove this to myself beyond dispute, I said that I had to go to the post office and despatch an important letter.

“To the post office?” said Prudence, displaying some confusion at the mention of that institution. “Oh, then, would you mind—it would be so kind—would you really mind——?”

“Calling in at the parlour window and telling Mr Davenport that you’re going to have some tennis after tea? With pleasure, of course.”

“I didn’t know you knew he lodged there!” she cried.

“Pending promotion to the Palace, yes.”

I made that last remark after I had turned my back, and I didn’t look round to see whether Miss Prudence had heard it; it was, in fact, in the nature of an “aside”—a thing which may be heard or not at pleasure.

“Won’t you come too?” she called.

“Certainly not. I propose to meditate.” On these words I did turn round, and waved her farewell. I think she was indulging in a most proper forgetfulness of her brothers and sisters—and, incidentally, of myself. So I proceeded to the post office, although of course I had no letter at all to send.

I found Mr Davenport in flannels, sitting with his feet on the mantelpiece, smoking a pipe and reading. He was an engaging six-feet of vigour, and I delivered my message with as little rancour as could be expected under the circumstances.

“I think I’ll go,” he said, briskly knocking out his pipe.

It was some satisfaction to me to remind him that it was only half-past three, and that tennis didn’t begin till after tea. He put his pipe back between his teeth with a disappointed jerk.

“What are you reading?” I inquired affably. I must be pictured as standing outside the post office parlour window while conducting this colloquy.

He looked a trifle ashamed. “The fact is, I sometimes try to keep up my Latin a bit,” he explained, conscious of the eccentricity of this proceeding. “It’s Juvenal.”

“Not so very clerical,” I ventured to observe.

“A great moralist,” he maintained—yet with an eye distantly twinkling with the light of unregenerate days.

“I suppose so. That bit about prudence now——?”

“About who?” cried he, springing to his feet and dropping his poet on the floor.

“Evidently you recollect! *Nullum numen abest si sit Prudentia*——”

“Curiously enough, I’ve just been having a shot at a rendering of that couplet,” said Mr Davenport. As he spoke he approached the window: I sat down on the sill outside and lit a cigar.

“Curiously enough indeed!” said I. “May I be privileged to hear it?”

He threw out one arm and recited—

“ ‘All Heaven’s with us, so we Prudence win:
If Fortune’s hailed a goddess, ours the sin!’ ”

“Pretty well for the spirit, but none too faithful to the letter,” I remarked critically. “However, Dr Johnson is open to the same objection. You remember—

“ ‘Celestial Wisdom calms the mind,
And makes the happiness she does not find.’ ”

“I call that pretty bad.”

“Not much to the present point, anyhow,” I agreed.

“I had another rhyme—and after all the rhyme’s the difficulty. How about this?—

“ ‘All Heaven’s ours if Prudence we can gain,
Our silly hands build Fortune’s empty fane!’ ”

“Really you fire me to emulation,” I said. “I think I’ll try my own hand at it—

“ ‘If Prudence loves, what other boon need I?’ ”

“Splendid!” he cried, puffing at his empty pipe.

“ ‘Unless a bishop’s palace by-and-by?’ ”

This audacious departure from the original affected him powerfully. He laid a hand like a pair of tweezers on my wrist and cried excitedly—

“You’ve been talking to her!”

“So have you,” said I, “and to better purpose.”

By a subtle and rapid movement he was, in a moment, outside the door and stood facing me in the little front garden of the post office.

“I shouldn’t wonder if they began tennis before tea,” he remarked.

“You’ll find somebody to play a single. Good-bye!” He was turning away eagerly when something occurred to me. “Oh, by the way, Mr Davenport——”

“Yes?”

“Do you think you’ll ever be a bishop really?”

“Only when I talk to her,” he said, with a confused yet candid modesty which I found agreeable.

“Go and do homage for your temporalities,” I said.

“I say—her mother!” whispered Mr Davenport.

“She probably thought the same when she married the vicar.”

He smiled. “That’s rather funny!” he cried back to me, as he started off along the road.

“So your son-in-law may think some day, my boy,” said I with a touch of ill-humour. No matter, he was out of hearing. Besides I was not, I repeat, really serious about it—not half so serious, I venture to conjecture, as the vicar’s wife!

To her, perhaps, Dr Johnson’s paraphrase may be recommended.

THE OPENED DOOR

“**W**E may float for ten minutes,” said the Second Officer.

After a pause the passenger remarked:

“I’m glad of it, upon my word I am.”

“You’re thankful for small mercies,” was the retort.

The passenger did not explain. He could not expect the Second Officer, or the rest of them, to sympathise with his point of view, or share the feelings which made him rejoice, not at the respite, but at the doom itself. Those who were not busy getting the women and children into the boats, and keeping the ship above water, were cursing the other vessel for steaming away without offering aid, or clutching in bewildered terror at anyone who could tell them

how the collision had happened and what hope there was of salvation. The boats were got safely off, laden to their utmost capacity; lifebuoys were handed round, and, when they ran short, men tossed up for them, and the losers ransacked the deck for some makeshift substitute. The passenger took no part in the competition or the search. He stood with his hands in his pockets and a smile on his lips, waiting for the ten minutes to wear themselves away. His only grudge against fate lay in those superfluous ten minutes.

Left to himself, he began to think, lighting a cigarette. He had to use a fusee, which was a pity, especially for his last cigarette, but the wind blew fiercely. It was strange how much harm a man could do without being a particularly bad fellow, and what an *impasse* he could get himself into. He had drifted on, and things had fallen out so maliciously that, because of him who hated hurting anybody, women were weeping and children smirched, and an old man hiding an honoured head in shame. He had even been required to be grateful to the man he hated most in the world, because he had not been put in the dock. That stuck in his throat more than all the rest. He had been ready to pay his shot and go to gaol—he would rather have done five years than owed the thanks for escaping them—but in very decency he couldn't insist on going; the trial would have killed the old man. So they had concocted a plan—a chance of a new life, they called it—and shipped him off to the other side of the world with fifty pounds in his pocket—the gift of that enemy. At least he could get rid of the money now; and, still smiling, he dropped his pocket-book over the side into the great heaving waves. He had always meant it to go there—God forbid he should use it—but he had hardly hoped to go with it. He would follow it soon now. The door whose handle he had shrunk from turning had opened of its own accord in a most marvellously convenient way. To throw oneself overboard is a cold-blooded impossible sort of proceeding; the old man and the women would have heard of it, and he really didn't want to give them any more pain. But this catastrophe was—from a selfish point of view—incredibly opportune. Such an exit had the dignity of the inevitable, and left the “new life” an agreeable hypothesis from which he doubted not that much comfort would be sucked by those dear, loving, foolish folk at home. Much “new life” he would have led! But let them think he would. And hurrah for a collision in deep water!

Five minutes gone—and they were deep in the water. The skipper was on the bridge; the engineers had come up and, together with the crew and such of the passengers as had not got away in the boats, were standing ready to jump at the word. Some were praying, some swearing, most discussing the matter in very much the same tones as they used in speculating about the weather on deck after dinner; but they all kept their eyes on the skipper.

“I shall just,” said the passenger, peering over the side, “go straight down. It oughtn't to take long,” and he shivered a little. It had just struck him that the process might be very unpleasant, however satisfactory the result.

There was a sudden movement of the deck under him. The skipper seemed to shout, and, waving his arms, began to run down from the bridge. Then everybody jumped. The passenger dropped his finished cigarette, kicked off his deck shoes—a purely instinctive action—and jumped too. “Here goes!” he said.

When he came up again, he found himself swimming strongly. His arms and legs were not asking his leave about it; they were fighting the water as they had been taught, and they promised to make a long bout of it. He had never felt so vigorous. It was great nonsense, prolonging the thing like this. If he had thought of it, he wouldn't have jumped so clear, then he would have been sucked down. He saw heads bobbing here and there about him; one man

shrieked aloud and disappeared. It was—less the shrieking—just what he wanted to do. But he couldn't. It was all very well to want to die, but this strong body of his had a word to say to that. Its business was to live, and it meant to live if it could. Well, it had always been a rebellious carcass—that was the cause of a great deal of the trouble—and it evidently meant to have its own way for this last time.

And it began to infect him. For the life of him, he couldn't give in now. It was a fight between him and the water. He might have been a brute, and a rogue, and all the other pretty names that had come as sauce to that wretched fifty pounds, but he had never been a coward or shirked a fight. It was all right—he must be drowned in the end. But he would keep it up as long as he could; he would see it through; and with strong strokes he met and mastered and beat down wave after wave, outlived head after head that sank round him, and saw the old ship herself go under with a mighty pothor.

All at once he found himself within reach of a spar. He was getting tired, though full of fight still, and he clutched at it for all the world as though he were in love with life. Hallo! There was a boy clinging to it—one of the ship's boys, whom he knew well.

"Get off!" shrieked the boy. "Get off! It's mine."

"All right, Johnny, we'll share it."

"It won't take us. Get off. It's not fair. Oh, it's going under!"

It was. The passenger let go, but kept close to it. It wouldn't bear Johnny and him, but it would bear Johnny alone; it would also, probably, bear him alone. And he was getting very tired. Johnny saw his face and, clinging tight, began to cry. The passenger laid hold again. How jolly it was to have something under one's chest! Johnny had had it for a long while. And what's a ship's boy? Besides, it's every man for himself at such a time.

Johnny's end ducked and Johnny's head dipped with it. Johnny came up whimpering piteously, and swore in childish rage at the intruder. He was not a pretty boy, and he looked very ugly when he swore.

"You'll drown us both, you——!" he gasped.

"It would bear me," replied the passenger, "and you shouldn't swear, Johnny."

Johnny blubbered and swore again.

For an instant the passenger, resting as lightly as he could on the spar, watched Johnny's face.

"You've kept afloat some time," he observed, with an approving air. He liked pluck in boys—even ugly whimpering boys. His end went under, and he came up gurgling and spitting. He felt now as if he had no legs at all.

Johnny had stopped swearing, but was blubbering worse than ever.

"Damn it," said the passenger, "haven't I made enough people do that?" And he added, "Ta-ta, Johnny," and let go the spar.

His legs were there, after all, and they let him know it. For time unmeasured he battled for the life he was weary of, and would not let himself be pushed through the open door. But at last he crossed its threshold.

Johnny was drowned too. But then the passenger had always protested against his acts being judged by their consequences; and it doesn't seem fair to take it against him both ways.

LOVE'S LOGIC^[1]

The Scene is a hall or corridor, lying between two conservatories, one on the right, the other on the left. Besides plants and other ornaments, the corridor is furnished with a couch and a small round table with an arm-chair by it. The time is between eleven and twelve in the evening.

Mr Marchesson's back is visible in the doorway leading to the conservatory on the right.

MR M. (*Speaking to unseen person in the conservatory.*) So awfully sorry, but I absolutely promised to meet a man at the club. (*Pause.*) Beg pardon? Oh, a fellow named Smith—you don't know him. (*Pause.*) Yes, I hope we shall meet soon, but I'm rather afraid I may have to go out of town. (*Pause.*) Good-night. (*Backs a little further into the corridor.*) Phew!

Miss Grainger's back appears in the doorway leading to the conservatory on the left.

Miss G. (*Speaking to unseen person in the conservatory.*) Yes, of course we shall be friends. What? (*Pause.*) Oh yes, great friends, What? (*Pause.*) I don't know—I may be going out of town. Good-night. (*She backs into the corridor, throws her eyes upwards, and draws in her breath with a long sigh.*)

Mr M. meanwhile has taken out a cigarette, and is just about to light it when they turn and see one another. Both start, smile, and then become grave and rather formal in manner.

Mr M. (*Putting his hands—with the cigarette and the match-box—behind him.*) Oh, I beg pardon! I didn't think anybody—(*He turns as if to retreat into the conservatory.*)

Miss G. Please don't go—and please do smoke. It's so nice and cool here, isn't it? (*She sits down on the couch and fans herself gently.*)

Mr M. May I really? (*He comes forward a little, holding up his cigarette.*) You're sure you don't mind?

(She nods. He lights the cigarette.)

Miss G. It's so warm in that conservatory. (*Pointing to the left.*)

Mr M. (*With feeling.*) So it was in that one. (*Pointing to the right. He wipes his brow, she fans herself assiduously.*) Ouf!

Miss G. You *do* look rather—flustered.

Mr M. Well—in fact—so do you.

(They look at one another, trying to remain grave, but presently both give a short embarrassed laugh. Mr M. comes a step nearer, placing his hand on the back of the chair.)

I've got it! I know the signs!

(She looks at him inquiringly and with amusement. He nods towards the conservatory on the left.) You've been refusing some fellow in there.

Miss G. Have I? (*Pointing to the conservatory on the right.*) And what have you been doing in there?

Mr M. (*After a careful glance over his shoulder.*) As you didn't see the lady, I don't mind admitting that I've been doing the same thing.

Miss G. (*Raising her brows.*) Refusing?

Mr M. Refusing—to ask.

Miss G. Oh!

Mr M. (*He smokes vigorously, then throws his cigarette into a receptacle.*) It's a precious lot easier for you than for us, though. I say, I must sound like a conceited idiot, I know, but—well, you see, the fact is——

Miss G. That you're Mr Marchesson——?

Mr M. (*Pleased.*) You know my name?

Miss G. Oh yes. Mine's Grainger.

Mr M. Yes. I—I know your name, Miss Grainger.

Miss G. You're diamonds? (*She touches some that she is wearing as she speaks. He nods gloomily.*)

I'm soap. (*He glances for a brief instant at his hand.*) So, of course——! (*She shrugs her shoulders and closes her fan. A moment's pause.*)

Mr M. Beastly, isn't it?

Miss G. Well, it's—monotonous.

Mr M. It's worse than that. It's degrading, it's heart-breaking, it's ruin to the character. It saps my faith in humanity, it trammels my actions, it confines my affections, it cuts me off from friendship, from the pleasant and innocent companionships which my nature longs for. I alone mayn't look with the eye of honest admiration on a pretty girl, I alone mayn't——

Miss G. Sit in a conservatory?

Mr M. (*With a shudder.*) Above all—not that! I tell you it's kept me single for years! And you for——

Miss G. Years?

Mr M. (*Smiling.*) Months! All last season and most of this! Take your case now——

Miss G. (*Eagerly leaning forward.*) Oh yes, let's!

Mr M. You'd naturally enjoy men's society, you'd like their friendship, their company, their admiration. You'd enjoy an innocent but piquant flirtation.

Miss G. Should I?

Mr M. (*Looking at her.*) Well, yes, I think you would. You daren't venture on it!

Miss G. It is generally fatal, I admit.

Mr M. The plain truth is that the thing's intolerable. I shall stick a placard on my waistcoat—"Not for sale."

Miss G. And I'd better become a hospital nurse!

Mr M. That's rather an odd remedy, Miss Grainger. But, in some form or other, celibacy—public and avowed celibacy—is our only chance. (*He throws himself down in the chair.*)

Miss G. (*Low.*) Unless there was somebody who——

Mr M. Didn't know who you were? Not to be done in these days, with the illustrated press! And—you'll excuse my referring to it?—but your fond father put *you* on the wrappings of the soap. And owing to the large sale of the article——

Miss G. Yes, I know. But I meant—if there was somebody who didn't—didn't care about the money?

Mr M. (*Half under his breath.*) Said he didn't!

Miss G. And who—who really did care just for—for oneself alone? Oh, I must sound romantic and absurd; but you—you know what I mean, Mr Marchesson? There *are* such men, aren't there?

Mr M. Well, admitting there was one—and it's a handsome admission, which I limit entirely to the male sex—in the first place you wouldn't believe in him half the time, and in the second he wouldn't believe in himself half the time, and in the third none of your friends would believe in him any of the time.

Miss G. That would be horrid—especially the friends, I mean.

Mr M. Female friends!

Miss G. Of course.

Mr M. Another disgusting aspect of the business! Do you—do I—ever get legitimate credit for our personal attractions? Never! Never!

Miss G. (*With conviction.*) That's awfully true.

Mr M. So even your paragon, if you found him, wouldn't meet the case. And as for *my* paragon, nobody but Diogenes would take on the job of finding her.

Miss G. (*Musing.*) Is *nobody* indifferent to money?

Mr M. Only if they've got more than they want. (*He gives a glance at her, unperceived by her, rises, puts his hands in his pockets, and looks at her.*) Only the unhappy rich.

Miss G. (*Roused from abstraction.*) I beg pardon, what?

Mr M. Imagine a man surfeited, cloyed, smothered in it; a man who has to pay six other men to look after it; a man who can't live because of the income-tax, and daren't die because of the death duties; a man overwhelmed with houses he can't live in, yachts he can't sail, horses he can't ride; a man in whom the milk of human kindness is soured by impostors, and for whom even "deserving cases" have lost their charm; a man who's been round the d——d world—I beg your pardon, really I beg your pardon—who's been round the wretched world twice, and shot every beast on it at least once; who is sick of playing, and daren't work for fear of making a profit——

Miss G. It almost sounds as if you were describing yourself.

Mr M. Oh no, no! No! At least—er—if at all, quite accidentally. I'll describe *you* now, if you like.

Miss G. I get absolutely no thrill out of a new frock!

Mr M. There it is—in a nutshell, by Jingo! Miss Grainger, we have found the people we want, the people who are indifferent to money, and would—that is, might—marry us for love alone.

Miss G. (*Laughing.*) You mean—one another? That's really rather an amusing end to our philosophising, isn't it? (*She rises, laughing still, and holds out her hand.*) Good-night.

Mr M. (*Indignantly.*) Good-night be——! Why, our talk's just got to the most interesting point!

Miss G. Well, you ought to know—you've been doing most of it yourself.

Mr M. Oh, but don't go! I—I'll do it better—and perhaps quicker too—if you'll stay a bit.

Miss G. (*Sitting again, with a laugh.*) I'll give you just five minutes to wind up the argument.

Mr M. The conclusion's obvious in logic. I ought to offer you my hand in marriage, and you ought to accept.

Miss G. (*Laughing.*) Logic is logic, of course, Mr Marchesson—but we've never even been introduced! I don't think you need feel absolutely compelled to go through the ceremony you suggest. We'll be illogical, and say good-night.

Mr M. You admit the logic? You see the force of it?

Miss G. Women don't act by logic, though.

Mr M. It's always at least a good excuse.

Miss G. If you want one, yes. (*She is about to rise again.*)

Mr M. I do want one.

(*She shakes her head, laughing.*)

I'm serious.

Miss G. You don't really want me to think that? The very first time we meet? The lady in there (*pointing to the conservatory on the right*) must have frightened you terribly indeed!

Mr M. Until the logic of the thing struck me—which happened only to-night—I thought it no good to try to know you.

Miss G. I don't suppose you ever thought about it at all.

Mr M. I had nothing to give you—and you had nothing to give me! So it seemed in the days of illogicality. Now it's all different. So I insist on—the ceremony.

Miss G. (*Laughing, but a little agitated.*) Go on, then. But your logic doesn't bind me, you know.

(*He comes and sits on the couch by her.*)

Yes, that's quite right—but don't put too much feeling into it. It—it's only logic! No, I—I don't think I want you to go on. I—I don't think it's a good joke.

Mr M. It's not a joke. I've never been introduced to you, you say. I've never spoken to you before to-night, I know. But you're not a stranger to me. There have been very few days in the last three months when I haven't managed to see you——

Miss G. (*Low.*) Managed to see me—*managed*?

Mr M. Yes—though I must say you go to some places which but for your presence would be very dull. I stuck at none of them, Miss Grainger. I swallowed every one! Did you ever notice me?

Miss G. Of course not.

(*He looks at her.*)

Of course I've *seen* you, but I never *noticed* you.

(*He continues to look at her.*)

Not specially, at anyrate.

Mr M. I suppose I must have been there a hundred times. How often did you notice me?

Miss G. How absurd! I'm sure I don't remember. Very seldom.

Mr M. Don't you remember even the first time?

Miss G. Oh yes, that was at the—— No, certainly I don't.

Mr M. Yes, it *was* at the Phillips's!

(*She smiles against her will. He also smiles.*)

I'm glad you remember.

Miss G. You stared so—as *you* may perhaps remember.

Mr M. Have I stared every time?

Miss G. Very often, anyhow.

Mr M. You noticed that?

Miss G. Every time I noticed you, I noticed that.

Mr M. And you noticed that very often! Therefore you noticed me——

Miss G. Please, no more logic!

Mr M. And yet you try to treat me as a stranger!

Miss G. It is rather a matter of *trying* with you, isn't it? You're not very susceptible to the treatment.

Mr M. And pretend to be surprised at my wanting to marry you! If the logic of it still leaves you doubtful——

Miss G. Doubtful! I never said I was doubtful!

Mr M. Look at the romantic side! How romantic it would be to throw yourself away on riches! Did you never think about that? Not when I—stared?

Miss G. I didn't exactly mean that you exactly stared. You—you—you—— Oh, you really might help me out! What did you do?

Mr M. I'd so much rather hear you say it.

Miss G. Well, right from the beginning there was something in your look—I mean the way you looked at me—I can't describe it, but it got more and more like that.

Mr M. Yes, I believe I meant it to.

Miss G. Never forward or—or impertinent. Just nice, Mr Marchesson.

Mr M. I say, was that a good chap you refused in there (*indicating the conservatory to the left*) a thousand years ago?

Miss G. Very—so handsome! I liked him awfully. And the girl you refused——

Mr M. To ask——

Miss G. In there? (*Indicating the conservatory to the right.*)

Mr M. Really, you know—impartially speaking—a ripper! Why did we?

Miss G. What?

Mr M. I said, “Why did we?”

Miss G. Was it—a thousand years ago? Yes?

Mr M. Which certainly makes it absurd to call us strangers.

Miss G. I wasn't thinking any more about that. Oh, you do——?

Mr M. I do—mean it.

Miss G. (*Rising.*) I think that—after all—it wouldn't be so bad in—in——

Mr M. The conservatory?

(*They look at one another and laugh.*)

Miss G. It's terribly absurd even to think about it.

Mr M. It's absolutely logical! And, by the way, it's time I put my question.

Miss G. Haven't you?

Mr M. Then it's time you gave your answer.

Miss G. (*Putting her hands in his.*) Haven't I?

Mr M. There'll be a great deal of talk about this to-morrow! (*He offers her his arm, and they go towards the conservatory on the left.*) Oh, your conservatory? No!

Miss G. Yours would be just as bad.

Mr M. Then stay here.

Miss G. Take me to my carriage. And—and come and see if I'm not perfectly logical to-morrow.

(*He releases her arm and kisses her hand. She adds in a low voice:*) And—somehow—it is absurd—so wonderfully happy to-night! Will you come with me?

Mr M. Will I live? Come! Quick—through your conservatory! (*He puts his arm round her waist.*) Come!

(*They disappear into the conservatory on the left.*)

CURTAIN

LA MORT À LA MODE^[2]

MONSIEUR LE DUC—MADAME LA MARQUISE

(*The tumbril is the last of a row of several, some of which have left, some of which stand at, the gates of the Conciergerie. The others are full, in this the DUC is alone. At the beginning of the conversation the tumbril stands still, later it is moving slowly, escorted through a turbulent crowd by National Guards to its destination in the Place Louis Quinze (Place de la Revolution.) The time is noon of a fine day during the Reign of Terror.*)

DUC. Alone! My luck holds to the last. They're close as fish in a tub in the others—and by strange chance every man next to his worst enemy—or at least his best friend's husband! These rascals have no consideration. Ah, somebody coming here! I've to have company after all. A woman too—deuce take it! (*A lady is assisted into the tumbril. The DUC rises, bows, and starts.*) Marquise! (*The lady sinks on the bench across the tumbril.*) You here! (*He takes snuff and murmurs:*) Awkward! (*Pauses and murmurs again:*) Even her! Curse the hounds!

Marquise. I—I heard you had escaped.

Due. Ah, madame, I can no longer expect justice from you—only mercy. And—excuse me—M. le Marquis?

Marquise. He—he has gone—

Duc. Ah yes, yes. He went before us? I remember now. Er—my condolences, Marquise. But on what pretext are you——?

Marquise. They say that, as his wife, I shared his designs and was in his confidence.

Duc. How little they know of the world! (*Smiling.*) As his wife—in his confidence! How simple the blackguards are! (*Looks at her.*) I protest I feel my presence inopportune.

Marquise. No. (*She holds out a little silver box.*) Will you hold this for me? (*He takes it.*) You may look. (*Opening it he finds rouge and a powder-puff. The MARQUISE smiles faintly.*)

Duc. (*Shutting box.*) On my honour you've no need of it this morning. Your cheeks display the most charming flush. Ah, we move. (*She starts.*) Yes, yes, it jolts horribly. But I won't drop the rouge.

Marquise. Will it take long?

Duc. It? (*Shrugs his shoulders.*) Oh, before you know—before you know!

Marquise. No, no—I mean the journey.

Duc. Ah, the journey! It will seem short now. Before you came, I feared the tedium—though the crowd's amusing enough. Look at that fellow! Why in heaven's name does he shake his fist at me? He's not one of my people, not even from my province. (*Smiles at the crowd and seats himself by the MARQUISE.*) You're silent. Ah, I remember, now I remember! When we parted last, you vowed you'd never speak to me again.

Marquise. I thought I never should.

Duc. The things we think we never shall do include all the most delightful things we do.

Marquise. You seem to flatter yourself, monsieur. I meant what I said then: but times are changed.

Duc. Faith, yes! The times more than I.

Marquise. More than you? Ah, changeful times!

Duc. And their changes bring more grief than any of mine could.

Marquise. Oh, as for grief—! It was your rudeness I deplored, more than my loss.

Duc. I am never rude, madame. I may have been——

Marquise. (*Low.*) Unfaithful?

Duc. (*Low.*) Unworthy, madame. (*She looks at him for a moment and sighs. He smiles and is about to speak when a great shout is heard from the direction of the Place Louis Quinze. She starts, turns a little pale, and involuntarily stretches out a hand to him.*)

Marquise. What's that? What's happening?

Duc. Oh, they're excited! In truth, my dear Marquise, I have long wished——

Marquise. No, no—what was the shouting?

Duc. Well—er—in fact, I imagine that the first of our friends must have arrived.

Marquise. (*Low.*) Arrived! (*He smiles, takes her hand and kisses it, then holds out the rouge-box with an air of mockery.*) No, no—I won't.

Duc. Why, no! We've no need of it. Let me bring the colour to your cheeks. Once on a time I—well, at least I have been there when it came. Ah, it comes now! Listen to me. I have long wished to——

Marquise. To explain?

Duc. (*Smiling.*) Ah, you were always a little—a little—exacting. No, no; nobody can explain these things. I wished only to——

Marquise. You daren't apologise!

Duc. Ah, and you never were quite just to my good breeding. No again! I wished to tell you frankly that I made a very great mistake. (*A voice from the crowd shouts "To Hell with them!" The Duc laughs.*) The Church's prerogatives follow the King's! Ah well! A terrible mistake, Marquise.

Marquise. (*Low, but eagerly.*) You suspected me of——? Was that why you——?

Duc. No. I suspected her.

Marquise. Her? But of what?

Duc. Of wit, madame, and of charm. I was most unjust.

Marquise. (*Smiling.*) And not perhaps of one other thing—in which respect you were unjust too?

Duc. (*Looking at her a moment and then smiling.*) No, no—on my honour I was not refused.

Marquise. Oh, not refused! (*She turns away.*)

Duc. Shall I tell you the reason of that?

Marquise. Can't I—I at least—guess the reason?

Duc. You least of all can guess it. I did not ask, Marquise.

Marquise. (*Turning quickly to him.*) You didn't——?

Duc. On my word, no. You'll ask me why not?

Marquise. Why not, indeed? It was unlike you, monsieur.

Duc. I thought of you—and behold, it became impossible. At the moment your image—— (*Another great shout is heard.*) Hum, they never get tired of the sight, it seems. (*He glances at the MARQUISE, but she has not noticed the shout. He takes her hand and presses it gently.*)

Marquise. Is it true? You ought to tell the truth now.

Duc. Now? (*Laughs.*) Ah, yes!

Marquise. Really true? (*She draws her hand away sharply.*)

Duc. You don't believe me?

Marquise. Yes, I believe you. But—but how stupid you were, monsieur!

Duc. Eh?

Marquise. How stupid you were, monsieur.

Duc. True. (*Takes snuff.*) True, by heaven! I was—monstrous stupid.

Marquise. To think that you could——

Duc. Love her?

Marquise. Forget me, monsieur. Alas, I lose all my pride in—— (*Pauses.*)

Duc. In——? (*Pauses. They smile and she blushes.*)

Marquise. In any compliments you may have paid me.

Duc. (*Softly.*) You won't forgive me? Well, it's the fashion now! I must die twice to-day?

Marquise. Twice—die twice! (*Looks at him and trembles a little.*) I—I had almost forgotten what—where we were. (*A fierce shout is heard, sounding nearer now.*) Louis, they'll—they'll do nothing worse than—kill me? You don't answer, Louis!

Duc. Yes, yes. There's no fear—no fear of that.

Marquise. But you hesitated.

Duc. (*Low.*) If we must talk of death, pray let it be of mine. (*She glances at him and lays her hand on his for a moment.*) Yours seems too—too—— (*Smiles.*) I want a word. Well, too incongruous, dear Marquise.

Marquise. I have confessed—and forgiven all my enemies.

Duc. Am I your enemy? Have you no forgiveness left for friends? (*She looks at him gravely for a moment, then smiles reluctantly.*) Why, we were growing grave! That would be a bad ending.

Marquise. The most seemly ending!

Duc. For me? Oh, oh, Marquise! They'd think they'd got hold of the wrong man. Your hand's a trifle cold.

Marquise. (*Laughing nervously.*) Well, if it is? We've stopped again! Are we near now?

Duc. At the entrance of the *Place*, I believe. (*Looks at her and goes on quickly.*) You and I have walked here together before now. You remember? Alone together—so often. (*Rises.*) Forgive me—as you face towards the *Place* the sun is in your eyes. Pray sit the other way. It's pleasanter to look towards the river—cooler to the eye. You remember our walks, dear Marquise?

Marquise. You still look towards the *Place*, though.

Duc. (*Laughing.*) Why yes! I can't have the dogs saying I daren't——

Marquise. Are they to say it of me then, monsieur? (*She rises and stands by him, looking towards the Place, where the scaffold is now visible.*)

Duc. (*Removing his hat and bowing humbly.*) I beg your pardon.

Marquise. (*Very low.*) Dear Louis, dear Louis!

Duc. I thought life done. I was wrong a thousand times!

Marquise. I cried when you——

Duc. Ah, if I beg them to torture me—— Would that atone?

Marquise. They found me crying. Think of the humiliation!

Duc. Oh, I must have a talk with a priest—after all I must! (*She turns away with a sob and then a gasping laugh.*) Ay, that's life, dearest Marquise—and perhaps it's the other thing too.

Marquise. I care less now, Louis.

Duc. Give me your hand a minute. Yes, it's warmer now. And the rouge—why, madame, I swear the rouge is utterly superfluous! Shall we throw it to the mob? It's their favourite colour. I'll leave it in the cart—when they turn on one another, some hero may be glad of it. Margot, dear Margot, are you cold? I thought you shivered as your arm touched mine.

Marquise. (*Low.*) No. I'm—I'm just a little afraid, Louis.

Duc. Oh no, no, no—Margot, no. You're cold. Or—(*Smiling.*) Come, flatter me. Say it's agitation—say it's joy. Come, Margot, say that!

Marquise. (*Drawing nearer.*) They didn't know what they were doing when they sent me with you.

Duc. The ignorance of the fellows is extraordinary.

Marquise. Because—everybody knew.

Duc. Alas, I was never too discreet! (*More shouts are heard. The Guard in charge of the tumbril cries "Ready? We're the last."*) Hum! For to-day, I suppose he means! (*He looks at her; her lips are moving. He takes off his hat and stands bareheaded. The movement of her lips ceases and she turns to him. He smiles.*) I think you can have little need of prayer.

Marquise. You say that? You?

Duc. Yes, I say that, Margot. (*They are at the foot of the scaffold now.*) As for me—well, I have always followed the fashion—and prayers are not the fashion now. I was bitten by M. de Voltaire. By the way, perhaps he's had something to do with this—and we made him the fashion! How whimsical! (*The National Guard turns and points his finger towards the scaffold.*) What? Oh, at your service, monsieur. (*He turns to the MARQUISE, smiling.*) I must leave you—this time in love.

Marquise. (*Stretching out her hands.*) Let me go first.

Duc. On my soul, I couldn't! (*Softly.*) The way is dark, let me show it you.

Marquise. Louis, Louis!

Duc. And now—look now towards the river. Pray—towards the river! I want you to remember me at my best. And—Margot—you mustn't—you mustn't want the rouge. Your hand's warm—still warm.

Marquise. (*Vehemently.*) I will go first. I—I can't see you—I will go first.

Duc. Your will is my law always. (*She turns to descend.*) It has been pleasant to come with you.

Marquise. It was—easier—to come with you.

Duc. I am forgiven, Margot?

Marquise. Louis, dear Louis! (*He raises her hand to his lips. She goes. He stands bareheaded, facing the scaffold while she suffers. Then he puts his hat on and mounts the scaffold. They carry past him the basket containing her head. A priest holds a crucifix before him. He starts and bows to the priest.*)

Duc. I beg your pardon, father, but—I knew the lady very well. She died bravely, eh? *Pardon?* Think how we have lived as well as how we die? Yes, yes; most just and—er—apposite. Die truly penitent? Ah yes, yes. Forgive me—I'm not master of my time. (*He bows and turns to the executioner and his assistants.*) Don't keep me waiting. My desire is to follow Madame la Marquise. What? "The woman died well!" God save us—the woman! Well, as you please. Shall we say—— (*He places himself beneath the knife.*) Shall we say—Margot? Nobody was ever like Margot. (*Smiles, then looks up.*) Well? Oh, you wait for me. Good! *Messieurs, allez!*

THE RIDDLE OF COUNTESS RUNA

HAVING reduced the rest of his kingdom to obedience in three arduous campaigns, King Stanislas sat himself down with a great army before the strong place of Or, which was held against him by Runa, daughter of Count Theobald the Fierce. For Countess Runa said that since her father had paid neither obedience nor tribute to the King's father for fifty years, neither would she pay obedience or tribute to the King, nor would she open the city gates to him save at her own time and by her own will. So the King came and enveloped the city on all sides, so that none could pass in or out, and sent his heralds to Countess Runa demanding surrender; in default of which he would storm the ramparts, sack the city, and lay the citadel level with the earth, in such wise that men should not remember the place where it had been.

Sitting on her high chair, beneath the painted window through which the sun struck athwart her fair hair, Runa heard the message.

"Tell the King—for a king he is, though no king of mine—that we are well armed and have knights of fame with us. Tell him that we are provisioned for more months than he shall reign years, and that we will tire him sooner than he can starve us."

She ceased speaking, and the principal herald, bowing low, asked: "Is that all the message?"

"No, there is more. Tell him that the daughter of Count Theobald the Fierce rules in the city of Or."

Bowing again, the principal herald asked: "Is that all the message?"

Runa sat silent for a minute. Then she said: "No, there is more. Tell the King that he must carry the citadel before he can pass the ramparts."

The principal herald frowned, then smiled and said: "But with deference, madam, how can that be? For the citadel is high on a rock, and the city lies round it below, and again round the city lie the ramparts. How, then, shall the King carry the citadel before——?"

Runa raised her brows in weariness.

"Your speech is as long as your siege will be," she said. "You are a mouthpiece, Sir Herald, not an interpreter. Begone, and say to the King what I have given you to say."

So the heralds returned to King Stanislas and gave him Runa's answer; but the King, in his wrath, listened more to the first part of it than to the last, and assaulted the ramparts fiercely for three days. But Runa's men rolled his men back with loss and in confusion, for they were in good heart because of the message Runa had sent. "For," they said, "our Countess has bidden the King perform what is impossible before she will yield the city; and as we trusted Theobald the father, so we trust the daughter Runa."

After his three assaults had failed, King Stanislas waited in quiet for a month, drawing his cordon yet more closely round the city. Then he sent again to the Countess, saying that he would spend the first half of his reign outside the walls of Or, provided he could spend the second half of it inside the same; yet if she would yield now, she should have his favour and all her wealth; but if she would not yield, she must await starvation and sack and the extremity of his anger. To which summons she answered only: "Tell the King that he must carry the citadel before he can pass the ramparts." And she would say no more to the heralds.

"A plague on her!" cried Stanislas. "A plague on the woman and her insolent riddles! Of what appearance is she? I have never seen her."

“As the sun for beauty and the moon for dignity,” said the principal herald, whose occupation naturally bred eloquence.

“Stuff!” said King Stanislas very crossly.

The herald bowed, but with an offended air.

“Does she seem sane?” asked Stanislas.

“Perfectly sane, sire,” answered the herald. “Although, as your Majesty deigns to intimate, the purport of her message is certainly not such as might reasonably be expected from a lady presumably endowed with——”

“I am ready for the next audience,” said King Stanislas to his Chamberlain.

And after the next audience he sat down and thought. But, as often happens with meaner men, he took nothing by it, except a pain in the head and a temper much the worse. So that he ordered three more assaults on the ramparts of the City of Or, which ended as the first three had; and then sent another summons to Countess Runa, to which she returned the same answer. And for the life of him the King could see in it no meaning save that never in all his life should he pass the ramparts. “Only an army of birds could do what she says!” he declared peevishly. Indeed he was so chagrined and shamed that he would then and there have raised the siege and returned to the capital, had it not been for the unfortunate circumstance that, on leaving it, he had publicly and solemnly vowed never to return, nor to show himself to his lieges there, unless and until he should be master of the City of Or. So there he was, unable to enter either city, and saddled with a great army to feed, winter coming on, and the entire situation, as his Chancellor observed, full of perplexity. On the top of all this, too, there were constant sounds and signs of merriment and plenty within the city, and the Countess’s men, when they had eaten, took to flinging the bones of their meat to the besiegers outside—an action most insulting, however one might be pleased to interpret it.

Meanwhile Countess Runa sat among her ladies and knights, on her high chair under the emblazoned window, with the sun striking athwart her fair hair. Often she smiled; once or twice she sighed. Perhaps she was wondering what King Stanislas would do next—and when he would understand her message.

II

THERE was with King Stanislas’ army a certain friar named Nicholas, a man who was pious, brave, and cheerful, although, in the judgment of some, more given to good-fellowship and conviviality than became his sacred profession. He was a shrewd fellow too, and had a good wit; and for all these qualities Stanislas held him in good will and allowed him some degree of familiarity. Friar Nicholas had heard the Countess Runa’s message, which, indeed, had leaked through the army and been much discussed and canvassed round the camp fires. The friar had listened to all the talk, agreeing with every man in turn, nodding his head wisely, but holding his tongue closely. No man heard him utter any opinion whatsoever as to what Countess Runa meant—supposing her to mean anything save defiance pure and simple.

One night, when the King sat in his tent very moody and sore out of heart with his undertaking, the flap of the tent was lifted, and Friar Nicholas stood there.

“I did not summon you,” said the King.

“David did not summon Nathan,” said Nicholas. “But he came to him.”

“What ewe-lamb is it that I have taken?” Stanislas asked, smiling, for he was glad to be rid of his thoughts and have company. “Let Nathan drink with David,” he added, pushing a flagon of wine towards Nicholas, who, on this invitation, let the flap of the tent fall behind him and came in. “Is the ewe-lamb this one city which of all the realm holds out against me? Is Or the ewe-lamb of Countess Runa?”

“The City of Or is the ewe-lamb,” said Nicholas, after he had drunk.

“But in the first place, O Prophet, I have not taken it—a curse on it! And, in the second, it is mine by right, as by right it was my father’s before me. Why, then, am I to be denounced by my holy Prophet?”

“I do not come to denounce you for having taken it, but to show you how to take it,” answered Nicholas. And he stood there, in the centre of the tent, wrapping his frock close round him. “O King,” said he, “I will put a question to you.”

The King leant back in his chair. “I will listen and answer,” he said.

“Where is the citadel of an army, O King?” asked Nicholas.

“An army has no citadel,” answered the King. “A city has a citadel, a fortress of stone or of brick, set in the middle of it and on high. But an army lies in tents or on the bare ground, moving hither and thither. An army has no citadel, O Prophet! Are you answered?”

“Where is the citadel of an army, O King?” asked Nicholas again.

“An army has no citadel,” replied the King. “A city that is made of brick and of stone has a citadel. But an army is not of brick and stone, but is made and composed only of men, of their flesh and bones, their sinews and muscles, their brains and hearts. An army has no citadel, O Prophet! Are you answered?”

“Where is the citadel of an army, O King?” asked Nicholas for the third time.

Then, seeing that he had a meaning, the King took thought; for many minutes he sat in meditation, while Nicholas stood in the centre of the tent, never moving, with his eyes set on the King’s face.

At last the King answered.

“An army has a citadel,” he said. “The citadel of an army is the stout heart of him who leads it. His heart is its citadel, O Prophet! Are you answered?”

“You have spoken it. I am answered, O King!” said Nicholas, and he turned and went out from the King’s tent.

But the King sprang to his feet with an eager cry. “It is not otherwise with a city!” he cried. “And before I can pass the ramparts of Or, I must carry the citadel!”

III

COUNTESS RUNA sat in her high chair under the emblazoned window of the great hall, with her ladies and knights about her, and one of her officers craved leave to bring a prisoner into her presence. Leave given, the officer presented his charge—a tall and comely young man, standing between two guards, yet bearing himself proudly and with a free man's carriage of his head. His hair was dark, his eyes blue, his shoulders broad; he was long in the leg and lean in the flank. Runa suffered her eyes to glance at him in approval.

“Where did you find him?” she asked of the officer.

“He came late last night to the southern gate,” the officer answered, “and begged asylum from the anger of King Stanislas.”

“He's a deserter, then?” she asked, frowning a little.

“He has told us nothing. He would tell his story, he said, to your Highness only.”

“Let him speak,” she said, taking a peacock fan from one of her ladies and half hiding her face behind it.

“Speak, prisoner,” said the officer.

“If I am a prisoner, it is by my own will,” said the stranger; “but I was in such straits that my will had no alternative save to cause me to throw myself on the mercy of your Highness. Yet I am no traitor, and wish naught but good to my lord King Stanislas.”

“Then you had best wish that he shall return to his own city and leave mine alone,” said Runa.

The knights smiled and the ladies tittered. The stranger took no heed of these things, nor, as it seemed, of her Highness's remark.

“I was high in the King's confidence,” he said. “He deemed me a wise man, and held that I knew all that was to be known, and that by my aid alone he could discover all that was hidden, and unravel any riddle, however difficult. Through three victorious campaigns I was by his side, and then he brought me to the walls of Or, not doubting that by my valour and counsel he should be enabled to make himself master of the city. I do not boast. I repeat only what the King has many a time said of me, both publicly and when we two were alone.”

“Then one man at least has a good esteem of you,” said Runa. “Indeed, as I think, two.”

Again the ladies tittered and the knights smiled. But the stranger was unmoved.

“Then,” he went on in a smooth equable voice whose rich tones struck pleasantly on their ears and made the ladies sorry for their mocking, “came the day, fatal to me, when your Highness was pleased to send his Majesty a message. For when the King asked me the meaning of your riddle—asked how a man could carry the citadel before he passed the ramparts—I told him to take no heed of it, for it was an idle vaunt. And he believed me and assaulted the ramparts three times in vain. And in vain brave men died. Again came your message, and when the King asked me the meaning of it, I said it was insolent defiance. And he believed me, and assaulted the ramparts three times in vain. And in vain brave men died. Then came the message a third time, and the King demanded of me the meaning of it. But I did not know the meaning, and, lest more men should die, I confessed to him that I could not read the riddle.”

“You learnt wisdom late and at a cost,” said Runa, setting her eyes on him over the top of the peacock fan.

“When I confessed that, he called me a blockhead and, with many hard words, told me plainly that all my credit stood on my reading him that riddle, and reading it, the third time, right; and that if I could not read it, I could never see home again nor my own people, but that my life must end here outside the walls of the city, and end in disgrace and defeat. So the King said to me in his wrath, and in fear of him and of the death he threatened I stole by night from his camp and delivered myself to the officer of your Highness’s watch at the southern gate of the city.”

“What do you want of me?” asked Runa.

“Either the answer to the riddle, that I may carry it back to the King forthwith and have his favour again——”

“And failing that?” said Runa, smiling.

“Leave to abide here for a while, in the hope that by my own wit I may discover the meaning.”

The knights laughed and murmured scornfully, but the ladies, on whom the stranger’s appearance had made no small impression, sighed sadly, as though it were lamentable to hear a personable brave man ask such foolish things. But Runa sank her head in thought. When she raised her eyes she met those of the stranger fixed full on her. They gleamed blue and keen. A faint flush rose on Runa’s cheek—or was it a red light from the painted window over her head?

“Seven days and seven nights you may abide here,” she said, “but on condition that at the end of that time my officers deliver you to your King again. If by then you have read the riddle, it will be good for the King and for you. But if you have not read it, let it be evil for you as for him—evil unto death. How say you?”

“I accept the condition, and I will abide,” said the stranger.

Runa signed that he should be led forth. “And leave me alone, all of you,” she said.

IV

SEVEN days and seven nights, then, the stranger abode in the city. Every day he held speech with Runa, both in the great hall, with the ladies and the knights, and privately. Much he told her concerning the kingdom and the King, and she showed him all the wealth and power of her city. But when she bade him speak of himself, he would answer, “I am nothing without the King,” and would say no more of himself, so that she was full of wonder about him, and pondered more and more as to who he was and whence he came. And meanwhile the King’s army lay idle in its tents and made no assault on the ramparts.

At last, on the third day, she said to him: “Tell me why the King your master leaves all his great kingdom and makes war on my poor city?”

“The King,” he answered, “makes war that peace may come, and union, and power. In three years he has brought peace to all the kingdom. This city alone is left, a foe set among

friends, disobedient among the obedient, a weakness amidst that which is strong. Without the kingdom the city is nothing, and without the city the kingdom is feeble.”

Runa knit her brows and heard him in silence. But after a while she said:

“Had the King sent an embassy to me with these words, it may be that I should have listened. But he sent me only a summons to surrender.”

The next day she sent for him again and said: “If I give up my city and submit myself to the King, what am I then—I who was Runa of Or?”

“You will be high in the King’s counsel and in his love,” he answered.

“I do not covet the King’s love,” said Runa, knitting her brows again.

“You do not know what it is, madam,” he said softly.

On the fifth day she sent for him again, and privately, and said to him:

“If I give up my city and submit myself to the King, and there is peace in the kingdom such as there has not been since the day my father Count Theobald ruled in Or, what will the King do?”

“He will enrich the kingdom, and make it fair and secure it against all foes.”

“And what will you do?” she asked.

“I shall be by the King’s side,” he answered, “if by chance I can give him good counsel.”

“And he will reward you with high honour?”

“All honour is at once mine if I read the riddle,” he replied.

“You have not read it?”

“I seek to read it in your eyes,” he answered boldly, and Runa turned her glance away from him, lest he should read the riddle there.

On the seventh day, in the evening, she sent for him again in secret, unknown to any of her knights or ladies. The great hall in which she sat alone was dimly lighted; only her face, her fair hair, and her rich robe of white gleamed from the gloom. He came and stood before her.

“To-morrow at sunrise,” she said, “I must deliver you to the King your master according to our agreement. What gift do you carry in your hand to turn his wrath into favour?”

“If I do not bear in my hand the keys of the citadel, I bear nothing,” he answered.

There fell a long silence between them, and the great hall was marvellously still. The stranger drew very near to Countess Runa and stood by the arm of her high chair.

“Madam, farewell,” he said.

She looked up at him and murmured softly: “Farewell.”

“Yet we shall meet again.”

“When?” she asked, with lips just parted and eyes that strained to see his face.

“In a day’s time, outside the ramparts.”

“Outside the ramparts?”

“Yes.” He knelt before her and kissed her hand. “The citadel of the city is the heart of its mistress,” he said.

She rose suddenly to her feet and would have spoken, but he raised his hand to impose silence on her. With one long look he turned away and left her alone, standing under the

emblazoned window, through which one ray of moonlight caught her fair hair and illumined it.

She stood with clasped hands, her eyes still set on the door by which he had gone out.

“My heart knows its lord,” she whispered. “I have been speaking with my King.”

V

ON the morrow, in the afternoon, King Stanislas, being returned from a journey on which affairs of State had called him, and having assumed again the command of his army, led it forth in battle array, and took up his position in the plain before the southern gate, not far from the ramparts of the city.

“We are going to assault the ramparts again,” said an old soldier to Friar Nicholas, who was there to see what passed and to exercise his sacred functions in case need arose.

“Nay, I think the King is going to carry the citadel,” answered the Friar, with a laugh. And all of them laughed, thinking that he jested at the King’s expense.

As the clock struck four the King rode forth, magnificently appointed, and bestriding a black war-horse of great strength and spirit. When he was two hundred yards from the walls, he halted all his army and rode forward alone, save for the herald by his side. Coming close under the ramparts, which were thronged with Countess Runa’s knights and men-at-arms, to say nothing of those who were ready to pour down stones and molten pitch and heavy bars of iron on the assaulters, he bade the herald cry that King Stanislas would speak with her Highness the Countess Runa.

Much stir arose on the ramparts at this message, but the King sat calm and motionless on his great black horse. So passed half-an-hour or so. Then the city gate rolled open, and Runa rode forth, in a robe of scarlet, seated on a white palfrey, and with all her knights and ladies round about her.

“This is no assault on the ramparts,” said the old soldier to Friar Nicholas, grumbling because there was danger that he should be balked of a fight.

“I think you will soon pass them, though,” said Nicholas.

When the King saw Countess Runa he touched his horse with the spur and rode up to her where she awaited his coming. When she saw him, her eyes brightened to a new brilliance. Yet she showed no wonder.

“My heart knew,” she said, when her ladies and her knights marvelled.

King Stanislas saluted her.

“Whither, my King?” she asked.

He leant down, put his arm about her waist, and lifted her from her palfrey. A great shout went up from the army in the plain and from the defenders on the walls. The King set her in front of him on his great horse.

“I carry the citadel,” he said. “And now I will pass the ramparts”; and they two rode together into the city amidst mighty rejoicings.

VI

TO which story there are a number of morals quite out of proportion to its size.

This for Kings and Rulers: That they should state their objects openly—provided that they wish to have them known.

This for Children: That what their fathers did for fifty years, it may be wise for them to cease from doing immediately—especially if they wish to make good marriages.

This for Men: That though it be impossible that a woman should mean what she says, yet she means something by what she says—at any rate, if she says it three times.

This for Women: That though the ramparts protect the citadel, the citadel may often betray the ramparts.

And this for Everybody: That he who devotes a good intelligence to enlightening others is like unto a man who cooks his neighbour’s dinner without being invited to table. For when once the citadel was carried, the ramparts passed, and the lovers happy, neither King nor Countess nor anybody else gave another thought to poor Friar Nicholas!

THE LADY AND THE FLAGON

THE DUKE OF BELLEVILLE—which name, by the way, you must pronounce by no means according to its spelling, if you would be in the fashion; for as Belvoir is Beevor, and Beauchamp is Beecham, even so on polite lips Belleville is Bevvle—the Duke of Belleville shut the hall door behind him, and put his latchkey into the pocket of his trousers. It was but ten in the evening, yet the house was as still as though it had been two in the morning. All was dark, save for a dim jet of gas in the little sitting-room; the blinds were all down; from without the villa seemed uninhabited, and the rare passer-by—for rare was he in the quiet lane adjoining but not facing Hampstead Heath—set it down as being to let. It was a whim of the Duke’s to keep it empty; when the world bored him, he fled there for solitude; not even the presence of a servant was allowed, lest his meditations should be disturbed. It was long since he had come; but to-night weariness had afflicted him, and, by a sudden change of plan, he had made for his hiding-place in lieu of attending a Public Meeting, at which he had been advertised to take the chair. The desertion sat lightly on his conscience, and he heaved a sigh of relief, as, having turned up the gas, he flung himself into an arm-chair and lit a cigar. The Duke of Belleville was thirty years of age; he was unmarried; he had held the title since he

was fifteen; he seemed to himself rather old. He was at this moment yawning. Now when a man yawns at ten o'clock in the evening something is wrong with his digestion or his spirits. The Duke had a perfect digestion.

"I should define wealth," murmured the Duke, between his yawns, "as an unlimited command of the sources of *ennui*, rank as a satirical emphasising of human equality, culture as a curtailment of pleasures, knowledge as the death of interest." Yawning again, he rose, drew up the blind, and flung open the window. The summer night was fine and warm. Although there were a couple of dozen other houses scattered here and there about the lane, not a soul was to be seen. The Duke stood for a long while looking out. His cigar burnt low and he flung it away. Presently he heard a church clock strike eleven. At the same moment he perceived a tall and burly figure approaching from the end of the lane. Its approach was slow and interrupted, for it paused at every house. A moment's further inspection revealed in it a policeman on his beat.

"He's trying the windows and doors," remarked the Duke to himself. Then his eyes brightened. "There are possibilities in a door always," he murmured, and his thoughts flew off to the great doors of history and fiction—the doors that were locked when by all laws human and divine they should have been open, and the even more interesting doors that proved to be open and yielded to pressure when any man would have staked his life on their being bolted, barred, and impregnable. "A door has the interest of death," said he. "For how can you know what is on the other side till you have passed through it? Now suppose that fellow found a door open, and passed through it, and, turning the rays of his lantern on the darkness within, saw revealed to him—Heavens!" cried the Duke, interrupting himself in great excitement, "is all this to be wasted on a policeman?" And without a moment's hesitation, he leant out of the window and shouted, "Constable, constable!"—which is, as all the world knows, the politest mode of addressing a policeman.

The policeman, perceiving the Duke and the urgency of the Duke's summons, left his examination of the doors in the lane and ran hastily up to the window of the villa.

"Did you call, sir?" he asked.

"Don't you know me?" inquired the Duke, turning a little, so that the light within the room should fall on his features.

"I beg your Grace's pardon," cried the policeman. "Your Grace gave me a sovereign last Christmas. The Duke of Belle-ville, isn't it, your Grace?"

"You will know," said the Duke patiently, "how to pronounce my name when I tell you that it rhymes with 'Devil.' Thus: 'Devvle, Bevvle.' "

"Yes, your Grace. You called me?"

"I did. Do you often find doors open when they ought to be shut?"

"Almost every night, your Grace."

"What do you do?"

"Knock, your Grace."

"Good heavens," murmured the Duke, "how this man throws away his opportunities!" Then he leant forward, and laying his hand on the policeman's shoulder drew him nearer, and began to speak to him in a low tone.

"I couldn't, your Grace," urged the policeman. "If I was found out I should get the sack."

"You should come to no harm by that."

“And if your Grace was found out——”

“You can leave that to me,” interrupted the Duke.

Presently the policeman, acting on the Duke’s invitation, climbed into the window of the villa, and the conversation was continued across the table. The Duke urged, produced money, gave his word to be responsible for the policeman’s future; the policeman’s resistance grew less strong.

“I am about your height and build,” said the Duke. “It is but for a few hours, and you can spend them very comfortably in the kitchen. Before six o’clock I will be back.”

“If the Inspector comes round, your Grace?”

“You must take a little risk for twenty pounds,” the Duke reminded him.

The struggle could end but one way. A quarter of an hour later the policeman, attired in the Duke’s overcoat, sat by the kitchen hearth, while the Duke, equipped in the policeman’s garments, prepared to leave the house and take his place on the beat.

“I shall put out all lights and shut the door,” said he. “The window of this kitchen looks out to the back, and you will not be seen. You will particularly oblige me by remaining here and taking no notice of anything that may occur till I return and call you.”

“But, your Grace, if there’s murder done——”

“We can hardly expect that,” interrupted the Duke, a little wistfully. Yet, although, remembering how the humdrum permeates life, he would not pitch his anticipations too high, the Duke started on the expedition with great zest and lively hopes. The position he had assumed, the mere office that he discharged vicariously, seemed to his fancy a conductor that must catch and absorb the lightning of adventurous incident. His big-buttoned coat, his helmet, the lantern he carried, his deftly hidden truncheon, combined to make him the centre of anything that might move, and to involve him in coils of crime or of romance. He refused to be disappointed although he tried a dozen doors and found all securely fastened. For never till the last, till fortune was desperate and escape a vanished dream, was wont to come that marvellous Door that gaped open-mouthed. Ah! The Duke started violently, the blood rushing to his face and his heart beating quick. Here, at the end of the lane most remote from his own villa, at a small two-storeyed house bright with green paint and flowering creepers, here, in the most unlikely, most inevitable place, was the open door. Barred? It was not even shut, but hung loose, swaying gently to and fro, with a subdued bang at each encounter with the doorpost. Without a moment’s hesitation the Duke pushed it open. He stood in a dark passage. He turned the glare of his bull’s-eye on the gloom, which melted as the column of light pierced it, and he saw—

“There is nothing at all,” said the Duke of Belleville with a sigh.

Nor, indeed, was there, save an umbrella-rack, a hatstand, and an engraving of the Queen’s Coronation—things which had no importance for the Duke.

“They are only what one might expect,” said he.

Yet he persevered and began to mount the stairs with a silent cautious tread. He had not felt it necessary to put on the policeman’s boots, and his thin-soled well-made boots neither creaked nor crunched as he climbed, resting one hand on the balustrade and holding his lantern in the other. Yet suddenly something touched his hand, and a bell rang out, loud, clear and tinkling. A moment later came a scream; the Duke paused in some bewilderment. Then he

mounted a few more steps till he was on the landing. A door to his right was cautiously opened; an old gentleman's head appeared.

"Thank heaven, it's the police!" cried the old gentleman. Then he pulled his head in and said, "Only the police, my dear." Then he put his head out again and asked, "What in the world is the matter? I thought you were burglars when I heard the alarm."

"Your hall door was standing open," said the Duke accusingly.

"Tut, tut, tut! How very careless of me, to be sure! And I thought I locked it! Actually open! Dear me! I'm much obliged to you."

A look of disappointment had by now spread over the Duke's face.

"Didn't you leave it open on purpose?" he asked. "Come now! You can trust me."

"On purpose? Do you take me for a fool?" cried the old gentleman.

"A man who leaves his door open on purpose may or may not be a fool," said the Duke. "But there is no doubt about a man who leaves it open without a purpose," and, so saying, the Duke turned, walked downstairs, and, going out, slammed the door behind him. He was deeply disgusted.

When, however, he had recovered a little from his chagrin, he began to pace up and down the lane. It was now past midnight, and all was very quiet. The Duke began to fear that Fortune, never weary of tormenting him, meant to deny all its interest to his experiment. But suddenly, when he was exactly opposite his own house, he observed a young man standing in front of it. The stranger was tall and well made; he wore a black cloth Inverness, which, hanging open at the throat, showed a white tie and a snowy shirt front. The young man seemed to be gazing thoughtfully at the Duke's villa. The Duke walked quietly up to him, as though he meant to pass by. The young man, however, perceiving him, turned to him and said:

"It's very annoying, but I have lost my latchkey, and I don't know how to get into my house."

"Indeed, sir?" said the Duke sympathetically. "Which is your house?"

"This," answered the young man, pointing to the Duke's villa.

The Duke could not entirely repress a slight movement of surprise and pleasure.

"This your house? Then you are——?" he began.

"Yes, yes, the Duke of Belleville," interrupted the young man. "But there's nobody in the house. I'm not expected——"

"I suppose not," murmured the Duke.

"There are no servants, and I don't know how to get in. It's very awkward, because I'm expecting a—a friend to call."

"With my assistance," said the Duke deferentially, "your Grace might effect an entry by the window."

"True!" cried the young man. "Bring your lantern and give me a light. Look here, I don't want this talked about."

"It is a matter quite between ourselves, your Grace," the Duke assured him, as he led the way to the window.

"By-the-by, you might help me in another matter if you like. I'll make it worth your while."

"I shall be very glad," said the Duke.

“Could you be spared from your beat for an hour?”

“It might be possible.”

“Good. Come in with me, and we’ll talk it over.”

The Duke had by this time opened the window of his villa; he gave the young man a leg-up, and afterwards climbed in himself.

“Shut the window again,” commanded the stranger. “Oh, and you might as well just close the shutters.”

“Certainly, your Grace,” said the Duke, and he did as he was bid.

The young man began to move round the room, examining the articles that furnished the side-tables and decorated the walls. The Duke of Belleville had been for a year or two an eager collector of antique plate, and had acquired some fine specimens in both gold and silver. Some of these were now in the villa, and the young man scrutinised them with close attention.

“Dear me,” said he in a vexed tone, as he returned to the hearth, “I thought the Queen Bess flagon was here. Surely I sent it here from Belleville Castle!”

The Duke smiled; the Queen Bess flagon had never been at Belleville Castle, and it was now in a small locked cabinet which stood on the mantelpiece. He made no remark; a suspicion had begun to take shape in his mind concerning this strange visitor. Two thousand seven hundred and forty guineas was the price that he had paid for the Queen Bess flagon; all the other specimens in the little room, taken together, might be worth perhaps a quarter as much.

“Your Grace spoke of some other matter in which I might assist you?” he suggested, for the young man seemed to have fallen into a reverie.

“Why, yes. As I tell you, I expect a friend; and it looks very absurd to have no servant. You’re sure to find a suit of dress clothes in my bedroom. Pray put them on and represent my valet. You can resume your uniform afterwards.”

The Duke bowed and left the room. The moment the door closed behind him he made the best of his way to the kitchen. A few words were enough to impart his suspicions to the policeman. A daring and ingenious scheme was evidently on foot, its object being the theft of the Queen Bess flagon. Even now, unless they acted quickly, the young man might lay hands on the cabinet in which the treasure lay and be off with it. In a trice the Duke had discarded the police uniform, its rightful owner had resumed it, and the Duke was again in the convenient black suit which befits any man, be he duke or valet. Then the kitchen window was cautiously opened, and the policeman crawled silently round to the front of the house; here he lay in waiting for a summons or for the appearance of a visitor. The Duke returned immediately to the sitting-room.

On entering, he perceived the young man standing in front of the locked cabinet, and regarding it with a melancholy air. The Duke’s appearance roused him, and he glanced with visible surprise at the distinguished and aristocratic figure which the supposed policeman presented. But he made no comment and his first words were about the flagon.

“Now I come to remember,” said he, “I put the Queen Bess flagon in this cabinet. It must be so, although, as I have left my key at my rooms in St James’s Street, I can’t satisfy myself on the point.”

The Duke, now perfectly convinced of the character of his visitor, waited only to see him lay his hands on the cabinet. Such an action would be the signal for his instant arrest. But

before the young man had time either to speak again or to put out his hand towards the cabinet, there came the sound of wheels quickly approaching the villa. A moment later a neat brougham rolled up to the door. The young man darted to the window, tore open the shutters, and looked out. The Duke, suspecting the arrival of confederates, turned towards the cabinet and took his stand in front of it.

“Go and open the door,” ordered the young man, turning round. “Don’t keep the lady waiting outside at this time of night.”

Curiosity conquered prudence; the Duke set more value on a night’s amusement than on the Queen Bess flagon. He went obediently and opened the door of the villa. On the step stood a young and very handsome girl. Great agitation was evident in her manner.

“Is—is the Duke here?” she asked.

“Yes, madam. If I lead you to the sitting-room, you will find him there,” answered the Duke gravely; and with a bow he preceded her along the passage.

When they reached the room, the lady, passing by him, darted forward and flung herself affectionately into the young man’s arms. He greeted her with equal warmth, while the Duke stood in the doorway in some natural embarrassment.

“I escaped so successfully!” cried the lady. “My aunt went to bed at eleven; so did I. At twelve I got up and dressed. Not a soul heard me come downstairs, and the brougham was waiting at the door just as you said.”

“My darling!” murmured the young man fondly. “Now, indeed, is our happiness certain. By to-morrow morning we shall be safe from all pursuit.” Then he turned to the Duke. “I need not tell you,” said he, “that you must observe silence on this matter. Oblige me now by going to my room and packing a bag; you’ll know what I shall want for two or three days; I can give you a quarter of an hour.”

The Duke stood in momentary hesitation. He was bewildered at the sudden change in the position caused by the appearance of this girl. Was he assisting, then, not at a refined and ingenious burglary, but at another kind of trick? The disguise assumed by the young man might have for its object the deception of a trustful girl, and not an abduction of the Queen Bess flagon.

“Well, why don’t you obey?” asked the young man sharply; and, stepping up to the Duke, he thrust a ten-pound note into his hand, whispering, “Play your part, and earn your money, you fool.”

The Duke lingered no longer. Leaving the room, he walked straight, rapidly, and with a firm tread, upstairs. When he reached the top he paused to listen. All was still! Stay! A moment later he heard a slight noise—the noise of some metal instrument turning, proceeding from the room which he had just left. The Duke sat down on the landing and took off his boots. Then with silent feet he crept cautiously downstairs again. He paused to listen for an instant outside the sitting-room door. Voices were audible, but he could not hear the words. The occupants of the room were moving about. He heard a low amused laugh. Then he pursued his way to the hall door. He had not completely closed it after admitting the lady, and he now slipped out without a sound. The brougham stood in front of the door. The Duke dodged behind it, and the driver, who was leaning forward on his seat, did not see him. The next moment he was crouching down by the side of his friend the policeman, waiting for the next development in the plot of this comedy, or crime, or whatever it might turn out to be. He

put out his hand and touched his ally. To his amusement the man, sitting there on the ground, had fallen fast asleep.

“Another proof,” mused the Duke in whimsical despair, “that it is impossible to make any mode of life permanently interesting. How this fellow would despise the state of excitement which I, for the moment, am so fortunate as to enjoy! Well, I won’t wake him unless need arises.”

For some little while nothing happened. The policeman slept on, and the driver of the brougham seemed sunk in meditation, unless, indeed, he also were drowsy. The shutters of the sitting-room were again closely shut, and no sound came from behind them. The Duke crouched motionless but keenly observant.

Then the hall door creaked. The policeman snored quietly, but the Duke leant eagerly forward, and the driver of the brougham suddenly sat up quite straight, and grasped his reins more firmly. The door was cautiously opened: the lady and the young man appeared on the threshold. The young man glanced up and down the lane; then he walked quickly towards the brougham, and opened the door. The lady followed him. As she went she passed within four or five feet of where the Duke lay hidden. And, as she went by, the Duke saw—what he half-expected, yet what he could but half-believe—the gleam of the gold of the Queen Bess flagon, which she held in her gloved hands.

As has been hinted, the Duke attached no superstitious value to this article. The mad fever of the collector had left him long ago; but amidst the death of other emotions and more recondite prejudices there survives in the heart of man the primitive dislike of being “done.” It survived in the mind of the Duke of Belleville, and sprang to strong and sudden activity when he observed his Queen Bess flagon in the hands of the pretty unknown lady.

With a sudden and vigorous spring he was upon her; with a roughness which the Duke trusted that the occasion to some extent excused, he seized her arm with one hand, and with the other violently twisted the Queen Bess flagon out of her grasp. A loud cry rang from her lips. The driver threw down the reins and leapt from his seat. The young man turned with an oath and made for the Duke. The Duke of Belleville, ignoring the mere prejudice which forbids timely retreat, took to his heels, hugging the Queen Bess flagon to his breast, and heading, in his silk socks, as hard and as straight as he could for Hampstead Heath. After him pell-mell came the young man, the driver, and the lady, amazed, doubtless, at the turn of events, but resolved on the recapture of the flagon. And just as their figures vanished round the corner, the policeman rubbed his eyes and looked round, exclaiming, “What’s the row?”

In after days the Duke of Belleville was accustomed to count his feelings as he fled barefooted (for what protection could silk socks afford?) across Hampstead Heath, with three incensed pursuers on his track, among the keenest sensations of his life. The exhilaration of the night air and the chances of the situation in which he found himself combined to produce in him a remarkable elation of spirits. He laughed as he ran, till shortening breath warned him against such extravagant wasting of his resources; then he settled down to a steady run, heading across the Heath, up and down, over dip and hillock. Yet he did not distance the pack. He heard them close behind him; a glance round showed him that the lady was well up with her friends, in spite of the impediment of her skirts. The Duke began to pant; his feet had grown sore and painful; he looked round for a refuge. To his delight he perceived, about a hundred yards to his right, a small and picturesque red-brick house. It was now between one and two o’clock, but he did not hesitate. Resolving to appeal to the hospitality of this house,

hoping, it may be, again to find a door left open, he turned sharp to the right, and with a last spurt made for his haven.

Fate seemed indeed kind to him; the door was not only unbarred, it stood ajar. The Duke's pursuers were even now upon him; they were no more than five or six yards behind when he reached the little red-tiled porch and put out his hand to push the door back.

But at the same instant the door was pulled open, and a burly man appeared on the threshold. He wore a frock coat embellished with black braid and a peaked cap. The Duke at once recognised in him an inspector of police. Evidently he was, when surprised by the Duke's arrival, about to sally out on his round. The Duke stopped and, between his pants, made shift to address the welcome ally; but before he could get a word out the young man was upon him.

"Inspector," said the young man in the most composed manner, "I give this fellow in charge for stealing my property."

"I saw him take the tankard," observed the driver, pointing towards the Queen Bess flagon.

The lady said nothing but stood by the young man, as though ready with her testimony in case it were needed.

The Inspector turned curious eyes on the Duke of Belleville; then he addressed the young man respectfully.

"May I ask, sir, who you are?"

"I am the Duke of Belleville," answered the young man.

"The Duke of Belle-ville!" cried the Inspector, his manner showing an increased deference. "I beg your Grace's——"

"The name," said the Duke, "is pronounced Bevvle—to rhyme with devil."

The Inspector looked at him scornfully.

"Your turn will come, my man," said he, and, turning again to the young man, he continued: "Do you charge him with stealing this cup?"

"Certainly I do."

"Do you know who he is?"

"I imagine you do," said the young man, with a laugh. "He's one of your own policeman."

The Inspector stepped back and turned up the gas in his passage. Then he scrutinised the Duke's features.

"One of my men?" he cried. "Your Grace is mistaken. I have never seen the man."

"Yes, yes," cried the young man, and, in his eagerness to convince the Inspector, he stepped forward, until his face fell within the range of the passage light. As this happened, the Inspector gave a loud cry.

"Hallo, Joe Simpson!" And he sprang at the young man. The latter did not wait for him: without a word he turned; the Inspector rushed forward, the young man made for the Heath, and the driver, after standing for a moment apparently bewildered, faced about, and made off in the opposite direction to that chosen by his companion. The three were thirty yards away before the Duke of Belleville could realise what had happened. Then he perceived that he

stood in the passage of the Inspector's house, alone save for the presence of the young lady, who faced him with an astonished expression on her pretty countenance.

"It is altogether a very remarkable night," observed the Duke.

"It is impossible that you should be more puzzled than I am," said the young lady.

"Excuse me," said the Duke, "but you run very well."

"I belonged to my college football club," said the young lady modestly.

"Precisely!" cried the Duke. "I suppose this door leads to our good friend's parlour. Shall we sit down while you tell me all about it? I must ask you to excuse the condition of my feet."

Thus speaking, the Duke led the way into the Inspector's parlour. Placing the Queen Bess flagon on the table, he invited the lady to be seated, and took a chair himself. Perceiving that she was somewhat agitated, he provided her with an interval in which to regain her composure by narrating to her the adventures of the evening. She heard him with genuine astonishment.

"Do you say that you are the Duke of Belleville?" she cried.

"Don't I look like it?" asked the Duke, smiling, but at the same time concealing his feet under the Inspector's dining-table.

"But he—he said he was the Duke."

"He said so to me also," observed the Duke of Belleville.

The lady looked at him long and keenly; there was, however, a simple honesty about the Duke's manner that attracted her sympathy and engaged her confidence.

"Perhaps I'd better tell you all about it," said she, with a sigh.

"Not unless you desire to do so, I beg," said the Duke, with a wave of his hand.

"I am nineteen," began the lady. The Duke heaved an envious sigh. "I live with my aunt," she continued. "We live a very retired life. Since I left college—which I did prematurely owing to a difference of opinion with the Principal—I have seen hardly anyone. In the course of a visit to the seaside I met the gentleman who—who——"

"From whom we have just parted?" suggested the Duke.

"Thank you, yes. Not to weary you with details——"

"Principles weary me, but not details," interposed the Duke.

"In fact," continued the young lady, "he professed to be in love with me. Now my aunt, although not insensible to the great position which he offered me (for of course he represented himself as the Duke of Belleville) entertains the opinion that no girl should marry till she is twenty-one. Moreover she considered that the acquaintance was rather short."

"May I ask when you first met the gentleman?"

"Last Monday week. So she forbade the marriage. I am myself of an impatient disposition."

"So am I," observed the Duke of Belleville, and in the interest of the discussion he became so forgetful as to withdraw his feet from the shelter of the table and cross one leg comfortably over the other. "So am I," he repeated, nodding his head.

"I therefore determined to live my own life in my own way——"

"I think you said you had been to college?"

"Yes, but I had a difference of——"

"Quite so. Pray proceed," said the Duke courteously.

“And to run away with my *fiancé*. In pursuance of this plan, I arranged to meet him to-night at his villa at Hampstead. He sent a brougham to fetch me, I made my escape successfully, and the rest you know.”

“Pardon me, but up to this point the part played by the flagon which you see on the table before you is somewhat obscure.”

“Oh, when you’d gone to pack his things, he took out a curious little instrument—he said he had forgotten his key—and opened the cabinet on the mantelpiece. Then he took out that pretty mug and gave it to me as my wedding present. He told me that it was very valuable, and he would carry it for me himself, but I declared that I must carry it for myself or I wouldn’t go. So he let me. And then you——”

“The whole thing is perfectly plain,” declared the Duke with emphasis. “You, madam, have been the victim of a most dastardly and cold-blooded plot. This fellow is a swindler. I daresay he wanted to get hold of you, and thus extort money from your aunt, but his main object was no other than to carry off the famous cup which you see before you—the Queen Bess flagon.” And the Duke, rising to his feet, began to walk up and down in great indignation. “He meant to kill two birds with one stone!” said he, in mingled anger and admiration.

“It is pretty,” said the young lady, taking up the flagon. “Oh, what is this figure?”

The Duke, perceiving that the lady desired an explanation, came and leant over her chair. She turned her face up to his in innocent eagerness; the Duke could not avoid observing that she had very fine eyes. Without making any comment on the subject, however, he leant a little lower and began to explain the significance of the figure on the Queen Bess flagon.

The Duke has been known to say that, in a world so much the sport of chance as ours, there was no reason why he should not have fallen in love with the young lady and offered to make her in very truth what she had dreamed of becoming—the Duchess of Belleville.

Her eyes were very fine, her manner frank and engaging. Moreover, the Duke hated to see people disappointed. Thus the thing might just as well have happened as not. And on so narrow a point did the issue stand that to this day certain persons declare that it—or part of it—did happen; for why, and on what account, they ask, should an experienced connoisseur (and such undoubtedly was the Duke of Belleville) present a young lady previously unknown to him (or, for the matter of that, any young lady at all, whether known or not known to him) with such a rare, costly, and precious thing as the Queen Bess flagon? For the fact is—let the meaning and significance of the fact be what they will—that when the young lady, gazing fondly the while on the flagon, exclaimed, “I never really cared about him much, but I should have liked the beautiful flagon!” the Duke answered (he was still leaning over her chair, in order the better to explain and trace the figure on the flagon):

“Of him you are well rid. But permit me to request your acceptance of the flagon. The real Duke of Belleville, madam, must not be outdone by his counterfeit.”

“Really?” cried the young lady.

“Of course,” murmured the Duke, delighted with the pleasure which he saw in her eyes.

The young lady turned a most grateful and almost affectionate glance on the Duke. Although ignorant of the true value of the Queen Bess flagon, she was aware that the Duke had made her a very handsome present.

“Thank you,” said she, putting her hands into the Duke’s.

At this moment a loud and somewhat strident voice proceeded from the door of the room.

“Well, I never! And how did you come here?”

The Duke, looking round, perceived a stout woman, clad in a black petticoat and a woollen shawl; her arms were akimbo.

“We came in, madam,” said he, rising and bowing, “by the hall door, which we chanced to find open.”

The stout woman appeared to be at a loss for words. At length, however, she gasped out:

“Be off with you. Don’t let the Inspector catch you here!”

The Duke looked doubtfully at the young lady.

“The woman probably misunderstands,” he murmured. The young lady blushed slightly. The Inspector’s wife advanced with a threatening demeanour.

“Who are you?” she asked abruptly.

“I, madam,” began the Duke, “am the——”

“I don’t see that it matters who we are,” interposed the young lady.

“Possibly not,” admitted the Duke, with a smile.

The young lady rose, went to a little mirror that hung on the wall, and adjusted the curls which appeared from under the brim of her hat.

“Dear me,” said she, turning round with a sigh, “it must be nearly three o’clock, and my aunt always likes me to be in before daybreak.”

The stout woman gasped again.

“Because of the neighbours, you know,” said the young lady with a smile.

“Just so,” assented the Duke, and possibly he would have added more, had not the woman uttered an inarticulate cry and pointed to his feet.

“Really, madam,” remarked the Duke, with some warmth, “it would have been in better taste not to refer to the matter.” And with a severe frown he offered his arm to the young lady. They then proceeded towards the doorway. The Inspector’s wife barred the passage. The Duke assumed a most dignified air. The woman reluctantly gave away. Walking through the passage, the young lady and the Duke found themselves again in the open air. There were signs of approaching dawn.

“I really think I had better get home,” whispered the young lady.

At this moment—and the Duke was not in the least surprised—they perceived four persons approaching them. The Inspector walked with his arm through the arm of the young man who had claimed to be the Duke of Belleville; following, arm-in-arm with the driver of the brougham, came the policeman whose uniform the Duke had borrowed. All the party except the Inspector looked uneasy. The Inspector appeared somewhat puzzled. However, he greeted the Duke with a cry of welcome.

“Now we can find out the truth of it all!” he exclaimed.

“To find out truth,” remarked the Duke, “is never easy and not always desirable.”

“I understand that you are the Duke of Belleville?” asked the Inspector.

“Certainly,” said the Duke.

“Bosh!” said the young man. “Oh, you know me, Inspector Collins, and I know you, and I’m not going to try and play it on you any more. But this chap’s no more the Duke than I am, and I should have thought you might have known one of your own policemen!”

The Inspector turned upon him fiercely.

“None of your gab, Joe Simpson,” said he. Then turning to the Duke, he continued, “Do you charge the young woman with him, your Grace?” And he pointed significantly to the Queen Bess flagon, which the young lady carried in an affectionate grasp.

“This lady,” said the Duke, “has done me the honour of accepting a small token of my esteem. As for these men, I know nothing about them.” And he directed a significant glance at the young man. The young man answered his look. The policeman seemed to grow more easy in his mind. “Then you don’t charge any of them?” cried the Inspector, bewildered.

“Why, no,” answered the Duke. “And I suppose they none of them charge me?”

Nobody spoke. The Inspector took out a large red handkerchief and mopped his brow.

“Well, it beats me,” he said. “I know pretty well what these two men are; but if your Grace don’t charge ’em, what can I do?”

“Nothing, I should suppose,” said the Duke blandly. And, with a slight bow, he proceeded on his way, the young lady accompanying him. Looking back once, he perceived the young man and the driver of the brougham going off in another direction with quick furtive steps, while the Inspector and the policeman stood talking together outside the door of the house.

“The circumstances, as a whole, no doubt appear peculiar to the Inspector,” observed the Duke, with a smile.

“Do you think that we can find a hansom cab?” asked the young lady a little anxiously. “You see, my aunt——”

“Precisely,” said the Duke, and he quickened his pace.

They soon reached the boundary of the Heath, and, having walked a little way along the road, were so fortunate as to find a cab. The young lady held out her left hand to the Duke: in her right she still grasped firmly the Queen Bess flagon.

“Good-bye,” she said. “Thank you for the beautiful present.”

The Duke took her hand and allowed his glance to rest for a moment on her face. She appeared to see a question in his eyes.

“Yes, and for rescuing me from that man,” she added with a little shudder.

The Duke’s glance still rested on her face.

“Yes, and for lots of fun,” she whispered with a blush.

The Duke looked away, sighed, released her hand, helped her into the cab, and retired to a distance of some yards. The young lady spoke a few words to the cabman, took her seat, waved a small hand, held up the Queen Bess flagon, kissed it, and drove away.

“If,” observed the Duke with a sigh, “I were not a well-bred man, I should have asked her name,” and he made his way back to his house in a somewhat pensive mood.

On reaching home, however, he perceived the brougham standing before his door. A new direction was thus given to his meditations. He opened the gate of his stable-yard, and, taking the horse’s head, led it in. Having unharnessed it, he put it in the stable and fed and watered it; the brougham he drew into the coach-house. Then he went indoors, partook of some brandy mixed with water, and went to bed.

At eleven o'clock the next morning Frank, the Duke's man, came up to Hampstead to attend to his Grace's wants. The Duke was still in bed, but, on breakfast being ready, he rose and came downstairs in his dressing-gown and a pair of large and very easy slippers.

"I hope your Grace slept well?" said Frank.

"I never passed a better night, thank you, Frank," said the Duke as he chipped the top off his egg.

"Half-an-hour ago, your Grace," Frank continued, "a man called."

"To see me?"

"It was about—about a brougham, your Grace."

"Ah! What did you say to him?"

"I said I had no orders about a brougham from your Grace."

"Quite right, Frank, quite right," said the Duke with a smile. "What did he say to that?"

"He appeared to be put out, but said that he would call again, your Grace."

"Very good," said the Duke, rising and lighting a cigarette.

Frank lingered uneasily near the door.

"Is anything the matter, Frank?" asked the Duke kindly.

"Well, your Grace, in—in point of fact, there is—there is a strange brougham and a strange horse in the stables, your Grace."

"In what respect," asked the Duke, "are the brougham and the horse strange, Frank?"

"I—I should say, your Grace, a brougham and a horse that I have not seen before in your Grace's stables."

"That is a very different thing, Frank," observed the Duke with a patient smile. "I suppose that I am at liberty to acquire a brougham and a horse if it occurs to me to do so?"

"Of course, your Grace," stammered Frank.

"I will drive into town in that brougham to-day, Frank," said the Duke.

Frank bowed and withdrew. The Duke strolled to the window and stood looking out as he smoked his cigarette.

"I don't think the man will call again," said he. Then he drew from his pocket the ten-pound note that the young man had given him, and regarded it thoughtfully. "A brougham, a horse, ten pounds, and a very diverting experience," he mused. "Yes, I am in better spirits this morning!"

As for the Queen Bess flagon, he appeared to have forgotten all about it.

THE DUKE'S ALLOTMENT

THE Duke of Belleville (nothing annoyed his Grace more than to hear his name mispronounced—it should sound “Bevvle”) was tired of it all. That succinctly expresses his condition; and the condition is really not to be wondered at after fifteen years of an existence such as his, although it is true that he had occasionally met with some agreeable and even some unexpected adventures. He wanted a new sensation, a new experience, a new environment, although it was possible that he would not want any of them for very long. He consulted his man Frank on the matter one evening at dinner.

“When I felt like that as a lad, your Grace,” Frank remarked, “my father used to put me to digging.”

“Excellent, Frank! Buy me a labourer’s allotment to-morrow morning.”

“Very good, your Grace,” said Frank.

He was an invaluable servant, although at times, the Duke would complain, lacking in imagination.

“Have you got it, Frank?” said the Duke the next morning at lunch.

“Yes, your Grace. And I thought it well also to obtain a cottage.”

“Very thoughtful! Clothes?”

“I thought that perhaps your Grace would prefer to give your personal——”

“Quite right, Frank. I’ll go to Clarkson’s to-morrow.”

“I beg your Grace’s pardon—am I to accompany your Grace?”

“I do not propose to dig all night, nor even after sunset. Men on allotments eat, I am given to suppose!”

“I beg your Grace’s pardon.”

“Never mind, Frank. In the evening we shall be as usual. Give the necessary orders. Neither you nor the *chef* will, of course, be visible.”

“Very good, your Grace.” Frank placed the coffee and old brandy on the table, and withdrew.

The next morning the Duke repaired to Wardour Street and mentioned something about private theatricals. The suave and accomplished proprietor was fertile in suggestion.

“I mustn’t look too new or clean,” the Duke stipulated. The hint was sufficient; he was equipped with an entirely realistic costume.

“Duplicate it, please,” said the Duke as he re-entered his brougham. “It was careless of me to forget that it might rain.”

The Duke and Frank left King’s Cross the same evening (the *chef* had preceded them with the luggage; he made no stipulation about kitchen or scullery maids—everybody was always anxious to oblige his Grace) under cover of night. A journey of some forty miles brought them to their destination. On the outskirts of the little town lay the allotments. They were twelve in number, each comprising half-an-acre of land. Three cottages stood facing the allotments with their backs to the highroad. One of these now appertained to the Duke. The *chef* had done wonders; all was clean and comfortable—though the furniture was, of course, very plain. The dinner was excellent. A new spade, a new hoe, a new rake, and a new wheelbarrow stood just within the door.

“Get up early and rub them over with dirt, Frank,” said the Duke as he retired, well pleased, to rest.

The next morning also he breakfasted with excellent appetite.

“I beg your Grace’s pardon,” said Frank, “but your Grace will not forget to be out of work?”

“I came here to be in work, Frank.”

“The men work on their allotments only in their spare time, your Grace.”

“I see, I see. Thank you, Frank. I will certainly be out of work, if occasion arises to define precisely my economic position. I trust, however, that this is not an inquisitive neighbourhood.”

It was not, as a rule. But just now there were special circumstances, unknown to Frank—and to the Duke.

He began to dig at 9.30 A.M. His allotment had been a good deal neglected, and the ground happened to be hard. Presently he found himself afflicted with acute sensations in the back. He began to wonder what men on allotments did when they felt tired. A thought struck him—a reminiscence of his wide and curious reading. Observing a small girl seated on the railing which bordered the allotments he approached her. “Child,” said he kindly, “be good enough to go to the nearest public-house and fetch me a pint of four-’alf.”

“W’ere’s your money?” said the child.

The Duke had been too realistic; there was no money in his pocket. He returned to his labours (he had promised himself to be independent of Frank for at least three hours) with a sigh. The little girl laughed scornfully, and then performed a somersault. The Duke was not quite pleased.

By twelve o’clock his back was very bad and his hands blistered. His corduroy trousers were cutting him at the back of the knees. Also it had begun to rain. “I have the sensation vividly enough for the moment. I will return to the cottage and have lunch,” he said to himself, throwing down his spade. He had turned up a considerable amount of earth, and had found some vegetables amongst it. He was not very clear what they were. He picked up his coat, put it on, and began instinctively to feel for a cigarette. No case was to be found.

“Oh, d—n that Frank!” said the Duke mechanically.

“Need you swear?” asked a voice suddenly.

“Who wouldn’t?” mumbled the Duke, who was just wiping his brow (which was like that of the blacksmith in the poem) with a large and fearfully rough pocket-handkerchief.

“What?”

The voice was very sharp. It recalled to the Duke the necessities of his situation. Emerging from behind the handkerchief, he found himself in the presence of a tall stout lady of imperious demeanour. She wore a skirt, consequentially ample, of shiny black, and a black velvet mantle embellished with beads, apparently jet.

The Duke’s instinct rarely failed him—that was what would have made him such a great man of affairs. “The parson’s wife!” he thought to himself, without a moment’s hesitation. Then he cast about for his wisest course of action.

“Why aren’t you at work?” the lady demanded sternly.

The Duke had worked extraordinarily hard for three hours. He was indignant. But he was wary. He was considering what accent to adopt. It struck him that he would try the Somersetshire; he had heard that at the theatres; the rural (but honest) father of the erring (but sweet) heroine usually employed it. Of course, if the parson's wife happened to come from Somerset—— Well, some risks must be taken.

"I do be of a-workin'," said the Duke. "Lasteways, I do be of a just 'avin' done it." He clung to his "be" with no small confidence.

"Where do you come from?"

"Zummer-sett," said he.

"You talk in a funny way. When did you come here?"

The Duke felt sure that he ought not to say "Last night"; accordingly he replied "Yuster-e'en."

The lady looked suspicious. "You're seeking employment?"

Suddenly—and opportunely—the Duke remembered Frank's warning: he was to be out of work.

"Yus, I be," he said, wondering if his face were dirty enough.

"Church or Chapel?" she asked sharply.

"Charch," answered the Duke. And by a happy thought he added, "Ma'am."

"What's your name?" With the question she produced a little note-book and a pencil.

"Bevv——" he began thoughtlessly. He stopped. A barren invention, and a mind acute to the danger of hesitation, combined to land him in "Devvle."

"Devil? That's a very odd name."

"My feyther's name afore me," affirmed the Duke, who felt that he was playing his part rather well, though he regretted that a different initial consonant had not occurred to him.

The lady surveyed him with a long and distrustful glance.

"Have you had any beer *this* morning?" she asked.

The Duke never took beer—not even in the evening. "None," he replied with a touch of indignation.

"I wish I was sure of that!" she remarked. The Duke, himself regretfully sure (for the digging had changed his feelings towards beer), wondered at her suspicious disposition. "Well, we shall see. You're in my daughter's district. She will come and see you."

"Vurry good, ma'am," said the Duke.

"Are you married?"

"No, ma'am."

"You live alone, then?"

Swiftly the Duke reflected. "I got a brother, ma'am, but 'e do be kind o'—kind o' weak."

"A pair of you, *I* think!" she remarked rather disconcertingly, as she turned and marched off. The Duke returned to his cottage and decided, over a pint of hock and a bottle of seltzer, that he had come out of the interview with much credit.

He did not hurry back to work after lunch. Why, he reflected, should he? None of the other men were working on their allotments. This fact seemed rather strange to him, since he overlooked the circumstance that harvest was in full swing and all his supposed compeers

busy from dawn till late evening in the fields; but, knowing that he was strange to his surroundings, he waited patiently for an explanation. He lit his pipe—a clay pipe, coloured by and borrowed from one of his stableboys, and sat on the fence in an agreeable meditation. The rain had ceased, and the afternoon was mild.

“What more in reality,” he exclaimed, “does a man want than this? I was quite right to insist on an entirely simple dinner.” He paused and added: “After all I will do a little weeding.”

When he had done quite a little weeding, a thought struck him. He repaired to the cottage and called Frank. Frank appeared; he also wore corduroys and other suitable habiliments. “Very good, Frank, very good. You’re really an intelligent man. If a young lady calls, you’re an idiot.”

“I—I beg your Grace’s pardon?”

“If a young lady calls, you’re to appear to be an idiot.” The Duke, as he spoke, smiled over the reflection that his order to Frank embodied nothing very unusual.

“Very good, your Grace! What’s Monsieur Alphonse to be?”

“If he must exist at all he’d better be in bed—with something a trifle infectious,” answered the Duke, after a moment’s reflection.

“Very good, your Grace. Burgundy or champagne at dinner? The chambertin appears to have recovered from the journey.”

“Then let me have the chambertin,” said his Grace. “Dinner at seven. I feel as if I should be hungry. I am now going to take a walk.”

On his walk through what proved to be exceedingly pretty country, the Duke meditated, in admiration mingled with annoyance, on the excellent organisation of English rural parishes. The immediate notice taken of his arrival, the instantaneous zeal for his moral welfare, argued much that was good—the Duke determined to say a few words about it in the House of Lords—but, on the other hand, it certainly rendered more difficult his experiment in the simple life—to say nothing of necessitating his adventurous excursion into the Somerset dialect.

“She is probably actuated,” he concluded, “by a groundless fear that I shall resort to the Nonconformist chapel.”

Seven o’clock found him seated before his brightly furnished dining-table. The table was of deal, but it was covered with damask, decked with silver, and ornamented by the chambertin. The Duke had a fine appetite, and fell to cheerfully on Monsieur Alphonse’s creations; these were studiously rural in their character—Watteau-like confections. Monsieur Alphonse was dreaming of the Petit Trianon.

The cottage was not large; the sitting-room was in close proximity to the door. A sharp rap of somebody’s knuckles on the door startled him, just as he was finishing his first glass of chambertin. He was in demi-toilette—a dress jacket and black tie. It should be added that, although daylight prevailed outside, the blind of the window was carefully drawn down.

The knock was repeated—rather impatiently. “Frank!” called the Duke in a voice carefully modulated.

“I’m on my way, your Grace,” Frank answered, putting his head in at the door. “I merely waited to put on a blanket over my dress-coat. Monsieur Alphonse has got into bed. He looks very natural in his official apron, your Grace.”

“Good,” said the Duke. “Don’t permit the person to enter.” He smiled slightly as he regarded Frank, who had hastily assumed a red blanket, striped with blue, and wore his hair brushed up straight from his head.

The next moment the Duke heard the door of the cottage open, and one of the sweetest voices he had ever listened to in his life softly pronouncing the question: “Oh, please, are you the man Devil?”

“I really ought to have recollected to tell Frank about that little mistake of mine,” thought the Duke, smiling.

His smile, however, vanished as he heard Frank, in answer to the question, shout with extraordinary vigour: “Yahoo, yahoo, yahoo!”

“This will never do,” said the Duke, rising and laying down his napkin. “The fellow always over-acts. I said idiocy—not mania.”

It appeared to do very well, all the same, for the sweet voice remarked, with no trace of surprise, “Oh, of course, you’re his poor brother; mamma—I’m Miss Hordern, you know, Miss Angela Hordern—told me about you. Please don’t let yourself become nervous or—or excited.”

Monsieur Alphonse’s voice suddenly broke forth, crying loudly: “I have ze fevaar—ze fevaar—veri bad fevaar!”

“*Point de zele!* Talleyrand was right,” said the Duke sadly.

“Who’s that?” cried Miss Angela. “Is some poor man ill in there? Oh, it’s not Devil himself, is it?”

No answer came from Frank, unless a realistically idiotic chuckle, faintly struggling, as it seemed to the Duke’s ears, with more natural mirth, may be counted as such.

“I must see this girl,” said the Duke.

“I think I’d better call again to-morrow,” said Miss Angela. “I’m in a hurry now—it’s Mothers’ Meeting night. I’ll come in to-morrow. Will you give this to your brother? Mamma sent it. Can you understand me, poor fellow?”

“Yahoo, yahoo,” murmured Frank.

The door closed. The Duke dashed to the window, furtively drew the blind a little aside, and looked out.

“Upon my word!” said the Duke. “Yes, upon my word!” he reflected, twisting his moustache as he returned to the table.

Frank entered, holding a silver salver. “With Miss Angela Hordern’s compliments, your Grace.”

“Thank you, Frank. You can serve the fish; and beg Alphonse in future to wait for his cue.”

“Very good, your Grace.”

Frank withdrew, and the Duke examined the paper which he had taken from the salver. It acquired a certain interest from having passed through Miss Angela’s hands. The Duke fingered it delicately and eyed it pensively. It was entitled “A Dram for a Drinker; or, Just a Drop to do you Good.”

“A neat title,” the Duke mused, “but perhaps liable to defeat its own object by evoking a reminiscence too pleasurable.”

Frank entered with the fish. "Frank, I am at home next time Miss Hordern calls. You are not—nor Monsieur Alphonse."

"Very good, your Grace," Frank answered. "Your Grace will answer the door yourself?"

The Duke had overlooked the point. He did not feel that he could answer a door at all plausibly.

"Leave it on the jar," he commanded, in a happy inspiration.

But when he was left alone his brow clouded a little. "Suppose the mother comes!" he thought. His face cleared. "She shall see Alphonse and Frank. And I will see Miss Angela." He lit his cigar with a composed cheerfulness. "It is impossible," he said meditatively, "to deny the interest of a sociological experiment. I am, however, inclined to hope that it will rain very hard to-morrow." He stroked his back warily as he slid into a chair.

II

HE rose early the next morning—and observed the weather anxiously. It rained heavily. "Good," said he, feeling his back. "One can't dig in the wet. I shall have time to arrange affairs."

He had, in fact, tasks of no small difficulty to achieve.

The first was with Monsieur Alphonse. The Duke courteously requested the *chef's* presence, Frank being the intermediary. Alphonse came.

"Monsieur," said the Duke, "I have to make a communication to you."

"*Hélas, Monsieur le Duc!*" said Monsieur Alphonse.

"I shall not dine to-night. No, I sha'n't have any dinner at all to-night."

"But this is worse than anything I had expected!"

"I shall have tea—at seven."

"*Mais——*" said Alphonse.

"Bread-and-butter, thickish; and tea—the tea of the grocer *du pays*."

"*Miséricorde!! Monsieur le Duc* will sup?"

"Possibly. As for tea, I understand that it would be appropriate if you added a shrimp. Monsieur, we play a part!"

"A part, *Monsieur le Duc*?"

"There's a lady in the case, Alphonse."

"Everything explains itself!" cried Alphonse, looking as though he might be about to throw himself on the Duke's bosom. "And she loves ze shrimp?"

"Adores it."

"It is not to be had in this wilderness, I fear."

"No, Alphonse. Go and get it—at Greenwich, or Wapping, or wherever it lives. Leave at once. Be back at six-thirty. Good-bye, Alphonse."

“A lady in the case! I will find ze shrimp!” said Alphonse, as he left the parlour.

Frank remained to be dealt with. The Duke summoned him, and addressed him with a serious air.

“You are attached to me, Frank?”

“Yes, your Grace.”

“I wish to be alone to-day. Have the goodness to occupy Mrs Hordern’s attention.”

“I don’t rightly know how to do it, your Grace.”

“What day of the week is it?”

“Sunday, your Grace.”

“A fortunate circumstance. One doesn’t dig on Sundays?”

“No, your Grace.”

“The rain may stop for all I care,” said the Duke. “Go and call on Mrs Hordern, Frank, and get taken to church. Mitigate your mental inferiority to a reasonable extent; and say that the man with the fever has been removed.”

“How, your Grace?” asked Frank.

“Don’t trouble me with details. Do as I tell you.”

“Very good, your Grace.”

“And let Miss Hordern arrive here at seven a’clock.”

“Yes, your Grace.”

“That will do, Frank. I shall not go out to-day. Leave the corduroys on the bed.”

“Thank you, your Grace.”

“And, Frank, in case I change my mind, let there be a motor-car here and a table at the Savoy this evening, rather late.”

“I’ll attend to it at once, your Grace.”

There was more work than usual at the local telegraph office before ten that morning. But no one connected it with the cottage at the allotments. The young woman in charge understood that a gentleman had lost his motor-car.

The simple device of sticking on his door a short notice that a case of infectious disease awaited removal to the workhouse infirmary secured for the Duke a quiet day. He sat behind his blind and observed his neighbours, who, in the intervals left them between the claims of devotion and those of conviviality, inspected their allotments and his. His appeared to the Duke to command a disproportionate amount of attention. He feared that he must have dug up something prematurely—Frank had omitted to acquaint him with the course of husbandry initiated by his predecessor. The laughter of his neighbours somewhat jarred his sensitive spirit. And they certainly stared a lot at his shut door, his forbidding notice, and his blind so carefully drawn. He was also vexed by a sudden thought that, it being Sunday, Miss Angela might have to go to church and would not come to tea.

“However I made my wishes quite clear to Frank,” he murmured, hoping for the best.

At one o’clock Frank returned by a circular route, and entered from the road, through the back-yard, which obviated the necessity of crossing the allotments. He served a cold luncheon.

“You’ve arranged matters?”

“Yes, your Grace. The young lady will call at seven, with some jelly for your bad throat.”

"I was rather afraid she might wish to go to church, Frank."

"Yes, your Grace; but, as you are too ill to go, the vicar thinks that it will do just as well if she comes and reads the Lessons of the Day to your Grace."

"That it will do just as well?"

"That was the vicar's expression, your Grace."

"Ah, he spoke from a professional point of view, no doubt. The arrangement is quite satisfactory. How did you get on with Mrs Hordern—and at church?"

"I did very well, your Grace, since your Grace is kind enough to inquire. With reference to last night, I explained that my attacks of mental affliction were intermittent, though frequently recurrent. But the doctor is to come and see me to-morrow—by Mrs Hordern's orders, your Grace."

" 'Sufficient unto the day!' " said the Duke serenely. "You will remove that notice from the door as soon as our neighbours have started for evening church—or chapel."

The afternoon wore itself slowly away, the Duke finding himself afflicted with some degree of *ennui*. "Is there no situation in life, however humble, however laborious," he said, "that is free from this plague? It is, indeed, a lesson to me that we should be content with our several stations." He went to his bedroom, snatched a short repose, and, rising in better heart, assumed his corduroys.

At six-thirty a large motor-car broke down opposite the village inn. The chauffeur announced that the necessary repairs would take some time. He took some time himself, and some refreshment, before he set about them. At six-fifty Frank, returning from a little stroll in the neighbourhood of the inn, reported the arrival of Monsieur Ferdinand, his Grace's chief chauffeur, and removed the notice from the door of the cottage. He laid tea and withdrew. Everything was ready except the shrimps. There was, as yet, no sign of the shrimps, nor of Monsieur Alphonse.

"It can't be that Alphonse will fail me!" thought the Duke uneasily. The shrimps, although not absolutely essential, constituted an artistic detail particularly congruous with his taste.

Precisely at seven o'clock he saw Miss Hordern approaching. With enormous pleasure he noted the graceful outline of her figure as she crossed the allotment; with less pleasure he observed that she was accompanied by what is termed a "growing lad" of about fourteen. "These precautions aren't very complimentary," thought the Duke.

Her knock sounded on the door. The Duke fell into a doze. She knocked again.

"I do hope he's not—not queer again to-day," said Angela.

"The door's open: let's go in and look. I'm not afraid."

He heard them enter the house; he rose and opened the sitting-room door.

"Oh, there you are! Good-evening. May we come in? Mamma would have come and let me go to church, only she's got such a bad headache that she's been obliged to go to bed."

The Duke made no immediate reply. Angela came in, followed by the boy. The boy put down on the table a round parcel which he was carrying.

"Jelly," thought the Duke.

Angela laid down a volume.

"Lessons," the Duke surmised.

“Oh, but you haven’t had your tea yet!” said Angela. “I’m afraid we are interrupting you?”

“It’s laid for *two*,” remarked the boy.

“Himself and his poor brother, Tommy!”

“I do be proud——” began the Duke.

But suddenly the door from the kitchen opened and Monsieur Alphonse appeared. He carried a large plate loaded with shrimps.

“Ze shrimp!” he cried triumphantly, waving a napkin which he held in his other hand.

“Crikey, who’s this!” cried Tommy.

Well he might! Monsieur Alphonse wore a tight-fitting frock-coat, a waterfall tie of huge dimensions, pearl-grey trousers, white spats, and patent-leather boots, a red rose in one lapel of the coat, and in the other the blue ribbon of the Order of St Honoratus of Pomerania, bestowed on him by his Serene Highness the Reigning Duke, on the occasion of the latter’s coronation banquet.

The Duke was vexed. “Monsieur Alphonse,” he said, “I did not ring.” Naturally he forgot the absence of a bell.

“*Mais, Monsieur le——*”

The Duke arrested his words with a gesture, and turned to Angela.

“Further concealment, madam, is, I fear, useless. I am not what I seem. May I rely on your honour?”

Angela fixed her charming blue eyes on the Duke.

“But who are you? And what does it mean?”

There is no telling what explanation the Duke intended to proffer; for at this instant Tommy cried, with every appearance of agitation: “Angela, Willie Anderson was right! It is them!”

“Them!” said Angela affrightedly, and sank into a chair.

“Who’s Willie Anderson, my boy?” asked the Duke kindly.

“He’s the Chief Constable—and you’ll soon find it out. If you did take the silver plate, you needn’t have knocked old Lady Culverstone down with the poker, you—you scoundrel, you!”

“I knock old Lady Culverstone down with the—— Oh, preposterous!” exclaimed the Duke. He turned to Angela.

“*You* don’t believe that of me?” he asked in a tender voice.

“It was supposed they wore the disguise of working-men,” she answered. “Willie did tell me that.”

“Willie?”

“I’m—I’m engaged to Captain Anderson, the Chief Constable,” Angela confessed, with a pretty blush.

“There you are!” said the Duke, fairly exasperated by this additional vexation. “That’s what always happens to me!”

Before he could say any more, Frank rushed in from the kitchen.

“The cottage is surrounded with police and labourers!” he cried. “They’ll be in at the door in a moment!”

To confirm his words there came a loud crash on the door (which Angela had thoughtfully closed after her). The next instant it burst open; a young man dashed into the room—a good-looking young man—followed by three police constables and half-a-dozen of the Duke’s curious neighbours. They had drawn their conclusions from his strange reserve and his obvious ignorance of agriculture; they had communicated with the police. Captain Anderson was a smart officer (D.S.O.). Three London burglars were wanted for the robbery at old Lady Culverstone’s, and were believed to be lurking in the neighbourhood, knowing that the railway and the road to London would be watched.

The Duke never hesitated. As Captain Anderson dashed in at one door, he dashed out at the other, followed by Frank and Monsieur Alphonse. He could, of course, have declared himself, but such an action would have severely wounded his *amour propre*; he prided himself on carrying out his experiments unostentatiously, and hated getting his name into the papers.

“Make for the inn!” he whispered to his companions, as they escaped from the back door of the cottage, dashed across its tiny yard, and gained the main road.

“After them, my lads!” rang out Captain Anderson’s military tones; and the whole force was at their heels, Tommy gleefully shouting “Tally ho!” Only two of the more intelligent neighbours stopped in the cottage and inspected the Duke’s household goods. They were afraid to take the silver (it was a special set, used during excursions, and bore no crest or arms) but they took the chambertin with results surprising to themselves; for it tasted mild.

All the rest went after the Duke, and with them Angela, who was as active a girl as one could wish to see. Moreover, she was wily; she knew the country. While the Duke and his companions, holding a lead of barely twenty yards, rushed along the highroad towards the inn, while Captain Anderson (who was not so intimately connected with the district) led his pack directly after them—Tommy hanging persistently to their heels—Angela took a short cut. The road curved. She struck across the diameter of the curve, breasting the undergrowth, narrowly avoiding the gorse, holding her Sunday skirt high in her hand, full of courage, eager to help her betrothed, eager to help to put a feather in his cap, to assist in his brilliant capture of the burglars.

Thus it chanced that when the Duke, Frank, and Monsieur Alphonse reached the motor-car—in which Monsieur Ferdinand, hearing the rush of hurrying feet and knowing that the Duke was occasionally pressed for time, had already taken his seat—they were, indeed, clear of their pursuers but they were faced by Angela.

“Jump in,” cried the Duke.

Frank and Monsieur Alphonse obeyed. The Duke was following himself with all agility—for Captain Anderson was now no more than ten yards off—when Angela threw herself upon him, gripping him firmly, and crying: “I’ll hold him for you, Willie!”

The Duke admired her courage, but regretted her persistency. He could not, without roughness, disengage himself from her grasp; but he could lift her into the car with him. He did. She gave a scream. “Full steam ahead!” cried the Duke. With a turn of Monsieur Ferdinand’s handles they were off!

Just in time! Monsieur Alphonse, on the back seat, felt Anderson's hand clutch his coat collar just as they started. Fortunately Frank had taken occasion to drop a waterproof rug over the number of the car at the back.

"Stop, stop, stop, I say!" cried Angela.

"I regret it deeply, but for the moment I'm not in a position to oblige you, madam," said the Duke, as he wedged her in safely between himself and Monsieur Ferdinand, on the roomy front seat. "The local police are otherwise occupied—you need not exercise excessive caution, Ferdinand," he remarked to the chauffeur. Ferdinand obeyed his injunctions.

Nothing more passed for some minutes. They were, in fact, all very much out of breath—except Ferdinand, and he had enough to do with his own work. At last, however, Angela gasped: "Anyhow, the air is delicious!"

The Duke was gratified and encouraged. "I'm so glad you're enjoying the drive," said he.

"Please don't speak to me."

"I fell into the error of supposing that you addressed me, madam."

"What does it all mean?" she said—for it was impossible for her not now to perceive that she was dealing with a gentleman.

The Duke replied with some warmth. "It means, madam, simply that I claim, and intend, to exercise an Englishman's right to occupy or, if you will, to amuse himself in his own way within the limits of the law; and that I will not be interfered with or harried by policemen and so forth while I'm so engaged. Do I do any harm to anybody? It's preposterous."

"I suppose you're mad really," she said thoughtfully.

"Then let's be mad together for just a little while," he suggested. "Come now, you're finding this enjoyable?"

"What will Willie be feeling—and thinking?" She gave a light laugh. "Oh, I'm glad mamma's gone to bed!" she added the next moment.

"She is beginning to enjoy herself," the Duke decided.

"You will take me back?"

The Duke looked at his watch. "You shall be at the vicarage not later than half-past ten."

"Oh, but that's very late!"

"Earlier, if you wish, but in no case later. After all, Mrs Hordern has gone to bed—and Captain Anderson is probably very busy."

Angela looked at him; her eyes twinkled a little—or maybe that was only an impression of the Duke's.

"I've always heard that it's dangerous to thwart mad people," she said.

The Duke has been heard to say that this young lady, whom he entertained that night in a manner which may be termed purely fortuitous, was one of the most agreeable companions whom it had ever been his fortune to meet. The praise, coming from him, is high. There can be little doubt that Miss Angela Hordern, in her turn, felt the attraction which the Duke's good-breeding and intellectual alertness seldom failed to arouse.

"I should love a motor!" sighed Miss Angela.

"You're going to have one," said the Duke. "But we must have something to eat first."

"You talk as if you were a prince in disguise!" she laughed.

The Duke laughed too, reflecting that, as a matter of strict formality, he was entitled to the style she mentioned. In view of this fact he did not feel called upon expressly to deny the suggestion. There can be little doubt that his silence, to which perhaps she attributed too much significance, enhanced the pleasure of her ride.

“I’m to know you then only by that very funny name?”

In an examination of her profile—for which the light still sufficed—the Duke had grown abstracted. “What name?” he murmured vaguely.

“The one you told mamma—Devil! That’s not really your name?”

“Not exactly!” laughed the Duke.

“I should think not,” laughed the lady. Herself somewhat addicted to colloquial expressions, she failed to understand with what accuracy the Duke had phrased his reply.

“I shall think of you as the Prince of Darkness,” said she with the kindest glance.

“I doubt whether much of this is not wasted on a Chief Constable,” thought the Duke.

“Are you married?” she asked.

“I am not,” said the Duke, turning sharply round as he spoke. He fancied that he had heard Monsieur Alphonse exclaim “*Mon Dieu!*” It must have been a mistake. Both Monsieur Alphonse and Frank appeared to be asleep.

“I’m going to be.”

“You’ve conveyed that to me already.”

“He’s such a dear!”

“I think, Ferdinand, that we might venture on going a little faster,” said the Duke. “Your licence is new: we will take the risk.”

Perhaps Miss Angela detected a certain lack of enthusiasm in the Duke’s demeanour. At any rate she said no more about the Chief Constable. From no point of view, if we consider the matter, would the topic be a grateful one to her host.

They were on the outskirts of London, flashing by Hampstead Heath.

“Is this actually London?” she asked, somewhat alarmed. “You will remember your promise?”

The Duke looked at his watch. “Eight-twenty! The Savoy would be rather a rush for you.” He called across to Monsieur Ferdinand: “To the cottage!”

Five minutes later they stopped before the Duke’s small house in a lane adjoining the Heath.

“Monsieur Alphonse, here’s your opportunity. A nice little dinner in a quarter of an hour for mademoiselle and myself!”

“It shall be so, *Monsieur le*——”

“Quick, quick!” interrupted the Duke. “Excuse me one moment. Frank, show Miss Hordern in, and see to her wants. I must have a word with Ferdinand.”

Angela Hordern entered the little house full of a pleasurable anticipation. All was ready for them; fresh flowers bloomed everywhere; *The Observer* and *The Referee* lay on the table. She turned to Frank in a sudden surprise:

“He meant to come here all the time?”

“No, madam. But this is always kept ready by his Gra——,—by my master’s orders.”

“He must be very rich!”

“I am given to understand that the revenue has decreased slightly of late,” was Frank’s answer, given with admirable carelessness.

“That’s all settled,” said the Duke, entering the room with a cheerful air. “I’m right, Frank, in supposing that Sir Gerald Standish is still in the Bahamas?”

“Yes, your——” He caught the Duke’s eye, and dexterously ended: “Quite right, sir.”

“Then this car will do admirably,” said the Duke. “You have no idea,” he continued to Angela, “how convenient it is to persuade two or three friends to allow one to register a car or two in their names, especially when they happen to be leaving the country. I don’t happen to be aware whether the practice is legal.”

Frank brought in an omelette.

“Pray be seated,” continued the Duke. “This particular car will take you home in forty-five minutes. Ferdinand has gone to bring it here—and a most trustworthy man to drive you.”

“But—but what am I to do with them?”

“The man will remove the number of the car, and himself return by train——”

“There isn’t any train at this time of night—or rather at the time it will be by then.”

“Oh yes, there’ll be a train—Ferdinand won’t forget that.”

“You mean—a special?”

“Really,” said the Duke, with the slightest air of being questioned enough, “they have so many different names for trains that I don’t encumber my memory with them. There will, however, be a train. As for the car—— What’s this, Frank?”

“Alphonse offers his sincere apologies. But the design, at least, is novel. The way the truffles are arranged——”

“Miss Hordern will excuse our shortcomings. Where is the champagne?”

“On the ice, your——”

“Yes, yes. As for the car, Miss Hordern, I venture to hope that you will accept it as a token of my regard—and a reminiscence of an evening which has turned out not, I hope, altogether unpleasantly?”

“Oh, I couldn’t!”

“You accepted the Chief Constable.”

“But he—he’s very delightful,” Angela said, apparently eager to convince him of the soundness of her judgment.

“So is the car,” said the Duke, tactfully avoiding the discussion.

Angela swallowed her last morsel of truffle, and drank her last drain of champagne. The sound of a motor was heard in the lane outside.

The Duke looked at his watch and sighed. She came up to him and stretched out her hand.

“And so are you—very delightful,” she said.

The Duke bent low and lightly kissed her hand.

“How am I to think of you?” she asked.

“We’ll each think of the other as of an evening’s holiday,” he said. “Some streak of variety across life—a dream, if you will—a sample of what we seek and see and lose. Or do I put my claim too high?”

“No,” she said softly. “But I must go back to my home.”

“And to your Chief Constable?”

She drew away from him, saying, a trifle defiantly: “I love him.”

“Yes; but you’ve enjoyed your evening?” asked the Duke.

“Oh, it’s been fun!” she cried, with a sudden gurgling laugh.

She darted her hand out to him again. This time he pressed it. She turned and ran out of the house. At ten-twenty-eight she arrived at the vicarage (the Duke had left a margin), and wrote to Captain Anderson to call very early and fetch away a motor-car. She would keep Mrs Hordern in bed till lunch-time; and the vicar never entered the unused stables.

As for the Duke, he changed his clothes and drove down to the Savoy.

As he was finishing his coffee in his dressing-room the next morning, Frank said: “I beg your Grace’s pardon?”

“Well, Frank?” said the Duke encouragingly.

“Does your Grace return to-day to the allotment?”

“Surely, Frank, I have told you before now that I prefer not to have my movements suggested to me?”

“Yes, your Grace; I know, your Grace. But—but what am I to do with the allotment and the cottage?”

“Pay for them, to be sure, Frank,” said the Duke.

“I’ve done that, your Grace.”

“Then what remains to be done? You buy a thing, you pay for it, use it, perhaps enjoy it” (he smiled contentedly)—“what more remains?”

“I—I don’t know, your Grace.”

“No more do I, Frank. You can take away the breakfast.”

THE END

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