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TOO OLD FOR DOLLS

A NOVEL

BY

ANTHONY M. LUDOVICI

AUTHOR OF "MANSEL FELLOWES," "CATHERINE DOYLE," "A DEFENCE
OF ARISTOCRACY," ETC.



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
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THE ENGLISH FLAPPER^[1]

*From Nature's anvil hot she hails,
The forge still glowing on her cheek.
Untamed as yet, Life still prevails
Within her breast and fain would speak.*

*But all the elfs upon the plain,
And in the arbour where she lolls,
Repeat the impudent refrain;
Too young for babes, too old for dolls.*

*Her fingers deft have guessed the knack
Of making each advantage tell:
Her hat, her hair still down her back,
Her frocks and muff of mighty spell;*

Her springtide "tailor-mades" quite plain:

*In summer-time her parasols;
Each eloquent with the refrain:
Too young for babes, too old for dolls.*

*Behold with what grave interest
She looks at all, or hind or squire;
In truth more keenly than the best
Matriculation marks require.*

*She's told to learn from all she sees;
To watch the seasons, how they go,
And note the burgeoning of trees,
Or bulbs and pansies, how they grow.*

*"Enough that they are fair!" she cries;
"Why should I learn how lilies blow?"
And, dropping botany, she sighs
For some new flounce or furbelow.*

*The murmur of the woodland wild,
The sound of courting birds that sing,
Are sweeter music to this child
Than all piano practising.*

*She reads of love time and again,
And writes sad lays and barcarolles,
All emphasising the refrain:
Too young for babes, too old for dolls.*

*And, truth to tell, the world's a thing
Of wonder for a life that's new,
And trembling her passions sing
Their praise within her father's pew.*

*Magnificats or credos sung,
Thus oft acquire a deeper note,
When they're intoned by voices young,
Or issue from a virgin's throat.*

*For all the world's a wondrous thing,
And magic to the life that's new,
And heartily her voice-chords ring
Beside her father's in his pew.*

*Who sees her clad in muslin white,
With eyes downcast and manner prim,
May well be minded by the sight,
Of angels pure or cherubim.*

*Yet, oh, the secret lusts of life!
The thrills and throbs but half divined;
The future and the great word "Wife,"
Which oft-times occupy her mind!*

*The wicked thoughts that come and go,
The dreams that leave her soul aghast,
And make her long to hold and know
The entertaining truth at last!*

*But still the elfs upon the plain,
And in the arbour where she lolls,
With merry gesture cry again:
Too young for babes, too old for dolls.*

[1] First published in THE NEW AGE, December 4th, 1919.

Too Old for Dolls

[3]

CHAPTER I

On a vast Chesterfield, every unoccupied square inch of which seemed to bulge with indignant

pride, Mrs. Delarayne reclined in picturesque repose. Her small feet, looking if possible more dainty than usual in their spruce patent leather shoes, were resting on a rich silk cushion whose glistening gold tassels lay heavily amid all the crushed splendour of the couch. Other cushions, equally purse-proud and brazen, supported the more important portions of the lady's frame, and a deep floorward curve in the line of the Chesterfield conveyed the impression that, however tenderly Mrs. Delarayne might wish to be embraced by her furniture and its wedges of down, she was at all events a creature of substantial proportions and construction.

The picture presented was one of careless and secure opulence.

The contents of the room in which Mrs. Delarayne rested had obviously been designed and produced by human effort of the most conscientious and loving kind. All the objects about her were treasures either of art or antiquity, or both, and stood there as evidence of the power which their present owner, or her ancestors, must have been able to exercise over hundreds of gifted painters, cabinet-makers, needlewomen, potters, braziers, carvers, metal-workers, and craftsmen of all kinds for generations. [4]

It was late in June in the ninth year of King Edward VII's reign—that halcyon period when nobody who was anybody felt particularly happy, because no such person had actually experienced what unhappiness was. Certainly Mrs. Delarayne had not, unless she had shown really exceptional fortitude and self-control over her husband's death.

A sound in the room suddenly made her turn her head, and she dropped her book gently into the folds of her dress.

"My dear child," she exclaimed, addressing her elder daughter, "are you still there? I thought you had gone long ago! I must have been asleep."

"You did sleep, Edith dear," her daughter replied, "because I heard you snoring. You only picked up your book a moment ago."

Mrs. Delarayne examined her own blue-veined knotty hands with the expression of one who is contemplating a phenomenon that is threatening to become a nuisance, and then dropping them quickly out of sight again, she glanced eagerly round the room as if she wished to forget all about them. She did not relish her daughter's allusion to her snoring,—another sign of the same depressing kind as her blue-veined knotty hands,—and her next remark was made with what seemed unnecessary anger. [5]

"Instead of wasting your time here, Cleo," she observed, picking up her book again, "why don't you go upstairs and pull some of those nasty black hairs off your upper lip? You know who's coming to-day, and you also know that young men, in this country at any rate, strongly object to any signs of temperament in a girl. They think it incompatible with their ideal of the angel, or the fairy, or some other nonsense."

Cleopatra rose, jerked her shoulders impatiently, and snorted.

"I should have thought it better to be natural," she blurted out. "If it's natural for me to have dark hairs on my upper lip, then surely I should not remove them."

Again Mrs. Delarayne dropped her book and glanced round very angrily. "Don't be stupid, Cleo!" she cried. "What do you suppose 'natural' means nowadays? Has it any meaning at all? Is it natural for you to blow your nose in a lace handkerchief? Is it natural for you to do your hair up? Is it natural for you to eat marrons glacés as you do at the rate of a pound and a half a week,—yes, a pound and a half a week; I buy them so I ought to know, unless the servants get at them—when you ought to be living in a cave, dressed in bearskins and gnawing at the roots of trees? Don't talk to me about 'natural.' Nothing is natural nowadays, except perhaps the inexhaustible stupidity of people who choke over a little process of beautification and yet swallow the whole complicated artificiality of modern life." [6]

As Mrs. Delarayne turned her refined and still very beautiful face to the light, it became clear that she at any rate did not choke over any "little process of beautification"; for she was at least fifty-five years of age, and at a distance of two or three yards, looked thirty.

Cleopatra moved mutinously towards the door.

"That's right, my dear," said her mother in more conciliatory tones. "I don't mind your upper lip; I like it. But then I understand. Denis does not understand, and I'm convinced that he doesn't like it."

Flushing slightly, Cleopatra turned to face her mother. "Edith dear, how can you talk such nonsense!" she exclaimed. "What do I care whether Denis likes it or not?"

Mrs. Delarayne smiled. "Well, I do, my dear. When you are my age you'll be as anxious as I am to get your daughters married."

The younger woman turned her head. "Married!" she cried. "Oh when shall I hear the end of that litany! I suppose you want me to marry anybody, it doesn't matter whom, so long as I—"

"H'm," grunted the parent. "I don't think the discussion of that particular point would prove profitable." [7]

Cleopatra sailed haughtily out of the room, and there was just the suggestion of an angry slam in

the way she closed the door after her.

She was now twenty-five years of age. "Much too old," was the mother's comment. "It must be this year or never." She was a good-looking girl, dark, with large intelligent eyes, a pretty, straight nose, and full well-shaped lips. About five foot six in height, she was also well developed. Certainly her colouring was not quite all that it might have been; but she was naturally a little anæmic, as all decent girls should be who, at twenty-five years of age, are still unmarried. "It seems absurd," thought her mother, "that such a creature should have had to wait so long." And then with an effort she turned her thoughts to less depressing matters.

Mrs. Delarayne was a widow. Her late husband, a wealthy, retired Canadian lawyer, had been dead four years, having left her in her fifty-first year very comfortably off with two attractive daughters. She had inherited everything he possessed, including two handsome establishments, the one in Kensington and the other at Brineweald, Kent,—and in his will there had not been even a small special provision for either of his children. Economically, therefore, Cleopatra and Leonetta Delarayne were bound hand and foot to their mother. But although Mrs. Delarayne was by no means averse to power, she wielded it so delicately in her relations with her offspring, that after their father's death neither of her daughters ever learnt to doubt that what was "Edith's" was theirs also. In regard to one question alone did Mrs. Delarayne ever lay her hands significantly upon her gold bags—and that was marriage. She never concealed from them that she would be liberal to the point of recklessness if they married, but that she would draw in her purse-strings very tightly, indeed, if they remained spinsters. In fact it was understood that when she died each of her daughters, if wed, would inherit half her wealth, but if they remained old maids, the bulk of it would most certainly go to some promising though impecunious young man in her circle.

[8]

She professed to loathe the sight, so common alas! in England, of the affluent spinster, "growing pointlessly rotund on rich food at one of the smug hotels or boarding-houses for parasitic nonentities, which are distributed so plentifully all over the land," while thousands of promising young men had to wait too long before they were able to take their bride to the altar. It was her view that this feature of social life in England was truly the white man's burden, and she vowed that no money of hers would ever help to produce so nauseating a spectacle. Behind Mrs. Delarayne's laudable views on this subject, however, there were doubtless other and less patriotic considerations, which may or may not be revealed in the course of this story.

[9]

A few minutes later the maid entered the room and announced, "Sir Joseph Bullion."

"Show him in," cried her mistress, throwing her legs smartly off the Chesterfield, adjusting her dress with a few swift touches, and then reclining limply amid the cushions in a manner suggesting extreme feebleness and fatigue.

The maid reappeared and ushered in a very much over-dressed old gentleman.

He stood for some seconds on the threshold, smiling engagingly into the room. It was difficult to refrain from the thought that his affability was largely the outcome of entire self-satisfaction; for as he posed in the full light of the window, there was that about his attitude and expression which seemed to invite and defy the most searching inspection. Nor did his eyes smile with true kindness, but rather with the conscious triumph of the attractive débutante.

Mrs. Delarayne quietly noticed all these familiar traits in her friend, and responded in the expected manner with one or two idle compliments that afforded him infinite satisfaction.

"No, sit here beside me," she whispered, as if every effort to speak might prove too much for her.

Sir Joseph did as he was bid, lingered tenderly over the handshake, and gazed with strained sympathy into his companion's healthy face.

[10]

"Younger than ever!" he exclaimed, "but not very well I fear."

He was accustomed to Mrs. Delarayne's occasional affectation of valetudinarian peevishness, alleged ill-health as a fact. As a rule it was the prelude to the request for a favour on a grand scale, and being a man of very great wealth, and therefore somewhat tight-fisted, he was always rendered unusually solemn by his friend's fits of indisposition.

They chatted idly for a while; Mrs. Delarayne gradually receding from the position of one on the verge of a dangerous malady, to that of a person merely threatened with a serious breakdown if her worries were not immediately made to cease.

It was a strange relationship that united these two people. Although Sir Joseph was not more than five years the lady's senior, she always treated him as if he belonged to a previous geological period; and he, chivalrously shouldering the burden of æons, had acquired the courteous habit of opening all his anecdotal pronouncements with such words as: "You would not remember old so-and-so," or "You cannot be expected to remember the days when";—a formality which, while it delighted Mrs. Delarayne, convinced her more and more that although Sir Joseph might make an excellent ancestor, it would have been an indignity for a woman of her years to accept him as a lover.

Sir Joseph had already been married once, and it had been the mistake of his life. Before he could have had the shadow of a suspicion that he was even to be an immensely wealthy man, he had, out of sentiment, taken a woman of his own class whom he had found somewhere in the

[11]

Midlands. With her decease Sir Joseph, who was rapidly becoming a substantial and important member of society, hoped that his lowly past had died also; and when from the window of the first coach he watched the hearse bearing his wife swing round through the gates of the cemetery, he mentally recorded the resolution that on that day all uncertain syntax, all abuse and neglect of aspirates, and all Midland slang should be banished from his house for ever. He had loved his wife, but he frankly acknowledged to his soul that her death had been opportune; and as her coffin was lowered into the grave, he could not help muttering the thought, "Here also lies Bad Grammar. R.I.P."

Now compared with the late Mrs. Bullion, Mrs. Delarayne seemed to Sir Joseph a paragon of brilliance. She had dazzled him from the moment of their first meeting, and she continued to do so without effort, or, it must be admitted, without malicious intent either. Here was a woman who could be an honour to a wealthy man, who could gratify his lust for display, and carry the convincing proofs of his great wealth right under the noses of the very best people, without ever provoking the usual comments of the spiteful and the envious. She was a creature, moreover, with a large circle of influential and distinguished friends, and she possessed that inimitable calmness of bearing in their company, beside which Sir Joseph's mental picture of the first Mrs. Bullion partook of the mobility of a cinematograph or of a Catherine wheel in full action. [12]

Mrs. Delarayne on the other hand had, as we have already seen, tutored herself into regarding Sir Joseph simply as a venerable old relic. In her fifty-fifth year this brave lady held very decided views about youth and age, and was very far from admitting that a man five years her senior was the only possible match for her. Indeed it was only the presence of her daughters that for some time past had prevented her from seriously contemplating and arranging a very different kind of match. Since their father's death she had schooled them into calling her "Edith"; she had also succeeded by means of certain modifications in her appearance, not confined entirely to her raiment and her coiffure, in creating the illusion of thirty; and everything she said and did was calculated to confirm this process of self-deception. She loathed old age. The very breath of an old person in the room in which she sat was enough to oppress and stifle her. It always struck her that the bitter smell of corpses was not far distant from the couch whereon they reclined. She wanted youth. Rightly or wrongly she thought she was entitled to the best, and who will deny that youth is the best? She was devotedly attached to young men. She would have required a good deal of persuasion to believe that a man of thirty was too young for her; and if she had deprived herself of this one luxury, it was, as we have seen, simply out of regard for her daughters. She entertained no rooted objection to disparity in ages as a matter of principle. [13]

In the circumstances, Sir Joseph's senile raptures were simply tiresome, and had he not been enormously rich she would have thought them a little presumptuous. But there were many ways in which Sir Joseph Bullion's friendship proved useful to her. He was not only a wealthy man, he was also highly influential, and again and again she had used him and his power for her own private purposes.

She proposed to use him again on this occasion.

"As a matter of fact," she said, correcting herself for the fourth time, "I am not so much indisposed as angry."

"Not with me, I hope?" exclaimed the baronet.

As he proceeded to chuckle asthmatically over the fantastic improbability of this suggestion, the elderly matron with marked irritation called him sharply to order. "Have you read the papers?" she demanded.

"Ave I read the papers?" he repeated. "Of course I've read the papers."

Occasionally, very occasionally, particularly after periods of much autogenous mirth, Sir Joseph Bullion dropped an H. But he never noticed it. It was a sort of unconscious reverberation of former days; as if his lowly past, especially that portion of it which had been spent with the first and ungrammatical Mrs. Bullion, insisted on revealing itself to the world, to be acknowledged and congratulated on what it had achieved. [14]

"Well then," pursued the widow firmly, "you know about Lord Henry!"

"Lord Henry?" he cried. "What about Lord Henry?"

Mrs. Delarayne began to examine her rings very studiously, as if she wished to make quite certain that none of the stones had gone astray in the last five minutes. "It's all very well, Joseph," she observed quietly; "but if Lord Henry goes—I go. Now understand that once and for all. I can't endure London without him."

"Not really?" he ejaculated, leaning forward. "Are you serious? D'you mean Lord Henry, the biologist or something?"

Mrs. Delarayne continued the close scrutiny of her rings.

"Of course I mean it," she said in the same quiet but utterly unanswerable way. "You have no idea what Lord Henry means to me. He's literally the only young man in London who does not treat me as if I were a creature of mediæval antiquity."

Sir Joseph crestfallen sank back again hopelessly into the cushions.

Mrs. Delarayne proceeded to explain that owing to the meddlesomeness of some officious busybody on the Executive Council of the Society for Anthropological Research—an old maid she felt certain—Lord Henry Highbarn had been invited to go to Central China as the Society's plenipotentiary, in order to investigate the reasons of China's practical immunity from lunacy and nervous diseases of all kinds. Lord Henry had accepted the honour and was leaving in three months' time. She then picked up the newspaper, and read aloud the concluding paragraph of the article on the subject: [15]

"His departure from this country will be a severe blow to the hundreds of nervous invalids who annually benefit from his skill at his Sanatorium in Kent, and the world of science will find it difficult to replace him. It appears that Lord Henry has one or two ardent disciples who will be in a position to carry on his great work, but a leading London specialist, Dr. David Melhado, declared to our representative to-day, that without the guidance of Lord Henry's brilliant and original genius, it is doubtful whether any of his pupils will ever dare to treat the more obscure nervous cases on their master's drastic and unprecedented lines."

"There now!" she cried, crumpling up the paper and throwing it away. "You see what that means. It means that women like myself are once more to be condemned to the dangerous misunderstanding to which we were exposed before Lord Henry came on the scene. And we certainly can't survive it." [16]

Sir Joseph surveyed his companion's robust figure and healthy countenance for some seconds, and an incredulous smile gradually spread over his flushed and puffy features. "Surely there can't be very much wrong with you—is there?" he dared to suggest for once.

Mrs. Delarayne's eyes suddenly flashed with fire, and she cowed him by a single glance. "Don't talk of things you understand so little," she snapped. "Lord Henry must at all costs be induced to remain in England,—that's your job. He must not go. And anyhow China is such a ridiculous place to go to. Nobody ever goes to China except missionaries. Of course the Chinese haven't any nerves, because they haven't any daughters—they kill them all. That's a very simple way of keeping your mental balance. I confess that the prospect of going to China is not an inviting one, and yet if Lord Henry goes, I don't see what other alternative we poor sufferers will have."

Sir Joseph again glanced dubiously at the healthy woman beside him, and drummed his knees thoughtfully with his large fingers.

"You know without me telling you," he observed at last, "that I'll do whatever you want. It's happened before and it'll happen again." And he rolled his bloodshot eyes as if to make it quite clear that for this great favour a great reward would be expected.

Mrs. Delarayne examined him covertly and began to wonder with a sudden feeling of despair how such a creature could possibly hope to be a match for Lord Henry. [17]

"And if I do induce Lord Henry to remain in England,—what then?" the baronet demanded.

The widow sighed. "You'll be a public benefactor," she said; "a blessing to your race."

"I don't suppose there's much money, is there, in this trip to China?" he asked pompously. "And Lord Henry can't be a very rich man."

"He's very poor," replied Mrs. Delarayne.

Sir Joseph smiled knowingly and lay back amid the cushions with an air of perfect self-appreciation and confidence.

"There's only one thing that great wealth cannot do, it seems to me," he said, smiling and making every kind of grimace indicative of the immense difficulty he was experiencing in not laughing at what was passing through his mind.

Mrs. Delarayne dreaded the worst, but felt that not to press for enlightenment at this juncture would reveal an indifference which would prove unfavourable to her schemes. "And what is that?" she asked.

"It cannot change a woman's fancy, of course!" Sir Joseph ejaculated, and laughed very violently indeed. "'Ave you caught my meaning?" he added, as his hilarity subsided.

Mrs. Delarayne toyed with her book.

"Come, come, Edith!" he pursued. "If I get Lord Henry to remain in London, as I've no doubt I shall,—what then?" He ogled her roguishly. [18]

Mrs. Delarayne tried, while smiling politely, to introduce as little encouragement as possible into her expression.

"Between you and I," the baronet continued, "it isn't as if we had a whole lifetime before us. You may have,—I haven't. These delays are a little unwise at our time of life."

He caught her hand and for some reason, possibly his great agitation, pressed her finger-nails deep into the convex bulb of his large hot thumb, as if he were intent upon testing their sharpness.

Mrs. Delarayne removed her hand. "Joseph, I had hoped you were not going to refer to this again for some while. I have told you hundreds of times, or more, that a woman cannot marry with decency a second time when she has two strapping daughters who have not yet married once."

Sir Joseph shrugged his shoulders.

"It's all very well," pursued the widow, "but it is difficult enough for Cleo to forgive my having married at all. I could not possibly confront her with a second husband before she, poor girl, had met her first. Oh no!—it would be too great an insult. I'd die of shame. No, before you have me you'll have to get my daughters married. That bargain I strike with you."

He smiled ecstatically. "Promise?"

"I promise."

He bent forward and kissed her very clumsily, and Mrs. Delarayne by blowing her nose was able deftly to wipe her mouth without his noticing the movement. [19]

"What is that young fool, my secretary, doing?" he enquired at last. "Did I not bring him and Cleo together all through the spring at Brineweald Park?"

"Denis is a nincompoop," Mrs. Delarayne declared drily. "I don't believe for a minute that we should any of us be here if he had taken Adam's place in the Garden of Eden. What a fortunate thing it was, by-the-by, that the Almighty did not choose a very modern sort of man to live in sin with Eve!"

Sir Joseph laughed. "Denis a nincompoop? I don't believe it."

Mrs. Delarayne snorted.

"But how are they getting on?"

"Don't ask me," she sighed wearily. "They philander. They are now at the very dangerous and inconclusive stage of being 'practically engaged.' It never signifies anything, because no man who really means business has the patience to be practically engaged."

Sir Joseph looked and felt sympathetic.

"They hold hands, I believe," the widow resumed, "and discuss the philosophers. Probably in a year's time if all goes well they will kiss and discuss the poets."

Sir Joseph uttered an expletive of surprise.

"Yes—I'm disappointed in Denis. I don't trust these very cheerful men, who have a ready laugh and a sense of humour. They laugh to conceal the fact that they cannot crow, and they crack jokes because they cannot break hearts. Give me the broody serious men with fierce looks and slow smiles." [20]

"Isn't Cleo in love with him?"

"Poor soul!" Mrs. Delarayne exclaimed. "She does her best. She would take him, of course, simply because it will soon be an indignity for her to remain single one minute longer. She would probably die of shame too if someone else took Denis from her. But I think you know, that the man who provokes Cleo's love will have to be a little bit different from Denis."

CHAPTER II

[21]

On being dismissed from her mother's presence, Cleopatra did not go as she had been commanded to her mirror in order to remove the little shadow of down that adorned her upper lip. She retired instead to the library, and ensconcing herself in one of the large leather easy chairs, continued her reading of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*.

Occasionally while she read she would raise her eyes from the printed page to look at her unengaged hand as it rested on the arm of the chair she occupied, and for some moments she would be wrapped in thought.

There had been no lack of competition for that hand since the day when, at her coming-out dance, she had so eagerly extended it to Life for all that Life had to offer. It was not that it had come back empty to her side that made her sad. If occasionally she was moved by a little bitterness about her brief existence, it was rather because the kind of things with which her outstretched hand had been filled were so dismally unsatisfying. She counted the men she had been compelled to refuse. They numbered only two, but there were at least three others whom she had never allowed to get as far as a proposal. [22]

Again for the hundredth time she passed them in review. Had she acted wisely? Were they so utterly impossible? Now, at the age of twenty-five, her worldly wisdom answered, "Nay," but deep down in her breast a less cultivated and more vigorous impulse answered most emphatically "Yea."

From early girlhood onwards Cleopatra had cherished very definite ideas about the man of her taste. In this she was by no means exceptional. But perhaps the circumstances that she had abided more steadfastly than most by the pattern her imagination had originally limned distinguished her from her more fickle sisters. The fault she found with the modern world was that it did not offer you man whole or complete, but only in fragments. To be quite plain, it offered you, from the athlete to the poet, a series of isolated manly characteristics, but it did not give you all the manly characteristics in one being at once, which constituted the all-round man of her dreams.

Whether it was that man had specialised too much of recent years, or what the reason might be, Cleopatra could not tell. But whenever she passed the men of her acquaintance in review, she always arrived at the same conclusion, that each represented only a fragment of what the whole man of her ideal was, and doubtless of what man himself had once been. It was as if she had been deposited among the ruins of a once beautiful cathedral. Fine pieces of screen architecture, exquisite portions of the capitals, delightful gargoyles, lay in profusion all around: but the whole building could be reconstructed in all its majesty, only by an effort of the imagination. This effort of the imagination she had made as a girl of seventeen. [23]

To-day it seemed to her, you might choose the cleanly-bred, healthy, upright, jaunty athlete, and sigh in vain for a companion who could either sob or rejoice with you over the glory of a sonnet, a picture, or a statue; or else you might choose the slightly effete and partly neurotic poet or artist, and languish unconsolated, away from the joys of the fine, clean, stubbornly healthy body. The kind of fire that led to elopements, to wild and clandestine love-making, could now, with too few exceptions, be found only among ne'er-do-wells, foreign adventurers, cut-throats or knaves; while the stability that promised security for the future and for the family, seemed generally to present itself with a sort of tiresome starchiness of body and jejuneness of mind, that thought it childish to abandon itself to any emotion.

She was deep enough, primitively female enough to demand and expect a certain savour of wickedness in him who wooed her. But she was more accustomed to perceive the outward signs of this coveted quality in the waiters at the Carlton, or the Savoy, and among dust-men, coal-heavers and butcher-boys, than in the men of her mother's circle. [24]

Had man been tamed out of all recognition? Or was her instinct wrong, and was it perverse to sigh for fire, wickedness, stability, cultivation, and healthy athleticism—all in the same man? She had read of Alcibiades, of men who were not fragmentary. Could such a man be born nowadays, and if born could he survive? Certainly the men she had refused had not been of this stamp.

It was miserably disappointing, and with it all there was her mother's untiring insistence upon the urgency of getting married. It was more than disappointing: it was a genuine grievance, but a grievance of a kind which most young women nowadays bury unredressed, and the former existence of which in their lives they reveal only by a tired, wasted look in their faces, which leads their husbands to consider them—"delicate."

With all her fastidiousness in regard to the man of her desire, however, Cleopatra was not to be confused with the romantic idealist who craves for that which never has been and never can be possible on earth. To have misunderstood her to this extent would have been a gross injustice. She had built up her picture of her mate, not with the help of feverish and morbid fancy, but guided only by the hints of an exceptionally healthy body. Modest to a degree to which only great reserves of passion can attain, it was to her a dire need that her mate should have fire, because half-consciously she divined that only fire purified and sanctified the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Half-heartedness here, or the lack of a great passionate momentum, that carried everything before it, spelt to her something distinctly discomfiting, not to say indecent. And in this, far from being a romantic idealist, she was entirely right and realistic. This explains why her taste inclined more resolutely to the adventurous idea of love, to the impromptu element, to the wild ardour of first embraces that must perforce flee from the sight of fellow creatures, than to the kind of graduated passion which begins with conversation, proceeds to a public engagement with staring people all about you, and ends with the still more measured tempo of a Church wedding. All the waiting, all the temporising, all the toadlike deliberation that these various slow steps involved, ran counter to her deepest feeling, that her love must be a matter of touch and go, a sudden kindling of two fires, the burning not of green wood but of a volcano. [25]

But where, these days, could she find the partner who was prepared, and above all equipped, to play his part to hers? This was her grievance. And again in justice to her it must be acknowledged that it was a genuine one.

The young man whom her mother was at present "running" for her, was a creature at whom, as a girl of eighteen, she would not have looked a second time. But how much more modest in its demands had her taste not become as she had advanced in years! How much more docile and unassuming! She saw other girls marrying men not unlike Denis Malster; so why couldn't she? She concluded that it must evidently be the fate of modern women to accept the third-rate, the third-best—in fact disillusionment as a law of their beings; and having no one to support her in her soundest instincts, she began rather to doubt the validity of their claim, than to turn resolutely away from marriage altogether. [26]

And now there was to be a complication in her trouble. Leonetta was returning home for good—Leonetta, the child eight years her junior, Leonetta was now as fresh, as attractive, and as blooming, as she herself had been when she was just seventeen, and whom, from habit, she still

called "Baby."

Quietly she had waited and waited for the man of her heart, and been able to do this without the additional annoyance of competition to disturb or excite her. Peacefully these seven years she had lain like a watcher on the shore, scanning the horizon with her glass, without even a nudge of the elbow from her younger sister. And now she was no longer to be alone. A distracting, possibly an utterly defeating element was going to be introduced into her peaceful though anxious existence, and she shuddered unmistakably at the thought.

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As yet she had harboured no conscious hostility towards her junior, merely a desire to keep her as long as possible at a distance, in order that the one relationship of which she had the deepest dread—that of competitors in the same field—might be warded off indefinitely, or, better still, never experienced between them.

She did not yet fear Baby. The disparity in their ages seemed too great and too obvious for that: but in recollecting certain incidents in their childhood, and one or two things about Baby's appearance and behaviour during the last two years, Cleopatra could not entirely free herself from a perfectly definite feeling of vexation in regard to her sister. Baby had not troubled her at all as an infant. It was as a child of eight, when Cleopatra was just sixteen, that her sister had first revealed disquieting proclivities. She had, for instance, a command of blandishments which to her elder were a closed book. By means of wiles and cajoleries utterly inimitable, she could extract money and presents from adults from whom the haughty Cleopatra would not even have solicited a kiss. In five years Baby had received more boxes of chocolates and more dolls than her sister had received during her whole lifetime. This was not, however, because the younger child was in any respect more beautiful than the elder, but rather owing to the younger's extraordinary gift for securing what she wanted by any means that might come to hand.

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For a long while Cleopatra had looked on, wistfully it is true, but not enviously at her sister's astonishingly successful career: for was not Baby only a child after all? And, from the age of eleven to fourteen, Leonetta had been so outrageously gawky and unattractive, no matter how beautifully she happened to be clad, that Cleopatra's feelings of uneasiness about her sister were laid to rest as if for ever during this period.

Then, all of a sudden—and the day was written indelibly on the elder girl's memory—on a certain spring morning, at the time of year when winter frocks are doffed for lighter and brighter confections, Cleopatra beheld a vision, the nature of which was such as in a trice to resuscitate all those anxieties about her junior which, to do her justice, she had long ago relegated to oblivion.

The event occurred in Mrs. Delarayne's bedroom. Cleopatra, then a girl of twenty-two, was discussing with her mother the details of the Easter holiday programme and with her back to the door and her face to the window, was as completely unconscious of the surprise awaiting her as the bedroom furniture itself.

All at once the door opened. At first Cleopatra did not turn round, and it was only when the exceptionally fulsome manner of her mother's outburst of joy awakened her suspicions that at last she looked round and was confronted by the vision.

It was Baby—undoubtedly it was Baby; but certainly not the awkward child of a month, of a week, of a day, or even an hour ago. It was Baby transformed, nay transfigured, as if by magic. Whether the change had been gradual and imperceptible, or as sudden as Cleopatra imagined it to have been, the elder girl did not stop to think; she simply allowed her eyes to dwell almost spellbound upon the startling apparition facing her, and as quickly as a dart, before she was able to arrest it, a pang, a pain, or a convulsion of some sort, was communicated to her heart, the meaning of which she did not dare at first to analyse.

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For Leonetta, from a Mohawk, from a sexless savage with tangled hair and blotchy features, from an angular filly devoid of grace and charm, had by a stroke of the wand become metamorphosed into a remarkably attractive young woman. It was startling: but it was also undeniable. It was not the vernal frock, of that Cleopatra was convinced; although Mrs. Delarayne had concentrated chiefly upon this feature in her transports of joy over her younger daughter's dramatic and spontaneous assumption of womanly beauty. Had it been only the frock Cleopatra was intelligent enough to have known that the pang she had felt would have been left unexplained. No, it was more fundamental than that. All the dress had accomplished was to set an acute accent over a development which, though already at its penultimate stage, had so far escaped the notice of Cleopatra and her mother. The picture had been present the day before, but it had not been quite perfectly focussed. The new frock had focussed it sharply.

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Cleopatra remembered having asked herself whether Leonetta could be aware of the change that had come over her. But plainly her behaviour had dispelled this suspicion. Leonetta had behaved on that memorable occasion exactly as she had done throughout the previous week. Not even a sign of enhanced self-possession or assurance had betrayed the fact of an inward change, and somehow this unconsciousness of her accession of power only seemed to Cleopatra to make that power more formidable.

Events followed rapidly one upon the other after that. Everybody noticed the change and the improvement. Everybody commented on it. Mrs. Delarayne was doubly rejoiced, because although both her daughters were beautiful, Leonetta's features and style were more her mother's than Cleopatra's were. Cleopatra was a Delarayne, her beauty was if anything more

severe and more stately than her mother's. Now the resemblance between Leonetta and her mother had become striking. But strangers were little occupied with this aspect of Leonetta's beauty. And when Cleopatra observed that the attention of men, in and out of doors, had become more marked towards her sister, and that they had begun even to turn round to stare at her in the street, the elder girl knew that her vision on that unforgettable spring morning had not been an hallucination: on the contrary it was a fact, and one to which she must do her best to reconcile herself.

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Gradually the consequences of the change were forced upon the consciousness of Leonetta herself and her manner became correspondingly modified. Leonetta knew that she was a beautiful young woman. Leonetta realised that this meant power, and at last she gauged to the smallest fraction the extent of that power.

Then followed a mighty tussle in Cleopatra's heart. The influence the elder daughter had always exercised over the mother's mind now presented itself as a temptation, as a weapon she might use in a threatened struggle. But it must not be supposed that this temptation was yielded to without a furious conflict.

Leonetta did not know French well. French would give the stamp of finish to an education which, in the case of the younger daughter, with her constitutional disinclination for study, was little more than make-believe. Ought not Baby to be sent abroad? Was it not doing her the greatest service to speed her thither? Crudely Cleopatra concluded that she was really acting altruistically in warmly advocating this scheme—self-analysis is frequently as inaccurate as this;—besides, would not she, Cleopatra, in the interval become engaged, married, and an independent person outside her mother's home, and away from Leonetta's "pitch"? The programme was surely all in favour of the younger girl.

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The plan was laid before Mrs. Delarayne, calmly, solemnly, with all the elaborate minutiae of earnest concern about a sister's welfare that Cleopatra could summon. And the result was that within six weeks of that terrible Easter, arrangements had been made for Leonetta to spend at least a year in a large and expensive school at Versailles, where she could not only acquire the vernacular, but also become infected with the polish of the native.

Sublimely unsuspecting, Leonetta had embraced her sister passionately on the platform of Charing Cross station, and Cleopatra had even shed a tear of pious sorrow.

Her mother had pointed out to Cleopatra at the time that she herself had enjoyed none of the advantages which she urged with so much generous fervour on behalf of her sister. Cleopatra had replied that she had had other advantages, a University education, a classical training, the kind of cultivation for which Leonetta was unsuited and in the acquisition of which she would have been unhappy.

But worse was to come. At the end of the year Leonetta had returned; and, if it is possible to imagine the superlative surpassed, certainly Leonetta's appearance on her return, her increased vivacity, her perfect command of French, her new tricks with her hair and clothes, utterly eclipsed the Leonetta who had left her Kensington home a year previously.

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Nothing had happened to Cleopatra in the meantime, and the elder girl, after having rapidly adopted subtly modified imitations of her sister's style of coiffure, was once again thrust hopelessly into the very position against which her nobler instincts most heartily rebelled. She refused to remain in a relation of tacit, covert, and ill-concealed rivalry to one whom the whole world, including her mother, expected her to love. It was ignominious; it was intolerable. It poisoned her to the very marrow. It made her ache at night when she ought to have been sleeping. Had she been less like Leonetta than she was, had she possessed less passion, less beauty, and less desire than her sister, she could have endured it. As it was the position entailed a perpetual upheaval of her peace of mind.

She was at her wits' end. To face her mother with another scheme for Leonetta's welfare was out of the question. What could she do?

Fortunately for Cleopatra, Leonetta herself brought about the unravelment in a manner sufficiently satisfactory to her sister.

Charming and, in many ways, irresistible as she was, Leonetta had brought back a will of her own from Versailles, and a tongue, too, by means of which she secured that will's highest purposes. During her absence from London, however, her mother had acquired certain habits and tastes, the pursuit of which now frequently clashed with her own plans and ran distinctly counter to her notion of what a mother should be and should do. For Cleopatra had made singularly few claims upon her mother's time all this while, and had never questioned her absolute right to seek her enjoyment when and where she chose.

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After a year of this novel experience, during which Mrs. Delarayne had discovered new haunts and new households in which she could behave, even if she were not accepted, as a person who was not of "mediæval antiquity," her taste for this kind of life had developed. Enamoured as this sprightly quinquagenarian had always been of the other sex, and resolute as she was to show that an old war-horse could prance as bravely as a colt to the stirring trumpet call of youth, she had entered heart and soul into an existence which her late husband would have deprecated as strongly as he had once admired the spirit which led her to do it.

Now the sudden intrusion of a full-grown, wilful and extraordinarily vigorous girl of fifteen and a half years upon these newly acquired habits, proved a source of some vexation to the widow; and, love Leonetta as she might, she very quickly discovered that the peace of mind and freedom of action that Cleopatra had allowed her unstintingly were to be despotically withheld by her younger and more exacting offspring.

Cleopatra watched and understood all this. It seemed that Mrs. Delarayne and Leonetta were inevitably heading towards a catastrophe; nor did the elder girl take any steps, either by word or deed, to guide either of them to a peaceable adjustment of their differences. [35]

Gradually Leonetta grew to be deliberately rude with her parent, would refuse to fetch and carry for her, was quickly bored over any little personal service performed for her, and did her best in every way to cramp the widow's ever freshly sprouting affection.

At last Cleopatra felt she must put in a word. Her mother was very highly strung, in any case too much so to be exposed constantly to irritation and sorrow. Could she help? Could she speak to Baby?

It was then that Mrs. Delarayne had opened her heart to Cleopatra. No, she had made up her mind. Reluctantly she had been forced to the conclusion that Leonetta must go away,—to a school of domesticity, or of gardening or something,—where she could acquire not only information, but also the discipline which would save her from growing up an impossible woman.

Cleopatra had given vent to a sigh of relief, and with decent slowness and hesitation had ultimately agreed.

A somewhat acrimonious quarrel between Mrs. Delarayne and Leonetta, a day or two after this conversation had taken place, proved to be the determining factor. In her passion Leonetta had declared that she would be as glad as anything to go, if only for company, as it seemed to her that her mother was eternally "gadding about"; and it was only when she was alone in a first-class carriage travelling northward that she regretted this hasty and ill-considered speech. [36]

Another year had passed in this way; Leonetta had by now become, according to the domesticity school reports, an accomplished housekeeper, and, as a girl of seventeen, was on her way home. Coming home!—Cleopatra had dwelt on this homecoming every wakeful hour of the last thirty days, and again she felt that pang, or pain, or strange convulsion of the heart, which she loathed because it humiliated her, and which she combated because it threatened to master her.

Thus did Cleopatra meditate over her lot as she examined her fine, strong, disengaged hand, as she sat in the study on that afternoon in June; and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* had little to offer her either in comfort or enlightenment.

It was a fine hand she looked at. The fingers were well-shaped, long and even, without any of those thicknesses at the joints which so often mar the beauty of hands even in men. The fingernails were not too long, and there was a sort of "well-upholstered" fulness of the fingers and palm which spoke of health and latent efficiency. It was not a small hand, or in any case, not too small a hand, and on the inside it possessed those soft corrugations that denote artistic sensibilities.

CHAPTER III

The central offices of Bullion and Bullion Ltd. were in Lombard Street. They occupied a large building constructed of ferroconcrete, on each floor of which, except the first, there was accommodation for hundreds of clerks. [37]

The room occupied by Sir Joseph Bullion, on the first floor, was one of those apartments with very tall mantelpieces and enormous windows, which seem to have been designed for a race of giants. Certainly Sir Joseph himself, unless he had climbed on a chair, could never have rested his elbow against the mantelpiece, nor could he have deposited his cigar thereon without an unusually strenuous effort. The remaining appointments of the room, except for two or three exquisite Stuart cabinets and some priceless old masters on the walls, were designed on the same scale. Sir Joseph's own table, for instance, though of normal height, looked as if it might have been purchased by the acre, while the carpet, a huge Turkey, presented an enormously long pile, as soft as moss, to the feet. Even the chair on which the head of the firm sat was exceptionally large, and seemed to offer its occupant the constant alternative of definitely selecting either one or the other side of the extensive surface which lay between its arms. [38]

Opposite him at a smaller table sat his chief private secretary, Denis Malster, a pale, clean-shaven, intelligent-looking young man, with mouse-coloured hair, grey eyes, and somewhat thin lips. Certainly Mrs. Delarayne must have been right about his sense of humour, for a pleasant twinkle played about his eyes, even while he was at work, which gave him the air of one amused by what he was doing.

Sir Joseph did not pretend to understand the people who served him; but having been hard driven himself in his day, he had a pretty shrewd notion of the power he could safely exercise over them, and of the duties, supplementary to the office routine, which he could reasonably induce them to fulfil. To make fourths at tennis or at bridge, to fill a gap at a Cinderella dance or

at a dinner, or to help at a charity bazaar—these were some of the duties which Sir Joseph's highest personnel knew that they might be called upon to perform at any moment for one of Sir Joseph's numerous lady friends.

Thus a few days after his visit to Mrs. Delarayne, which has already been described, the Chairman of Bullion and Bullion Ltd., occupying the centre of his thronelike chair, was engaged on two tasks, either one of which would have been sufficient to occupy the wits of any ordinary man. He had before him the figures showing the business of his firm for the half year, and in the intervals of his study of these data, he was covertly watching his chief private secretary, with a view to estimating his chances of success in regard to a certain secret scheme in which this young man was to play a leading part. [39]

Suddenly his dual activities were interrupted by the chief messenger, who, entering in his usual pompous fashion, presented a card to his chief, bearing the name Aubrey St. Maur. "The gentleman wishes to see you urgently, Sir Joseph," said the man.

Sir Joseph passed the card to his assistant, and waited for enlightenment.

Denis Malster examined it, rose, and returned it to Sir Joseph. "Lives in Upper Brook Street, Mayfair," he said; "he's evidently somebody, but I've never heard of him."

"The point is," Sir Joseph exclaimed sharply, "have I an appointment with him?"

"No, sir, you have no appointment with him," said Denis firmly, without referring to the notes on his table.

Sir Joseph was too well aware of his secretary's efficiency to doubt this assurance, and bade him go to see what Mr. Aubrey St. Maur wanted.

In a moment Denis returned. "He's from Lord Henry Highbarn," he informed his chief. "He wishes to deliver a message to you."

Sir Joseph glanced out of the huge window at his side, and appeared to take counsel of the tangle of chimney pots and telegraph wires that formed the only prospect from that side of the building. He repeated the name once or twice in a mystified manner, at length remembered the difficult task Mrs. Delarayne had asked him to perform in persuading Lord Henry to abandon his mission to China, and bade his secretary show St. Maur in. [40]

The young man who followed Denis back into the room was a person of refined and handsome appearance, who, as he advanced towards Sir Joseph, introduced himself and explained his business with a degree of grace and composure at which even the seasoned old Stuart furniture seemed to stare in amazement.

St. Maur took a chair beside Sir Joseph's vast table, and Malster returned to his place.

"You are doubtless aware," said the stranger, "that Lord Henry was due here at this very moment."

Sir Joseph looked furtively towards his secretary and nodded.

St. Maur then proceeded to explain that owing to urgent Party duties at Westminster Lord Henry could not possibly reach Lombard Street before six o'clock that evening, and begged Sir Joseph to say whether he could see him at that hour. He was to return to Westminster at once and convey Sir Joseph's reply to Lord Henry.

The baronet fixed the appointment with Lord Henry for that hour, and St. Maur rose to go. [41]

"Half a minute!" exclaimed Sir Joseph. "Please remain seated a moment longer, Mr. St. Maur, and tell me something about Lord Henry. I am a busy man and have not much time to keep myself informed of all these matters. Lord Henry must be a younger son of the Marquis of Firle, is he not?"

"He's the third and youngest son," replied St. Maur.

"And may I ask for details about the title;—you must think me dreadfully ignorant!"

"Not at all, sir," St. Maur answered. "It is a Charles I. creation. They are a Sussex family. As you probably know, Charles I. did not create peers indiscriminately. The Stuart creations are, on the whole, a credit to the monarchs who were responsible for them, particularly those of Charles I."

Sir Joseph nodded politely, but looked as if this information did not quite harmonise with his own conception of that prince.

"The fourth Earl of Chesterfield perhaps disgraced himself a little over Dr. Johnson," St. Maur added, "but as a rule the families who owe their rank to the Royal Martyr have upheld their great traditions with singular success. And possibly against the case of the fourth Earl of Chesterfield we may set that of the sixth Lord Byron, who gave us *Childe Harold* and *Manfred*."

Sir Joseph was genuinely interested. "Lord Henry is, I believe, a very wonderful personality," he remarked. [42]

"You are right, sir," replied St. Maur, "very wonderful."

The young man rose again. He was a little above medium height, with dark crisp hair and a sallow complexion. His figure and features gave the impression of metallic virility: they were at once hard, supple, clean-cut, and finely moulded. His mouth was a little full, and his jaw perhaps a trifle heavy, but the deep thoughtful eyes gave a balance to his face which saved it from appearing unduly sensual.

"That is a pleasant young man," Sir Joseph declared, when St. Maur had gone.

"Yes," Denis replied half-heartedly. He, too, had been impressed by St. Maur, but not favourably. For Denis Malster, cultivated, sleek, and refined though he was, just lacked that exuberance and vitality which he had observed in St. Maur, and which made the latter so conspicuously his superior. Denis had nothing to compensate him for his tame, careful, Kensington breeding. St. Maur, on the other hand, had that fire and warmth of blood, without which even the highest breeding is little more than the extirpation of the animal at the expense of the man. Denis was an easy winner with the women of his class, precisely because of the parade which, in his face, nature made of his gentle antecedents; but he had sufficient intelligence to realise that when women are confronted by a man possessing all he possessed, besides that something more that was noticeable in St. Maur the best of them do not hesitate a second in selecting the St. Maur type.

[43]

"I wonder if that is all true about Charles I.?" Sir Joseph demanded with a little irritation.

Denis leant back in his chair and his eyes twinkled. "I doubt whether it is true of Charles I.," he said; "but it certainly isn't true of his son and heir, for Charles II. used the peerage more or less as a sort of foundling hospital for his various illegitimate offspring."

Sir Joseph smiled, as he frequently did, at his secretary's odd way of summing up a case, and then quickly resuming his gravity, glanced searchingly at Denis as if pondering whether the word of such a man could confidently be taken against that of an Aubrey St. Maur. For some minutes he paced the rug in front of the fire-place, his hands behind his back, and his head bowed. At last he raised his eyes and looked more affably than usual at his assistant.

"You know, Malster," he began, "I've been thinking for some time that although you appear to take to this work less quickly than some men I have had, you are on the whole trying your hardest—are you not?"

Denis, a little startled by the palpable injustice of this remark, rose, and resting the points of his fingers lightly on the table, leant forward. "Ye—yes, sir," he stammered.

[44]

"Ow old are you?" Sir Joseph continued.

"Twenty-eight, sir."

Sir Joseph repeated the words. "How much are you getting?"

"Eight hundred, sir," Denis replied.

Sir Joseph turned sharply on his heel and slightly accelerated his pace across the rug.

"H'm! Well, I propose to make it a thousand," he said thoughtfully.

Denis Malster smiled nervously. "Thank you, Sir Joseph."

"I propose to do this," continued the baronet, "because I think you must be wanting to marry, and because I think it wrong that a man of your age should be prevented from marrying owing to lack of means. D'you understand? Only that!"

"I think it most considerate of you," Denis faltered again.

"Well, that's settled," said Sir Joseph drily. "But," he added, always on tenterhooks of anxiety lest one of his staff should begin to think too much of himself, "I should like you to be quite clear about my reasons for the change. I don't want you to run away with the notion that I am giving you a rise because I am entirely satisfied with your work."

As he said this Sir Joseph resumed his seat, and pulled in his heavy chair as smartly as he was able, with the air of a man who had neatly achieved his object without abandoning the usual safeguards.

[45]

It was a minute to six when the messenger announced Lord Henry Highbarn, and the moment the announcement was made, Denis, reaching for his hat and stick, took leave of his chief. He strode out into the street with a sprightly gait, humming as he went:

"I don't adore the girl in blue
For all her family's after you."

There is probably in most men a sense of quality, a power of divination in regard to value which, on occasions when they are confronted by a stranger whose worth they do not know, informs them immediately of the comparative rarity or commonness of his type. This sense may at first be baffled by the delusive disguises in which men sometimes present themselves, but as a rule a

chance word, an artless gesture, or even a glance, quickly corrects the initial error of the eye, and in a moment the original estimate is adjusted to the unmistakable evidence of a definite quality.

When this peculiar apprehensiveness in regard to worth becomes aware of any marked superiority in a fellow creature,—an experience which in unhappy lives very seldom occurs,—a feeling of certainty usually accompanies it, which is as mysterious as the evidence upon which it is based is intangible and elusive. A man knows that he has met his superior, he knows too how far the superiority he recognises extends, and he is conscious of experiencing something exceptional, something exquisitely precious.

[46]

That such encounters are becoming every day more rare, probably explains the increasing growth, in modern times, of that kind of disbelief and heresy which, far from being wanton, arises from a total inability to envisage greatness, whether in kings, ideals, or gods. For we arrive at our most exalted images, not by solitary flights of imagination unassisted, but by actual progressive steps in the world of concrete things; so that the spring-board from which we take our final leap into the highest concepts of what a god might be, is always the highest man we happen to have met. We can have no other starting-point. Hence in an age when greatness among men is too rare to be felt as a universal fact, a disbelief in all gods is bound sooner or later to supervene.

When Lord Henry Highbarn presented himself before Sir Joseph, it was plain from the meek droop of the baronet's eyelids and the subdued hesitating tone of his voice, that something in the young nobleman's appearance had like a flash intimated to the experienced financial magnate that here was someone of a quality as unfamiliar as it was rare. Moreover, the difference which the older man felt distinguished him from his visitor was of a kind too fundamental and insuperable to challenge even that friendly rivalry so instinctive between two natures each conscious of their own particular efficiency and excellence.

[47]

Indeed, it needed all the elaborate complications of our modern civilisation to account even for the meeting of these two people under the same roof, not to speak of the fact that they met on an equal footing.

The one, a plain but not unpretentious man of business, still a little perplexed by his stupendous success, and not yet certain of his precise social level, revealed in his unshapely but kindly features the modest rung on which Nature herself would probably have placed him, if the peculiar economic conditions of his Age had not intervened to bring about a different result; while two characteristics alone led one to suspect his latent power,—his large energetic hands with their powerful spatulate fingers, and his masterful and meditative dark eyes.

The other,—a tall, muscular, youthful-looking aristocrat, with deep-set thoughtful blue eyes, a straight finely-chiselled nose, and a full eloquent mouth (the whole overshadowed by an unusually lofty brow, from which, particularly over the temples, the hair had noticeably receded)—possessed that unconscious ease of manner and unassertive masterfulness of bearing, which derive on the one hand from breeding, and on the other from a constant habit of preoccupation with external problems, that is unfavourable to any self-concern. As his alert vision took in the details of his surroundings, including the person of Sir Joseph himself, on whom he appeared to cast only the most casual sidelong glances, it was clear that his mind, far from being occupied with internal questionings, was measuring even then the probable extent to which this visit might serve some ultimate important purpose upon which the whole gravity and earnestness of his being seemed to be concentrated; and if his solemn features occasionally relaxed into a smile, it was precisely the habitual gravity of his mien that lent his passing levity such extraordinarily persuasive merriness.

[48]

It was chiefly Lord Henry's air of preoccupation that set Sir Joseph so quickly at his ease. For although the baronet was familiar enough with the sons of peers and peers themselves,—for had he not a number of them on his various boards?—there was, as we have seen, something more than mere rank in his youthful visitor to disturb him.

While the first courteous platitudes were being exchanged, Sir Joseph quietly took stock of his companion, and was for a brief moment a little perturbed by the latter's unconventional attire.

We have noticed that though he was young, Lord Henry's hair receded a little from his brow, and made it appear even loftier than it actually was. Between the high bald temples, however, a wisp of stiff fair hair still remained over the centre of the young man's forehead, somewhat resembling that seen in the portraits of Napoleon, and with this tuft his long well-shaped and sensitive fingers would play continuously while he spoke, with the result that he constantly bowed his head.

[49]

Occasionally, therefore, when his customary gravity gave way for a space and his face was irradiated with a smile or a laugh, an expression of such irresistible and almost wicked mirth suffused his features, owing to the upward glance he was constrained to give you from the bowed angle of his head, that willy-nilly you were compelled to laugh with him.

Sir Joseph felt this; he was also aware of the peculiar charm of it; but what struck him even more forcibly were Lord Henry's loose-fitting and apparently badly cut clothes. Anyone else so clad would have looked hopelessly dowdy, while the carelessly knotted green tie that bulged all askew from beneath the young man's ample collar, seemed for a moment almost offensive.

It was strange how the displeasure provoked by these shortcomings in his attire gradually

vanished beneath the steady persuasiveness of the wearer's fascinating personality; and very soon not only had Sir Joseph ceased from feeling their aggressiveness, but had actually begun to associate them inseparably with the strange charm of the creature before him.

"Mrs. Delarayne," said Lord Henry, "would give me no peace until I came to see you, Sir Joseph, so you must forgive me for forcing myself upon you in this way, and relying for your forbearance simply upon the strength of the friendship you bear her." [50]

He laughed, and Sir Joseph perforce laughed with him.

"Ave you seen her lately?" the baronet enquired.

"She's always seeing me," Lord Henry replied, smiling in a manner that was at once childishly winsome and wise. He was still startlingly boyish, despite his thirty-three years, and though his slight baldness added a few years to his face, he did not look a month older than five-and-twenty.

"She is very fond of you," Sir Joseph proceeded earnestly, beginning to feel, for the first time, not only that Mrs. Delarayne's infatuation was clearly justified, but also that young St. Maur had probably been right in his remarks concerning Charles I.'s creations. It was strange to recognise the evidences of unusual wisdom in such a childish face; it reminded him vaguely of what he had heard or dreamt of Chinese mandarins,—evidently such phenomena were possible.

"She's an amazingly captivating woman," muttered Lord Henry, still pulling at the tuft of hair over his brow. "Her blank refusal to accept the fact of her advancing years is the most wonderful and at the same time the most pathetic thing about her."

Sir Joseph, with an expression of deep curiosity, leant heavily over the right arm of his chair, and stared expectantly at his visitor. [51]

"She has not had her second decisive love affair, you see," Lord Henry continued. "And every day she arrays herself to experience it,—that second and decisive love affair which alone reconciles the best women to old age and to snow-white locks."

Sir Joseph fidgeted. He did not understand, but thought he did. "Her second and decisive love affair," he repeated,—"yes."

"We are apt to forget," continued Lord Henry, "that all deep, decently constituted women have two definite relationships to man, one alone of which is insufficient to satisfy them. The first is their relationship of wife to the man more or less of their own generation whom they have loved; the second is the relationship of mother to the man of their children's generation, whom under favourable circumstances they worship."

Sir Joseph shifted in his chair, raised his hand to his chin and looked fixedly at the speaker.

"This last and most precious relationship is the only one that reconciles a woman to her wrinkles and makes her happy in her grey hairs. Without it she takes to peroxide, smooths out her wrinkles with cream, and what is even more tragic, develops a tendency to pursue the young men of her children's generation. People call it ridiculous, lunatic,—so it would be, if it were not so nobly, so terribly pathetic."

"But I have known women with grown-up sons behave exactly as Mrs. Delarayne behaves," Sir Joseph objected with as much breath as he could summon in his surprise at what Lord Henry had said. [52]

"Not sons with whom they are in love," Lord Henry corrected. "Most mothers have sons, but of these not all experience that great love for one of their male offspring which is perhaps the most beautiful, the most passionate, and the most permanent of earthly relationships. Mrs. Delarayne is obviously a woman who would have been capable of such a relationship had she only had a son."

"Is it only one particular son?" Sir Joseph enquired with an unconscious note of profound humility in his voice.

"Always—yes!"

Lord Henry, still tugging at his wisp of hair, now turned to Sir Joseph, and blinking very quickly, as was his wont when deeply absorbed in a subject, contemplated the baronet for a moment in silence.

"Doesn't that clear up the problem of Mrs. Delarayne a little for you?" he asked at last. "Believe me, few women care to admit that they are thirty-five unless they have a husband whom they love, and still fewer women resign themselves to their fiftieth year unless they are wrapped up in a beloved son."

Sir Joseph, to whom Mrs. Delarayne, except for her repeated refusals of his hand, had never been precisely a problem, demurred a little. "It certainly sheds some light,—yes," he said slowly. "But don't you think that a second great love with a man more or less of her own generation is equally satisfying to a woman like that?" [53]

"How can it be when it is simply a repetition of a former and thoroughly explored experience?" Lord Henry replied. "I do not mean, mind you, that great-hearted women who have not enjoyed that exquisite relationship to a beloved son, are conscious that it is this circumstance which has

been lacking in their lives. Because precious little whatever is conscious in the best women. But in their loathing and repudiation of advancing years, and in their repeated attachments to men of my generation, such women reveal to the psychologist the constant ache they feel from the vast empty chamber in their hearts."

For some moments Sir Joseph played idly with an ivory paper-knife on his desk. He had completely forgotten the object of Lord Henry's visit. It was as if he had always known the man, and that they were just having one of their usual pleasant chats after their work was done. Such was the power that Lord Henry possessed of immersing his listeners in the thoughts that occupied his mind.

"And this," continued the younger man, after a while, "is the only consideration which makes me feel I ought to marry. I mean that it almost amounts to wanton vandalism not to give a wife of one's choice and a son of one's own begetting at least the chance of beautifying the world by this most wonderful of all relationships." [54]

"You are a poet," said Sir Joseph with that spontaneous penetration of which the uncultivated are sometimes capable.

"If to understand Mrs. Delarayne a man must be a poet, then I am one," Lord Henry replied, smiling in his irresistible way.

Sir Joseph perforce smiled too, and the return to earth which this faint levity signified, reminded him of the real object of the young nobleman's visit. The thought did not reassure him, however; for after all the intelligence he had been able to glean regarding his visitor's character, he realised that if Lord Henry had resolved to undertake this mission to China, it would obviously serve no purpose to exhort him to change his mind. It was clear that Mrs. Delarayne could not have understood the man she was dealing with; or, if she had, she must have urged this step as a last hope.

As a forlorn hope it certainly appeared to Sir Joseph, and it was only half-heartedly that he opened the attack.

"And now tell me about China," he said. "Have you quite made up your mind?"

Lord Henry rose, thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets, and paced the hearth-rug.

"I think so," he replied, musing deeply as he glanced from one to the other of Sir Joseph's art treasures.

"But you are doing good here," the baronet protested feebly. "What good will you do in China?" [55]

"I'm not convinced that I am doing good here," Lord Henry rejoined sharply. "That's precisely the point."

"But everybody says you are."

"No doubt."

Sir Joseph turned to his ivory paper-knife. He did not understand.

"If it's doing good," Lord Henry added, "to salve the nervous wreckage that our unspeakable Western civilisation produces with every generation; if it's doing good to render the disastrous mess which we have made of human life possible for a few years longer, by bringing relief to the principal victims of it; then, indeed, I am a desirable member of society. But I question the whole thing. I question very much whether it can be doing good to help this hopeless condition of things to last one moment longer than it need."

Sir Joseph glanced up a little anxiously. "Are you serious?" he enquired.

Lord Henry sat down again.

"Am I serious?" he scoffed. "Can you be serious, can you be sane, and expect me to think otherwise? But you have been a great success by means of the very system which is rotten and iniquitous to the core. How could you sympathise?"

Sir Joseph stammered hopelessly that he was trying to sympathise.

"You are no doubt convinced," Lord Henry continued, "that all you are witnessing to-day is what you would call Progress. And the further we recede from a true understanding of human life and its most vital needs, and the more we complicate the world and increase its machinery, the more persuaded you become of the reality of your illusion. How could it be otherwise?" [56]

Sir Joseph expostulated ineffectually, and Lord Henry continued:

"Still, I am not a reformer," he said. "I do not wish to reform, even if I could. It is not only too late, things are also too desperate. What I chiefly want is to take refuge somewhere where humanity and its deepest needs are the subject of greater mastery, greater understanding; so that I can cease from being distracted by the immensity of modern error. No great intellect, no great creative power can exist in this country; because the moment it becomes conscious it is so obsessed by the shams and the shamelessness that surround it, that instead of devoting itself to the joys and enrichment of life, it feels impelled by the horrors on every side to take up the social system and attempt to put it right. This sterile pitfall is now the temptation of the greatest minds."

Your Shelley, your Coleridge, even your Byron,—what did they do? Menaced by this same vortex of negative effort, sentenced to intellectual annihilation if they attempted to straighten out the muddle of modernity, they fled, or drowned themselves in water or opium."

He had ceased playing with his tuft of hair. His face was distraught with indignation and with the bitterness of a thwarted love of mankind; it was also illuminated by the distant dream of a world as he would have it, so that though he brought down his fist on the corner of Sir Joseph's table with some weight, the baronet was too much moved to notice the gesture. [57]

"Things are so bad," he pursued, lightly lowering his voice, "that to have any genuine insight to-day, any special human feeling to-day, means perforce to devote these gifts to the social problem, instead of to art and to beauty. That is the curse of being born into this Age. The gigantic ghastliness of modern Western civilisation successfully engulfs every superior brain that comes to being in its midst."

Sir Joseph fell back limply in his chair. He acknowledged the game was lost before the struggle had actually begun. How could he presume to strike a bargain with such a man? He remembered Mrs. Delarayne, however, and braced himself once more.

"There are times," Lord Henry began again, glancing kindly at Sir Joseph, "when I feel that perhaps I ought at least to risk even my life in order to do something here, in this country. But what is one man's life in the face of this sea of blunders? What is even a giant's effort, against the Lilliputian swarm of modern men who are determined to gain the precipice?"

"I was hoping," said Sir Joseph quietly, "that I might make you an offer which would induce you to abandon this mission to the Far East. I was hoping, in fact, that I might help you." [58]

Lord Henry glanced thoughtfully at the baronet and then shook his head.

Sir Joseph, more and more convinced that he was embarking on a hopeless enterprise, persisted notwithstanding.

"I am prepared to put a considerable sum of money at your disposal," he said. "I believe your sanatorium for nervous disorders in Kent is a veritable public boon. I feel that I could not find a nobler public object for my wealth than to support you in your work."

Lord Henry rapped his fingers on his knees impatiently.

"Could I not assist you in enlarging this establishment? Could I not give it a permanent foundation or effect what alterations in it you may suggest for its improvement and greater utility? If by the same token I succeeded in retaining you in England, I feel I should in addition be doing a personal service to someone, to a lady, for whom you and I have a very deep respect."

Lord Henry blinked rapidly as he turned to face the old gentleman at his side, and his smile was kind and courteous.

"If, Sir Joseph, my only motive in going abroad were indeed to transact the business of the Society for Anthropological Research, I might perhaps be induced to yield to the temptation you so generously put in my way. But seeing that possibly my principal object is to give my endowments a fair chance away from this whirlpool of confusion, which makes social reform a morbid *idée fixe*, I cannot persuade myself that it would be worth while." [59]

"But supposing," Sir Joseph persisted lamely, "I gave you *carte-blanche* to extend your work as you liked?"

"And with what object?"

"I have told you the object," the baronet replied mildly.

"No!" exclaimed the younger man with emphasis. "The object would be to add to the organisations which are springing up everywhere for the purpose of making our impossible civilisation possible for at least a little while longer. *That* would be the ultimate object."

"How much would you require?" Sir Joseph suggested in his most melting tones, still clinging desperately to his belief in the only bait he possessed.

Lord Henry laughed despondently. "Only enough to purchase sufficient dynamite to blow my present sanatorium skywards," he said. Then resuming his gravity and rising, he extended a hand to the baronet.

"No," he added, "I'm afraid my mind is made up. I must leave this country, Mrs. Delarayne or no Mrs. Delarayne. Thank you very much indeed, all the same. I have seen you and enjoyed our talk. Mrs. Delarayne's behest has at least been strictly obeyed." [60]

"When will you be leaving?" Sir Joseph enquired, gracefully throwing down his cards.

"In about three months' time, I expect."

"I am sorry, very sorry," ejaculated the baronet.

The two men walked gravely to the door.

On the threshold Lord Henry stopped, and looking methodically round the room, pointed at last

to one of the most beautiful of Sir Joseph's Stuart cabinets.

"You also unconsciously acknowledge that there is something revolting and intolerable about this Age, Sir Joseph," he said smiling mischievously; "otherwise why do you use your wealth to surround yourself both here, and as I understand at Brineweald too, with all the treasures of art that were produced by our ancestors."

Lord Henry laughed again; his deep thoughtful eyes filled with the tears of mirth, and he vanished from the room leaving Sir Joseph contemplating his costly old furniture with feelings of utter bewilderment.

CHAPTER IV

[61]

Despite Sir Joseph's very careful reservations in regard to the increase, which unsolicited he had thought fit to make in his chief secretary's salary, Denis, who was perfectly well aware of his own efficiency, was inclined rather to discount every feature of his master's generous behaviour, except the covert tribute which he believed it was intended to make to his invaluable services. He knew the business man's instinctive reluctance to reveal his full appreciation of a subordinate's worth, and felt he must allow for this. But, on the other hand, in view of Sir Joseph's intimate relations with the Delarayne household, he was unable altogether to dispel a certain lurking anxiety concerning the baronet's very precise allusions to the question of marriage, which it was hard to believe could have been altogether gratuitous. This thought was disquieting.

Denis Malster, without being exactly an incurable philanderer, was nevertheless insufficiently commonplace to contemplate marriage, in the Pauline sense, as a necessity. He was much more disposed, at least for the present, to regard it merely as a piquant possibility, towards which his very attitude of indecision lent him an extra weapon of power in his relations with the other sex.

[62]

His life, hitherto, had been enjoyable, he thought, simply because it had been an uninterrupted preparation for marriage without the dull certainty of a definite conclusion. To excite interest in the other sex and envy in his own had, ever since he had been a boy of eighteen, constituted the breath of his nostrils, the one spring from which he drew his love of life and his desire to live. Immaculate in his dress, adequately cultivated and intellectual in his speech, and carefully punctilious in the adoption of such amateur pursuits as would be likely to give him the stamp of artistic connoisseurship, he had until now employed his ample income principally in furnishing his extensive wardrobe, in collecting old books and prints, and in giving his chambers that appearance of *outré* refinement, which was calculated to force his friends to certain inevitable conclusions concerning both his means and the extent of his æsthetic development.

In the circumstances, therefore, it was difficult for him to regard the addition to his income, which Sir Joseph had suddenly thought fit to make, as anything more than a fresh means of indulging his various whims to an even greater degree than he had indulged them heretofore,—those whims which had by now become almost driving passions to the exclusion of all else;—and he was certainly not in the least disposed to take Sir Joseph at his word, and to embark upon that undertaking which he knew would put an abrupt end to all the careless dalliance in which his clothes, his fastidious speech, and his parade of artistic discrimination played so effective a part.

[63]

Such were the thoughts that occupied his mind as he made his way from Lombard Street to his rooms in Essex Court; and by the time he had dressed for dinner and was waiting for a cab in the Strand, a look of fixed determination had settled on his face which was indicative of the firm resolve he had made.

In any case Sir Joseph could not expect him to marry immediately. For a while yet, therefore, he would continue to enjoy the life so full of secret triumphs which he had succeeded in leading ever since he had entered the house of Bullion & Bullion, and from this day with the additional pleasures that his increased income would allow. Had he not been told by Mrs. Delarayne herself that a man should not marry until flappers had ceased to turn round to get a second look at him in the street? And was there not something profoundly wise in this advice, although it had been pronounced in one of the old lady's most flippant moods? A smile of complacent well-being spread slowly over his features as he recalled this remark, and the last endorsement was mentally affixed to his private plans.

What would Cleopatra Delarayne do? Charitably, almost chivalrously, he imagined, he gave her a thought. Had he led her to hope? Undoubtedly he had. But then he had not resolved never to marry; he had merely determined to postpone the step *sine die*. Perhaps in a year or two he would come to a definite understanding with Cleopatra. After all, she was only twenty-five. She was an attractive girl, and she would be wealthy. He felt that marriage with her would not be an uninviting conclusion to another year or two of his present delightful existence. Thus he satisfied his conscience and gratified his deepest wishes into the bargain.

[64]

He dined alone at the Café Royal. It was a sultry evening, and London was still stifling after a sweltering day. One had the feeling that the roofs and masonry of the buildings all about were still burning, as probably they were, with the heat of the sun that had been pouring down upon them all day; and the big city seemed to breathe its hot dust into the face of its inhabitants.

Having nothing better to do, he thought how pleasant it would be to finish the day in Mrs. Delarayne's cool garden in Kensington, and thither he betook himself after his meal, devoutly hoping that they would be at home.

Cleopatra had evidently been half expecting him, for she appeared in the drawing-room on the heels of the maid who had ushered him in, and gave him a friendly welcome. Mrs. Delarayne had ensconced herself upstairs and did not wish to be disturbed, and at that moment her penetrating voice could be heard conducting what appeared to be a most lively and acrimonious debate with someone unknown across the telephone. So on Denis's suggestion they went into the garden and installed themselves there in Cleopatra's favourite bower. [65]

"Rather late for the Warrior to be upbraiding a tradesman," Denis observed. "I wonder what she can be doing."

He had nicknamed Mrs. Delarayne "the Warrior" himself. He was sensitive enough to apprehend the strong strain of courage in her character; he had on several occasions been impressed by the tenacious boldness of her claims to youth and by the energy she displayed in keeping up the difficult part,—frequently entailing exertions out of all proportion to her bodily vigour;—so he had nicknamed her "the Warrior." But this sobriquet was used only when he and Cleopatra were alone together.

"The poor Warrior is peevish anyhow, you see," Cleopatra explained. "Baby comes home tomorrow, and if there's anything that annoys mother to exasperation, it is to have to cluck and fuss round her chick like an old hen. She loathes it, and Baby always makes her feel she must do it."

Denis pretended to be interested only in a casual way. "What sort of a girl is—Baby?" he asked. "Is she like you?"

"I suppose she is like me to the same extent that I am like the Warrior," the girl replied. "But she's most like the Warrior herself. Imagine my mother at the age of seventeen and you know my sister. Surely you have seen that old photograph of the Warrior as a girl in the drawing-room? It is simply Baby over again,—or rather *vice versa*." [66]

"I must look at it," said Denis thoughtfully.

"In fact they are so much alike," Cleopatra proceeded, "that they know each other inside out, and annoy each other accordingly."

"They don't get on well then?" he enquired.

"Oh, yes, but Baby's a little trying at times. You see, she will forget for instance that we call mother Edith, and have done ever since father died; and she will suddenly shout Mother! out loud on crowded railway platforms, or at the Academy, or worse still at garden parties, which always gives the Warrior one of those nervous attacks for which she has to go to Lord Henry."

Denis started almost imperceptibly at the mention of Lord Henry's name, and turned an interested face towards the girl. "Do you know Lord Henry?" he asked.

"No, I don't. There are some men the Warrior knows whom she never introduces to me. I feel as if I knew Lord Henry very well indeed, but I have never met him."

"You haven't lost much," Denis snapped.

"I beg your pardon?" Cleopatra exclaimed, smiling kindly but deprecatingly, and arching her neck a little, as she scented the injustice behind his remark. [67]

"He dresses abominably," Denis pursued, "and from what I can gather is benighted enough to believe in our beheaded sovereign Charles I."

"He must be very able though," the girl objected. "It isn't often, is it, that our aristocracy distinguish themselves? And d'you know that he is a Fellow of the Royal Society entirely on the strength of his original research into the subject of modern nervous disorders?"

Denis pouted and smiled with an ostentatious show of incredulity. "He's the son of the Marquis of Firle, remember!"

"Oh, but I don't believe that's got anything to do with it—honestly!" she retorted.

Cleopatra knew her mother as well as any daughter has ever known her parent; she could have compiled a catalogue of Mrs. Delarayne's foibles more exhaustive and elaborate than any that Mrs. Delarayne's worst enemies could have produced; but, on the other hand, she had so often found her mother a safe guide where her fellow creatures were concerned, and had thus acquired so deep a faith in her mother's judgment, that it was hard for her to believe that in the matter of Lord Henry the Warrior could be mistaken.

She regarded her companion for some moments in silence. He was cutting a cigar, and failed to notice that she was observing him.

Certainly he was very sleek and smart, and showed that perfect efficiency in all he did which betokens general ability. What was it then that gave her a little pang of doubt whenever she was moved by an impulse to look up to him? His voice, it is true, was thin and a trifle high-pitched,— [68]

always a bad sign in a man,—but she would have overlooked all his shortcomings if only her craving to revere where she loved had been sufficiently gratified. He was beyond all question the best type of man who had hitherto paid her attention. Others, perhaps, might have been more manly; but then they had been clumsy, heavy, and puerile, and had, above all, lacked that air of complete efficiency which was perhaps Denis's greatest asset.

She thought herself foolish for expecting too much from life, and without any effort turned a kindly smiling face to her visitor.

"The Warrior!" he ejaculated suddenly, blowing sharp strong puffs from his cigar; and he was either annoyed or made a good pretence of it.

Yes, there, indeed, was Mrs. Delarayne, stalking majestically up the garden, and from the way she glanced rapidly from side to side, and grabbed at her frock, it was plain that she was in none too pleasant a mood.

Denis rose when she was about four yards from them.

She glanced quickly at Cleopatra, seemed to notice the perfect serenity of both young people with marked dissatisfaction, rapidly recorded the fact that her daughter's hair was utterly undisturbed, and smiled grimly. "Evidently things have taken their usual course," she mused. "He had not even attempted to kiss her!" [69]

"Don't you think you two people are rather silly to sit out here doing nothing?" she demanded irascibly.

"It's so delightfully cool," Denis protested.

"Yes, too cool!" snapped the old lady with a deliberate glance at her daughter, which was intended to convey the full meaning of her words.

Cleopatra moved impatiently. Her mother always made her feel so miserably defective, and this was hard to forgive.

Mrs. Delarayne settled herself elegantly in a wicker chair, took a cigarette from a case, and snapped the case to with a decisive click. She looked hot and a little tired, and as Denis proffered her a light he noticed the beads of perspiration amid the powder round her eyes.

"I've had the most tiresome evening imaginable," she croaked.

"I thought so," said her daughter. "We heard you."

"Really men are most ridiculous cowards," she cried, frowning hard at Denis. "There's Sir Joseph, for instance. He's failed ignominiously with Lord Henry; has been unable to induce him to give up his absurd mission to China, and instead of coming here to tell me all about it, he keeps me thirty-five minutes brawling at him over the 'phone in this heat, simply because he daren't face me!" [70]

Denis stretched out his legs before him and clasped his hands at the back of his head. This was a signal, well known to the women, that a long analytical speech was to follow, and Mrs. Delarayne looked wearily away, as if to imply before the start that she was not in the least interested.

"It's all organisation nowadays," Denis began. "If you can organise your machinery with the help of good subordinates, the trick is done. And since Sir Joseph simply exudes lubricants, everything works smoothly and successfully. He——"

"Don't talk of exuding lubricants in this weather, please!" Mrs. Delarayne interrupted. "I suffer from the heat almost as badly as butter."

It was becoming clear to Cleopatra that her mother was for some reason intent on chastising their visitor, and she watched the interesting woman before her with her filial feeling in almost complete abeyance. The children of remarkable parents frequently do this after they have turned a certain age. It is not disrespect, but merely absent-mindedness.

It was almost dark now, and Denis noticed Mrs. Delarayne's fine profile outlined against the lighted rooms of the house. There was a sadness delineated on her handsome, aristocratic face, which, as he had observed before, was to be seen only when her features were quite still. Could this apparently gay widow still be mourning her husband? Denis was sufficiently romantic and ill-informed to imagine this just possible. [71]

"So the interview between Sir Joseph and Lord Henry was a failure?" he enquired trying to be sympathetic.

"Yes, of course," Mrs. Delarayne rejoined, flinging her cigarette into the bushes at her side. "And I do so hate the idea of going out to China."

Cleopatra laughed. "But, Edith, surely you don't really mean that you'll go to China if Lord Henry goes?"

Denis glanced quickly at Cleopatra and in his eyes she read the supercilious message: "People of *our* generation could not be so foolish."

"You don't flatter yourself, Cleo, I hope," Mrs. Delarayne retorted icily, "that I say these things to

amuse you and Denis, do you?"

Cleopatra signified by a glance directed at Denis that she did not like the message in his eyes, and regretting the laugh with which she had opened her last remark, she turned conciliatingly to her mother.

"I'd go with you, Edith dear, if you wanted me to," she said.

For the first time since he had made their acquaintance Denis began to have the shadow of an understanding of the depth of these two women's attachment to each other, and he bowed his head.

"Thank you, Cleo," Mrs. Delarayne replied after satisfying herself that there was not a trace of insincerity either in the voice or features of her daughter. "We'll see."

She rose, smoothed down the front of her frock with a few rapid gestures, and turned to the younger people. [72]

"Come on!" she said. "You and I cannot afford to lose our beauty sleep, Cleo. Two hours before midnight,—you know the time, and it's now half-past nine."

Evidently Mrs. Delarayne intended to be rude to Denis. Sir Joseph had told her something across the telephone, and she had expected a result which had not occurred.

The following morning after breakfast Mrs. Delarayne as usual retired to the bureau in the library where every day she devoted at least thirty minutes to her housekeeping duties.

Silently on this occasion Cleopatra followed in her wake, and pretending to be in search of a book, lingered in her mother's company longer than was her wont after the morning meal. Book after book was taken down from the shelves, perfunctorily examined and returned to its place. Once or twice the girl looked towards her mother, possibly in the hope that the elder woman would provide the opening to the subject that was uppermost in both their minds. At last Cleopatra spoke.

"Baby comes home to-day," she said, in a voice strained to appear cheerful.

Mrs. Delarayne looked up from a tradesman's book. "Yes," she sighed wearily. "One of Sir Joseph's cars is coming to fetch us at half-past two. The train reaches King's Cross at three. Will you come?" [73]

"Of course,—rather!" Cleopatra exclaimed, taking down another book and examining it cursorily.

There was silence again, and Cleopatra could be heard running quickly through the pages of the volume she held.

"What is Baby going to do?" she asked after a while.

"Don't ask me!" exclaimed the mother.

"Haven't you any plans?" the daughter enquired with studied indifference, her eyes wandering vacantly over the letter-press before them.

"Plans—what plans?" ejaculated the old lady. "I suppose the poor child will have to put up with us now. You don't suppose we can send her gadding about the Continent again?"

"I didn't dream of any such thing!" Cleopatra protested a little guiltily.

"No, I promised her that she should come home for good after the School of Domesticity, and she expects it. You saw what she said in her last letter."

"Naturally," Cleopatra added, closing her book and replacing it hurriedly on the shelves.

"We'll have to put up with it—that's all, my dear. I hope she won't be too trying. But you must really help me a little by taking her off my hands, particularly on my Bridge and 'Inner Light' days." [74]

Cleopatra cast a glance full of meaning at her mother, and quietly left the room. She had heard all she wanted to hear.

Meanwhile, the subject of this conversation, ensconced comfortably in the corner of a first-class carriage, was speeding rapidly towards London.

Looking remarkably at her ease in a smart tailor-made frock of navy serge, silk stockings, suede shoes, and a perfect summer hat trimmed with bright cherries as red as her lips, she sat amid a farraginous medley of newspapers, small parcels, and shiny leather traps, and presented an attractive picture of a flourishing schoolgirl of seventeen,—careless, mischievous, and keenly, though discreetly, interested in everything about her;—but, perhaps a little too healthy, and certainly too beautiful, to be quite typical either of the class or of the kind of school from which

she hailed.

Her large dark eyes, veiled by unusually long lashes, looked sharply at you and then quickly turned away, with that air of mystery and secrecy, and love of secrets at all costs—even mock secrets—peculiar to the young virgin of all climes. Occasionally in glancing away they would half close in a thoughtful smile, which, to the uninitiated, unaware of the irrepressible spirits of their owner, was as unaccountable as it was provoking.

There was an air of childhood still clinging, as if from habit alone, to the outward insignia of maturity, in this mercurial, magnetic, and undaunted young person; and in her malicious elfish eyes could be read the solemn determination to force every possible claim that her double advantage, as child and adult, could, according to the occasion, uphold. [75]

Her thick dark hair did not hang down her back in the rich spiral curl which is now becoming so common among schoolgirls; for that it was too plentiful, too troublesomely luxuriant. It hung like heavy bronze in a thick stiff plait—a badge both of her robust youth and the redundant richness of her blood,—and at its extremity it was tied with a broad ribbon of black silk. Beneath her hat, bold festoons of hair reached down almost to her eyebrows, and to these portions of her coiffure she constantly applied her soft shapely sun-tanned fingers, as if to reassure herself that they were keeping their proper position.

The roguish expression of her face was partly due to pure health and partly to wanton spirits, and her features possessed that exceptional animation which, even in the simple process of eating a fondant, produced the impression of extreme mobility.

Having long previously examined her fellow-passengers and judged them uninteresting, she divided her attention between the fleeting landscape at her side, a box of fruit creams, which she was consuming with grave perseverance, and the contents of a pocket-portfolio, which she appeared to be slowly sorting and weeding out. To everything she did, however, to each one of her movements, she had the air of imparting so much mysteriousness, so much elaborate secrecy, that she soon found herself the object of the united attention of all her companions. And occasionally when her fresh full lips parted in a smile at the things she read, the old gentleman opposite her had to turn also to the fleeting landscape as a prophylactic against the infection of her high spirits. [76]

She gave the impression of that aggressive vitality with which Nature seems deliberately to equip her more favoured female children at this age, as if to challenge the other sex to a definite attitude immediately. A quivering freshness—the "bloom" of the poets—gave a soft shimmer to her skin of which the powder of later years is such a palpably poor travesty; her limbs were nicely rounded and not too fragile; her teeth, like Cleopatra's, were perfect, and although she was a trifle smaller than her sister, she was broad across the shoulders, and well developed.

Leonetta, as we have already seen, knew that she was attractive; but she did not know this fact as surely and unmistakably as—say, a philosopher looking at her did. She probably knew that she was sunburnt, for instance; but she was not aware of the depth which the dark natural virginal pigmentation of her neck, eyes, and knuckles, lent to the warm tanning of her skin. She did not know how prone the philosopher is to associate like combination of these two rich colourings with the wicked, dusky denizens of a tropical jungle—those creatures whose blood he suspects of being something deeper than red, who really look as if they were made from the earth and were going back to it, and who have nothing of that translucent pallor suggestive of heaven-sent and heaven-destined attributes. [77]

She probably knew her dark eyes were fine and that their lashes were long; but she would have been surprised and perhaps even a little hurt if she had been told that their most striking feature was that, to every man, modest and shrewd enough to divine all that they could exact, they were terrifying. She knew her teeth were faultless; but she did not even suspect the thrill of pained joy that went through the philosopher's frame when he saw the life-hunger they revealed, and, what was more, the full deep bite and fast hold they would take of Life's entrails. A young girl's canines are self-revelatory in this respect. Let them be big and prominent, as Leonetta's were, and the fastness of her hold on Life, once she has bitten, promises to break all records. The sensitive philosopher has little patience with your fair delicate misses with small mouse-like canines. There are too many of them to begin with, and they are so instinctively ladylike.

Perhaps the most amusing thing in this world is to watch the antics of a large-canined virgin *de bonne famille* who is trying to be a lady,—by "lady" is here meant someone who, among other parlour tricks, can perform the feat of "controlling" her feelings,—who has, that is to say, on the one hand "control" and on the other hand "feelings," and whose feelings are weaker than her control. [78]

Leonetta's highly pigmented and sunburnt fingers suddenly ceased their twofold activity with the box of fondants and the pocket-portfolio of secret papers, and held a letter long and steadily before her eyes. Again the old gentleman opposite turned to the landscape of fields on his right, and his loose lips worked ominously. The fixity of those keen eyes with their tell-tale slight inward squint, as she studied the letter, proved too much for him, particularly when she began to smile; and his glance wandered desperately to the country he was traversing, in the cool, pallid British greenness of which he found relief.

Evidently the letter was a piece of life, for Leonetta was now in deadly earnest, pinching her beautiful tawny neck thoughtfully here and there with her free hand, as she read, and breathing

deeply. Her glance travelled rapidly, too, over certain passages, and would then stop dead, sometimes in order to allow a smile to dawn, sometimes to wander a moment to frown at the country-side. Evidently certain portions of the letter were quite uninteresting, or else she knew them by heart.

The letter she read was as follows:

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"My own dearest Leo,

"Oh, how I miss you already! But I shan't be the *only* one! That's *some* comfort. Think of church now without your dreadful remarks about all the still more dreadful people. I know one or two who are not going to church any more now. Don't you feel ashamed of yourself? Don't you ever feel ashamed of yourself? And the river on Wednesdays, and the *park* on Saturday afternoons! The place will be dead. It will be a vast waste. You told me to make up to Dorothy Garforth. But she's not *you*. She'll never have the pluck to talk to strange young men about their motor bikes or their horses and things. You *were* a wonder! Still my own dear Leo, you promised to invite me up to London to meet your people, didn't you, and don't you dare to forget. I shall pine away here if you do.

"I must tell you something that happened last night. Well, I met Charlie as I was coming home from saying good-bye to you. He was desolate. You really have been a little cruel. He said you gave him back his match-box and gold pencil, and that that meant you did not want anything more to do with him. He said he had been waiting behind the usual shrubbery in the park for two hours, for a long last good-bye and that you never turned up. I know what you mean about him, that he isn't smart and clean and all that, but he is rather nice all the same. Almost the best we knew. I think the hair on his hands, as you pointed out, made up for a heap of other shortcomings in him. But I know what you mean. He's a little rough and there's an end of it. I thought of telling him to write to you; but then it struck me you would not like him to. He said you were a flirt, and that you would only have a rich man. I said it wasn't that a bit, that he had quite misunderstood you. I couldn't tell him the truth, could I?—that he wasn't altogether '*toothsome*,' as you call it. He said he had seen us talking to that motor-cyclist fellow in the park last Saturday, and that proved it. I said it proved nothing, because we did not know then that he was one of the wealthiest boys in the county. However he seemed very bitter.

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"Did you really give him so much encouragement? Of course men *do* think it a lot if you let them kiss you. Aren't they stupid? They can't understand that even if one does not love them overmuch one wants to know what it's like. And you *did* like pretending you were deeply in love, didn't you now?—all the time? I tell you who'll be glad you've gone, Alice Dewlap. She was sweet on Charlie long before you met him, because Kitty told me so.

"Oh, Leo, you were a wicked creature, a regular godsend! What shall we do without you! *Do* ask me to come soon. That's cool, isn't it? Asking for an invitation. But you know what I mean. Think of me in church next Sunday. Good Lord deliver us! Tell me what to say to Charlie if he bothers me about you again. And don't forget to tell me all that happens in London. Describe all the men you meet minutely,—you know to the smallest detail as you used to here. You taught me to notice heaps of things I should never have thought of.

"Good-bye my dearest treasure-trove, with heaps of love and kisses.

"Yours for ever and ever,

"Nessy."

The old gentleman lost sight of Leonetta during the lunch interval; but when she returned from the restaurant car, slightly flushed, and her eyelids lazily drooping, he concluded that she had probably partaken heartily of the good fare provided, more particularly as a few stray crumbs still clung about the corners of her lips, betraying to his experienced eye the unconscious eagerness which healthy people habitually show over their meals. Wisely he did not infer from these evidences of a youthful and unimpaired appetite that she was slovenly in her table manners, because the unmistakable gentleness of her upbringing precluded any such possibility. The observation merely confirmed his general impression of her, and left him pondering over the relationship of daintiness to health.

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Drowsily the girl re-opened the letter which she had been perusing before the luncheon hour, and re-read it once or twice; then dropping it listlessly upon her lap, she turned upon her fellow-passengers a look of such guileless interest that they might have been excused had they been moved by that compassion, so frequently unwarranted, for innocence on the threshold of Life's great adventure.

The letter she held had been brought to her that morning by Vanessa's maid. Leonetta and Vanessa had made friends the moment they first met, and when Vanessa, duly qualified, had left the School of Domesticity, about six months after Leonetta's arrival there, they had continued to see each other outside its walls. There was a difference of only a year in their ages, Vanessa

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being the elder; but the younger girl with her greater keenness of vision, more exuberant health and spirits, and more resolute unscrupulosity, had so carried the heart of the other by storm that it was Vanessa, the provincial termagant, who looked up to and worshipped her sister dare-devil of the Metropolis, and who watched her for her every cue.

The train was nearing London; already the coquettish veil of smoke with which the "hub of the Universe" conceals the full horror of her ugliness from the eyes of critics, gave the summer sky a murky yellow tinge. Leonetta yawned, glanced across the vast city which she hoped would henceforward be her home, and then suddenly recollecting that her mother and sister would probably be at King's Cross to meet her, quickly folded the letter that was lying on her lap and relegated it to one of the interstices of her pocket-portfolio.

CHAPTER V

[83]

Leonetta was home again and the old house in Kensington felt the change acutely. The stairs creaked in a manner almost indignant; doors which for months had disported themselves with quiet dignity, manifested a sudden and youthful tendency to slam; Palmer, the parlour-maid could never be found, except at the heels of her youngest mistress, who seemed to have requisitioned her entire services; while a fresh young voice, as imperious as it was melodious, could be heard on almost every floor at the same time, calling the stately rooms back to life again, and shivering the cobwebs of monotony as it were by acoustic principles alone.

The expression of the kindly maiden aunt, who, after having played for some while with a boisterous and powerful young nephew, gradually realises that he is becoming too rough for her, is, as everybody knows, one of tremulous expectancy, in which a half-frightened flickering smile plays only a deceptive and scarcely convincing part in concealing the feelings of anxiety and disapproval that lie behind it.

Now there was, as we have seen, little of the maiden aunt in Mrs. Delarayne's disposition, and yet this is precisely the expression which, from the moment of Leonetta's arrival at King's Cross, had fastened upon her features. It was the look of one who, though anxious to humour a youthful relative as far as possible, was nevertheless determined that the young creature's pranks should not be allowed to extend to incendiarism, personal assault and battery, homicide, or anything equally upsetting. It scarcely requires description: the brows are permanently slightly raised, the eyes are kept steadily upon the youthful relative in question in mingled astonishment and fear, while there is the aforesaid agitated smile, which threatens at any moment to assume the hard and petulant lines of impatient reproach.

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Leonetta had quite properly insisted upon a completely new outfit. She had not "unpacked" in the accepted sense. She had simply emptied her boxes into the dust-bin. Some of her things, it is true, had fallen to Palmer, and to Wilmott, her mother's maid, but very few of them, indeed, had she been willing to return to her wardrobe or her chests of drawers.

No one could take exception to this procedure. It was perfectly right and proper. It was the way it was done, as if it had been a forgone and incontrovertible conclusion, that unnerved Mrs. Delarayne, and drove Cleopatra, more abashed than indignant, to the quietest corner of the house for peace and solitude.

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Obviously Leonetta had as yet received no check from life, no threat of an obstacle, or worse still a snub. Her pride pranced with an assurance, a certainty, that was at once baffling and unbaffled. In the presence of her sister's unbroken and unshaken will and resolute assertion of her smallest rights, Cleopatra shrank as before the force of an elemental upheaval. Her tottering self-confidence swayed ominously in the neighbourhood of the younger girl, and it was with alarm and helplessness in her eyes, that she sought a refuge where she could breathe undisturbed.

In the library she dropped desperately into a chair, and her glance ran nervously up and down the bookshelves, while her ears listened stealthily for echoes of the voice that was subordinating the house.

She had forgotten during these blissful months how beautiful her sister was. Some mysterious power in her, that found it easy to forget these things, had even led her memory to form quite a moderate estimate of Leonetta's charms in her absence,—even her sister's telling tricks with her hair had been completely banished from her mind.

Cleopatra rose and walked to the fire-place. On the mantelpiece, she knew, there was a photograph of herself at Leonetta's age. She felt she wanted to examine this record of her adolescence. She was groping for strength: she wished to fortify herself.

She drew the photograph towards her. No, she had not changed so very much. Only something inside her seemed to have grown less tense, less self-confident. Also, she had not had Leonetta's advantages,—advantages that she herself had been chiefly instrumental in securing for her younger sister. More arts than that of wielding the French tongue are learned in Paris. Apparently she never had arranged her hair quite as Baby arranged hers.

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And then, all at once, the door opened, and she pushed the photograph violently from her, so that

it fell with a clatter on the marble of the mantelpiece. It was her mother; and as the door opened and shut, the sound of Leonetta's voice upstairs swelled and died away again.

"Oh, it's you," Cleopatra cried, setting up the fallen frame.

Mrs. Delarayne walked to the window, spasmodically drew back a curtain, and then turned to face her daughter.

"She's amazingly high-spirited, isn't she?"

"Extraordinary!" Cleopatra exclaimed.

"Can you go with her to Mlle. Claude's to-morrow to order those frocks? You see, I have my Inner Light meeting in the afternoon."

"She won't like it."

"What does it matter? She won't listen to my suggestions, so I might just as well stay at home as go with her. She knows exactly what she wants down to the last button."

"Then why can't she go alone?"

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"Well,—I don't know," replied Mrs. Delarayne anxiously; "she might perhaps feel that neither of us was taking much interest in her, don't you think?"

"How much are you allowing her?"

"A hundred pounds."

"Edith!"

"My dear,—I could say nothing!"

"But I never had half that sum all at once."

"I know," sighed her mother wearily. "But you can have it now, or more if you want it."

There was a loud drumming of feet, and the door opened.

"Oh, Peachy darling!" Leonetta cried, "you're the very person I wanted to see, and I couldn't think what had become of you."

She was brandishing a paper of the latest Paris fashions in her hand as she skipped to her mother's side.

"You see," she pursued, "this is what I want for my best evening turn-out, I couldn't find it a moment ago." And she proceeded to describe to her mother what the particular confection consisted of.

"Of course they do these things miles better in Paris," she added with a pout.

"No doubt," said Mrs. Delarayne coldly.

"And they're not a scrap more expensive either," Leonetta continued.

"Possibly not," her mother rejoined. Then there was a moment's silence while Leonetta ran rapidly through the newspaper in her hands.

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At last Mrs. Delarayne spoke.

"Leo, darling," she began, "would you mind very much if Cleo went with you to-morrow instead of me?"

Leonetta glanced up, scrutinised her mother and sister for a second, and her brow clouded. "Oh, Peachy," she cried at last, "you are a worm!"

Mrs. Delarayne sat down, and fumbled nervously with a brooch at her neck. She realised dimly that she ought to protest against being addressed in this manner by her younger daughter and stared vacantly at Cleopatra.

"You see," she said, "I have my Inner Light meeting."

"Your inner what?" Leonetta exclaimed contemptuously.

A slight flush crept slowly up the widow's neck, and she looked hopelessly in the direction of her elder daughter.

Leonetta laughed. "Inner Light!" she cried. "Peachy, you are getting into funny ways in your old age; now come, aren't you?"

A look of such deep mortification came into Mrs. Delarayne's eyes, that Cleopatra herself felt provoked.

"There's no need to be rude, Baby!" she ejaculated angrily, not realising quite how much of her anger was utterly unconnected with her sister's treatment of their mother.

Leonetta glanced down at her paper in the thoughtful manner of a buck about to butt. For the [89]

first time she had perceived clearly that much of which she had not the smallest inkling must have happened during her long absences from home, and that these two women,—her mother and sister,—were united by strangely powerful bonds. Being an intelligent creature, therefore, she decided to postpone the framing of her strategy until she had learned more about the strength that seemed to be constantly combining against her.

She raised her eyes at last, and looked straight into her sister's face.

"I can't think what makes you so dreadfully stuffy," she declared, "surely there's no harm in what I said."

Mrs. Delarayne, who longed only for one thing—that the remark complained about, with its brutal reference to her old age, should not be repeated, and least of all discussed,—here interposed a word or two.

"No, my darling Leo, of course not. You come fresh from school; you are full of new ideas and schemes; and we,—well, we've remained at home."

This observation was perhaps a little feeble, and it also constituted a desertion of Cleopatra, but in any case it seemed to give Leonetta the necessary hint, for she went quite close to her mother and began smoothing her hair. "You must tell me all about the Inner Light some time," she said, "it sounds ripping."

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She glanced triumphantly at her sister as she spoke. Half of her action had been completely unconscious. Obviously she felt the need of making one of these women her friend, and instinctively she inclined to the one who appeared to be the more powerful.

"Peachy darling," she continued, "don't you think this white satin frock that the Claude hag is going to make me might be my coming-out frock? It will be new for the early autumn."

Cleopatra gasped, and Mrs. Delarayne gave her a glance full of meaning.

"You see," Leonetta pursued, "it will be the best of the lot, won't it?"

Mrs. Delarayne drew Leonetta towards her with an affectionate gesture, and smiled in that ingratiating manner so necessary to timidity in distress.

"But I didn't know you were to come out this autumn," she protested lamely, not daring to look at Cleopatra, whose attitude she only too shrewdly divined.

"It's ridiculous," Cleopatra exclaimed; "I didn't come out until I was eighteen. You know, Edith, you and father wouldn't hear of making it a moment sooner."

"Yes, but things are a little different now," Leonetta interposed.

"It would be unfair, grossly unfair, Edith," Cleopatra protested, "if you let her come out earlier than I did. Particularly as I did my best to make you and father let me, and you both absolutely refused."

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Leonetta was now gently stroking her mother's hair. She would not trust her eyes to look at her sister.

"Well, Peachy," she said, "surely you can't make a fuss about six months, whatever you say, Cleo. After all, I'll be seventeen and a half."

"Any way," Cleopatra snapped, "it won't be right."

"But what can it matter to you?" the younger girl demanded, glaring not too amiably at her sister.

Cleopatra's face coloured a little at this question.

"Oh, nothing," she replied, and she moved towards the door. "I don't care what you do."

"Where are you going to, Cleo dear?" Mrs. Delarayne enquired in a voice fraught with all the sympathy she could not openly express.

"I'm going out to get a breath of air," replied Cleopatra without turning her head; and she swept out of the room, performing as she went those peculiar oscillations of the upper part of her body, which are not unusually adopted by young women who are very much upon their dignity when they retire. The oscillations in question consist in curving the body sideways over small obstacles, such as chairs and tables, at the moment of passing them, as if with an exaggerated effort to combine the utmost care with the utmost rapidity of movement.

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Mrs. Delarayne rose and went sadly to the window. Her eyes, full of self-pity, gazed with unwonted indifference at the passers-by. How thankful she would have been to have Mr. Delarayne at her side at this critical moment in her life. There were times when she was not unappreciative of the many advantages of widowhood; but this was not precisely the moment when the bright side of her peculiar situation seemed to be conspicuous. With Leonetta home for good, and Cleo still unmarried, she felt the need of help and advice; and it was significant that, as she became more and more aware of the practical usefulness that the late Mr. Delarayne might have had at this juncture, her thoughts turned rather to Lord Henry than to Sir Joseph Bullion.

She must speak to Lord Henry. He would know how to direct her.

A sound in the room disturbed her meditations. Leonetta, having concluded a further examination of the Paris fashions, had tossed the paper on to the table.

"Peachy darling," she began, with slow deliberation. "May I have a friend to stay with me?"

Mrs. Delarayne continued to gaze into the street. She did not like being called Peachy. She had an indistinct feeling that it sounded vulgar,—why she would have been unable to explain. Nevertheless, since anything was preferable to being called "Mother" at the top of Leonetta's strident soprano in the public highway, and for some reason or other Leonetta would not make use of the name "Edith," she felt that it would perhaps be diplomatic to say nothing. [93]

"Who is she?" she enquired cautiously.

Leonetta was silent for a moment. It was not the question, but the caution that dictated it, that struck the girl as strange.

"Isn't it enough that she is a friend of mine?" she observed.

"Quite, of course!" Mrs. Delarayne hastened to reply. "I only meant,—what is her name, who are her people?"

"Vanessa Vollenberg," answered Leonetta.

"It sounds foreign," was the mother's quiet comment.

"As a matter of fact, it is."

"It sounds a little Jewish."

"She is a Jewess," Leonetta admitted.

Mrs. Delarayne purred approvingly over her remarkable display of insight.

"She's very beautiful and wonderfully clever," Leonetta pursued.

"How old?"

"A year older than I am,—eighteen and a half."

"Jewesses are always pretty at that age," Mrs. Delarayne muttered, glancing at her daughter furtively for a moment.

"Oh yes, I know," Leonetta replied with unexpected warmth; "and they fade quickly afterwards. That's what everybody says." [94]

It was clear that for some obscure reasons, she was very much attached to Vanessa Vollenberg.

"But Mrs. Vollenberg," she continued, "is the most beautiful woman in the world. She has been painted by every great artist in Europe. So she can't have faded much."

"How long do you want Vanessa to stay?"

Leonetta suggested that her friend might go to Brineweald with them for a fortnight; Mrs. Delarayne said that it might be three weeks if she chose, and the girl bounded towards her mother and embraced her.

"Oh Peachy, my own Peachy,—that is sweet of you," she exclaimed, "you are forgiven for not coming to the Claude hag to-morrow."

One of the points in Cleopatra's nature that greatly endeared her to her parent, was that she scarcely ever kissed, and when she did so, it was delicately, with a respectful consideration for her mother's facial toilet. Moreover, she never, in any circumstances, disarranged her mother's hair.

"Are they well off?" Mrs. Delarayne asked, easing a ringlet of hair tenderly back into its position near her ear.

"If you mean the Vollenbergs," Leonetta answered, "they're as rich as you and Sir Joseph knocked into one."

Her mother protested.

"Oh, very well. He owns a whole quarter of Hull, and has a West Indian Copra business into the bargain." [95]

Leonetta did not know what "copra" was, but she thought it sounded sufficiently like a precious metal to suggest immense wealth.

Later in the evening, Mrs. Delarayne and Cleopatra were alone in the former's bedroom.

"I have a feeling," Cleopatra was saying, "that I don't love Denis sufficiently to go mad about him. You know what I mean: he may be the best specimen of manhood who has ever crossed this threshold, but he does not electrify me."

"That's very sound," her mother rejoined with unusual emphasis. "There's no need to be electrified by the man one marries."

"Yes, but I feel that one ought,—I mean that seeing that I could,—you know,—if one is going to be something to a man, one feels that one would like to be electrified by him."

Mrs. Delarayne deposited her voluminous transformation lovingly upon the dressing-table,—Cleo was such an intimate friend!

"Rubbish!" she ejaculated. "Romantic rubbish! How often have I told you girls that provided a man can keep you in comfort and has a clean sweet mouth, it doesn't matter a rap about anything else. Even if he has dirty hands and finger-nails in addition, it doesn't signify;—there's the English Channel and the Atlantic close by to wash them in. But if he hasn't a clean, sweet mouth, a second deluge wouldn't wash it for him. How can you attach so much importance to trifles, when in Denis you have the two first prerequisites in an eminent degree? You are romantic, my dear Cleo. And matrimony is a matter of flesh and blood. When the demands of these are properly attended to, I assure you the rest is mere foolishness. Denis can keep you in comfort, and he has the teeth of an African negro. What more can you want? You cannot go on losing chance after chance through these romantic notions."

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"But surely," Cleo objected hopelessly, "a man ought to fire you with something more exciting than the consideration of his means and his dentition!"

"In our class," Mrs. Delarayne rejoined with gravity, "men no longer set fire to anything. Get that out of your mind at once. Modern English civilisation has entirely failed to produce men who can be at once gentlemen and fiery lovers. We have wanted things both ways, and that is why we have failed. We have wanted nice clean-minded men with whom we could walk, talk, and play games freely. But that means men who can exercise self-control. Now, of course, we are certainly free to enjoy men as safe playmates all through our youth; but we are, I'm afraid, also free to be bored with them as husbands for the rest of our lives."

CHAPTER VI

[97]

There are many people who would have considered Mrs. Delarayne a selfish mother. Despite the fact that no man, woman, or child has ever yet been known to perform an unselfish action, the superstition still holds ground, that "selfish" and "unselfish" are two different and possible descriptions of human life and action. Believing, as we do, however, that no intellectually honest man can any longer attach any significance to these words, it cannot be admitted in these pages that Mrs. Delarayne was selfish. Neither was she at all conscious of any evil impulses when, standing at the dining-room window on her "Inner Light" afternoon, she watched her two children leave the house on their way to the "Claude hag," as Leonetta called the lady. On the contrary, she felt wonderfully free, exceptionally happy, profoundly relieved. The big house was silent. She was alone. She even had to suppress the half-formed longing that it might always be so.

She knew that Cleopatra felt no deep sympathy with any part of the "Inner Light" doctrine, and she was convinced, before enquiring, that Leonetta would sympathise with it even less. Although, therefore, she expected a number of young men that afternoon,—Lord Henry, St. Maur, and Malster, among them,—who might have interested her daughters, she was not in the least conscious of having acted with deliberate hostility in arranging so neatly that they should be out of the house when these gentlemen came.

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To explain precisely what the "Inner Light" meetings meant to Mrs. Delarayne would entail such a long discussion of the relation of women's religiosity in general to sex and to self-deception, that it would require almost the compass of another independent treatise to deal with it adequately.

In a word Mrs. Delarayne suffered, as a large number of modern women suffer, from receiving no sure and reliable guidance from men. As a widow this was, of course, incidental to her position; but she knew well enough that there were thousands who still had their husbands, who were no better off than she was. In addition to this, she had succumbed to the influence of that absurd belief, so prevalent in cultivated circles, that typical modern thought is superior to Christianity.

She felt the ease and peace of mind that resulted from having a belief of some sort; but she would have regarded it as a surrender of principle to return to Christianity; and, far from suspecting that most modern thought, as manifested in the doctrine of the "Inner Light," for instance, or Theosophy, or Christian Science, is inferior to Christianity, she had become a member of the Inner Light, and paid its heavy entrance fee of fifty guineas, with a feeling of deep pride and satisfaction.

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The doctrine of the Inner Light was an importation from America. It had been introduced into England by a very intelligent, very tall, but very delicate looking Virginian lady, about fifteen years before this story opens. It had not spread very much, it is true,—its total number of members in Great Britain amounted only to two thousand five hundred; but it was all the more select on that account, and it was guaranteed by its founders and by all who belonged to it, to be entirely free from those "regrettable remnants of superstition which so very much marred the beauty of the older religions."

It professed to recognise only one purifying and creative agent in life, and that was Light. "The world was all darkness and death," said the first prophet of the "Inner Light,"—an American named Adolf Albernspiel, who had died worth half a million dollars,—and then Light appeared, and with it Life and the great lucid Powers: Thought, Spirit, Order."

It was so obviously superior to Christianity, it commended itself so cogently to the meanest intelligence, that the members of the "Inner Light," try how they might to exercise the tolerance which is universal to-day, could hardly refrain from a mild consciousness of superiority when they looked down upon other creeds.

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Thus the priests of the Order were not called "Fathers" or "Brethren," which implied a false anthropomorphic relationship to a supreme parent "God"; they were simply "Incandescents":—Incandescent Bernard, Incandescent Margaret, Incandescent Mansel, and so on. Again, in allowing women to officiate at the altar of the Supreme Incandescence, the doctrine of the Inner Light rose superior to Christianity. "Owing to Judaic tradition and influence," as his Incandescence Albernspiel had truly pointed out, "the Christian Church had never enjoyed the eminent advantage of women's ministrations. Even the Greeks had been wiser than this. And thus much of an essential character in all true religion had always been absent from Christianity, owing to this proscription of feminine influence." (*The Doctrine of the Inner Light*, Vol. II., p. 1303.)

There was only one Temple in England, at which all the faithful met once a year, and that was at Liverpool. It was hoped that other churches would be built sooner or later in other big centres, but meanwhile,—that is to say, pending the collecting of the necessary building fund,—all the faithful outside Liverpool were recommended to meet once a month at each other's houses, where one of the Incandescents would hold a service.

The Incandescent for London was a pale and feverish looking little man, Gerald Tribe by name, with false teeth and large, bony red hands, who lived as a sort of non-paying guest at the house of Miss Mallowcoid, Mrs. Delarayne's elder sister, at Hampstead. It was a perfectly orderly arrangement, because, apart from the fact that he had his young wife with him, he was in any case such a learned and pure-minded young man, that, as Miss Mallowcoid declared, even if he had not been married, she would have regarded it as a privilege to live under the same roof with him. She admitted, of course, that his wife was so far beneath him as to present an almost insufferable objection to the arrangement; but Miss Mallowcoid regarded this creature as the trial and chastisement sent by the supreme Incandescence, to bring both her own and Gerald Tribe's inner light to ever greater prodigies of brilliance and power.

[101]

Miss Mallowcoid, who had been responsible for her sister, Mrs. Delarayne's conversion to the Inner Light, was expected that afternoon, as were also Sir Joseph Bullion, and all the London faithful. Lord Henry had also reluctantly agreed to attend this one meeting after months of persuasion from Mrs. Delarayne.

If Mrs. Delarayne had been asked why she had joined the cult of the Inner Light, she would have probably replied that it was a simple doctrine. Light was the beginning, Light would be the end. Life on earth was simply the struggle of Light against Darkness. When you died, you became one with the Eternal Incandescence. Age, old age,—and this was the part that chiefly attracted Mrs. Delarayne,—*was simply the fatigue incurred by battling with darkness*. When Light prevailed, as it would in the other world, Age would pass away, *and everybody would remain eternally youthful*.

[102]

Thus, far from feeling selfish or unselfish, Mrs. Delarayne was conscious only of a sensation of supreme elation, as she watched her daughters leave the house on that afternoon in July. She was even able to contemplate their unusual beauty, which would have made them a credit to any family, with unmixed feelings of pride as they walked down the square, and she smiled as she noticed the eagerness with which Leonetta strode ahead, just about half a pace in front of her sister. When she turned away from the window, therefore, and once again surveyed the large stately dining-room, with its row upon row of chairs all ready for the meeting, she was conscious only of feeling supremely happy and above all secure.

Lord Henry was to come at last. For months, in fact ever since her first initiation into the Order, she had implored him to attend a meeting, and now that her will had prevailed she felt confident that once he saw with his own eyes the large number of distinguished people gathered that day under her roof—all followers and devotees of the Inner Light,—he would be forced to acknowledge that there was a good deal in it.

Among the first arrivals was Sir Lionel Borridge, the inventor of the most up-to-date calculating machine, and a mathematician of renown. He had a conical brow like a beautifully polished knee, and very sad eyes which seemed to proclaim to the world that the study of mathematics was, on the whole, a most harrowing occupation. With him came his aged wife and spinster daughter. Both appeared to be over fifty, and, like the head of their household, also deeply depressed by mathematics. These three, looking so learned, looking so miserable with learning, were surely the best evidence that could be advanced in support of the truth of the Inner Light; for they were all convinced adherents of the Order. Sir Joseph arrived punctually at three, the hour appointed for the meeting. With him came Malster, and one of the junior secretaries of Bullion Ltd., a certain Guy Tyrrell. Lord Henry and St. Maur came a minute after time, and were followed by a phalanx of ladies of uncertain age, with their Poms, their Pekinese, their Yorkshire and their toy terriers.

[103]

Mrs. Delarayne's dining-room was filling rapidly. A buzz of conversation, accompanied by the shuffling of the latest arrivals' feet, began to pervade the large room, and necks were craned in tense expectation of celebrities.

The philocanine Palmer was entrusted with the care of the legion of lap dogs out in the garden,—for the religious meeting could not admit even the most docile pet animal; and the sound of their spiteful yappings could be heard through the open windows at the back of the room. [104]

"You know, my dear," said Lady Muriel Bellington, who had brought her Mexican hairless, "of course he is very, very naughty. And it's very tiresome. But they are so minute, one couldn't beat them. It would be really too too!"

Lady fflote, already purple with the heat, went almost black at the suggestion of beating the Mexican hairless.

"Beat them!" she ejaculated. "Oh that would be very wrong. Oh no, you couldn't bully them. Better far let them tyrannise over you. I should never forgive myself."

In another part of the room Sir Lionel Borridge was leaning across Mrs. Gerald Tribe, the delicate and emaciated wife of the Incandescent Gerald Tribe, to address a word to Miss Mallowcoid.

"I think it possible, you know," he said very gravely, and looking the image of the most unconquerable woe, "that I may be able to give our minister certain mathematical facts, which I feel convinced are all in support of the doctrine of the Inner Light. I was working at them with my daughter last night,—the results are simply astounding—astounding, that's the only word."

Miss Mallowcoid ejaculated, "Really! Really!" in a hushed, awed voice, and then quickly proceeded to communicate the thrilling intelligence to her right hand neighbour, who marvelled as reverently and as inaudibly as she had done.

Sir Joseph, feeling a little bewildered, was asking Guy Tyrrell a string of questions which this young man was quite unqualified to answer, and both looked and felt extremely uncomfortable. [105]

Lord Henry, who was seated in the second row from the front, between Denis Malster and St. Maur, glanced round at the crowd behind him, and frowned darkly.

"I think, you know, Lord Henry," said Denis Malster, noticing the young nobleman's expression of angry scorn, "you do not allow sufficiently for the fact that all of us have a subconscious inkling of the supernatural behind phenomena, and these attempts on the part of the followers of the Inner Light, of the Theosophists, or the Spiritualists, to realise the nature of this supernatural basis to the material and visible world, are all proofs of this subconscious inkling."

"I don't think," Lord Henry replied, "that you are sufficiently inclined to allow for the fundamental fact, that mankind is very, very slow in dropping an old habit. We are now, thank goodness, witnessing the slow death agony of Christianity. These people here are among those who plume themselves on having abandoned Christian dogma. But deep down in their natures, there is not the inkling of the supernatural of which you speak, but simply the religious habit,—the habit of believing in something vague and indemonstrable, the habit of services and congregational worship. And while they are dropping away from the old Church in all directions, they simultaneously, from sheer habit, create new-fangled creeds very much more absurd than anything the Church ever taught, and not nearly so beautiful." [106]

At this moment a hush suddenly fell upon the whole company, and Mrs. Delarayne, who by virtue of her rôle as hostess, was officiating as assistant to the Incandescent Gerald that afternoon, entered the room by a small door at the back, followed by the minister.

Everyone stood up, and Lord Henry noticed that the venerable bald head of Sir Lionel Borridge was bowed in humble reverence.

The service lasted about three quarters of an hour; even Sir Joseph Bullion, who, as the latest of the elect, was the new broom of the afternoon, was seen to gape once during the course of it; and when it was over and a sort of blessing had been pronounced by the minister, the whole company filed out of the dining-room into the library for refreshment and also for the discussion of the meeting.

Everyone seemed intent upon reaching Mrs. Delarayne, and among those who struggled most to achieve this end was Sir Joseph Bullion. Congratulations were being pronounced on all sides. "How well she had read the Articles of Faith!" "How clearly she had announced the hymns!" "How cool and collected she was, and yet how reverent!"

Gradually the throng pressed less thickly about her, and Sir Joseph reached his idol. [107]

"Wonderful, Edith,—wonderful!" he whispered. "And what a beautiful impressive service!"

Mrs. Delarayne grasped his hand, and even nodded, but her eyes were busy elsewhere. She was watching the movements of Lord Henry, who had not yet spoken to her, and who, apparently in animated conversation with Sir Lionel Borridge, had hitherto held himself aloof.

"You wouldn't remember, of course," Sir Joseph pursued, "the arrival of Baroness Puckha Bilj in London in the late eighties, with her doctrine of 'Self-Exteriorisation.' The Inner Light reminds me somewhat of that. We were her bankers. She was most successful."

"Your husband surpassed himself, Mrs. Tribe," said Denis Malster to the emaciated wife of the Incandescent Gerald. Denis felt extremely superior behind his solid Anglican Protestant entrenchments, and thought that he could afford to be generous and even patronising to the members of a struggling creed.

"Of course, Baroness Puckha Bilj had not your advantages," continued the undaunted Sir Joseph. "She was already advanced in years when she left Hungary."

"Have some cake?" said Mrs. Delarayne.

"I admit," Lord Henry was saying, "that a new religion is perhaps the most urgent need of modern times; but then this Age is scarcely great enough to make it."

"Come, come!" exclaimed Sir Lionel gruffly, his melancholy eyes closing heavily as he spoke, "you are a little hard surely. Is not this your first attendance here? I don't seem to remember having seen you amongst us before." [108]

Lord Henry apologised and turned away. He had noticed his hostess's eye upon him, and he hastened towards her.

"Sir Lionel's conversation seems to have been singularly engrossing," remarked Mrs. Delarayne as he approached.

"It always amazes me," declared the young nobleman with laughter in his eyes, "how the men of the so-called 'exact sciences' become involved in our new emergency substitutes for a great Faith."

Mrs. Delarayne purred with a slightly treble note of dissent.

"Why not?" Sir Joseph demanded.

"I suppose it is the refuge of the mind that deals only with precise and exact terms and rules, to plunge into the opposite extreme,—into blue mistiness for instance. Or is it perhaps the fact that mathematicians and physicists deal very largely with symbols, with abstractions as opposed to realities, and that they therefore easily fall a prey to this sort of thing?"

Sir Joseph shrugged his shoulders and tried hard to look wise.

"The worst of it is," Lord Henry pursued, "the adherence of a man like Borridge, makes lesser men imagine that the creed to which he lends his support, must have something in it." [109]

Mrs. Delarayne contented herself with pouting, and casting a glance full of distress signals at Sir Joseph.

But Sir Joseph appeared not to notice, and taking unnecessarily large bites at a piece of cake he held, was evidently hoping to convey the impression that a sudden and inconvenient access of appetite prevented his opposing Lord Henry as violently as he might otherwise have done on the subject of the Inner Light.

The occupants of the room were beginning to revolve in that purposeful manner which augurs of leave-taking. People came up to shake hands with their hostess, and gradually the library emptied. Only Denis Malster, St. Maur, Sir Joseph, and Lord Henry remained.

Their hostess fidgeted uneasily. She wished to be alone with Lord Henry. Gradually the others understood, and ultimately took their leave.

"Now quickly, explain to me," Lord Henry began severely, "why you have anything to do with this arrant nonsense. Surely it would be more dignified, more sensible to be a Christian again, than to lend your support to this inferior modern bunkum?"

Mrs. Delarayne, with her elbow on the mantelpiece and her chin in her hand, stood sulking and was mute.

"Good Heavens! The Inner Light!" He strode towards her. "Promise me you'll give it up," he said. [110]

"What for?"

That was her position. What for? What did he propose to offer in compensation? His protection? His devotion? His love? Then the sacrifice might be worth while. She bowed her head and smiled icily. She adored this young man. This was the last weapon she believed she could still wield against him. She was aware, perhaps, that the Inner Light was all nonsense. The fact that he said it was made it abundantly probable to her. But was it possible that the Inner Light might afford her a means of bringing their relationship to its desired conclusion?

"A supremely intelligent woman like you," Lord Henry continued, "—really! And the Incandescent Gerald! And hymn number 27—!"

"You may scoff," said the poor lady, feeling uncommonly hot, "but it all means something to me."

"That is not true!" Lord Henry exclaimed. "You know it's not true. Oh, and Lady fflote, and Lady Muriel. And Adolf Albernspiel—God!"

"Are you still determined to go to China?" Mrs. Delarayne demanded, her voice faltering a little.

"As firmly as ever."

"Well, don't let us quarrel then," she said. "The time is short enough."

"Lord Henry," she began hesitatingly, as she pulled a marguerite to pieces over the fender. "I asked you to stay for a few minutes because I wanted to consult you on a very delicate matter." [111]

He sat down facing her, and began to tug at the mesh over his brow. He frowned and blinked rapidly, as was his wont when interested. He wondered whether this charming and unhappy creature realised how thoroughly he understood her.

"You know Leonetta is home again," Mrs. Delarayne continued.

Lord Henry nodded.

"She is rather difficult to manage."

He nodded again.

"She is so full of life, so eager, so—well, can you imagine me at seventeen? Can you picture the mercurial creature I was, with every sense agog, with every nerve on the *qui vive*?—a dreadful little person in every way."

Lord Henry chuckled, and gave his forelock one or two unusually rapid twists.

"Leonetta is if anything worse than I was," Mrs. Delarayne continued, "for she is of this century. I belonged to the last one. D'you understand?"

He bowed.

"She is vitality incarnate,—wilful, womanly, vain, beautiful,—not more beautiful than Cleopatra, but more intrepid, more inquisitive, more determined to live than her elder sister."

"Have you a photograph of her?" Lord Henry enquired. [112]

Mrs. Delarayne darted across the room, and returned with a large framed photograph which she handed to her visitor.

"There's the latest. It was taken a month ago."

Lord Henry examined it closely.

"Yes," he said, with his customary gravity in dealing with interesting questions. "I see. I see now. Well?"

"Can you see the girl she is? Daring,—oh, and can I say it?"

Lord Henry looked up and blinked rapidly again.

"A little—a little——"

"A little inclined to temperamental precocity?" Lord Henry enquired.

Mrs. Delarayne, very much relieved, nodded quickly.

"That's exactly it,—that's just what I meant to say,—that's it precisely. Oh how accurately that describes her!"

The elegant widow was uncommonly agitated and anxious. Lord Henry noted her state of mind, and wondered what it signified.

"I feel—people tell me,—I feel I ought perhaps to tell Leonetta——"

"You are wondering," Lord Henry interrupted, hoping to help her, "whether it is your duty to enlighten the child at all concerning——"

She sat down beside him. "Yes, I am," she said quickly. [113]

"Has she asked any questions?" Lord Henry demanded, allowing his hand for a moment to hang motionless from his mesh of hair and glancing up at the cornice.

"No, I scarcely expect that," Mrs. Delarayne replied. "But in case. You see Cleopatra was so different. I never had any difficulty with her. Her reserve was always so rigid, I would have trusted her as a *cantinière* in a barracks of Zouaves. I never spoke a word about anything to Cleopatra. But Leonetta!"

"Yes, I see. You think Leonetta different?"

"What ought I to do? Do help me! Some say this and some say that. Some say that a mother should speak; some say that they never did, and they don't see why I should. My sister, Miss Mallowcoid, you know, says I ought to."

Lord Henry gave vent to an expletive of contempt.

"I'll do what you say;—only what you say," said the harassed matron, resting a hand on his.

"You should begin, my dear lady," Lord Henry replied, "by utterly distrusting all the nonsense the

modern world says on this subject."

"But I do,—I don't! I mean, I pay no heed to what anybody says but you."

A shadow from the Inner Light passed across Lord Henry's mind; but that, he rightly imagined, was the widow's last little fortress against him.

"The bond that unites parent to child is a very precious one," Lord Henry continued. "It is, however, as brittle as it is precious. A trifle will snap it. Now there is one aspect of the relationship between parent and child, the physical aspect, the physical relation, which lies beneath a sort of sacred seal: it is deliberately never fully realised; it does not require to be fully realised, particularly by the child—"

Mrs. Delarayne nodded quickly and smiled.

"Think of the havoc you may create, through yourself breaking this seal by calling this delicate aspect into prominence, by discussing with your child all those matters which, as between you and her, by virtue of your relationship, are a closed book!"

"Yes, I see, I see," cried the widow quickly. "My feelings, my instincts, were always against it from the very start, and I see now that I was right."

"The modern world is immensely stupid; few of us know how immensely stupid it is. Everything that modern thought expresses, on this subject, particularly, you must feel sure therefore is utterly and radically absurd. You cannot afford to weaken the precious bond that unites you to your children; therefore do not attempt this business."

"Yes, I see. Yes, you are right. I feel you are right."

"It can only lead to the most acute embarrassment as between parent and child,—however well it is done;—and you would do it admirably, I know. Unfortunately, when one is embarrassed one is not at one's best for understanding. Consequently the whole proceeding, besides being dangerous, would be utterly futile."

Mrs. Delarayne pressed his hand. "It is at times like these," she burst out a little tearfully, "that I think of you going to China, and all that."

He rose.

"One minute," she said, turning eyes glistening with tears pleadingly upon him. "You have not told me what to do."

"The natural and proper thing," he replied, "is to keep her well in hand and then to trust her to her husband. The good husband is the best hierophant."

"Yes, I understand," said Mrs. Delarayne rising also.

"They master these things better on the Continent than we do in England," Lord Henry continued. "The young girl is carefully supervised, scrupulously watched, and a good husband is entrusted with the rest. That is by far the best."

"Yes," Mrs. Delarayne exclaimed, laughing in her old way for the first time that afternoon, "but then, you see, they happen to have the Continental husband to whom they can entrust the matter."

"True," Lord Henry replied. "Never mind. We must try to find her someone who is as like a Continental husband as possible."

"St. Maur is a most fascinating boy," Mrs. Delarayne observed.

"Ah—hands off Aubrey, at least for the present. He's not ripe yet," said Lord Henry; and in a moment he was gone.

CHAPTER VII

A day or two later,—that is to say on the Saturday before Sir Joseph's evening At Home in honour of Leonetta's homecoming,—Mrs. Delarayne herself gave a dinner party, to which a few of her more intimate friends were invited. Sir Joseph, of course, was among the guests, as were also Denis and Guy Tyrrell. For some reason, into which she made no effort to enquire, however, Mrs. Delarayne did not ask Lord Henry.

On the afternoon of the day in question, Leonetta, after her tea, ensconced herself in the library and wrote the following letter to her friend, Vanessa Vollenberg:

"My Sweetheart,

"It is Saturday and we are having a dinner party this evening, and I'm feeling awfully excited. Things are particularly slow here on the whole. I have scarcely spoken to a man since I addressed my porter at King's Cross four days ago. Isn't it rank? What mother and my sister Cleo do with their men I can't imagine, unless

they think they are better out of harm's way. I know they know heaps of men.

[118]

"By the way, talking of keeping out of harm's way, you remember you used to tell me at school that if I looked long enough at a young man with my dark eyes he would get sunburnt,—well, the day before yesterday a very funny thing happened. I was in the train with poor old Cleo (she's grown a most appalling old maid, by-the-bye), and there was a young man opposite who really looked a most awful devil. You know, he had those wicked eyes that go up at their outside corners like tigers'. He was heavenly. I simply couldn't take my eyes off him, and he kept looking at me. Cleo said very stuffily (she's always stuffy with me), 'Don't stare!' and he must have overheard, because he turned away, and there was a most devilish curl on his lips. If we hadn't got out at the next station, I'm sure we should have ended by smiling at each other quite openly. You know, he was one of the sort who one guesses has got good teeth before they even open their mouths.

"Some men are coming this evening, thank God! But what they'll be like Heaven alone knows! I have hopes though, because mother always did have a sweet tooth for rather nice men, you see father was tremendously attractive. But what poor Auntie Cleo's choice will be I daren't think. One of the men is supposed to be earmarked for her.

"Oh, and now listen. Peachy—that's my mother—insists upon your coming to our place at Brineweald for at least three weeks during the summer holidays. Oh, Nussy, my heart's love!—what a joy to see you again! So you will come, won't you? I told Peachy you could play a good game of tennis, and now she insists on your coming. So mind, no refusal. You must tell your dear mother she simply must spare you, and there's an end of it.

[119]

"Thank you a billion trillion times for your absolutely divine letter. But I cannot write about all you say, I'm too excited as it is. When can you come? Then we can talk. Oh for another long talk with my wise and wicked Nussy.

"Now listen! We leave for Brineweald in about ten days. Can you join us in about a fortnight from now? We might have gone at once, but I must have some clothes. And it seems to me that it will take all my time to get them before we start.

"Oh, and now another thing (and this is very, *very* secret, so secret that you must *swear* you'll tear up this letter *at once*, the moment you have read it). You remember you and the other girls used to laugh at me at school about my brown neck and my brown eyelids, and my brownish knuckles. You used to chaff me and tell me it was because I hadn't washed. Well, you were all wrong, and I told you at the time you were all wrong. I have just been reading a most interesting book, all about these things (but you must never let Peachy know about it, as it is one of father's and I have been reading it on the sly). Remember you've sworn to tear this letter up. In any case it explains all about my brown neck and my brown eyelids and knuckles. It calls it 'Pigmentation'—the '*pigmentation of the mature virgin*.' Isn't it interesting? So you see it was quite natural; and I can't help it; on the contrary it shows I am very vigorous. So you were all wrong—even Miss Butterworth who said I was afraid of cold water.

"But I'll forgive everything to my sweet Nussy if only, *if only* she will come to the bosom of her love at Brineweald.

[120]

"With crates of kisses,

"Yours ever,

"LEO."

"P.S. Excuse this short scribble. I must go to dress. Tell Charlie that if he has not kissed that horrid Dewlap girl yet, I send him a nice long kiss. By-the-bye, he's such a blind fool, he won't have noticed she bites her nails. *Do* tell him!

"Yours LEO."

This letter written, sealed, and stamped, Leonetta put on a tam-o'-shanter, and ran to the post with it; whereupon hurrying upstairs, she burst violently into her mother's bedroom, to announce what she had done. It was half-past six and her mother was dressing.

Now Mrs. Delarayne's toilet, as may be imagined, was an unusually elaborate and skilful business. Every corner of her large bedroom seemed to offer its contribution towards the final effect. The bed, the chairs, and even the mantelpiece participated in the process, while cupboard and wardrobe doors stood ominously open.

Mrs. Delarayne's maid Wilmott,—silent, grave, preoccupied and efficient,—moved hither and thither, calmly but quickly, her head discreetly bowed, her voice more subdued than at ordinary times, as if she were officiating at a rite; and gradually, very gradually, the business proceeded.

[121]

Facing a corner of the bedroom, with a large window to her left, Mrs. Delarayne sat before her dressing-table, upon which, towering above the forest of bottles, brushes, boxes, and other

paraphernalia, stood a large triple mirror, which enabled the elegant widow to get three different aspects of her handsome face at the same time.

The expression upon Mrs. Delarayne's face when she peered into this formidable reflector of her own image was scarcely self-complacent or serene. It was rather studious, anxious, critical, almost fierce, like that one would expect to find on the face of an ancient alchemist contemplating an alembic of precious compounds. Year in, year out, ever since her gradually waning youth had begun to add ever fresh complications to her once rapid and easy toilet, Mrs. Delarayne had faced herself with this determined and defiant expression on her features, resolved to overcome every difficulty and every undesirable innovation of time. Slowly the complex equipment had grown up. Now it was so extensive, that it required all the dexterity and knowledge that habit alone can impart, in order to master and understand its multitudinous intricacies.

In this mirror, then, when her expression was at its fiercest in intentness and concentration, she saw her daughter enter the room behind her, and for an instant a spasmodic frown darkened her already lowering brow.

"I cannot see you now, you know that, Leo darling," she hastened to exclaim as sweetly as possible, while her daughter was still on the threshold. [122]

"All right, Peachy,—I shan't keep you a moment."

A slight flush crept up the mother's neck just below her ears,—this was a thing Cleo had too much delicacy to do. Cleo never disturbed her while she was dressing,—and she straightway stopped all operations and laid her hands resignedly in her lap.

"Well, be quick," she said, with ill-concealed irritation. "What is it?"

In the glass she could see her daughter's quick and intelligent eyes wandering all about her with the deepest interest, and resting here and there as if more than usually absorbed, and she frowned again.

Meanwhile, Leonetta, who had not seen her mother's bedroom, particularly the dressing-table, at such a busy crisis for many years, and who, when she had seen it in the past had been too young to grasp its full meaning, was too eagerly engaged scanning its imposing array of creams, scents, powders, oils, salves, cosmetics, tresses of hair, and other "aids," to be able to remember what she had come for, and simply stood there like one fascinated and spellbound.

"Quick, child! can't you see you're wasting my time?" her mother ejaculated irascibly. "Besides, you've got to get dressed too!"

This was an unfortunate remark. It brought out more vividly than was necessary, the immense contrast between her own and her daughter's toilet, and before she had time to think, Leonetta had replied. [123]

"Oh, I've got heaps of time. It doesn't take me a moment. I'll race you easily, even now."

Then a thought entered Leonetta's mind, which, to her credit be it said, she resisted at first, but which was too overpowering to be completely banished. It struck her for a moment that there was something faintly comical, almost pathetically ridiculous, in this elderly matron taking such laborious and elaborate pains to make herself attractive. Try as she might, Leonetta, from her angle of vision of seventeen years, could not repress the question: "What was it all for? What was the good of it all? Who could possibly care? Was the end commensurate with the exhaustive and exhausting means?" As the fierce light from the window beat down upon her mother's face, it seemed so old, so wondrously old, that all the formidable machinery of beautification about the room struck a chord of compassion in the flapper's breast, which was, however, at once compounded with humour in her mind. And then she could control herself no longer, and was forced to smile,—one of those broad mirthful smiles that are parlously near a laugh. Feeling, however, that her mood was one of derision, she turned quickly aside,—but not soon enough successfully to evade her mother's observant scrutiny. [124]

Mrs. Delarayne was too well aware of the awkward possibilities of the situation, and moreover too acutely sensitive generally, to be in any doubt as to the meaning of her younger daughter's amusement, and the flush beneath her ears spread to her cheeks. Simultaneously, however, her handsome face seemed suddenly to grow wonderfully stern and composed, and her eyes flashed with the fire which every woman seems to hold in reserve for an anti-feminine attack.

"Wilmott," she said quietly, "will you leave the room a moment? I'll ring when I want you."

Without even turning round to satisfy her curiosity, the well-trained servant dropped on to the corner of the bed the things she held in her hands, and was gone.

For some unaccountable reason Leonetta at the same time felt a tremor of apprehension pass slowly over her, and her hands grew icily cold. She could feel her mother's masterful will in the atmosphere of the room, and glancing tremulously askance at the widow's unfinished coiffure, every line of which seemed crisp with power, walked over to the hearth-rug.

Mrs. Delarayne's redness had now vanished. She was if anything a little pale, and she turned to face her daughter.

"I am not angry, Leo," she began with terrifying suavity, "but I felt I really could not explain all these things to you,"—she waved a hand over the mass of articles displayed on the dressing-table,— "in front of Wilmott. You see, servants have to take these things for granted without explanation." [125]

Leonetta felt her ears beginning to burn furiously. Her mother could be terrible.

"Yes, you see now," continued the widow, "how worrying and how difficult are the means which I have to use to make myself presentable. Age is a tiresome thing, is it not? It is so much more simple when one is young."

The invincible "Warrior" smiled kindly, and saw that tears were gathering in her daughter's eyes.

"Would you perhaps like me to go through these things with you, and explain them to you one by one?" she continued. "I have had to learn it all myself. I might save you a good many pitfalls in the remote future."

Leonetta's throat was dry, and her lips were parched.

"No, thank you," she replied hoarsely, and she made quickly towards the door.

"You have not told me what you wanted to say," said her mother playfully.

"I'll tell you later on," rejoined the girl in broken tones.

"Then will you please ring for Wilmott?" said Mrs. Delarayne, turning calmly to face her mirror again.

And after savagely pressing the bell, the flapper vanished. [126]

With her eyes blinded by stinging tears, and feeling very much more maddened by regret than by mortification, Leonetta fled to her room. She was not only staggered, she was also thoroughly ashamed. A boy suddenly butted by a lamb, which he had believed he might torment with impunity, could not have felt more astonished. A convert brought face to face with the livid wounds which, in her days of unbelief, she had inflicted upon a Christian martyr could not have felt more deeply dejected and penitent. Like a flash, an old emotion of childhood had filled her breast; an old emotion that seemed only to have gathered strength in the intervening years,—that blind, unthinking and dependent love of the infant for its mother.

Should she go back and throw herself at the wonderful woman's knees? Should she set out her plea for forgiveness in the folds of her mother's dress as she had done as a baby? No, Wilmott would be there,—Wilmott and everything besides! Moreover,—she looked in the glass,—her face was distraught, her ears flared, her eyes still smarted horribly. Even if Wilmott were dismissed as before, the girl would guess something.

Slowly she proceeded with her dressing, and, as she did so, a certain vague delicacy of feeling, a sort of secret reverence for her brave youth-loving mother downstairs, kept her from glancing too frequently in the glass. The contrast now, instead of elating her, simply accentuated her reminiscence of guilt. The very speed with which she adjusted her hair and made it "presentable," as her mother had expressed it, brought back the cruel memory of what had happened only a few minutes previously. [127]

In being thus affected by Mrs. Delarayne's able and perfectly relentless handling of a difficult situation; in feeling her love for her mother intensified backwards, so to speak, to the degree it had attained in infancy, as the result of the incident, Leonetta showed not only that she was worthy of her incomparable mother, but also that she had survived less unimpaired, than some might have thought, the questionable blessings of a finishing education.

Mrs. Delarayne who, without being truculently triumphant, was nevertheless mildly conscious of having scored a valuable and highly desirable point, repaired to the drawing-room twenty minutes later in a mood admirably suited to giving her guests a warm and hearty welcome.

Cleopatra was the first to join her. Each woman honestly thought that she had rarely seen the other look quite so beautiful, and the comments that were exchanged were as sincere as they were flattering.

Mrs. Delarayne was too loyal to betray one sister to the other, so she did not refer to the incident in her bedroom. Occasionally, however, thoughts of it would make her glance a little anxiously in the direction of the door, and as she did so, she fervently hoped that the lesson she had administered to her younger daughter had not been too severe. [128]

"I wonder what Baby can be doing all this time!" Cleopatra exclaimed at last.

"I'll go and see, I think," said Mrs. Delarayne, lifting her dress just slightly in front, and making towards the door.

"No, Edith," her daughter exclaimed, rising quickly. "I'll go. I cannot have you making yourself hot by climbing all those stairs. Please let me go!"

Mrs. Delarayne's wiry arm braced itself as her hand clasped the handle of the door. "I think I'd better go," she replied.

For the first time Cleopatra began to suspect that something had happened. She knew the

relations existing between Leonetta and her mother, but as the latter had always been so surprisingly patient and long-suffering, she was very far from suspecting what had actually occurred.

Their hesitation was cut short for them by the arrival of the first guest, Sir Joseph Bullion, who, a moment later, was followed by Denis Malster, Guy Tyrrell, Agatha Fearwell and her brother Stephen (friends of Cleopatra's), and Miss Mallowcoid.

The last to enter the drawing-room was Leonetta. She had evidently dreaded encountering her mother and sister alone, and she had purposely waited till she heard the guests arrive before coming down. Although to those who knew her there were certain unusual signs of demurity in her expression and demeanour in the early part of the evening, she presented a dramatically beautiful appearance, and the sober reserve of her mood if anything enhanced this effect, by lending it the additional charm of mystery and inscrutableness. [129]

Cleopatra was a little puzzled. Never had she expected that Leo would behave in this way, particularly in the presence of young men, and her feeling towards her sister underwent a momentary revulsion. She noticed that Denis scarcely took his eyes off her sister; but she also observed that Leo hardly ever responded, and simply talked quietly and demurely on to Guy Tyrrell or Stephen Fearwell. She could not understand, nor did her deepest wishes allow her to suspect, that her sister's delightfully sober mood was only a transient one.

During the dinner a slight diversion was created by Leonetta's addressing her parent as "Mother." But the poor child was so confused when she realised what she had done, and particularly when she thought of why she had done it, that everybody except Miss Mallowcoid endeavoured to ease the situation by being tremendously voluble.

After what had occurred between herself and her mother, the cold and distant appellation "Edith" did not spring naturally or spontaneously to Leonetta's lips. On the other hand "Peachy" seemed to belong to another and previous existence. She did not wish her mother to suspect, however, that she had used the term "mother" with deliberate intent to annoy. [130]

"That's right, my child," cried Miss Mallowcoid. "It is really refreshing to hear one of you girls, at least, addressing your mother in the usual and proper fashion!"

Leonetta with her cheeks ablaze, glared at her aunt menacingly.

"Well, I don't like it," she blurted out. "It was a slip of the tongue. Cleo and I much prefer the name Edith."

She spoke sharply and even rudely, seeing that it was her aunt she was addressing, but Mrs. Delarayne, who was beginning to understand the penitential spirit she was in, smiled kindly at her notwithstanding.

"I always look upon them as three sisters," Sir Joseph exclaimed somewhat laboriously, "whatever they call one another."

Miss Mallowcoid scoffed, and Mrs. Delarayne patted his hand persuasively. "You get on with your dinner," she said playfully.

Meanwhile Miss Mallowcoid had not taken her vindictive eyes off her younger niece, and the latter in sheer desperation plunged into an animated but very perfunctory conversation with her right-hand neighbour, Guy Tyrrell.

It is time that this young man should be described. He was the type usually called healthy and "clean-minded." He loved all sports and all kinds of exercise, particularly walking, and he could talk about these out-of-door occupations fairly amusingly. He was fair, blue-eyed, clean-shaven, and healthy-looking, and he believed in the possibility of being a "pal" to a girl,—particularly if she happened to be a flapper. His age was twenty-seven. [131]

It is not generally understood what precisely is implied by the so-called healthy "clean-minded" unmarried Englishman of twenty-seven, or thereabouts. As a rule the epithet "clean-minded" sums up not merely a mental condition, but a method of life. It signifies that the young man to whom it may justly be applied is either a master, or at least a lover, of games, that his outlook is what is known as "breezy," that he observes the rules of cricket in every relation to his fellow creatures, and that he is capable of enduring defeat or success with the same impassable calm and good-nature. Now it would be absurd to deny that here we have a very imposing catalogue of highly desirable characteristics; it would, however, be equally absurd to claim that the person in whom they are all happily combined, necessarily displays, side by side with his mastery of games and his deep understanding of cricket in particular, that mastery or understanding of the mysteries of life, that virtuosity in the art of life, which would constitute him a desirable mate. There is a *savoir faire*, there are problems and intricacies in life, which no degree of familiarity with cricket, no vast fund of experience in the football field, can help a man to master; and it is even questionable whether a young man's ultimate destiny as a husband and a father, far from being assisted, is not even seriously complicated by the extent to which he must have specialised in games and sports in order to earn for himself the whiteflower of "clean-mindedness." It is the wives of such men who are in a position to throw the most light on this question. There is no doubt that they frequently have a tale to tell; but the best among them are naturally disinclined to admit the very serious reasons they may have for disliking the silver trophies that adorn their homes. [132]

As the dinner wore on, animation waxed greater; Sir Joseph dropped an ever-increasing number of aspirates, and Leonetta was actually heard to laugh quite merrily.

Cleopatra still noticed that Denis was very much interested in her, and also observed that, from time to time, Leonetta now responded to his attentive scrutiny.

The conversation turned on gymnastics. Denis, Guy, and Leonetta all seemed to be talking at once; it was a subject that Cleopatra did not know much about.

"We always had three quarters of an hour's gym a day," said Leonetta, looking straight at Denis.

He laughed. "Oh, well," he exclaimed, "you have done me. I haven't touched parallel bars or a trapeze for ten years."

[133]

"Neither have I," Guy added.

Thereupon Leonetta allowed Guy to feel the muscles of her arm.

"Iron!" he ejaculated, while Cleopatra looked on with just a little surprise.

"You might at least say steel," she interjected, trying to sustain her rôle as one of the juveniles at table.

In the midst of a very prosy conversation with Sir Joseph and Miss Mallowcoid, Mrs. Delarayne found opportunities enough to watch the younger people, and she was not a little relieved to see the cloud gradually lifting from Leonetta's brow. She knew that in the circumstances she had not been too hard, and gathered from a hundred different signs that her relationship to her younger daughter had been materially improved by what had occurred.

Later on in the drawing-room, before the men arrived, however, Leonetta seemed to suffer a relapse into her former mood of excessive sobriety, and it was then that Miss Mallowcoid beckoned her niece to her.

"I think you were unnecessarily cross with me at dinner," Mrs. Delarayne overheard her sister saying.

Leonetta pouted, and with an air of utter indifference turned to Cleopatra.

"I think Guy Tyrrell rather tame, don't you? It was most awful uphill work talking to him all through dinner."

Cleopatra held up a finger admonishingly. "You seemed to be talking animatedly enough," she said.

[134]

"Yes," Leonetta began, "all about photography, walking tours, and things that don't matter—" Then she felt Miss Mallowcoid's huge cold hand on her arm.

"Leonetta dear, I said something to you a moment ago," lisped the elderly spinster. And again Mrs. Delarayne looked up to try to catch her daughter's reply.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Bella," said the girl, "but really one does not usually expect to be congratulated on a slip of the tongue, and your—" she burst out laughing.

Mrs. Delarayne thereupon resumed her conversation with Agatha Fearwell, as she was now satisfied that Leonetta was both thoroughly recovered and satisfactorily reformed.

"But I did not congratulate you, I—" her aunt persisted.

"Oh, well," Leonetta interrupted, "it really isn't worth discussing."

In any case it was not discussed, for at this juncture the men appeared.

They distributed themselves anything but haphazardly; Sir Joseph, for instance, seating himself by the side of his hostess; Denis Malster between Leonetta and her sister, and Guy and Stephen, as their diffidence suggested, as remotely as possible from the younger women of the party.

"Now, Leonetta," Sir Joseph began, "tell us something about your school life. You are the only one amongst us who has just come from a strange world."

[135]

Leonetta laughed. "Yes, a very strange world," she exclaimed.

Sir Joseph laughed too at what he conceived to be a most whimsical suggestion.

"And did you 'ave nice teachers?" he pursued.

"Miss Tomlinson, the history mistress was my favourite," replied the girl.

Denis remarked that he did not know they taught history at a school of Domesticity.

"Yes, you see," Leonetta replied, "the history of the subject. Cookery since the dawn of civilisation, or something desperate like that."

"Was she nice?" Sir Joseph enquired.

"I thought so," answered the girl, "though she wasn't beautiful. You know, she had that sort of very long chin that you feel you ought to shake hands with."

Sir Joseph laughed and made all kinds of grimaces at Mrs. Delarayne, intended to convey that Leonetta was indeed a chip of the old block.

"That's unkind," said Miss Mallowcoid.

Denis Malster threw out his legs and clasped his hands at the back of his head preparatory to making a speech.

"The heartlessness of flappers!" he murmured. "This is indeed a subject worthy of elaboration. Why is the flapper usually heartless?"

Mrs. Delarayne was quick to perceive the unpleasant possibilities of developing such a theme, particularly in view of what had happened earlier in the evening, and, seeking to save Leonetta's feelings, she valiantly tried to change the subject. [136]

"Well, in any case," she said, addressing Leonetta, "you are none the worse for it, my dear. Two years ago you were such a tomboy you could scarcely get out of the door without chipping a piece off each hip; and now——"

"Yes, now she chips pieces off other people," interposed Miss Mallowcoid.

Leonetta, however, was not attending. Her eyes were for the moment fastened on Denis Malster. He had known how to say just the very thing to provoke her interest. He had as much as declared that she was heartless. He,—a man,—had said this. It was like a challenge. She, who felt all heart, or what the world calls "heart," was strangely moved. How could he say such a thing? This was the last remark she would have expected from any man. Her curiosity was kindled, and with it her vanity.

She noticed, as her sister had noticed before her, that he was efficient, well-groomed, smart of speech, passably good-looking, independent at least in bearing, hard, at least in appearance, and possessed of a certain gift of irony that could act like a lash.

She began to think more highly of him; in fact the recollection of his last remark actually piqued her now she thought of it again. At last, for sheer decency, she had to look away from him, and as she did so, she observed that Cleopatra averted her eyes from her. [137]

There was a stir in the company. Agatha Fearwell was going to sing, and Miss Mallowcoid went to the piano.

The performance was not above the usual standard of such amateur efforts, and at the end of it the singer was vouchsafed the usual perfunctory plaudits.

Thereupon Sir Joseph requested a song from Cleopatra. This apparently necessitated a long search in the music cabinet during which all the young people rose from their seats. At last a song was found; it was a sort of French folk-song entitled *Les Épouseuses du Berry*.

As Cleopatra turned to join her aunt at the piano, however, a spectacle met her eyes which, innocent as it appeared, was nevertheless fatal to her composure.

Denis Malster and Leonetta, facing each other in a far corner of the room, with heads so close that they almost touched, and with hands tightly clasped, were playing the old, old game of trying the strength of each other's wrists, each endeavouring to force the other to kneel.

It was harmless enough,—simply one of those very transparent and very early attempts that are almost unconsciously made by two young people of opposite sexes, to become decently and interestingly in close touch with each other. [138]

Cleopatra's first feeling was one of surprise at Leonetta's being so wonderfully resourceful in engaging the attention of men. When, however, she observed the details of the contest,—the closely gripped hands, the fingers intertwined, the palms now meeting, now parting, and the two smiling faces, Denis Malster's rather attractive figure, appearing to tremendous advantage now, she could not quite see why,—a feeling of uncontrollable alarm took possession of her, and she spread her music with some agitation before her aunt.

Miss Mallowcoid played the opening bars, and still the contest in the far corner did not stop. Denis was not even aware that she—Cleopatra—was about to sing.

At last Mrs. Delarayne, who had not been blind to what was taking place, felt she must interfere. Cleopatra's first note was already overdue.

"Leo, Leo, my dear," she cried, "your sister is going to sing to us."

Leonetta turned round, said she was sorry, released her hands, and she and Denis joined the seated group at some distance from the piano.

The incident, however, was not over yet; for, just as her sister sang her first note, Leonetta, her eyes sparkling with excitement, and her hands discoloured by the struggle, ejaculated loud enough for everyone to hear, "Denis, you're a fibber. Your hands are like iron too!"

Mrs. Delarayne put a finger to her lips, but it was too late. There was a sound of music being roughly folded up, and Cleopatra turned away from the piano. [139]

"If you're all going to talk," she said, looking a little pale, "it's no use my singing, is it? I can wait

a moment."

"Sorry, old girl," Leonetta cried. "It was only me. I'm dumb now."

Mrs. Delarayne had risen and was urging her elder daughter back to the piano. Sir Joseph was also trying his hand at persuasion, and when Miss Mallowcoid and Agatha added their prayers to the rest, Cleopatra at last spread her music out again, and the song began.

Those, however, who know the swing and gaiety of *Les Épouseuses du Berry*, will hardly require to be told how hopeless was the effect of it when sung by a voice which, owing to recent and unabated vexation, was continually on the verge of tears. Nothing, perhaps, is more thoroughly tragic than a really lively melody intoned by a voice quavering with emotion, and even Sir Joseph, who did not understand a word of the song, was deeply grateful when it was all over.

Mrs. Delarayne made determined efforts at restoring the natural and spontaneous good cheer which the party appeared to have lost, but her exertions were only partially successful, and although Agatha Fearwell and Cleopatra sang other songs, the recollection of that tragico-comic *Les Épouseuses du Berry* had evidently sunk too deeply to be removed. [140]

That night, as Cleopatra was taking leave of her mother, in the latter's bedroom, she lingered a little at the door.

"What is it, my darling?" Mrs. Delarayne demanded. "Do you want to ask me something?"

"Yes, Edith," Cleopatra replied slowly, looking down at the handle she was holding. "I am perfectly prepared to admit that Leo did not perhaps intend to be offensive over my song, although, of course, as you know she ruined the whole thing; but anyhow, do you think that she has any right, so soon after meeting him, to call Mr. Malster 'Denis'? Isn't it rather bad form?"

Mrs. Delarayne sighed. "Very bad form, my dear, very bad form," she replied. "Of course, I admit, it's very bad form. But for all we know, he may have asked her to do it. You see, both you and I call him 'Denis,' and I suppose he thought it would sound odd if Leo did not also."

Still Cleopatra lingered. She wanted to say more, and Mrs. Delarayne divined that she wanted to say more. The words, however, were hard to find, and, at last, bidding her mother "Good-night," she departed only half comforted.

CHAPTER VIII

Lord Henry felt he had done his best for England, and now his mind turned covetously towards a country and a clime where his best promised to yield richer and better fruit. He had mended society's nervous wrecks so long that he had come to look upon the whole modern world as a machine too hopelessly out of gear to repay his skilful efforts. [141]

"People who never sit down to a meal with an appetite," he would say, "people whose bodies are as surcharged as their houses with superfluous loot, cannot hope to be well, physically or spiritually. We live on an island huddled together, and yet we grow every day further apart. For the acquisition of superfluous loot means incessant strife. The worst sign of the times is that abstract terms no longer mean the same thing to any two people. Individualism is thus destroying even the value of language. Because where each man has his individual view a common language itself becomes an impossibility. The effort of the Middle Ages was to convert Europe into a single nation. The effort of the modern or 'Muddle' Age, is to convert each single nation into a Europe. That is why abstract terms are slowly losing their value as the current coin of speech." [142]

St. Maur had attached himself to Lord Henry as a kind of voluntary or honorary secretary. He assisted his master where and when he could, and felt that he was more than adequately repaid in the enormous amount he learnt from him.

"Is there no remedy?" he demanded seriously on a day early in August, when the prospect of losing his friend was weighing more heavily than usual upon him. The two were sitting talking in the study of Lord Henry's cottage which stood in a lane off the London road, about two miles north of Ashbury, where his sanatorium was situated.

"There is a remedy, of course," replied Lord Henry. "It would consist in uniting modern nations afresh by means of a powerful common culture. It is only then that men can be guided and led, for it is only then that they can understand what they are taught about life and humanity. In the Middle Ages a common culture was so universal, that even the barriers of nationality did not prevent men from understanding one another. Now there is such a total lack of a uniform culture that men of the same nation speak an unknown tongue to one another. That is the recipe for stupidity."

"But cannot this new uniform culture be created?" St. Maur insisted.

"It would mean a great new religion," Lord Henry answered. "And we are all too much exhausted for such a stupendous undertaking. New religions depend in the first place upon the belief in great men, and where are the great men of to-day? Only those whose coarse impudence has made them forget their limitations start new religions nowadays. And look at the result!" [143]

"There are enough of them at all events," suggested St. Maur.

"Exactly,—their number is the best comment on their futility."

"But surely the effort, general as it is, shows that people agree with you, and feel the need that you see and recognise?"

"Yes, but the arrogance with which they pretend to supply the need themselves, is the best proof of how deeply they misunderstand the gravity of their plight. Look at these Theosophists, Spiritualists, and members of the Inner Light,—mere cliques, mere handfuls of uninspired and uninspiring cranks. They'll never spread a uniform and unifying culture. They cannot therefore make language once more a common currency for thought."

Aubrey St. Maur had endeared himself to Lord Henry chiefly by the inordinate beauty of his person, his exuberant health, and his modesty. He was wealthy and the only son of a wealthy father. All the "loot" of the de Porvilliers had come to him through his mother, and to Lord Henry's surprise had failed to turn his head. On the contrary, it had if anything filled him with a feeling of guilt, or perhaps that which is most akin to guilt—obligation. And he had long wondered how best he could discharge this obligation to the world. In Lord Henry's company he had elected to find a solution to this problem. [144]

But Lord Henry did not want the youth to join him on his journey to China. The love the young nobleman still felt for his native country bade him leave this promising member of it, if only as a forlorn hope, to prove to Englishmen that here and there, at ever more distant intervals, their blood was still capable of producing something that was eminently desirable.

"You will succeed your father in the Upper House," he said to St. Maur on this occasion, when the latter expressed the desire to become a pious mandarin, "and you will, I trust, be an example of health and wisdom to all. The faith in blood and lineage wants people like you. There is so precious little to which it can be pinned nowadays."

"That's all very well," protested St. Maur. "But you are deserting the battlefield, and leaving an unfledged pupil in charge. Is this nothing to you? Are you incapable of becoming attached to anybody? Without fishing for compliments, is it nothing to you to break our friendship in this way?"

Lord Henry, who as usual was curling his mesh of hair with his fingers, cast a sidelong glance full of meaning at his friend and smiled.

"My dear boy, if it hadn't been for you," he said, "I should not be here now. Do you suppose it amuses me to investigate the unsavoury details of every society lady's nervous affliction? Do you suppose I'm flattered by such and such a Guardsman's encomiums when I have cured his stammer, or his inability to proceed beyond the letter 'P' when writing a letter?" [145]

"What is your real purpose in going to China?" persisted the younger man. "I shan't divulge. Can't you tell me?"

"In the first place, my dear boy," Lord Henry replied, "curiosity. I honestly want to see how Chinamen have escaped the madness that is overtaking Europe. Secondly, I have a heart, and I love my country, and I cannot witness my country's decline. Thirdly, and chiefly,—but this is a secret,—I feel that now it is the duty of all enlightened Western Europeans, who have seen the madness of European civilisation, to hasten to the last healthy spot on earth and to preach the Gospel of Europophobia,—that is to say, to warn the wise East against our criminal errors, and to save it from becoming infected by our diseases. If the world is to be saved, a *cordón sanitaire* must be established round Europe and everything like Europe; for Europe has now become a pestilence."

St. Maur who had been standing at the window with his back turned to his friend swung suddenly round, his face illumined as if by an inspiration.

"By Jove," he cried, "that is an idea! That is indeed a crusade! I hadn't thought of that!" [146]

"It is the only beneficent direction in which I feel I can use my powers," said Lord Henry gravely. "It is, if you will, my religion. I feel I am called to be a missionary to the East, to preach the solemn warning against Western civilisation."

"God!" St. Maur exclaimed, "that's an idea with which to fire a generation. It is a new gospel; a new gospel of sin and the Devil."

"I assure you," Lord Henry rejoined, "the bulk of the men at my club would not turn a hair at the suggestion. They would simply turn their papers over, nod significantly at each other, and whisper, 'The fellow's not all there.'"

At this moment Lord Henry's man, Fordham, entered the room.

"Yes?" his master grunted from the depths of his chair.

"A lady to see you, my lord," replied the man.

"I'm out."

"That's what I said, my lord."

"Well?"

"The lady said that was all nonsense; she 'ad called at the Sanatorium, and they'd said you was 'ere."

"Then her name's Delarayne," said Lord Henry.

"Yes, that's it, my lord."

"Very well, then, show her up."

"That woman's a wonder," St. Maur exclaimed. "It is a boiling hot day; at any moment there may be a storm; there was probably no fly at the station,—there never is when I come,—and she must have walked the whole of the two miles in the dust. She has an eye on you, my friend." [147]

"Yes," said Lord Henry, "and by the time a woman has her eye on you, she usually has her claws in you as well. You needn't go," he added, as he noticed St. Maur preparing to leave. "But she's an admirable woman. Good taste amounts almost to heroism in these women who battle with age until their very last breath."

Mrs. Delarayne, if anything more regal and more youthful than ever, but certainly showing signs of having taken violent exercise along a chalky thoroughfare, stepped eagerly towards Lord Henry.

"My dear Lord Henry," she began, "so good of you to be in only to me. But oh, I felt I must see you before leaving town."

She turned and shook hands with St. Maur, and Lord Henry moved an easy chair in her direction.

"Oh, that's right; give me a chair, quick!" she gasped. "I'm broken—broken in body and spirit."

Lord Henry asked the expected question.

"Only this," she said, "that my life soon won't be worth a moment's purchase."

"You are tired," suggested her host. "You don't look after yourself."

"It isn't that," Mrs. Delarayne rejoined. "Nobody takes greater care of themselves than I do. I go to bed every night at ten o'clock precisely, and read until half-past two. What more can I do?" [148]

Lord Henry blinked rapidly, and surveyed her with an air of deep interest. "And you say you are leaving town?" he enquired.

"Yes, I'm taking my family to Brineweald, you know. It is my annual penance, my yearly sacrificial offering to my children. It lasts just six weeks. By the end of it, of course, I am at death's door; but I feel that I can then face the remaining forty-six weeks of gross selfishness with a clean conscience and a brazen face."

"Who's going?"

"Oh, the usual crowd,—my daughters, of course, a friend of theirs, a young Jewess, and perhaps the Fearwell children. The men of the party and my sister Bella will be lodged at Sir Joseph's place, Brineweald Park."

"It sounds engaging enough," said St. Maur.

"Oh, most!" sighed Mrs. Delarayne. "Oh, you can't think what a happy mother I'd be if only I had no children!"

Both men laughed, and Mrs. Delarayne who, ever since her arrival, had been casting unmistakable glances at St. Maur, at last succeeded in silently conveying her meaning to him.

"Well, I'm afraid I must be going downstairs," he said, "I've letters to write."

She extended a hand with alacrity. "Oh, it looks as if I were driving you away," she said.

St. Maur protested feebly against this truthful interpretation of his proposed retreat, and withdrew. [149]

Lord Henry took a seat opposite to his visitor, who was obviously as shy as a schoolgirl in his presence, and surveyed her covertly.

"Have you come to tell me that you have abandoned that absurd Inner Light?" he demanded playfully.

"No, indeed; why should I?" she rejoined with affected indignation.

"It is unpardonable," he murmured.

"Why unpardonable?"

"Had you been a Protestant in the past, it would at least have been comprehensible," he said, "because any kind of absurdity is possible after one has been a Protestant. What after all are all these ridiculous, new-fangled creeds but further schisms of Protestantism? But seeing that you were once a Catholic, I repeat, it is unpardonable."

Mrs. Delarayne purred resentfully, as if to imply that it would require something more than that line of persuasion to convince her of her error.

"What do you do to induce me to abandon anything—however erroneous?" she protested at last. "It isn't as if you were even remaining in the country. You are going away. But I cannot bear to think of your going away."

Lord Henry folded his hands and scrutinised her for a moment beneath lowered brows. Her manner was unmistakable; she revealed as much of her game as her dignity allowed. His heart softened towards her. [150]

"Is it so much to you that I am going?" he demanded.

"Oh, no," she replied, mock cheerfully, "*le roi est mort, vive le roi!*"

"Haven't you a number of friends?"

"Weighed in the scales, of course," she said, "they represent a tremendous amount of friendship."

"Aren't your daughters an interest?"

"Too adorable, of course,—so adorable that I sometimes wish I'd never been born."

The problem as it presented itself to Lord Henry was rightly: how could this quinquagenarian be given a son whom she could worship? To Mrs. Delarayne the problem was: how could she induce this young man to overcome the obvious objection consisting in the disparity of their ages? She could read her own nature no further than this.

"Have you never any feelings of loneliness?" she demanded. "Don't you ever reflect upon the happiness you might secure yourself and somebody else by being decently married?"

"I might be tempted to marry. It is perfectly possible," Lord Henry replied. "Hitherto the only thing that has deterred me has been my vanity. It would be so horrible to watch the love a woman might bear me slowly turning to indifference,—for that is what marriage means,—that I don't think I could have the courage to embark upon the undertaking." [151]

"You are flippant," said the widow sadly. "You pipe and joke while Rome is burning."

"One day, of course, I shall have to marry," he muttered, as if to himself.

She would have liked to ask him to Brineweald. She wanted a deep breath of him before he left. For some reason, however, for which she was not too anxious to account, she did not express this wish.

"Why will you *have* to?" she asked.

"I mean," he said, "simply what I am always repeating in my clinique, that save in the case of those who are really called to celibacy,—the Newmans, the Spencers, and the Nietzsches of this world,—physical and spiritual health is difficult without a normal sexual life."

"Quite so," the widow agreed.

"Quite so," Lord Henry repeated, "a *normal* sexual life." He emphasised the word "normal," hoping thereby to convey gently how hopeless her scheme was.

"And when will that be?"

"Oh, Heaven knows!"

She rose, went to the window, and there was a pause.

"Lord Henry," she began after a while, "would it seem odd to you? Would you think me shameless? Am I hopelessly abandoned, to tell you now, how very much more than mere friendship, mere gratitude I feel for you?" [152]

He buried his face in his hands and held his breath. He knew this was inevitable; but as he had already told St. Maur, he had a heart.

She did not look at him, but continued speaking fluently, warmly, incisively.

"Ever since I met you, I have felt what all of us women long to feel, the ridiculous inferiority of the bulk of modern men suddenly relieved by an object which we are willing to serve and obey. Your cures, if you have ever effected any in me, were just that,—not your regimens or your analyses,—but your words, your glance, the touch of your hand, your presence. Everybody knows you have a bewildering presence. I need not add to the idle compliments you must receive on all hands. But surely I have recognised the greatness beneath the outward glamour. And it has cast a spell over me. I admit it. I am fettered to it, riveted to it. We women suffer to-day because we have no such men as you to look up to. Oh, to have met for once something great, something precious, in a world where these things are so rare!"

He glanced up at her. He could not help observing her spruce footgear smothered in the dust of the road, her straight proud back, her fine profile outlined against the bright colours of the chintz, and her blue-veined hands. And he felt an uncontrollable impulse to tell her how deeply he admired her.

"You are no fool," she pursued; "you must have known that I loved you. Therefore I'm only confirming what you already know. But, believe me, Lord Henry, I am something more than one of your interesting cases." [153]

He protested.

"Yes, I know; you always say women cannot understand men, because to comprehend is to comprise, and the smaller cannot comprise the greater——"

He smiled approvingly.

"You see how accurately I can quote you. That is possibly true. I do not claim to be able to understand you. But surely you will grant me that a woman may have a deep and very real knowledge of being in the presence of something exceptionally great, without precisely understanding it?"

Lord Henry rose. He was blinking rapidly and tugging with more than usual force at his mesh of hair.

"Am I impossible?" she asked hoarsely. "Is the disparity of our ages such that, hitherto, the thought of our being more than friends has been unthinkable to you?"

He went to her side by the window. Words were forming on his lips, but they would make no sentence. She saw his lips moving and noticed his distress.

"Is it not a sign of our deep sympathy that you are the only man in all England in whose presence I forget my ghastly age, my half century and more expended on futilities?" [154]

He took her hand.

"Oh, Edith Delarayne, you wonderful creature!" he exclaimed; "that is the tragedy. You put your finger on the tragedy. If only you could be twenty again, what a wife you would make for me!"

She gave a little sob and fell into his arms. "Oh, my boy, my dear boy!" she cried, and kissed his hand almost with the avidity of hunger, as it clasped hers on his shoulder.

She released herself slowly and lightly dabbed her eyes.

"When are you going away?" he demanded gravely.

"The day after to-morrow," she replied.

"Write to me as usual," he said.

She caught his hand and grasped it firmly. "Oh, Lord Henry, be the same to me!" she pleaded.

He laughed the plea to scorn. "Of course I'll always be the same to you. What do you think?"

She saw that he meant it and moved lightly towards the door. "I must be going," she said, putting away her handkerchief, and trying to control an awkward catch in her breath which was reminiscent of her weeping.

He urged her to stay for lunch; he offered to have her fetched by the Sanatorium car; he begged to be allowed to accompany her back to Ashbury; but she stalwartly refused; and in a moment he and St. Maur were watching her, sprightly as a girl, tripping back along the dusty road to the station. [155]

"My boy, my dear boy," he muttered to St. Maur, "that is what she felt, that is what she said. The unconscious voice in her knew the desired relationship and expressed the wish, although the conscious mind thought only of 'husband.'"

CHAPTER IX

"So inexhaustibly rich is the sun that even when it goes down it pours its gold into the very depths of the sea; and then even the poorest boatman rows with golden oars."

Thus spoke the greatest poet of the nineteenth century, and thus all generations of men have felt.

The warm rich colour, as of ripeness, that it gives to the youngest cheek, the tawny tinge as of jungle fauna with which it vitalises every dead-white urban hand, and the enchanting glamour it lends to the plainest head and face,—these are a few of the works of the sun that are surely a proof of its demoniacal glory. Halos, it is true, it fashions as well, and beyond reckoning; but the white teeth that flash from the tanned mask are scarcely those of a saint. Or has a saint actually been known who really had white teeth of his own?

August in England, between the moist wood-clad hills and the blinding glitter of the sea; August in a beautiful country homestead, with its flowering garden, its cool carpet of lawn stretching to a black line of thick hedgerow which seems to be the last barrier between earth and ocean,—what a season it is, and what a setting for the greatest game of youth, the game of catch as catch can, with a cheerless winter for the losers! [157]

The world is at her old best, and all her children are exalted and exhilarated by the knowledge that they are at their best also. Even the trippers are perpetually in Sabbath clothes, as a sign that they are infected with the prevalent feeling of festivity.

Sabbath clothes without the Sabbath gloom, beauty without piety, freedom with open shops, sunshine without duty,—these to the masses are some of the chief joys of the summer sun in England.

In this enumeration of a few of the leading features of a sunny August in England, however, we should not forget to mention what will appear to some the least desirable of them all. The fact that this particular feature is omitted by the most successful English poets of the Victorian School, as by other sentimentalists, would not excuse us in failing to give it at least a passing reference here; for Victorian, alas! does not by any means signify Alexandrian in regard to the periods of English poetry; and even if it be a sin to mention this aspect of a sunny August, we prefer to sin rather than to resemble a Victorian poet.

The quality referred to, then, is a certain result of the eternally pagan influence of the sun. For, say what you will, the sun is pagan. It says "Yea" to life. In its glorious rays it is ridiculously easy to forget the alleged beauties of another world. Under its scorching heat the snaky sinuousness of a basking cat seems more seductive than the image of a winged angel, and amid the gold it lavishes, nothing looks more loathsome, more repulsive, than the pale cheek of pious ill-health. In short it urges man and woman to a wanton enjoyment of life and their fellows; it recalls to them their relationship to the beasts of the field and the birds in the trees; it fills them with a careless thirst and hunger for the chief pastimes of these animals,—feeding, drinking, and procreation; and the more "exalted" practices of self-abnegation, self-sacrifice, and the mortification of the flesh, are easily forgotten in such a mood.

[158]

Nothing goes wrong, nothing can go wrong, while the sun blazes and the flowers are beautiful. So thinks everybody who has survived Puritanism unscathed, so thought the majority of Brineweald's visitors that year, so thought Mrs. Delarayne and her party of eager young swains and still more eager virgins. Wantonness was in the air,—wantonness and beauty; and when these two imps of passion come together August is at its zenith.

Mrs. Delarayne had been down at Brineweald a little under a week; Vanessa Vollenberg and the young Fearwells had already been of the party four whole days; Sir Joseph with Denis Malster and Guy Tyrrell, Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Tribe and Miss Mallowcoid had arrived at Brineweald Park twenty-four hours after the Delarayne household had been completed, and now everybody was busy settling down to the novelty of life, effacing the traces of strangeness wherever they appeared, and measuring each other's skill and power at pastimes not necessarily confined to swimming, golf, and tennis.

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Leonetta had been congratulated on her friend Vanessa. Mrs. Delarayne who had expected an over-dressed, heavy young lady, with Shylock countenance and shaggy negroid coiffure, had been not a little surprised when she saw alight on the Brineweald down platform a girl who, though distinctly Semitic in features, had all the refinement, good taste, and sobriety of a Gentile and a lady. It was a relief, to say the least, and when, in addition, she found her intelligent and a lively companion, she was devoutly thankful.

Nothing beneath that fierce August sun escaped the keen comprehending eye of Vanessa Vollenberg. The mother and the two daughters with whom she found her present lot cast, gave her food enough for meditation and secret comment; but while their acumen and penetration were hardly inferior to her own, she felt an adult among people not completely grown up. It was as if they still retained more of the ingenuousness of primitive womanhood than she, and thus she "circumnavigated" them, while they, all too self-centred, had barely discovered in which hemisphere her shores were to be found. In this way the seniority of her race was probably revealed.

[160]

Beautiful in her own Oriental style, voluptuous and graceful, with small well-made hands, and shapely limbs, she might have proved a formidable rival to Leonetta; or was it perhaps precisely her Jewish blood,—which seemed in Leonetta's eyes to preclude rivalry,—that had first endeared this attractive young Jewess to her wilful Gentile friend?

Girls have strange reasons for "falling in love" with each other at school. It is not impossible that the inconceivability of eventual rivalry should be one of these.

Mrs. Delarayne's house, "The Fastness," was one of a round dozen large houses that stood along the crest of Brineweald Hill, overlooking the little seaside town of Stonechurch. It took a little over fifteen minutes to walk down from Brineweald to the beach at Stonechurch, and perhaps a little over twenty minutes to walk back up the steep hill. Sir Joseph's place, Brineweald Park, lay inland on the far side of the village of Brineweald, about a mile from "The Fastness," but the distance was soon covered by the young people, even when they could not dispose of one of Sir Joseph's cars; and the two households were therefore practically always mingled.

Bathing, tennis, golf, picnicking, croquet,—these helped to fill the time while the sun was high; and when the cool of the evening came, the quiet paths and groves of Brineweald Park, or the bowers of Mrs. Delarayne's garden, were an agreeable refuge for bodies pleasantly fatigued and faintly languorous.

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Mrs. Delarayne who was not uncommonly in a condition of faint languor was content, during

these terrible six weeks of her life, to play the part of spectator. Silently, but with a good proportion of the available interest, she contemplated the younger members of the party, and whether she happened to be on her *chaise-longue* overlooking her own lawn, or on the terrace of Brineweald Park, her deep concern about the performances of her juniors never abated. The fact that a good deal of this determined attention was calculated to ward off the less attractive alternative of Sir Joseph's untiring advances, was suspected least of all by the generous squire of Brineweald himself; but it was noticeable too, that she would often sit for long spells neither observing the pranks of her young people nor listening to Sir Joseph's dulcet tones, and then it was that her daughters would suspect that age was after all beginning to tell, even in the case of their valiant parent. At such times she was, of course, simply dreaming day dreams of the life she could have had if, as "he" had said, she had been twenty now; and the beatific expression that would come into her face was scarcely one of reconciliation to senility.

To say that Vanessa Vollenberg and Agatha Fearwell were perfectly happy on this holiday, would be a little wide of the mark. Indeed their condition fell very much more short of perfect happiness than they could possibly have anticipated. [162]

Truth to tell, Leonetta was too indisputably mistress of the stage. The infinite resource with which she contrived always to draw the limelight in her direction, the unremitting regularity with which she turned every circumstance into a "curtain" for her own apotheosis, while it fired the proud Cleopatra to ever fresh efforts at successful competition,—efforts which were proving tremendously exhausting,—left Vanessa and Agatha in a state not unlike a suspension of hostilities. They simply waited. Of all the men, Denis Malster was certainly the only one that a girl could have been expected to make a struggle for, and since he appeared to be entirely hypnotised by Leonetta, the remaining two, one of whom, in Agatha's case, was a brother, seemed to invite only a Platonic relationship of games and sports.

It is true that Guy Tyrrell felt he could have gone to any lengths with the fascinating, voluptuous Jewess; but he had the inevitable defects of his "clean-mindedness," and knew as little how to engage the interest of a thoroughly matriculated girl as to rouse enthusiasm for botany in a cat.

The first walk they had taken with the three young men and Cleopatra and her sister had been typical of much that followed.

In the middle of a conversation in which Vanessa's native Jewish wit was beginning to tell against the more homely gifts of the rest of the party, Leonetta would suddenly fall back, stand in an attitude of rapt attention over a brook, a well, a wild flower, a plank bridge, a pool, or anything; and, at a signal from her, the three men of the party would quickly rally to her halting place, and enter heartily into whatever spirit the object contemplated was supposed to stimulate. [163]

It was usually the merest trifle that caused her thus to arrest for a moment the forward movement of her companions, and to interrupt a conversation to boot; but Vanessa alone had the penetration to see the unflinching instinct for power, the unflagging determination to be the centre of attention, which prompted this simple strategy, on Leonetta's part; and rather than compete with it,—seeing that it was practised with all the usual efficiency of unconsciousness,—she saved herself the vexation of possible defeat by yielding quietly to Leonetta the supremacy she apparently insisted upon having. Thus, while she kept a steady eye upon Denis Malster, whose manner had captivated her from the start, she was content, or rather discontent, to note step by step Guy Tyrrell's blundering innocence in attempted courtship.

Agatha, accustomed as she was to the rôle of padding in life, fell back on her devoted brother, and used such influence as she possessed over him, to keep his mind well aired and cool amid the slightly overheating breezes of that memorable midsummer. [164]

Cleopatra, on the other hand, not so wise perhaps as Vanessa, certainly not so ready to retire as Agatha, and possibly less able to feel if not to simulate indifference, than either of them, plunged into the conflict with a vigour and a degree of animation which made her almost as unbearable to the other girls as Leonetta herself. Again, however, Vanessa was shrewd enough to realise the emergency Cleopatra was in, and forgave her much that left Agatha painfully wondering. For Cleopatra the fight was a serious one. It called for all her resources and all her skill. Unfortunately she lacked Leonetta's fertility in finding means by which to draw the general attention upon herself, and being overanxious as well, her tactics frequently failed. She would descend to every shift to thwart her sister's wiles,—only to find, however, that it was more often Stephen Fearwell or the Incandescent Gerald, than Guy and Denis, who allowed themselves to be diverted from their orbit round Leonetta, to attend to her.

At tennis it would be a blister suddenly formed on Leonetta's hand; at croquet it would be a fledgling just beside her ball; on the beach it would be a peculiar pebble,—anywhere, everywhere, there was always something over which Leonetta would suddenly stand dramatically still, until every male within sight, including sometimes Sir Joseph himself, had run all agog to her side.

Now the imitation of such tactics is difficult enough; their defeat, when they are combated consciously, is literally exhausting. In two or three days Cleopatra was exhausted. [165]

Never at a loss for a pretext, never apparently thinking any excuse too jejune, too transparently fatuous, or too puerile, to draw the attention of the men, Leonetta, with unabated high spirits, won again and again, every day, every hour, such a number of these silent secret victories over the rest of the young women of the party, that at the end of a week, when their cumulative effect

was so overwhelmingly manifest as no longer to allow of denial, she openly assumed the rôle of queen of the party.

Again and again, in a game of tennis, Cleopatra's tired and overworked brain would grapple with the problem, why a certain empty remark of Leonetta's had caused Denis and Guy to double up with laughter, and had thus held up the game for a moment; and the solution was hard to find. She knew that even a brighter remark from herself would not have so much as caused them to interrupt their service; but she was imperfectly acquainted with the psychology of rulership, and did not understand that when once, by fair means or foul, a certain member of a party has by her own unaided efforts elevated herself to the position of its queen, everything ostensibly witty that proceeds from her mouth is greeted with obsequious laughter by her devoted subjects.

Indeed, in order not to appear a spoilsport, Cleopatra was at last reduced to the humiliating resort of joining in the courtly merriment which appeared to her so extravagantly to result from her sister's mildest jests. [166]

To say that by this time she was feeling a slight sinking sensation in the region of her heart, would be to express with scrupulous moderation what was actually taking place. For Cleopatra, theretofore, had held her own against the best. A good rider, a splendid shot, with almost a professional form in tennis and golf, and a good swimmer and dancer besides, she possessed none of those shortcomings, so handsomely acknowledged when they are present, which would even have justified her in taking up an unassuming position. Besides she was quite rightly aware of owning certain sterling qualities which promised to afford a very much more solid support to the everyday life of this world, than the constant carnival brilliance of her sister; and she found it oppressive to have to appear perpetually in carnival spirits, when she craved for those more sober moods in which her less volatile virtues could make a good display.

She was beginning to find her sister's hard, unrelenting rivalry difficult to forgive, and the steady shaping of a dreaded feeling of loathing for the cause of her partial eclipse began to cause her some alarm.

Thus each day ended with a tacit, concealed, but very real victory for Leonetta, without her sister deriving any further satisfaction from the unavowed contest, than an aching weariness both of body and spirit. [167]

Meanwhile Vanessa, more piqued by her whilom "sweetheart's" increasing neglect of her than by that young lady's inordinate success with the men, would come on the scene in the evening with all the advantage of being less jaded than Cleopatra by the day's incessant duel, and then would frequently score point after point against her schoolmate, without ever revealing a sign of the eagerness she felt for the fray. In addition she made herself a great favourite of the wealthy baronet, and recognising in him a means of possibly exercising some power over Denis, cultivated his affection by every wile of which her clever race made her capable.

Denis Malster was obviously the most staggered by the turn events had taken. Bewildered and fascinated by Leonetta's art of blowing hot and cold, as the spirit moved her, kept constantly alert by the rapid changes of her caprice, he had come to have eyes and ears only for her imperious youth. If she ran off with Guy Tyrrell or with Stephen Fearwell,—a mere boy,—he grew grave, meditative, taciturn; when she returned he resumed his rôle of obsequious courtier without either reserve or concealment. And who can be more obsequious to a pretty schoolgirl than an Englishman of thirty?

The British are known all over the world for their stamina, for the grit and tenacity with which they can play a losing game; nay, it is even reported that they have frequently turned a losing game into a victory by this very capacity for stubborn patience in adversity. [168]

Cleopatra lacked none of the qualities which have made the British nation famous. She, too, could play a losing game with dignity, grace, and pride; even if, as in this case, it was the cruellest game that a girl can be called upon to play. Perhaps, too, she noticed the conflict that had started in Denis Malster's heart; or maybe she simply saw the unmistakable signs of his dawning passion. But, in any case, and as quickly as surely as she realised that he was becoming enslaved to her sister, his charms underwent a mysterious intensification in her eyes that only aggravated the difficulties of her position.

Certainly he had not made the first advances. Or, if he had, they had been too subtle to be observed. What woman, moreover, really believes that a man is ever guilty in the traffic of the sexes? She had, however, been compelled to notice her sister's manœuvres. They had been unmistakable, untiring, unpardonable.

At times she had even been constrained to admire the skill with which Guy Tyrrell, Stephen Fearwell, and the Incandescent Gerald himself had been employed by Leonetta in the business of tormenting Denis into a state of complete subjection. Every means was legitimate to Leonetta. If she could not pretend to read a man's hand, she would make a cat's cradle with him; if she could not take his arm, she would plead sudden fatigue in order that he might take her hand to pull her up hill; if she picked a wild rose, a thorn would be sure to remain buried in the skin of her finger, which at some propitious moment would require to be laboriously removed by one of the male members of the party. [169]

A girl may struggle with fortitude against such a determined dispute for supremacy; she may deploy her whole strength and even contrive parallel manœuvres of her own; but even when she

is not less beautiful than her rival, as was the case with Cleopatra, the more conscious of the two engaged in such a match is bound in the end to be less happy in her discoveries, less spontaneous in her inventions, and therefore less successful in her results. For natural spontaneity is quickly felt and appreciated by a group of fellow-beings, as is also the element of vexation and overanxiousness, which Cleopatra was beginning to reveal despite all her efforts at concealment.

The most unnerving, the most jading, however, of all her self-imposed performances at this moment, was the constraint to laugh and be merry, when others laughed and were merry over the frequently empty horse-play of her sister.

It was this particularly that was beginning to tell against her in the duel. And as fast as she felt herself losing ground, as surely as she felt her hold on Denis slackening, the old gnawing sensation at her heart, which had first been felt years before when Leonetta had ceased to be a child, would assert itself with hitherto unwonted painfulness, unprecedented insistence, until it began like a disease to come between her and her meals, and, worse than all, to engage her attention when she ought to have been sleeping. [170]

Thus during these wonderful summer days, while all nature was proud with her magnificent display, while the sun poured down its splendour without stint upon the homely Kentish coast, Cleopatra, nodding and bowing in the breeze, like any other flower, fragrant and unhandseled like the other blooms about her, and voluptuous and seductive like a full-blown rose, was yet aware of a parasitic germ in her heart that was eating her life-blood away. To her, alone, in all that party, the warm arms of the sun brandished javelins, and the calm riches of the landscape concealed jibes. The meanest field labourer seemed happier than she, the commonest insect more wanton and more free.

You would have passed her by without noticing that she was in any way different from her sister, except perhaps that she was obviously more mature. In her spirited glance and smile you would have detected nothing of the tempest in her soul, nothing of the fear in her heart. Only a botanist of the human spirit could have observed that subtle difference in her look, that suggestion of anxiety in her parted lips, which told the tale of her incomparably courageous, determined, undaunted, but sadly unavailing fight. [171]

It was the night, the long silence alone, that she was beginning to dread. And those who dread the night show the lines of fear on their faces during the day. They laugh, they join in the general sport, their gait is light, their clothes may be gay, but at the back of their eyes, the sympathetic can see the previous night's vigil; and it is the haunting fear of experiencing it again that gives their voices, their words, their very laughter that ring of overanxiousness, that stamp of heavily overtaxed bravery.

Cleopatra dreaded the night; but she also dreaded the dawn. Denis, sunburnt, athletic, efficient at everything he undertook, Denis ironical, pensive, independent, Denis revealed anew to her in a way she had least expected, was obviously either humouring a flapper most shamelessly—or—or—

The alternative could not be articulated. To have pronounced it would have lent it a reality that it must not possess. It was, however, in the effort not to frame the alternative that her vigils were kept. And it is extraordinary how one can perspire even on the coolest night over such an effort.

CHAPTER X

"Peachy, what do you think has happened? Oh, *do* guess!"

The voice was Leonetta's. The question was followed by a laugh, a laugh that spoke at once of triumph and merriment.

It was lunch-time on the morning of the ninth day of their holiday. Mrs. Delarayne, in the garden of "The Fastness," was stretched on her *chaise-longue* reading. Beside her Cleopatra, who had not felt inclined for a bathe that morning, and who, therefore, had not been into Stonechurch, was working at some fancy embroidery.

"I haven't any idea," Mrs. Delarayne replied, as Leonetta stalked up the garden path with Denis at her side, followed by Vanessa, Guy Tyrrell, and the Fearwells. They all had their wet bathing things with them, and even the matronly Vanessa had her hair hanging over her shoulders.

"Why, the man in the sweetstuff shop at the corner of the High Street took Denis and me for husband and wife!" Leonetta exclaimed, bursting with laughter once more.

Cleopatra's hand shook a little, but she did not look up. [173]

"He probably noticed us waiting outside and thought you were the schoolmistress of the party,—that's all," interjected Vanessa.

Everybody laughed except Leonetta.

"That's absurd," she protested, "because he could scarcely have thought I could be——"

But her voice was drowned by more laughter, led chiefly by Vanessa.

"Oh, well, it's not worth arguing about, any way," said the Jewess, twirling her bathing dress round very rapidly.

"Don't do that!" cried Leonetta sharply. "Can't you see that you're simply drenching poor Peachy?"

Mrs. Delarayne smiled imperceptibly at this remark, and all the bathers ran off to prepare for lunch.

"I think," said the widow to her elder daughter, "that it would have been only considerate if Denis had offered to stay behind to keep you company this morning."

Cleopatra, bundling up her work with lightning speed, rose. Her ears were hot and red, and she could not let her mother see her face.

"Do you,—oh, well, I don't," she said a little tetchily, and made rapidly towards the house.

Mrs. Delarayne stared sadly after her. Had she said anything offensive?—Children were difficult, very difficult, she thought; and she longed for the freedom and the society of her London home.

"I think I made Denis rather savage this morning," Leonetta was explaining to Vanessa, [174] meanwhile, as the two were arranging their hair in the bedroom they shared.

Vanessa, stopping her operations for a moment, turned and regarded her friend with some interest.

"When and where?" she demanded.

"Well, you know that awfully good-looking boy who was sitting on the bench when we bathed yesterday——"

Vanessa nodded in her business-like way.

"Well, didn't you notice that he bathed at the same time as we did to-day?"

"Oh, I thought I saw him," replied Vanessa.

"And he kept standing in the water," Leonetta continued, "with his arms folded, staring at me. He looked most awfully wicked,—it was lovely!" she cried laughing.

"But where does Denis come in?" enquired the Jewess, who was not too prone to jump to hasty conclusions concerning other people's triumphs.

"Well, don't you see,—Denis saw him, and saw that I sometimes stared back at him."

"Oh, is that all?" Vanessa exclaimed, with a somewhat exaggerated note of disappointment in her voice. "But did he say anything then?"

"Yes, after the bathe," Leonetta rejoined, dropping her voice to a whisper, "he asked me whether I knew that strange young man."

"Well?" Vanessa demanded, still retaining the note of disappointed expectancy in her voice. [175]

"That's all," Leonetta replied, conscious that Vanessa had ruined the effect of her little narrative.

For some moments Vanessa silently continued her toilet; then when she was quite ready to go downstairs, she sat down and waited for her friend.

"Are you fond of Denis?" she enquired at last.

"He's not bad," replied Leonetta carelessly. "What do you think he thinks of me?"

Vanessa's keen Jewish features became inscrutable in a moment, and her eyes turned as it were indifferently to the window. A week ago she might have replied that Denis was obviously "smitten"; but four days of almost total neglect and really formidable rivalry are hard to forgive, even when one flatters oneself that one is "above" such treatment.

"He certainly seems to be amused by you," she said cryptically.

Leonetta did not like this way of putting it, and the conversation therefore ceased to interest her. "Are you coming?" she said, and made towards the door.

In another room Cleopatra had been listening to Agatha Fearwell's account of what had occurred at Stonechurch that morning, and the facts she culled from the girl's guileless and unsuspecting statement had not reassured her.

"Cleo, what on earth's the matter?" Agatha cried suddenly.

"Why—what?" Cleopatra rejoined, bracing herself, but turning a drawn and haggard face, that [176] had just grown unusually pale, to her friend.

"My dear, aren't you well?"

"Quite," replied Cleopatra, parting her lips in a faint, hardly convincing smile.

"But you can't be,—sit down, do!" said Agatha.

Cleopatra made a stupendous effort to recover herself, which was singularly reminiscent of her undefeated mother. "The heat, I suppose," she observed.

But Agatha was not satisfied. She was too intelligent to be silenced by such an obvious feminine defence. She could not help drawing her own conclusions, although Cleopatra's proud reserve forbade her asking any further questions.

Denis stayed to lunch at "The Fastness" that day, and in the afternoon there was tennis. The beautiful weather still continuing, Mrs. Delarayne was loath to join Sir Joseph on his interminable excursions by car. He had her sister with him, and the Tribes, and she had also sent Vanessa, of whom he had grown very fond, to represent her. "If people will keep a lot of fat chauffeurs who must be occupied," she said, "I don't see why I should be compelled to bore myself for hours at a time on that account." However, they were all returning to "The Fastness" to tea that afternoon.

So she reclined on her *chaise-longue* in one of the shady corners of her garden behind the lawn, reading the latest of Richard Latimer's novels, and there very soon Cleopatra joined her. Between them stood an occasional table, and upon it were tumblers, a few bottles of ale, and a glass jug containing still lemonade. [177]

A moment before Agatha had had five minutes' private conversation with Mrs. Delarayne, and the latter was looking a trifle serious when her daughter joined her.

"Cleo, my dear," she began, "you look tired,—been overdoing it?"

"I have a headache," Cleopatra retorted impatiently.

No more than Agatha was Mrs. Delarayne likely to be satisfied with this reply. She saw now that Agatha had been right, and blamed herself for her blindness hitherto.

"I don't like you to be so interested in that silly needlework," she added. "You are not yourself, or you would not work so ridiculously fast."

Cleopatra said nothing.

"Cleo, do you hear me?" she cried. "I'm speaking to you. Look up?—Why are you so silent?"

"Oh, Edith, for Heaven's sake!" exclaimed the distracted girl. "I don't think I could have slept well last night—that's all."

"Why aren't you Denis's partner at tennis?"

"For the simple reason," Cleopatra replied, with a self-revelatory glare in her eyes, "that Baby is!"

Mrs. Delarayne turned to her novel for a moment. "Who's Agatha playing with?" she enquired at last. [178]

"With Guy of course."

"And where's Stephen?"

"Oh, he's somewhere. I believe he's cleaning his motor-cycle."

At this point Guy's voice was heard from the lawn:

"We're thirty and Leonetta and Denis are love!"

Cleopatra made a violent movement with her foot, and accidentally kicked the table so that all the tumblers rang in unison.

"Oh, Cleo, my dear!—do be careful!" the widow exclaimed. "What have you done?"

"It's nothing, Edith—nothing."

"Forty—love," cried Guy Tyrrell.

"The terminology of tennis is at times a little tiresome," thought Mrs. Delarayne.

"You must play in the next game," she said, regarding her daughter a little anxiously.

"Oh, I'm sick of tennis," Cleopatra sighed. "I hate all games."

"You used to like it so!" her mother expostulated.

Then suddenly there came the sound of shrieks from the direction of the lawn, and Guy's voice was heard again: "I say, Denis, old man," it said, "do attend to the game, please; you can flirt with Leonetta later on."

Cleopatra put down her embroidery with a jerk and pressed a hand spasmodically to her brow. "Don't you think it's dreadfully hot here?" she exclaimed. [179]

Mrs. Delarayne frowned. "My dear, you couldn't have a cooler place in all Brineweald. Take some lemonade." Then after a pause during which she made another brief examination of her daughter's looks, she added: "I certainly think you ought to go and lie down; but I do wish they wouldn't shout so."

Then she took up her novel again.

A few minutes passed thus, Mrs. Delarayne pretending to read, and wondering all the while whether Agatha had not perhaps overstated Cleopatra's trouble; and Cleopatra working frantically like one who is determined not to think at all.

All of a sudden Leonetta came racing down the path from the lawn, and dashed past her mother and sister, with Denis close at her heels.

Mrs. Delarayne looked up, and her expression was one of annoyance. She saw Denis catch her younger daughter just as she reached the shrubbery concealing the kitchen end of the house from the garden.

"Leo, will you give that up!" panted Denis.

They were only a few yards away, and Mrs. Delarayne followed the whole proceeding with a frown. "Well, tell me first what it is!" rejoined the flapper, holding her hands behind her back, and smiling defiantly at him.

"I thought you two were playing tennis," Mrs. Delarayne cried aloud, with just a suggestion of indignation, and craning her neck so as to be seen by them. [180]

"Oh, we've done with that long ago," Leonetta replied, obviously a little excited.

"It's my note-book," said Denis, "it must have fallen out of my pocket." He caught the girl by the arm, and she laughed. Then quickly shaking him off, she dashed up the garden with Denis close behind her.

"The game of chasing and being chased," said a familiar voice, and Cleopatra looked up. It was Vanessa, followed by all the motoring party.

"Yes, the oldest game of mankind," added Sir Joseph.

"And one of which I suppose the human female never grows tired," Mrs. Delarayne observed rising.

"Any excuse will do," Vanessa continued, resting a hand gently on Cleopatra's shoulder. "Won't it, Cleo dear?"

Cleopatra darted up, saw that her mother was too much engaged greeting the party from the Park to notice her disappearance, and made rapidly towards the house.

"Isn't Cleo well?" Miss Mallowcoid demanded, her eyebrows high up in her fringe with indignant surprise.

"It surely isn't as bad as all that!" ejaculated the unfortunate widow. "Do you notice it too?"

"It certainly is very noticeable, I should have thought," Vanessa remarked. [181]

Mrs. Delarayne then begged the young Jewess to find out what Cleopatra was doing, and to persuade her if possible to lie down. She thereupon conducted her guests to a small marquee where tea was laid, and called to the tennis-players to join them.

In a moment Vanessa returned.

"She doesn't want me," she exclaimed. "She says she wants to be alone."

"But isn't she going to have any tea?" cried Mrs. Delarayne shrilly.

"Later on, she said," the Jewess replied.

"How full of caprice these young things are!" interjected Miss Mallowcoid. "Why, she did not even wish us good-day!"

"The truth is," said Mrs. Delarayne, "Cleo hates being ill, and probably wished to avoid being asked questions."

"Oh, how natural that is!" Mrs. Tribe observed, glancing half fearfully at Miss Mallowcoid.

"You've made this place look very pretty," said Sir Joseph, smiling unctuously at his hostess; "charming, charming! A perfect setting for a—for a precious——"

"Here, you want some refreshment," snapped Miss Mallowcoid gruffly. "Edith, where's Sir Joseph's cup?"

Sir Joseph laughed a little boisterously, and the tennis players arrived.

"Where's Cleo?" was Leonetta's first question. She looked hot and excited, but extremely happy. [182]

Miss Mallowcoid explained that Cleo was in one of her "precious" moods, as she put it. She had never been a great favourite with her nieces, and since the fuel of affection is so largely a distillation of vanity, she did not feel much love towards them. Her remark, however, succeeded in making Mrs. Delarayne fill Sir Joseph's saucer with tea.

"That's not kind," said the widow, glaring first at her sister and then at Denis. "Cleo, I'm afraid, is not very well."

"The heat perhaps," lisped the Incandescent Gerald.

"And other things," added Agatha, in her quiet, eloquent way.

Her brother Stephen stared perplexedly at her for some seconds, and then looked round the party with an air of utter bewilderment.

"Ah, these young people will do too much!" Sir Joseph remarked solemnly. Then turning to his hostess he added: "It was the same at the time of the bicycle craze in the early nineties,—but you would scarcely remember that, my dear lady!"

"What!" ejaculated Miss Mallowcoid. "Edith not remember the bicycle craze of the nineties! My dear Sir Joseph, what absurd rubbish!"

Miss Mallowcoid was beginning to make her sister feel what the doctors call "febrile."

"You so frequently jump at wrong conclusions in your efforts to set the world right, my dear Bella," she said with bitter precision. "Surely one's life may be so full of other preoccupations that one can forget even the most startling events." [183]

"Oh, I see what you mean," said Miss Mallowcoid, speaking with her mouth full of very dry short-bread, "I didn't know he meant it in that way."

Sir Joseph was about to exclaim that he did not, as a matter of fact, mean it "in that way"; but realising the hyperbolic quality of his intended compliment, he preferred to appear eager to swallow the end of a chocolate *éclair* rather than attempt to explain.

At this point Denis was observed to try and snatch back a piece of cake that Leonetta had, in keeping with her customary tactics, previously taken from his plate. In doing so, however, he struck the top of the milk jug with his elbow, and the vessel toppled over and emptied itself upon his own and Leonetta's clothes.

Mrs. Delarayne flushed a little in anger. At any other time she would have laughed with the rest over such an incident, but in the circumstances it was too intimately connected with the cause of her anxiety to be passed over in silence.

"Leo, you really are a pest," she exclaimed. "You simply cannot leave Denis alone one minute. Really, Denis, if you'll excuse my being outspoken, I'm surprised at your encouraging the child!"

"What it is to be young and good-looking!" sighed Vanessa, casting a sidelong glance at the young gentleman in question.

"All right, Peachy!" Leonetta snapped, vexed and almost outraged by her mother's bald statement of the plain truth, "it's only an accident; you needn't be so cross." [184]

Mrs. Delarayne was on the point of administering a stinging lesson to her flapper daughter,—a lesson which that young person would certainly have remembered to the end of her days,—when, suddenly, Wilmott appeared on the lawn in front of the marquee.

"Yes, Wilmott, what is it?" Mrs. Delarayne enquired irritably.

"If you please, mum, will you come and see Miss Cleopatra; she's fallen down in the billiard-room."

"Fallen down in the billiard-room?" everybody repeated.

The whole party were on their legs in an instant.

"Now, what are you all going to do?" cried Mrs. Delarayne, never more herself than when a heavy demand was laid upon her self-possession. "Please remain where you are, and get on with your tea. I'll go and see what's happened. Agatha!"

Mrs. Delarayne and Agatha, followed by Wilmott, went back to the house, and, as they went, the maid explained that it was a wonder Miss Cleopatra had not killed herself, as her head "was quite close up against the fender."

That evening, on the terrace of Brineweald Park, where the whole party had dined, Mrs. Delarayne and Sir Joseph sat solemnly talking. [185]

"You will have to do something, Joseph," the widow was saying. "He's certainly in your power. Convey to him by some means that he cannot play fast and loose in this way. He accepted the rise of two hundred on the understanding that he would marry."

"Well, my dear Edith, I can't exactly make him marry, can I?" Sir Joseph protested.

"But he has not even proposed yet!" the lady cried.

Sir Joseph grunted.

"Instead, if you please, he is making a fool of himself with Leo, and turning her into an insufferable little prig."

"Not really!"

"Really!"

Sir Joseph grunted again.

"It's making Cleopatra quite ill. Agatha says it is, and I'm sure she's right. She fainted in the billiard-room this afternoon and her head was within an inch of the fender. The poor girl almost killed herself. Besides, I hate a child to have her head turned by a man of thirty. It's such easy going for him, and she's too young to know the difference between an actor and a coachman."

"I'll see what I can do," said the baronet, stirring himself a little. "But you'll admit the position is delicate."

"It's so absurd, because Leonetta has not got the marks of the cradle off her back yet."

"A child as fascinating as her dear mother," Sir Joseph interposed, taking the widow's hand. [186]

She brushed his fingers from her. "I've lost patience with him," she cried. "What is it makes these young Englishmen always abandon full-blown maturity for flapperdom? I suppose it is the tradition of their manufacturing race to worship raw material."

"Oh, he's not in love with her," Sir Joseph objected.

In another part of the park Miss Mallowcoid, Agatha, and Cleopatra were walking arm-in-arm. Miss Mallowcoid, always stirred to some act of self-sacrificing devotion by the sight of genuine illness, was making it her duty to give her niece a little healthy exercise before going to bed. Cleopatra would have given a good deal to escape this determined altruism on her aunt's part, but Miss Mallowcoid was not so easily thwarted in the practice of her virtues.

Meanwhile, Denis, surrounded by the rest of the party, was indulging in a form of amusement that he had popularised of late among the younger members of the two households. It consisted in a sort of uneven cock-fight between himself and Gerald Tribe, on the question of religion, and it was punctuated by roars of laughter from Leonetta, Vanessa, Guy Tyrrell, and even Stephen Fearwell; while the unfortunate Mrs. Tribe, feeling that her husband was being made to look ridiculous for the edification of the rest of the party, would repeatedly interrupt the proceedings by urging her spouse to "come to bed." This, however, he always resolutely refused to do, much to the satisfaction of everybody present; and the unequal contest would be continued. [187]

Sometimes the sensitive and sensible woman would interpolate a remark which considerably discomfited her husband's aggressor; and then, hoping to bring the controversy quickly to an end on this note of triumph, would tug vigorously at his coat sleeve. But Incandescent Gerald, hot, excited, beaten, and indignant, was not to be lured away to the marital bed while he still smarted from his opponent's blows, and endeavouring ever afresh to turn the tide of battle, would remain to blunder on into another rout.

At one moment on the evening of the day of Cleopatra's first fall, when the laughter against him rose too high, the moon revealed to Stephen Fearwell that tears of indignation were welling in Mrs. Tribe's eyes; and then thinking of Miss Mallowcoid, and of how this one holiday in the year, away from the hard spinster's cold tyranny, was being spoiled for her by these evening debates, he rose smartly to his feet, clapped the Incandescent Gerald on the back, and tugged at his collar.

"Look here, sir," he cried, "you're beginning to interest me in this Inner Light of yours. Come for a walk and tell me more about it. Perhaps Mrs. Tribe will join us?"

"Oh, don't take them away!" cried Guy Tyrrell, while Leonetta and Vanessa moaned. [188]

"Sorry," said Stephen, "but I honestly want to hear all about it. Come on, Tribe!"

Incandescent Gerald rose, half dazed. He believed in his Inner Light, whatever Denis might have to say against it, and he could hardly resist Stephen's gratifying suggestion. He smiled guilelessly into the young man's face, and he, Stephen, and Mrs. Tribe vanished into the darkness.

"Stephen was a lout to go and do that!" Guy exclaimed.

"I think he noticed that Mrs. Tribe was beginning to cry," said Vanessa.

"Nonsense, Nussy, you must be dreaming!" retorted Denis.

CHAPTER XI

[189]

In the full-grown schoolgirl, who stands on the threshold of womanhood, we have a creature who, though probably admirably equipped with normal or even supernormal passions, is, possibly owing to the accident of her age and her position, less prone to be led by passion than by vanity in her first affairs with the other sex.

Standing on the threshold of life as she does, she may be a little too eager to prove that she is fit for the game, fit for the thrills and throbs of the great melodrama. Out of sheer anxiety therefore, without any genuine desire to gratify a passion, but simply with the view of giving her self-esteem

the proof that she is mature, she may behave very much as if her heart and passions were involved. And though, in later life, she may develop into a supremely desirable woman, she behaves for the nonce very much like those deplorable people who in all they think and do are actuated by vanity alone.

The dupe in such cases, the fool in such cases, the creature who, owing to his gross misunderstanding of the situation, allows himself to be persuaded by his vanity that he has stimulated *une grande passion* in an unbroken filly, naturally deserves all he gets. Unfortunately, as the world is at present constituted, his punishment, like that of the modern co-respondent, always falls short of its proper severity. [190]

Now Denis Malster was certainly no fool,—nay, he was probably above the average in intelligence; and yet the speed with which he had succeeded in monopolising Leonetta's attention made him feel in his gratified vanity, so immensely grateful to the girl, that willy-nilly, he found himself drifting all too pleasantly along that warm and intoxicating stream that the nineteenth century called "Love," without feeling either the obligation or even the desire to realise calmly and dispassionately what had actually happened.

Quite recently she had even allowed him to kiss her. It was unspeakable bliss, almost distressing in its transcendent quality. He "had such joy of kissing her," he "had small care to sleep or feed. For the joy to kiss between her brows time upon time" he "was well-nigh dead." How could he be deceived by such unequivocal demonstrations of real passion? In any case it was too wonderful to be wrong, and if wrong—what then? The Devil was worth a score of heavens!

He had not carelessly overlooked the other sister. He was not absent-minded where she was concerned. He had resolutely cast her out of his mind. With conscious deliberation he had banished her far beyond his horizon. His only remaining difficulty was not to discover the nature of his next step, but how to take it. He felt an irrevocable destiny bidding him solicit Leonetta's hand, but he rightly foresaw that there might be some difficulty where Mrs. Delarayne was concerned. [191]

It was because he happened to be in this mood of conscienceless desire, unreflecting longing, that he had been able to listen calmly at the table, the day before, while Wilmott announced Cleopatra's fall. Dimly he had connected his behaviour with her indisposition; but the temptation to continue along his present lines was too great to allow him to dwell profitably upon that aspect of the situation.

Now again, just after he had come down from Brineweald Park to "The Fastness," as was his wont after breakfast, he had scarcely felt a fibre of pity or remorse stir in his body while Mrs. Delarayne had described Cleopatra's second fainting fit to him. He had expressed his sympathy formally, conventionally, like one who had but a few moments to spare for such considerations, and even before Mrs. Delarayne had completed her narrative, had allowed his eyes to wander eagerly all over the garden for a sign of Leonetta.

Rigid and unmoved, he had seen the stir caused by the arrival of the doctor, and later by the departure of Stephen Fearwell on his motor-cycle with an urgent message from Mrs. Delarayne to Sir Joseph to send one of his cars round at once for her immediate use. [192]

What the car was wanted for, how it was connected with Cleopatra's illness, he hadn't either the inclination or the interest to discover; he only deplored the destiny that caused Cleopatra's breakdown when, suddenly, without Mrs. Delarayne's having made any mention of the plan to him, Leonetta, dazzling, electrifying, and elfish as usual, tripped out into the garden to whisper to him that her mother wished her to drive with her to Ashbury at once.

"To Ashbury—you—at once—with the Warrior?" he ejaculated. "Whatever for?"

"I don't know," said Leonetta.

"But it's impossible," he objected. "Can't you say you can't go?"

"I wish I could."

"But why should the old Warrior want to take precisely you to Ashbury?" he pursued.

"I only know," she replied, "that Lord Henry's Sanatorium is at Ashbury, and that Peachy's making far too much of Cleo's illness. Why, it's only the heat."

"How many miles is it to Ashbury?"

"Seventeen to twenty, I believe."

"So you'll be gone about two hours?"

"Yes, my darling,—cheer up."

He smiled at these words, pressed her hand tenderly as he did so, and heard the car glide round the drive. [193]

"Good-bye, my goddess," he whispered.

Then suddenly Mrs. Delarayne's head appeared at one of the bedroom windows of the house.

"Come in and get ready at once, Leonetta!" she called out angrily. "The car has just arrived."

"Good-bye, my angel," she whispered, and ran in.

It was eleven o'clock; they could be back for lunch. The Fearwells, Vanessa, and Guy Tyrrell had gone to Stonechurch for a bathe. The whole place was a desert. He thought he might go for a walk, and entered the house to fetch his hat and stick. But he hesitated; he felt so desolate alone. The sound, however, of another car in the drive outside, and Sir Joseph's voice giving instructions to the chauffeur, brought him quickly to his senses, and snatching his hat down, he ran out of the house, through the garden, and out into the meadows beyond.

It was a glorious day. He had no wish to try to account for his reluctance to meet his chief alone at that moment, and as he swung his stick and whistled on his walk, he tried to convince himself that he could afford to snap his fingers at the powerful City magnate.

Meanwhile Mrs. Delarayne and Leonetta were racing along as swiftly as Sir Joseph's head chauffeur dared to go. The road and the hedges on either side seemed to be simply a green-edged ribbon which the bonnet of the car cut into two gigantic streamers that flew for miles and miles behind them. Villages were skirted as far as possible, and appeared to be packed hurriedly away like so much stage scenery. Narrow bridges and awkward turnings were negotiated at top speed, and seemed to be cleared more by good luck than skilled driving; but still the pace was not sufficiently hard for Mrs. Delarayne, who, sitting almost erect in the car, with neck craned and eyes fixed on the farthest horizon, spoke scarcely a word to her companion. [194]

The mother instinct had been roused in the heart of this elegant, youth-loving widow,—that, and also the complex emotions provoked by the fact that, since her last momentous interview with Lord Henry, she had not heard from him.

It had cost her a good deal to decide upon this step. For reasons which she had refrained from investigating, she had not introduced Lord Henry to her daughters. At first the omission had been the outcome of a series of pure accidents, quite beyond her control. Then, as she acquired the habit of meeting him alone, or at least unaccompanied by her offspring, her relationship to him had at last seemed to derive part of its essential character from this very exclusiveness. He appeared to belong to her. The thought of one of her daughters becoming perhaps attached to him filled her with vague qualms, as if her relationship to him would thereby be marred. Thenceforward intention or design began to take the place of accident, and her daughters had been rigorously excluded whenever Lord Henry and the widow met. [195]

And now, in a moment of stress, in a mood of deep anxiety concerning a daughter who, despite the radical difficulty of daughter-and-mother relationships, had been on the whole singularly devoted and sensible, she had resolved to reverse the old order, to invite Lord Henry to "The Fastness," and thus necessarily to let her daughters meet him.

The sight of the blundering local practitioner that morning had revealed to her the danger of excluding Lord Henry any longer from her family affairs. Her difficulties had become too heavy. She knew that he and he alone could assist her; and she determined to enlist his help. Thus her principal "secret" man, the most cherished of all her clandestine male attachments, was to be brought by her own hand, by her own act and exertion, into the presence of charms far more magnetic, far more irresistible than any she could now hope to wield, and which were all the more apparent to her for being so much like her own. This was indeed a surrender of principle which showed that Mrs. Delarayne's maternal instinct had been moved to action; but its energy in this case, creditable as it was, fell so far short of what it might have been in the case of a beloved son, that the widow far from being happy, was conscious only of being urged by painful duty upon the errand she was now fulfilling. [196]

The presence of Leonetta in the car, though an insoluble mystery to the child herself, was accounted for simply as an obvious manoeuvre on the part of an angry and ingenious woman of the world, to retaliate to some extent upon the chief cause of all her trouble, the annoyance and disturbance he had occasioned her. But she was too sensible to upbraid the girl herself. She knew how fatally decisive opposition might prove at this stage in Leonetta's sudden excitement over Denis Malster, and she resolved to be guided in the whole of the complicated business by the sure hand of Lord Henry.

To Leonetta's secretly guilty heart, however, her mother's silence seemed to remove the one possible explanation that yet remained for her having been made to drive to Ashbury; and by the time three quarters of the journey had been accomplished, she resigned herself to a mood of mystified boredom.

Occasionally her mother would mutter anxiously: "I wonder whether Lord Henry will be in";—but that was all. Her affability and good nature seemed to be the same as usual.

At last the car drew up at the northern outskirts of Ashbury, before a building that appeared to Leonetta as unlike her mental image of a sanatorium as anything could possibly be. It was a large building with a white stucco front, badly cracked all over,—evidently a sort of old manor house of about the period of George IV,—and the sight of the smart motor cars drawn up on either side of the road in front of its partly dilapidated gate, seemed but to enhance the general impression of decay which characterised both the house and its surroundings. [197]

The string of cars, however, brought a smile to Mrs. Delarayne's lips, for they showed that Lord Henry's clinique was open that day.

"Now wait for me here, in the car," she said in her most positive manner, "however long I am."

Leonetta and Cleopatra knew from experience that when their mother spoke in this way she would brook no disobedience; and so throwing off her dust cloak, Leonetta settled herself in the car to see what interest she could derive from watching the activity at the gate.

Mrs. Delarayne's card sufficed to bring the matron hurrying down with the assurance that Lord Henry would see her next. He was very busy, and had been hard at work for at least a fortnight. There was a room full of people waiting.

"Unusually hard at work!" Mrs. Delarayne observed.

"Yes," replied the matron, "quite exceptional."

"And why is that?" the widow enquired.

"We think it is the heat. The dog days seem somehow to increase nervous trouble in quite a number of people,—at least so Lord Henry says."

"Then you may be sure it is so," said Mrs. Delarayne emphatically. She was taken to a private room, and there in a few minutes Lord Henry joined her. [198]

He listened with his usual earnestness to all she had to tell him, and learned as much as he could from the description of her untrained observation of Cleopatra's symptoms.

"What is it, Lord Henry,—do tell me,—that makes grown-up men of the present day so susceptible to raw flappers? You surely have an explanation!"

"I have," Lord Henry replied, smiling in his malicious way. "It is accounted for by the whole trend of modern sentiment and modern prejudice. It is in the air. It is the result of the nineteenth century's absurd exaltation of rude untrammelled nature. It really amounts to anarchy, because it is always accompanied by a certain feeling of hostility towards law and culture. Hence the love of wild rugged moors and mountains which is a modern mania."

"Oh, didn't the ancients admire these things?" the lady exclaimed a little crestfallen.

"Of course they didn't," Lord Henry replied. "Hence, too, the ridiculous present-day exaltation of childhood, because children are stupidly supposed to trail 'clouds of glory' from whence they come, as that old spinster Wordsworth assures us. In fact everything immature or uncultivated is supposed to be sacrosanct. Of course that young man, Denis Malster, must be a sentimentalist, too, and he probably wants kicking badly; but it is not entirely his fault. The sentiment, as I say, is in the air. We are all threatened with infection. They had it in the eighteenth century in France." [199]

"What can I do?" Mrs. Delarayne demanded.

"Nothing!"

"But I can't let Cleopatra fall about in all directions,—she'll kill herself."

"What did the doctor say?"

"Need you ask?"

"Prescribed iron and strychnine, I suppose. Or did he suggest cold baths?"

"No, as you say, he prescribed iron, quinine, and strychnine."

Lord Henry glanced at his note-book.

"Of course, I am absolutely full up. But—but——"

Mrs. Delarayne fidgeted.

"I'm afraid I shall have to come if I'm to do any good. My senior assistant here will have to do the best he can, that's all."

Although Mrs. Delarayne was quite prepared for this, she had hoped even until the last that Lord Henry might be able to treat Cleopatra from a distance, and that she would therefore be spared the duty of having him at Brineweald. It was a hard pill to swallow, but she took it gracefully.

"When can you come?" she asked with forced cheerfulness.

"Can you send the car for me at about quarter to eight this evening?" [200]

Mrs. Delarayne promised to do this, and the young man rose.

She held his hand for some time as they said good-bye, and gazed longingly into his face. It seemed to her that after this last meeting, alone, on their old terms, nothing could any longer be quite the same. He would become the friend of other members of her family. He would no longer be her private refuge, her nook-and-corner intimate, her own friend, her secret.

"Lord Henry," she pleaded on their way downstairs, "would you advise me to say anything to

Leonetta?"

"What can you say?" he protested.

"My sister says I ought to scold the child for what she calls her 'fast' way with young men."

"Oh, nonsense!" Lord Henry exclaimed. "What can you tell the girl?—to be less fascinating, to be less beautiful, to be less full of life? That would be as futile as it would be deforming. You can only watch her so that she does not come to harm, or fall into the hands of a villain. You cannot moralise. I think you have been wonderful to restrain yourself so far. But continue doing so."

"You see, I remember what I was at her age!" the widow admitted bashfully.

Lord Henry laughed, and in a moment she laughed with him.

He accompanied her to the door, and feeling very much relieved she rejoined her daughter.

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At half-past four that afternoon, just as the car bearing away Lord Henry's last out-patient, had glided out of the drive, he sent for St. Maur.

The day had been a particularly heavy one. Unfortunate, miserable, and beautiful girls, with everything they could wish for, had come in their dozens for the last month, with nervous tics that utterly marred their beauty and blighted their lives. He had seen no less than three that day. Business men, Army men, clergymen, married women, mothers, each with some kind of nervous catch in their voices, uncontrollable spasms in their limbs, stammers, or obsessions,—everyone was now beginning to hear of Lord Henry's wonderful success in dealing with such cases, and he was getting inconveniently busy.

Only a few were perhaps aware that he derived most of his skill in the handling of these nervous disorders from the teaching of a certain Austrian Jew of brilliant genius; but even those who knew this fact also recognised that he had shown such enormous ability in adapting the principles of his Semitic master to modern English conditions that he was entitled to be regarded quite as much as an innovator as a disciple.

What Lord Henry had done could have been accomplished only by an Englishman of exceptional intelligence. He had discovered that the almost universal feature of nervous abnormalities in England, which were not the outcome of trauma or congenital disease, arose out of the national characteristic of "consuming one's own smoke." He had been the first to demonstrate with scientific precision that the suppression of Catholicism in England, with its concomitant proscription of the confessional box from the churches, had laid the foundation of three quarters of the nation's nervous disabilities. He had thus called attention to yet one more objectionable and stupid feature of the Protestant Church, and one which was perhaps more nauseating, more sordid, than any to which his friend Dr. Melhado was so fond of pointing. Thus he called his sanatorium in Kent "The Confessional," and his methods, there, followed pretty closely the methods of the mediæval Church.

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He would point out that it was this absence of the rite of confession that made people in Protestant countries so conspicuously more self-conscious than the inhabitants of Catholic countries. For nothing leads to self-consciousness more certainly than the attempt constantly to consume one's own smoke.

"The independence, individualism, and natural secrecy of the English character, together with the enormous amount of sex suppression that English Puritanism involves," he used frequently to say, "leads to an incredible amount of consumption of their own smoke by millions of the English people. Large numbers of these people are able to digest the fumes, others fall ill with nervous trouble owing to the poison contained in the vapours they try to dispose of in secrecy."

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His startling successes had all been based upon the recognition of this fundamental fact. "But," as he said, "instead of these people keeping well through the ordinary exercise of their religion, they have, owing to their absurd Protestant beliefs, to pay me through the nose for providing them with a scientific instead of a sacerdotal confessional box."

Nevertheless, the hard work was beginning to tell, and as he waited for St. Maur and recalled the circumstances of Mrs. Delarayne's visit, it struck him that it would not be unwise to avail himself of that lady's need of him in order perhaps to take a short holiday.

Truth to tell, he was a little satiated with Society's nervous wrecks. You cannot hold your nose for long over any kind of smoke without being nauseated; but the fumes which men and women have tried to consume themselves, and failed, have this peculiarity, that they are perhaps more foetid, more unsavoury, more asphyxiating, than any that can be produced by the combustion of the most obnoxious and malodorous chemicals.

St. Maur observed his friend's condition as he entered the room.

"Hard day?" he enquired.

"Very."

"I thought so. Cheques have been coming in pretty plentifully too. Any celebrities?"

"One M.P. and one Canon,—the rest ordinary, or rather extraordinary men and women. But don't let us talk about it; my stomach's turned as it is. I'm going to take a few days' holiday, Aubrey." [204]

St. Maur in his astonishment had to sit down.

"Mrs. Delarayne has just been here. Her daughter seems to be an interesting case of self-surrender and inversion of reproductive instinct owing to repeated rebuffs. She is now at the self-immolating stage. Rather dangerous. Falls about. Her knees give way. Might cut her head open. Great struggle for supremacy apparently with flapper sister. Both passionate girls, of course. Only thrown up sponge after hard and unsuccessful fight. Local doctor orders iron, quinine, and strychnine. It's a wonder he didn't order brimstone and treacle. Mother doesn't understand the condition at all, but is sufficiently wise to suspect that the behaviour of a certain young man with fascinating flapper sister may be contributory."

"Can't she come here?" asked St. Maur.

"Well, she could. But it is one of those cases in which, if I want to do any real good, I must watch conditions on the spot."

"When do you leave?"

"In an hour or two. The car's coming to fetch me."

He rose, looked down with grave disapproval at his baggy trousers, and flicked a speck or two of dust from his jacket.

"Aubrey, dear boy, I want you to make me look smart,—do you think it can be managed?" He smiled in his irresistible way, and St. Maur had to laugh too. "You evidently think it quite impossible," he added. [205]

"No, not at all, you ass!" St. Maur objected. "I'm always telling you that you can look the smartest man in England if you choose. You fellows who are habitually dowdy create a most tremendous effect when, for once, you really dress in a rational fashion."

Lord Henry scratched his head and glanced dubiously down at his clothes again.

"I suppose these would do," he said.

St. Maur expostulated with scorn. "Where are all your things? You've got some presentable clothes, only you never wear them; or if you do, you wear the wrong ties or the wrong shirts, or the wrong socks with them."

"Have you got your crow's nest here?" Lord Henry demanded.

St. Maur nodded.

"Drive me to the cottage, then," said the elder man, throwing out his arms dramatically, "and get me up to kill!"

St. Maur was interested, and showed it in his glance.

"Don't be alarmed, dear boy," said Lord Henry. "I may have to play a part down at Brineweald."

St. Maur did as he was bid, and the two spent about an hour and a half in Lord Henry's bedroom, sorting out ties, collars, shirts, lounge suits, dress clothes, and boots and shoes. [206]

At last Lord Henry was clothed, and, as St. Maur had truthfully prophesied, looked the very paragon of a well-dressed man. Indeed, not only was the contrast with his usual self so bewildering as to banish all sense of proportion in estimating the splendour of his transformation but the singular nobility of his face, with its wise, youthful brow and deep, thoughtful eyes, also added such a curious piquancy to his fashionable attire, that the general effect was little short of startling. It is always so. Dress your scholar, your thinker, your poet, in clothes that Saville Row has carefully designed and carried out for a Society peacock, and the result is not a member of the *phasianidæ*, but a golden eagle. It is as if the art of the tailor or shirt maker were grateful for once to adorn something more than a mere dandy. That depth of the eye, that wise and learned mouth, those intelligent and almost understanding hands, the noble studious brow,—all these embellishments added to the figure of the ordinary man, give a certain finish to well-made garments, which these in their turn impart to the aspect of the scholar; and the result is an effect of completeness which is perhaps the highest product of the fashion, as well as the taste, of any Age.

Perhaps it is because it is so rarely seen that it is so overwhelmingly attractive.

"Are you sure this is right?" Lord Henry demanded, scrutinising his image without a trace of recognition, in the long wardrobe mirror of his room, and lightly fingering a tie that St. Maur had lent him. [207]

"Yes!" St. Maur cried in alarm; "for Heaven's sake don't touch it!"

On the floor lay the young nobleman's portmanteau, partly filled with St. Maur's shirts, collars, and ties; and in a large suit-case sufficient clothes to provide him with decent variety. St. Maur had drilled him carefully in the combination of socks, shirts, ties, and suits, and had gone so far as to pack certain groups of things together, in special sections, so that at Brineweald no mistake

should be made.

"You are a marvel, Aubrey!" ejaculated Lord Henry, twisting about in front of the mirror. "I used to dress like this years ago, but I had completely forgotten how to do it."

"It's you who are the marvel," St. Maur exclaimed, contemplating his friend with a critical and approving eye.

They returned to the Sanatorium to partake of a light dinner. The porter stared as he opened the door, and could scarcely believe his eyes. The matron was unusually self-conscious as she received the parting instructions from her chief, and the nurses all turned their heads in Lord Henry's direction as they sped hither and thither, unable to understand the meaning or the object of the strange metamorphosis. [208]

"The gorgeous vestments of the priest are all part of the general scheme," Lord Henry whispered to St. Maur, as he stepped into Sir Joseph's car.

"Rather!" St. Maur cried after him; and in a few moments the car was well on its way.

CHAPTER XII

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Except to Sir Joseph, Mrs. Delarayne had revealed nothing about the nature of her journey to Ashbury to any member of the party at Brineweald. Lord Henry's visit was to be a surprise. She wished to safeguard Cleopatra from all suspicion that his arrival that evening might be connected with her indisposition, and contented herself with assuring her child that, having heard that he was overworked and very much run down, she had gone over to him in order to urge him to take a holiday. She merely hoped, she said, that he would be able to follow her advice and come to Brineweald.

The afternoon was spent by the whole of the two households in paying a visit to Canterbury. Under Mrs. Delarayne's vigilant eye, Leonetta and Denis Malster had therefore been very discreet, and as the cars returned in the evening, Sir Joseph was firmly of the opinion that his idol had, with her customary art, slightly exaggerated the attentions which his private secretary was paying to her younger daughter.

Dinner at Brineweald Park was over, the younger people, except Cleopatra, who had gone to bed, had dispersed themselves over the grounds as usual and Mrs. Delarayne, Miss Mallowcoid, and Sir Joseph were sitting on the terrace finishing their coffee, when Sir Joseph's head chauffeur was seen walking towards the steps with his junior, bearing Lord Henry's Gladstone bag and suitcase. [210]

"Where did you leave Lord Henry?" Mrs. Delarayne cried.

"He told me to drive straight to the garage, ma'am," replied the man, "and bring the luggage here by hand."

"Yes," Sir Joseph exclaimed, in the bullying tones he usually adopted with his servants; "but can't you answer a question? Where did you leave his lordship?"

"He left the car at the Brineweald Gate," the man answered, "and said he would take a walk in the grounds, sir."

"Oh, that's all right!" Mrs. Delarayne remarked, and the men moved on with their load.

It was twilight. The lady scanned the stretch of park that lay before her, and discovering no sign of life, turned to Sir Joseph.

"I hope he will find his way," she said.

"Couldn't possibly help it, I should have thought," snapped Miss Mallowcoid.

"Oh, but he's so tiresome sometimes," replied the widow. "He's so incorrigibly absent-minded."

Brineweald Park was one of the largest in the whole of the West Kent districts. Its confines stretched to the straggling outskirts of four villages: Brineweald to the south-west, Hedlinge to the north, Headstone to the east, and Sandlewood to the south-east. Paths cutting diagonally through the Park, at a respectful distance from the house, joined all these outlying places one to another, and the inhabitants of all four villages were allowed a right of way, provided they conducted themselves with due propriety and did no damage. It was a favourite recreation ground for the children of the locality, but it was so vast that it was but seldom a stranger was ever encountered in the grounds. [211]

The house, which was a large white building, three stories high, of Georgian design, stood on an eminence overlooking the whole country-side; and to the south a series of terraced lawns flanked by steps descended as far as the broad drive leading to the Brineweald Gate.

A large wild and wooded tract lay in the direction of Sandlewood, where Sir Joseph preserved his game, and where there were rabbits in abundance; while joining Brineweald to Hedlinge there was a small fast-running stream, called the Sprigg, which at certain points in its course, fell in

picturesque cascades, surmounted by rockeries and ornamental foot-bridges. In the neighbourhood of these, on either bank, Sir Joseph had also built seats and bowers, and in the summer these resting-places were the coolest in the whole park.

It was towards one of these cascades that, on the evening in question, Lord Henry idly wandered. The vast and peaceful expanse of the grounds delighted him, and knowing the pertinacity and loquacity of his fair admirer, he wished to have both his walk and his first view of his new abode alone, before presenting himself at the house. [212]

Dimly in the gathering dusk, he discerned the outline of a rustic bridge, and guided by the sound of plashing waters, directed his footsteps towards it. Then above the murmur of the stream he heard the ripple of a girl's ecstatic laughter, followed by what appeared to be high words between two men, and then more laughter, followed by more high words.

There was evidently a party round the bridge, and they seemed to be engaged in a fairly acrimonious discussion. He distinctly heard the words, Inner Light, Incandescence, Spiritualism, God-head, First Cause.

The argument was evidently religious, and it was conducted chiefly by the men, with the rest of the party as audience and occasional chorus.

He approached stealthily. A big dark shadow against the moonlit sky gradually assumed definition on the other side of the stream. And from the depths of that shadow came the voices to which he had been listening.

As he drew nearer, he recognised the shape of a bower in the mass of shadow he had seen, and within it vaguely guessed the form of human faces. It was evidently a large party. He could distinguish at least half-a-dozen different voices. [213]

He stepped on to the bridge, and leant against the rail. There was a momentary pause in the discussion in the bower. Evidently its occupants were taking stock of him. The subject of their argument, however, interested him, and he stood motionless, hoping they would resume. He could have represented but a shadow to them, even though the steadily waxing light of the moon fell directly upon his head and shoulders; and he rightly divined that, as other people besides the inhabitants of Brineweald Park would probably enjoy the right of using the grounds, they could not possibly tell who he was.

Gradually the discussion was resumed.

"What you don't seem to see," said a voice, which to Lord Henry appeared to reveal the arrogance of its owner, "is that your Inner Light is but a vague and vapid abstraction, a mere whiff of the whisky bottle, but not the whisky itself."

Here followed a delighted feminine laugh, full of music and malice.

"And how do you hope," continued the arrogant voice, "ever to be able to build anything upon a vaporous abstraction? What authority can a spook have? What appeal to love, to fear, to reverence, to worship?"

"Come to bed, Gerald!" said a rather sweet feminine voice, which was half-drowned in the general laughter it seemed to provoke. "These discussions never lead to anything, and I'm sick of them. They only disturb your sleep." [214]

"Half a minute, Mrs. Tribe," said another man's voice, which Lord Henry had not heard before, "we have reached an interesting point here. Do let us just settle that!"

"But my husband can only feel these things," continued the soft sweet female voice, "he cannot argue about them. You only laugh at him, so what's the good?"

"I'm not laughing, am I?" said the arrogant voice.

"No, but you make others laugh," persisted the soft sweet voice.

"Leave them to me," interposed a weak male voice, which Lord Henry recognised immediately as that of the Incandescent Gerald. And there was a note so pathetic in the feeble strains of it, that the listener could not help thinking of a hare being overtaken by harriers.

"How can you invite the enlightened nineteenth century to accept the idea of a godhead that is anything else than an abstraction?" continued the weak male voice. "Why, to personify your god is to limit him. How can a god be limited?"

"Bravo, old Tribe!" cried a boy's voice, "that's a jolly good point. Now what have you got to say to that, Malster?"

"To understand him at all," replied the arrogant voice, which Lord Henry now concluded must be Denis Malster's, "is in any case to limit him to the compass of your understanding, even if that can only grasp a monkey on a stick; so why not proceed to personal limitations at once? It makes things much easier for the bulk of humanity, and it also makes love and fear, and therefore morality possible. Without a personal god you feel as if you are dealing only with a natural element, or natural law. But who minds if the sea watched him while he picks his neighbour's pocket? Who cares that the sky is overhearing him when he courts and kisses his neighbour's wife?" [215]

The remark provoked wild outbursts of laughter, followed by the weak voice, which said, "Don't, Agnes, don't fidget! Leave my coat-sleeve alone!"

Lord Henry having formed a fairly accurate estimate of the situation, and realising that little Mrs. Tribe was evidently miserable, felt he could endure it no longer. In any case Malster was having it too much his own way with his chorus of sympathetic females, and so, turning towards the group in the bower, the young nobleman advanced a few paces towards them.

"Forgive me," he began, "but the subject of your discussion, which I could scarcely help overhearing, interests me enormously. Might I be allowed to join in it too?"

Nobody recognised him. From the refined, gentle manner of his speech, he might have been one of the local vicars taking a stroll. Only Malster stirred, as if he felt there was something oddly familiar about the speaker, but seeing that he had no reason to suppose that Lord Henry was anywhere within twenty miles of the place, the identity of the stranger did not immediately occur to him. There was a pause, and then Malster said:

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"Move up a bit, Leo! Yes, certainly, sir; we should be glad if you would."

"I'm tired," said the sweet soft female voice, which Lord Henry, as he sat down, realised that he had rightly ascribed to Mrs. Tribe, "I want to go indoors."

"One moment," said the weak voice, which had now become more than usually agitated.

"To begin with," Lord Henry said, "I should like to join issue most violently with the gentleman who has been arguing in favour of a personal god. Nothing,—in the last two centuries has been more fatal to Europe and humanity than this."

There was a general movement as if the whole party wished to draw closer to the speaker, and Stephen Fearwell, who was leaning against one of the outside uprights of the bower, swung round until his head was well inside the shelter.

"Good man!" he ejaculated enthusiastically, as he performed this movement. And Lord Henry recognised his voice as that of the boy who had previously endeavoured to support Gerald Tribe. It was evident that he could feel no deep concern about the issue. He merely wanted Gerald Tribe to get an innings for once against Malster.

"You see, as the supporter of a personal god has very truly pointed out," continued Lord Henry,

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"the morality of any race, or nation, or group of nations, who believe in a personal god, comes ultimately to derive its authority from the will of that personal god."

"Quite so!" said Denis in the same arrogant tone he had used all the time.

"Yes, but with what result?" Lord Henry demanded.

"With the result—" began the Incandescent Gerald.

"Leave it to him, you silly!" whispered the soft, sweet, female voice with some eagerness. It was clear that Mrs. Tribe had suddenly changed her mind about going to bed.

"With the result," continued Lord Henry emphatically, "that the moment the belief in the personal god declines, as on analysis it must decline, morality declines with it. For morality in such cases is bound up, as you say, with the belief in a personal god. Civilisation, in fact, is once again on the rocks and society is no longer safe—why? Because by making your moral code issue from the lips of your personal god, it has become so much waste paper now that your personal god is beginning to be felt as an absurdity. Thus in a religion with a personal god, heresy always kills two birds with one stone. But once the bird morality is killed, it takes a new civilisation and a new culture to hatch another one. Man can survive without a belief in a personal god; he cannot survive without a morality."

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"But a personal god," objected Denis, "is omniscient, all-seeing. He is assumed to know all men's actions, and they dare not do wrong precisely because they know he is watching them. That surely is the best safeguard to decent conduct; it is in fact the meaning of conscience!"

"Yes, I was coming to that point," said Lord Henry gravely, "and what is the outcome of the thousands of years of belief in this omniscient god, who can see all men's action? Why, sir, whoever you are," Lord Henry exclaimed, his voice swelling with indignation, "the result is that to-day things have come to such a pass that it is scarcely possible to trust one man or woman in the whole of these islands to do the right thing against their own interests, when your god, and your god alone is their witness. That is the state to which your belief in an omniscient personal god has reduced us, and you know that what I say is true."

The Incandescent Gerald was so jubilant that he wished to laugh outright; but his keen eager wife prevented him. She had no wish to save the feelings of her husband's tormentor, but she was too much fascinated and spellbound by what she had been able to divine of Lord Henry's personality to brook the coarse interruption. Leonetta and Vanessa were beginning to be conscious of this feeling too, and stared eagerly through the darkness to try to catch a glimpse of the powerful stranger.

"People have got so used to violating even the most elementary principles of savage morality," continued Lord Henry, "without the thunder of your almighty descending on their heads, that there is scarcely a man or woman in Europe to-day who really fears your god as their only

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witness, who really troubles about your god as their only witness, or who even gives him a passing thought, when they stand absolutely alone before the temptation to perpetrate some mean, despicable or dishonourable action."

Lord Henry was at his best. His words were uttered with extreme precision, his manner was emphatic and passionate, and his mysterious presence in the party only magnified the impression that these characteristics made upon his listeners.

"May I ask who you are?" Denis Malster demanded, leaning forward in the darkness.

"Certainly," replied Lord Henry suavely. "I am Lord Henry Highbarn. I have come here this evening for a rest and a change."

A stillness as of death fell on the party, and the excited breathing of all present could be heard.

"I thought I knew you," Denis exclaimed at last, recovering from the unpleasant shock the announcement had given him. "But I couldn't for the life of me think who you could be."

"Do they know you are here?" Leonetta gasped.

"I presume so," said Lord Henry, "my luggage was taken up about an hour ago."

He rose, and immediately the rest of the party did likewise. Out on the bank of the Sprigg, in the moonlight, Denis then proceeded to introduce all those present, and the whole gathering slowly crossed the bridge and moved towards the house. [220]

Lord Henry, with Denis on his left and Leonetta on his right, was in the van, but the others clustered round as closely as they could, and conversation was general.

Women of whatever station in life and from whatever clime, have a very acute sense of strength and power in the opposite sex. If modern society has dispensed with the arena and with the tilting jousts of chivalry, it has nevertheless not deadened either women's passion for the tournament, or the keenness with which they divine the merits of their respective knights. And if argument is the only remaining form in which that clash of arms of olden times is witnessed by them to-day, it is with no diminished interest or perspicuity that they register its results. Ordinary games hardly meet all the demands of the true joust; for, in the first place, they do not include to the same extent as argument, that formidable element in modern knightly equipment, the intellect; and, secondly, because to the most thick-skinned there is something so much more mortifying, ignominious, and humiliating in being beaten in argument than in losing a game, that argument still retains, though in an attenuated and spiritualised form, something of the excitement and gravity of armed conflict.

Denis Malster was well aware of all this,—indeed had he not thrown down his gauntlet every night to the Incandescent Gerald precisely because he knew how well he himself looked in the lists, and how well he tilted? But perhaps Lord Henry was even better aware than Denis of the important part played by intellectual male conflict in the presence of women; and he moreover realised more certainly than Denis could possibly have guessed, the precise effect on the female mind of repeated victories in this modern and polite form of tournament. [221]

Certainly as Leonetta, Vanessa, Agatha, and Mrs. Tribe hastened their footsteps to catch every word that fell from Lord Henry's lips, they were largely animated by the natural curiosity provoked by the presence of a distinguished stranger; but in their eagerness to get close up to him and to be in constant earshot of his voice, there was also the tacit admission, possibly unrealised by any of them as yet, that in him they had recognised a knight of peculiar power and of brilliant style.

They had not concerned themselves with the merits of the actual point that had been at issue. All they felt was that a certain speaker had spoken, not as one of the scribes, but as one having authority, and that the former champion of the lists had for once been worsted in their presence.

All this was in the air, unuttered, and even imperfectly present in unconsciousness. Only Denis Malster, a little uneasy and a little resentful, and Lord Henry, as usual perfectly serene and urbane, could have accurately explained what had taken place. [222]

Lord Henry had been right. Cleopatra had given up. Jaded by the unremitting exertions of a week's struggle for supremacy with her sister, quite unable to face another week of similarly exhausting effort, and unwilling to acknowledge herself defeated, illness had come almost as a boon, almost as an angel of mercy. Something seemed to have snapped inside her,—her main-spring it appeared to be; and now she hugged her ailment, her weakness, or whatever it was, because it seemed to offer her the chance of a graceful retreat before her ebbing forces compelled her to surrender.

She did not come to breakfast now, and retired early. She half hoped, perhaps, that the very air of fragility and pathetic languor, which she had half consciously adopted, would draw even keener attention than had her former attitude of robust equality with her sister. Vanity is full of resources when it is wounded. But her attacks of sudden faintness she could not control; they represented the only genuine feature of her indisposition,—at least they, and the continued insomnia which was an important symptom.

On the first evening of his visit, therefore, Lord Henry did not see her, neither did she know as she tossed about in her bed at "The Fastness" that he was anywhere within call. Instinctively she felt that her mother's deep sympathy and anxiety to help were with her, but it never occurred to her that the maternal devotion to her would ever extend to extreme measures. [223]

Meanwhile Lord Henry was quietly taking stock of everybody at Brineweald Park. An hour in the drawing-room there, after his walk in the grounds, supplied him with much useful information; and by the time the car arrived to take the Delarayne household back to "The Fastness," he had already formed certain very valuable conclusions.

It was clear to him that Denis Malster was head and shoulders above the other men of the party, and but for a certain priggishness of manner which, though offensive, was not altogether unamenable to correction, by far the most attractive English male he had seen for some time. He had almost forgotten their first encounter at the Inner Light meeting, and was more favourably impressed than he had expected to be by the young man who had quite evidently been the cause of Mrs. Delarayne's domestic troubles.

Conversely, the impression Lord Henry had made upon Denis Malster had been unfavourable in the extreme. Here was a man who could not be relied upon to be the same two days running. On the occasion of his first visit to Bullion Ltd. he had looked a vagabond; his clothes had hung in shapeless folds about his body, completely concealing whatever symmetry it might have possessed.

Denis remembered the faded green tie and the badly fitting collar he had seen Lord Henry wearing at the Inner Light meeting, the same green tie and badly fitting collar in which the young nobleman had had the simplicity to be photographed for the *Bystander* only a few weeks previously,—and filled with consternation at the unaccountable metamorphosis compared it with Lord Henry's present elegant neck-gear. [224]

It was monstrous to be so unreliable, monstrous to be so saltatory, so capricious, as to upset other people's surest reckonings.

On the following morning it was obvious that Denis had made a supreme effort. It was an effect in white flannels with a superb foulard tie of navy blue and wonderful white buckskin shoes. He reached the breakfast-table at Brineweald Park unusually early, so eager was he to discover what further sartorial devilry Lord Henry would be guilty of, and he was not a little disappointed to find only Guy Tyrrell down.

"Hullo Malster!" cried Guy, looking up from a partly consumed dish of pork chop. "What the hell's up,—are you going to be married?"

"Don't be an ass!" Denis replied, helping himself to devilled kidneys.

"You're looking a howling swell this morning," continued the junior secretary.

"Oh, you mean my rig-out?" Denis enquired with a feeble pretence at not having understood the meaning of Guy's remarks. "That's nothing. As a matter of fact I hadn't tried these on since they were made, and I was wondering what they were like." [225]

"Oh, tell us what you think of Lord Henry!" Guy pursued after a while.

"What do you?" Denis retorted, endeavouring to show indifference.

"He's rather wonderful," Guy exclaimed.

"What do you mean—wonderful?" the other demanded with an unmistakable sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Well, you know, smart in every sense of the word, brains and everything."

If Guy had deliberately intended to give Denis indigestion he could not have set about his task with greater scientific understanding.

In a moment Miss Mallowcoid appeared. Breakfast to her was an important meal only when she was visiting. At other times she was satisfied with a minute fish-cake, or a mere postage-stamp of thin bacon, particularly when she had to show by example how megalosaurian was the appetite of the frail Mrs. Gerald Tribe. She was quickly followed by Sir Joseph and Mr. and Mrs. Tribe, and a few minutes later by Lord Henry himself.

At the sight of Lord Henry, Denis grew unusually silent and the Tribes exceptionally voluble. Sir Joseph asked the conventional questions of his new guest, and on receiving the customary conventional replies, serenely continued his meal. Miss Mallowcoid, on the other hand, insisted on attending with scrupulous unselfishness to the latest arrival's wants, and encouraging him in every way to partake as plentifully as she herself of the generous board. [226]

Meanwhile covertly and methodically Denis Malster was busy confirming his worst suspicions of this scion of the house of Highbarn, and his final conclusion was that the young man was behaving with deliberate malice.

Clad in a perfect grey flannel suit of graceful design in which even the seams in black thread were made an attractive feature, and with a collar and tie that had evidently been selected with taste, there was yet that character of artless unconsciousness in his attire which gave Lord Henry

at once the appearance and the ease, without any of the traces of effort, of a well-groomed man. Denis felt that no one could pertinently have asked Lord Henry whether he was going to be married that day, and yet there was a glamour about his person which was unmistakable.

"There is no means of anticipating the wiles of charlatans," he thought as he finished his breakfast; and he braced himself for a difficult day.

Thus his imagination played with the new element that chance seemed to have dropped in his path, and as he smoked his after-breakfast cigarette on the terrace with Guy Tyrrell he was not in the happiest of moods.

Sir Joseph, the Tribes, Miss Mallowcoid, and Lord Henry were discussing the programme of the day.

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"I suppose I had better consult Mrs. Delarayne," said Lord Henry, "before I dispose of any of my time. She will naturally——"

"Oh, don't trouble to do that!" Miss Mallowcoid exclaimed. "You are down here for a rest, and must do just as you like, Lord Henry."

Sir Joseph, who was the only member of the party in Mrs. Delarayne's secret, understood however what the young man meant. He might possibly have to remain with Cleopatra.

"Quite right, Lord Henry," he said. "We really cannot do anything before you see Mrs. Delarayne."

At that moment a thumping noise from the direction of Brineweald announced the usual morning visit of young Stephen Fearwell, and sure enough, up the main drive, at top speed, there appeared the familiar silhouette of the youth on his motor-cycle. This time, however, he did not seem to be alone, fair arms seemed to be clinging to him, and the flutter of a dress and a sun-bonnet seemed outlined at his back.

The party on the terrace concentrated into a group at the top of the steps, and the motor-cycle swung like a rocket round the last bend of the drive.

"Why, if it's not that little terror, Leonetta!" cried Miss Mallowcoid.

Denis Malster made an impulsive movement to descend the steps and checked himself. Never before had Leonetta accompanied Stephen like this. What could it signify?

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The cycle stopped, and in a moment the children were running up the steps.

"Peachy has sent me for the morning at least," announced Leonetta, as Sir Joseph greeted her, "and she wants Lord Henry to go to "The Fastness" with Stephen at once, if he doesn't mind."

"Anything wrong?" Sir Joseph demanded.

It was difficult to imagine that such a sunny, happy messenger could bring sad tidings, and Sir Joseph had to smile as he contemplated her.

"I believe Cleo has had another fall, or something," replied the girl. "Anyhow, Agatha and Vanessa will be here in a minute, and Stephen of course will come back. Peachy and Cleo will stay at home."

Leonetta eyed Lord Henry up and down as she spoke in that solemn searching way in which virgins take stock of men. It was Nature measuring the worth of one of her own products through the medium of another of her own products.

"Am I to go at once?" Lord Henry enquired, glancing for a moment at Leonetta, and then turning to Sir Joseph.

"Yes, please," said Leonetta and Stephen together.

Lord Henry descended the steps while Stephen and Leonetta both assured him that he could make himself quite comfortable on the back of the motor-cycle. It was noticeable, however, that he paid more attention to Stephen than to the girl.

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"I can order the car, and we can all go to the beach," said Sir Joseph.

Denis Malster was jubilant. There stood Leonetta, a dream of beauty in her simple cotton dress and sun-bonnet, magnetic in her grace and luxuriant health, and Lord Henry was to be out of the way for at least three hours.

At last the couple on the motor-cycle were ready. "Sorry you're leaving us," cried Sir Joseph. "But we'll see you later."

Leonetta remained at the foot of the steps waving her hand, but Lord Henry took no notice; he merely flourished his hat to Sir Joseph and Miss Mallowcoid on the terrace.

Mrs. Delarayne, hatless and tearful with impatience, was at the gate waiting for the sound that was to announce the arrival of Lord Henry. Inside Cleopatra had just recovered from another fainting fit, and Agatha, who was with her, had rendered valuable help. Mrs. Delarayne had never considered her weeks at Brineweald as a source of joy; if this continued, however, they would prove absolutely intolerable.

At last the familiar thumping sound became audible in the distance. Yes, it was that dear boy Stephen, and someone was riding on the pillion-seat of his cycle.

In a moment cyclist and passenger dismounted at Mrs. Delarayne's gate, but the latter alone accompanied the lady into the house.

"Oh, Lord Henry," gasped the widow, "it is really very tiresome. Poor Cleopatra has had another of her attacks, and I thought it would be best if she saw you immediately afterwards. That's why I sent for you in all that hurry."

"I'm afraid the attacks themselves can tell me little," observed Lord Henry gravely. "It really didn't matter when I saw her. However, I might just as well speak to her now." [231]

"Half a minute," whispered Mrs. Delarayne, leaving him in the drawing-room. "I'll go and prepare her." And so saying she vanished into the adjoining apartment, which, as far as Lord Henry was able to tell from a glimpse, appeared to be the billiard-room.

High words seemed to pass between the widow, her daughter, and Agatha; for, although Mrs. Delarayne had closed the door behind her, Lord Henry could distinctly catch snatches of their discussion. It was clear that Cleopatra was resolutely objecting to see him, and that her mother and Agatha were doing their utmost to induce her to alter her mind.

At last Mrs. Delarayne returned.

"Isn't it tiresome," she exclaimed, taking a chair, "now she absolutely refuses to see you!"

"It's not surprising," observed Lord Henry, sitting down beside her.

"Yes, but she must see you; I insist," Mrs. Delarayne pursued.

"Her indisposition," muttered Lord Henry, "is probably a salutary refuge. She imagines that she alone knows the cause of it, and that it would therefore be utterly futile to be examined and worried by people who cannot possibly trace it to its origin. She knows, moreover, that even if it is traced to its origin, the discovery can only prove humiliating to her pride." [232]

"Yes, but——"

"We must manoeuvre."

The widow did not understand.

"I mean, if you and Agatha will only disappear, I'll walk into the room and prevail upon her to make friends. That is to say," he added, "provided she doesn't escape meanwhile."

Mrs. Delarayne fingered her necklace pensively, and jerked her head forward once or twice in solemn silence.

"That's the only thing, I'm afraid," said Lord Henry.

The widow rose, still staring very thoughtfully before her.

"Don't make too heavy weather of it," continued Lord Henry. "It's not serious. It will all be well in a day or two."

"Really?" she exclaimed brightening.

"Certainly," he said.

Mrs. Delarayne surveyed him a moment. She hadn't the faintest idea what he was driving at, but such was her confidence in the soundness of his judgment that she started on her way to fulfil his instructions. There was but one circumstance that made her feel that Lord Henry was a trifle unfamiliar to her on this visit, and that was his unusually well-groomed appearance. In his present outfit he seemed just a little terrifying. It was as if she divined that his more normal, his more fashionable exterior on this occasion, made him accessible to other women besides herself. [233]

She smiled a little nervously and left the room, leaving the door ajar.

He rose as soon as she had gone, heard her say a few words to her daughter and Agatha, and a second or two later, was given the signal which announced that the ground was clear.

He entered the room as if by accident, glanced casually round, and in doing so got a fleeting glimpse of Cleopatra.

She was lying back in a deep armchair, her chin resting in her hand. He noticed that she raised her head, regarded him with an expression of mingled interest, fear, and surprise, then slightly stirring in her chair, looked about her for some means of escape. Her back was turned to the light so that her face was in shadow, and with the object of leaving her under the protection of the discreet lighting she had chosen, he sat down facing her, with the whole glare of the sunlit

garden upon him.

"Miss Delarayne," he began, "please don't move on my account. I don't think I shall disturb you. I heard you would not see me. Quite right too, perhaps. But surely there can be no harm in our talking, if it does not annoy you."

The woman in Cleopatra now urged her to show more animation, beneath this young man's gaze, than was compatible with her avowed condition of extreme lassitude and feebleness.

"I only said I did not wish to see you," she declared, "because I felt better alone."

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He was a little staggered by the extraordinary beauty of this girl who so far had not taken her eyes off him. He had expected that Mrs. Delarayne's daughters would be beautiful,—and in Leonetta he had had his expectations confirmed. In Cleopatra, however, as he surveyed her then, he discerned a degree of nobility and pride, which were apparent neither in her mother nor her sister, and which lent a singular queenliness to her impelling charms.

"There, of course, you were wrong," he said with gentle persuasiveness, blinking rapidly. "We are no longer wild beasts of prey who can creep into caves to recover or die alone. We are human beings, social animals. Two heads are better than one, even in the matter of getting well."

She frowned and her expression grew more solemn than ever. If this were Lord Henry, the mental picture she had formed of him had evidently been very far from the truth; nor had Denis Malster's description of him been even fair. She wondered, as she examined his fine thoughtful head, and handsome athletic figure, telling to such advantage in his impeccable attire, what motive Denis could have had in saying what he had about the young noblemen before her. She was deeply interested, and for the time being this feeling overcame every other motive in her breast.

"If people don't understand you," she said, "it is surely better to be alone."

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He smiled in his roguish irresistible way. "If—" he repeated.

A slight flush sprang into Cleopatra's cheeks, and quickly vanished again. He was distinctly attractive—almost bewildering. She was going to expostulate: "Surely you don't imagine that," when something which she read in his face, in his intelligent hands, and in his general manner made her feel that the words would sound banal.

"I wish you wouldn't stay with me, Lord Henry," she pleaded. He rose. Whatever she may have meant, the plea sounded sincere enough, and he did not wish to harass her.

"Of course I won't," he said, "if it is unpleasant to you," and he moved towards the door.

"You surely want to be out in the sun," she added quickly. "You don't want to stay indoors. Besides I am better now."

"Yes," he said, with his fingers on the handle of the door leading to the drawing-room. "One always feels a little stronger when one is excited. That is only natural. The presence even of the meanest stranger always causes a little excitement."

She sighed. She began to wish he would sit down again. "But I assure you I feel quite well now." The conviction was gradually stealing over her that it was ignominious to be ill in the neighbourhood of this young man. She asked herself whether he had seen Leonetta, and what he thought of her, and she was seized by an incontrollable shudder.

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"You soon will be quite well," said Lord Henry gravely.

"How can you tell!" she exclaimed, smiling incredulously and with some satisfaction too as she noticed that he left the door and returned to his seat.

"Well, any way," he continued, "tell me just exactly what you feel. Try to explain to me exactly how you feel just before you fall. I need hardly tell you that it is of course not natural for a girl of your age to have these sudden fits of collapse. Can you tell me about it?"

There was a pause, and then she replied, with a strain of defiance in her voice: "I frankly don't know. It's something I can't explain."

"Is it something you frankly don't know, or something you can't explain?" he demanded.

She looked up as she heard her reply repeated in that form, and was a little discomfited.

"Will you try?" he added. "It is just possible, though, I admit, not probable, that I may be able to help you when I know."

"Well—" she began, determined if possible that he at least should never know the truth.

"Yes?" he interjected eagerly.

"Directly after lunch the day before yesterday," Cleopatra pursued, "—I must tell you we had curried chicken for lunch,—I felt a heavy sensation in the pit of my stomach. I felt sick and giddy, my hands grew cold, and about tea-time, I was walking in this very room, and my knees gave way."

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He looked at her beneath lowered brows, as he tugged at his mesh of hair. "So you think it is all a

fit of indigestion," he said.

She wondered whether he knew that she was lying. "Yes," she said.

There was a pause, and he looked away from her.

"Remember, Miss Delarayne," he muttered after a while, "that it will be difficult to start me off on a false scent, even if it is as savoury as curried chicken."

Cleopatra started a little at this remark; she noticed his enigmatic smile, and her brows twitched nervously.

"I don't see what you mean," she stammered.

"I mean," said Lord Henry, his head still bowed, and his free hand picking imaginary atoms of fluff from his trousers, "that if you tell me the truth, our two heads may make some progress. If you deliberately mislead me, although the task will even then not be beyond the wit of man, it will be a little more difficult."

"But I assure you, Lord Henry," she protested, "I am not trying to mislead you."

"Come, Miss Delarayne, come!" he remonstrated. Then he added, after a pause, "But perhaps I am wrong in assuming that you should feel any confidence in me. After all, why should you?"

She had never yet been in the presence of a man who inspired such complete confidence, or who made her desire so ardently to be up and about, active and well in his presence. Nevertheless her indomitable pride made her moderate the manner of her reply. [238]

"What can I say?" she exclaimed, pretending to be at the end of her resources.

He flicked an imaginary feather from his knee. "Shall I prompt you?" he enquired.

His coolness at once mastered and terrified her.

"How can you!" she ejaculated, her resistance failing.

"Why haven't you told me, for instance," he began, "that you have scarcely slept for five or six nights."

Her mouth fell. "Lord Henry!"

"Why haven't you said that last night, or perhaps for the last two nights, you have tried a certain narcotic without much success? Sleep is a very essential thing, Miss Delarayne. One cannot go without it with impunity. You probably realise that."

She stammered the beginning of a denial, but the words died on her lips. She was too stiff with alarm to be able to speak. After all, vanity is a great power even in the noblest of us.

"Miss Delarayne," Lord Henry continued, "you and I can keep a secret. I can at any rate. Let me see whether I cannot tell you why you have tried to mislead me."

Her ears were hot, and she glanced involuntarily towards the garden door. Had any one else than Lord Henry revealed a fraction of his ability to pierce her secret she would have fled. [239]

"A good suggestion," he exclaimed, following the direction of her eyes. "Let's sit in the garden."

He opened the door, and she walked out in front of him,—stiff, proud, and erect. He noticed a shadow running back into the house, and presumed it was Mrs. Delarayne.

They reached the small marquee, two or three wicker chairs lay about the lawn outside it, and they sat down. Now for the first time he could form a just estimate of his companion's beauty, and he experienced some difficulty in removing his glance from her. The stay at Brineweald had tanned her face, and deepened the warm colour of her skin, and though the recent vigils had somewhat deadened the brilliance of her eyes, they still flashed with a dignity and independence that were a warning to any one who might have thoughts of perpetrating an indiscretion in her presence.

Lord Henry tugged at his mesh, and wondered whether he had better proceed. This girl's secret, wrapped as it was in her pride and, worse still, in her vanity, seemed a very sacred thing to penetrate. Never had he felt that divination could lie so close to desecration as when he watched this magnificent creature before him, making her last proud stand in front of the humiliating cause of her breakdown. His heart went out to her, however; he suddenly felt the impulse, not of the trained psychologist to cure a patient, but of a gallant knight to save a beautiful lady in distress. He was prepared to use every weapon in order to defeat the dragon, and as his strongest weapons seemed to be his deep knowledge of the human soul, and his long experience in curing it, he proceeded on his old lines. But how different he was, notwithstanding, from the Lord Henry of the Ashbury Sanatorium none knew better than himself. He could no longer be cool and collected. He must fight with the girl against the canker in her heart as if he himself also felt the pain of it. He must tear it out and save her peace of mind, like the therapist that he was; but he could not help also being the fellow-sufferer, so deeply did he feel that he wished to share her woe and her fears. [240]

"Well," he said, "I was beginning to tell you why you wished to lead me astray."

"I didn't wish to lead you astray," she cried, almost desperate lest he should guess the truth.

"Very often," Lord Henry continued, "we can confide in a friend concerning a blow directed at our hearts, in fact that is actually one of the uses of friendship. But it is difficult sometimes to confess the pain of a blow levelled at our self-esteem, at our vanity."

He looked discreetly away as he spoke, but he noticed that she stirred at this point.

"Not only your heart and your womanly yearnings are at stake here, Miss Delarayne," he pursued. "These when they are thwarted simply make one sweetly miserable, languorously self-commiserating,—but it is your pride and vanity that are concerned." [241]

She regarded him now as one magnetised, hypnotised, petrified.

If every line of his face, and every sign in his whole person had not convinced her of his exceptional character, she would have fled his presence even now, never to confront him again.

"These are real savages when they are provoked," he went on suavely. "What do they care for the destruction their anger brings upon your body? They would devastate your whole beauty without scruple in order to calm their tempestuous rage. They begin by undermining the trust you feel in your own claims. They then proceed to keep you awake at night and to toss you about in your bed, when you ought to be refreshing your body with sleep; and, finally, when they have ravished your sleep, they open your mind to all the hideous spectres and shapes that are always waiting, like hungry unemployed, to get busy in a wakeful and anxious brain."

"Lord Henry!" gasped the girl, starting as if to rise.

"I am saying these things for you, Miss Delarayne," he said quickly, "because it is perhaps too much to expect you to say them yourself, and because you will find that their expression will relieve you. Oh, if I can only do that,—surely—"

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She looked at him for a moment and noted the fervour in his face, the energy in his hands, and the honest nobility of his eyes; and anxious as she now felt to escape from his terrifying presence, she was riveted by his personality and could not move.

"It was not only the prospect of having all your life to stroke the cheeks of other people's children, Miss Delarayne, that you dreaded. This is a natural, noble, splendid dread, it is true, which every woman worthy of the name should feel when she reaches your age. But there is something far more poisonous, far more harmful to your system in the present situation, and that is the thought that you may have all your life to stroke the cheeks of other people's children, thanks to a creature who, delightful as she may be, you nevertheless rightly regard not only as your subordinate, not only as your junior both in age and claims, but also as one towards whom it is loathsome to you to feel any such feelings as rivalry."

Cleopatra gripped the arms of her wicker chair, and turned eyes full of horror upon her companion.

"It is this that is slowly causing your strength to ebb," he went on; "it is this acid which is corroding your life."

She gasped. "But it is a very real and additional pain," she exclaimed hoarsely.

"It is, of course," he assented. "It would be absurd to ignore it. Just as it would be absurd to ignore the extra filip which your presence, or your part in the business, adds to this, Leonetta's first affair. For what is a man to her, after all? Another feather in her cap,—another bauble! She has left school and her maiden's vanity,—we'll call it self-esteem,—bids her at once try to confirm the high claims she rightly thinks her beauty and her sex entitle her to make upon the world. She wants to win her first crown as May Queen. No deeper passion is involved. And should a man be induced, in his arrogance, to take these first steps of hers seriously, she would regret all her life what was merely a schoolgirl's whim. For society would take no pity on her, and would compel her to spend her life with a creature of whom she had only solicited the flattery of a season."

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Cleopatra bowed her head, and toyed nervously with a bracelet. She was breathing heavily, but was now showing no desire to escape.

"But there is a difference, a very deep difference," he continued, "between the purchaser of a pearl necklet and the purchaser of a loaf of bread. The first is acquiring merely another ornament, another set-off to her beauty, another weapon in the fight for supremacy, and she performs the act with a frivolous smile. The other is obtaining a primitive and fundamental necessity, and she does it solemnly, aware as she is of its real uses. The first is the schoolgirl receiving her first attentions from a man; the second is the woman of passion who knows what life has promised her."

"Lord Henry," Cleopatra ejaculated, "how wonderfully you understand!"

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"What aggravates your pain a thousandfold is the thought you are being robbed of a necessity, by one who uses it as a toy. You feel as a starving child might feel who sees the loaf that has been snatched from him being used as a football."

A tear trickled down Cleopatra's face. "That is wonderfully true," she assented, and brushed the tear quickly away.

He paused and looked at her for a moment beneath lowered brows. A wonderful serenity had come upon her, and her lips no longer seemed tormented with words they did not dare to utter.

"What is so terrible, Lord Henry," she said at last, "what the world does not seem to understand, and will not see, is that a girl with a sister is placed in intimate, daily, and inevitable contact with the very woman who is her most constant and most formidable rival. She sees her grow up and gradually assume womanly shape. She watches the development of every feature with eyes starting out of her head with horror. While her sister is at the gawky age, she gets a short breathing space, because a child at that time is so clumsy, so unattractive and foolish. But all of a sudden this vanishes. The child becomes a woman, startlingly beautiful and seductive. She realises it herself, and naturally wants her successes, as Baby did."

"Who's Baby?" Lord Henry interrupted.

"My sister, Leonetta."

"Oh, I see—go on."

"Then you do everything you can to make her feel she is not grown up yet. But it is hopeless. In vain you try to thrust her back into childhood——" [245]

"By calling her 'Baby' instead of 'Leonetta,' for instance," said Lord Henry.

"Oh, of course!" Cleopatra cried. "I didn't think of that." Then she continued after a while, "But of course they want to shine, and you can do nothing. You are expected to love them, cherish them; you are even expected to take an interest in their clothes, in their hair! You even have to go and help put the finishing touches, when all the time you dread seeing her dressed up. It is excruciating, it is brutal. It is inhuman, Lord Henry! Shall I tell you the truth,—though it's dreadful, wicked. Well, *I hate* my sister. I loathe her with a deadly loathing. My fingers itch to—oh, all through the night I think of some means of disfiguring her. It is the most diabolical cruelty to put any woman into the position I am in now. I long to fly away, where I shall never, never see her again. It's that and nothing else that has given me these fainting fits. I have controlled my loathing too long. One day, if only fate is kind, I shall fall down and be killed."

She collapsed at the end of this tirade, and burst into a torrent of tears. There was no affectation about that flood. It was the expression of real anguish, of long-pent-up suffering, and Lord Henry knew what infinite good it would do.

"Come, come, Miss Delarayne!" he exclaimed, still fearing that the humiliation of the discovery, despite the relief it gave, would prove too much for her immensely proud nature. "I share your secret now. I am strong. You will feel my strength with you. You are no longer alone. You will not have any more of these fainting fits." [246]

She still sobbed, and it was heartrending to Lord Henry to watch her. Unmoved as he was, as a rule, by women's tears, he felt that these, coming as they did from such a proud spirit, were almost like blood issuing from a wound.

"And now what will you think of me?" she said at last, lifting her head, and drying her eyes. "Now that you have heard how unwomanly I am, how wicked, how criminally wicked! Because, I suppose, morally speaking, to lie awake and scheme out one's sister's disfigurement is as bad as to accomplish it."

He smiled. "You don't imagine, do you," he said, "that I am so thoroughly modern and romantic as to turn away from an eagle when I find it has not only angel's wings but also claws?"

She laughed. "How did you manage to know so much about me?" she demanded. "Ordinary men know and understand nothing. They would be shocked and horrified, if I spoke to them about my sister as I have spoken to you. How do you know these things?"

"There is much less difference between human beings than one thinks," he replied. "To know one decent man and one decent woman well, is to be intimately acquainted with the rest of the decent world, I can assure you." [247]

"How I dreaded that anybody should know!" she exclaimed, "and yet how simple it all seems to me now that you should know!"

"And now why don't you go and lie down for a bit," he said.

She rose, and without looking back at him, walked towards the house. Her gait was lighter, more assured, more self-confident. It was the gait of one who had ceased to run the gauntlet.

CHAPTER XIV

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It wanted an hour and a half to lunch time. Mrs. Delarayne appeared to have left "The Fastness," and Lord Henry was alone in the garden, meditating and maturing his plans.

A strange and pleasant titillation of all his nerves, somewhat similar to that which in the morning convinces a man that he has had a refreshing and healing sleep, seemed to hint to him that here

he was not the usual neuropathic therapist of Ashbury fame, not a mere specialist spectator, but an acting figure, a participator in this family affair. Could it be his old and deep-rooted admiration for Mrs. Delarayne that made him feel this hearty concern about a patient's condition?

He yawned lazily and stretched himself in the fierce August sunlight. Cleopatra's empty chair brought back to him her queenly presence, her passionate confession, and the thought of what it must have cost her. He felt a primitive and violent impulse to perform miracles for the girl whose health and happiness, out of blind friendship for her mother, he had undertaken to protect. He even felt prepared to go to greater lengths in rescuing her self-esteem than he would ever have dared to go with other people. For, to become normal again, he knew that her self-esteem must be revived. [249]

Suddenly, in the midst of his meditations, the sound of somebody approaching from the direction of the house made him turn his head. It was Mrs. Delarayne, and, some distance behind her, the whole of "The Fastness" and Brineweald Park party.

He rose with alacrity and, seizing her by the arm, led her across the lawn to the far end of the garden.

"Quick," he said, "before the others join us."

She followed, looking up at him with the deepest interest.

"Do you want Leonetta to marry Malster?" he demanded.

"Oh no, most certainly not!" cried the widow with angry emphasis. "Anything but that. I have taken the most profound dislike to him. That must be avoided at all costs. The child doesn't know her own mind. Besides, he doesn't deserve her, and Cleopatra's feelings have surely been outraged enough. No, most emphatically not. She would only learn to despise him in a couple of months. In fact, I believe Sir Joseph is dismissing him from Bullion's."

"I thought you would take that view," he said. "You are not forgetting, I suppose, that they are very much in love with each other."

"In love!" she exclaimed. "Why, Leonetta would fall in love with a stuffed owl at present, provided it could dance attendance on her." [250]

He grunted. "Now one thing more. Do you agree with me that, beautiful, fascinating, and bewitching as Leonetta undoubtedly is, she would be all the better for realising for once that she cannot have everything her own way?"

"She's an over-confident little hussy," ejaculated Mrs. Delarayne. "I've tried to make her feel that myself, but parents are not much good at that sort of thing. Children think we do it out of spite, you know. That's what I used to think of my own mother."

"It would make her deeper, more reflective, more desirable."

"Certainly," agreed the widow.

"Now let us go back," said the young man, and they returned to the others who had settled themselves round the marquee.

"Ah, here's Lord Henry!" Vanessa cried. "We'll ask him what he thinks!"

Leonetta was silent, because the difference of opinion concerned Denis, and she could not take sides against him. So she contented herself with observing Lord Henry in that grave, interested manner, which is always a sign that something deeper than consciousness is taking stock of an object.

The moment Lord Henry had settled himself in a chair, Stephen Fearwell, who was at the stage of distant and inarticulate adoration towards him, dropped on the grass in front of him, at Agatha's feet, and contemplated him with grave interest. [251]

Stimulated pleasantly as he had been by his interview with Cleopatra, Lord Henry was still enough of a youth and a man to feel equally moved by the subtle influence of the beautiful girls and the silent young men about him. This was just the situation in which experience had always taught him he could shine to the best advantage, and in which his formidable weapons could be wielded with the finest effect.

"We are discussing poetry, Lord Henry," said Guy Tyrrell.

"Yes," said Stephen a little shyly, "those two fellows Guy and Denis have had a fit of indigestion I should think; they've been talking about what they call Victorian verse the whole morning. Look, Denis has got his Browning with him still. You don't like poetry, do you?" Stephen blushed a little. It was his first long and direct appeal to the man he had been secretly admiring ever since the previous evening.

"But I do very much indeed!" Lord Henry protested.

Miss Mallowcoid, Leonetta, Denis, and Guy laughed triumphantly at this, and Vanessa, Stephen, Agatha, and Sir Joseph stirred awkwardly.

"We're just four against four,—isn't it funny?" cried Vanessa, jerking Sir Joseph's arm in which hers was locked. "Of course the Tribes are on our side too, but they stayed at Stonechurch shopping." [252]

"So I'm to give the casting vote, am I?" Lord Henry enquired.

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Vanessa, clapping her hands eagerly, "and you'll give it to us, won't you, Lord Henry! Please!"

Leonetta regarded her schoolmate with grave disapproval, and as she glanced down at her hands, raised her eyebrows in grieved surprise.

"Well," said Denis, "you see, Lord Henry, I've been telling these people about the curious decline in poetry reading, and in the appreciation of poetry, which is noticeable nowadays."

"I confess I never read it," Sir Joseph averred. "I can never make out what the fellow's driving at, turning everything upside down and inside out!"

Vanessa cried "Hear, hear!" and the baronet laughed uproariously.

"Ow can people read the stuff?" he pursued.

"I can't read it," said Stephen, "because it entirely fails to interest me."

"I can't read it," Agatha declared, "because it all seems to me mere beautiful words."

"Chiefly archaic!" added Stephen.

"I never read it," Vanessa observed, "because you have to wade through such quantities of stuff before you can find anything worth remembering."

Miss Mallowcoid, Leonetta, Guy, and Denis laughed. [253]

"I tell them there's something lacking in them," snapped Miss Mallowcoid, looking as unlike a poetical muse as it was possible to be.

Lord Henry turned to Denis. "You hear what they have said?" he enquired.

"Yes, they've been repeating that the whole morning," Denis rejoined.

"Their voices are at least those of sincerity," said Lord Henry. "Neither can you say they are exceptionally ill-favoured human beings. Without wishing to cast any aspersions on you, Miss Mallowcoid, Leonetta, and Guy, I think an impartial judge might be excused if he regarded your opponents as at least as intelligent as yourselves."

"Unquestionably," Denis admitted.

"Of course!" cried Guy.

Miss Mallowcoid and Leonetta, however, who were not at all persuaded that they could excuse such a judge, looked stonily unconvinced.

"Well, then," said Lord Henry, "that shows we must seek the cause of this modern indifference to poetry elsewhere than in the inferiority of those who refuse to read it."

"Good!" cried the baronet, and Agatha, Vanessa, and Stephen cheered.

"The question is," Lord Henry continued, "why is poetry not read to-day?"

"What is poetry, to begin with?" Vanessa demanded.

Everybody agreed that this was obviously the first thing to decide, and various definitions were given, none of which proved satisfactory. Denis Malster's definition which was: "Fine thoughts expressed in rhythmic order, and sometimes rhymed," was rejected by Lord Henry. [254]

"You must get out of your mind altogether, the idea that poetry is all exalted vapourings, and high-browed sublime blue steam!" he said. "Its most important characteristic is that it adopts a mnemonic form,—that is to say, the form you would instinctively cast words into if you wished to remember them."

This was generally agreed to.

"But what is it that can justly claim the right of a mnemonic form?" Lord Henry exclaimed. "Clearly only those things that are worth remembering,—important, vital things!"

Vanessa who was the only person present whose nimble mind foresaw Lord Henry's conclusion, cheered at this point.

"Very well, then," he continued. "A man who casts his thought or his emotion into a poetical or mnemonic form, implies that he is dealing with thoughts or emotions that are important or vital enough to be remembered. If they fall short of this standard, he is dressing asses in lions' skins!"

Stephen and Vanessa looked at each other and smiled approvingly.

"The disappointment felt is then all the greater," Lord Henry added, "seeing that the form leads us to anticipate important things and we do not get them. In fact," he said, withdrawing a note- [255]

book from his breast pocket, "I made a note the other day of the poet's duty. It is to prepare for mankind memorisable formulas in universal terms of important thoughts or emotions."

"But that's almost what I said," Denis protested.

"Yes, almost," Lord Henry replied, with just that restraint in scorn which makes scorn most scathing.

"The consequence is," Lord Henry concluded, "that according to this view of poetry, which I believe is the right view, and the view unconsciously taken by the masses, more than three quarters of Victorian Verse is simply so much superior drivel."

The baronet's party clapped their hands.

"The works of your Wordsworths, your Tennysons, your Brownings, your Matthew Arnolds," cried Lord Henry above the noise, "might be distilled down to one quarter of their bulk and nothing would be lost."

Sir Joseph laughed. "Now I know, now I know!" he ejaculated.

"And as for your very modern poets, they are even worse than the Victorians. Masefield, for instance, is jejuneness enthroned. How can you expect the bulk of sane mankind to read poetry, when they repeatedly encounter this vacuity, this unimportance of thought and emotion, presented with all the pomp and circumstance of a memorisable form?"

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"Bravo, Lord Henry!" Stephen cried.

"But have you read Wordsworth's *Ode on Immortality*?" objected Miss Mallowcoid, with mantling cheeks and indignant glare. She belonged to the class of persons who always fancy they have thought of an objection to a generalisation which the man who made it must have overlooked.

"Yes, of course," replied Lord Henry. "It is a preposterously false and therefore dangerous thought; but I admit it is magnificently expressed. A much more sensible and profound view of childhood is given by Browning at the end of *A Soul's Tragedy*; but unfortunately it is expressed in Browning's usual turbid and muddled way, without Wordsworth's art."

Denis Malster and Guy Tyrrell were shrewd enough to see that Lord Henry knew his subject, and had at least endeavoured to understand what poets should aspire to; Denis, however, felt that at all costs he must enter the lists against the young nobleman. He knew the women would be quick to account for his silence in a manner not too complimentary either to his courage or his ability, and he felt that his very prestige demanded at least a demonstration of some kind on his part. Leonetta, too, was beginning to look at him with a suggestion of enquiry in her eyes, and then ultimately Agatha made it impossible for him to desist any longer.

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"Come on now," she said, "you two champions of Victorian verse,—aren't you going to defend it?"

"Lord Henry has admitted all we claim," he observed lamely. "No one would dream of saying that all Wordsworth or all Tennyson or all Browning was worth reading."

"Yes, but I claim that fully three quarters of it was not worth printing," said Lord Henry.

"I think that's a gross exaggeration," Miss Mallowcoid averred.

"Still at it?" enquired Mrs. Tribe, who accompanied by her husband now joined the party. "I agree with Lord Henry whatever he has said."

"Ah, you know a thing or two!" cried Vanessa.

At a signal from Sir Joseph, Lord Henry now rose, and the two strolled off together in the direction of the house.

"Have you seen Cleopatra?" the baronet asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

Lord Henry told him briefly what had happened.

"How strange!" Sir Joseph exclaimed.

"It is all the result of our detestable English system of leaving it to our daughters to dress their own shop window, so to speak," Lord Henry remarked, "so that at a given moment they each enter business on their own account, make the best possible show, and of course become the most bitter rivals. It is as cruel as it is stupid. It is the old Manchester School, the commercial idea of unrestricted competition, invading even the family."

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Sir Joseph who imagined that the young nobleman was trying to be humorous, laughed at this.

"Ye-es, yes, I see!" he exclaimed chuckling.

Lord Henry groaned.

"But it is a most impossible situation," he said sternly. "Don't you understand? In the case of women of deep passions, like these beautiful Delarayne girls, it is a harrowing drama."

Sir Joseph looked up. Lord Henry's words had sobered him.

"You don't say so!" he muttered.

"I do, most emphatically," the young man continued "All our plan of life in England, you see, is founded on the assumption that only people of mediocre and diluted passion will hold the stage. We allow our girls to go about freely with young men, for instance. Why?"

"Because we can trust the young men," suggested Sir Joseph.

"Not a bit of it!—because both men and girls are usually so very much below par temperamentally that they can exercise what is called 'self-control,'—that is to say their passions are relied upon always to be weaker than their 'self-control'."

Sir Joseph was by now utterly bewildered.

"We allow our daughters to exercise the most heartless rivalry one against the other in the matrimonial field—why?"

Sir Joseph, who imagined that the young nobleman was growing impatient with him, did not venture to reply. [259]

"Because," continued Lord Henry, "we know perfectly well that they are too tame, too mild, too listless about life, ever to become homicidal in their hatred of one another. The moment two deep, eager and adorable girls, like these daughters of Mrs. Delarayne, walk on to our English boards, our whole fabric, our whole scenery, and stage machinery, is shown to be wrong to the last screw. God! How different this country must have been when Shakespeare was able to say that thing about one touch of nature! Now one touch of nature in England sets the whole world by the ears!"

"Is Cleopatra very bad then?" Sir Joseph enquired anxiously.

"So bad that she would have been suicidal if steps had not been taken immediately. You see it isn't everybody who is so lukewarm, so anæmic, as to make a cheerful old maid. Cheery old maids are the condemnation of modern English womanhood Their frequency in England shows the shallowness of the average modern woman's passion. Among all warm-blooded peoples old maids are known to be bitter, resentful, untractable and misanthropic."

"Are they really?" exclaimed Sir Joseph. "I didn't know that."

Mrs. Delarayne came towards them.

"Lord Henry," she cried, "Cleopatra is coming to lunch. You have already done wonders with her. At least she wants to be well now. That's a great triumph." [260]

The remainder of the party now came up the garden towards the house.

"Lord Henry!" Leonetta cried, skipping up to his side, bearing a kitten. "Do you like cats? Look at this little angel!"

Lord Henry, without looking at her, raised a hand deprecatingly.

"We are not out of the wood yet," he murmured in an aside to Mrs. Delarayne.

"Oh, she's scratching,—do look at her, Lord Henry!" Leonetta exclaimed, a little over anxiously this time, as she was not used to having her self-advertising manœuvres disregarded in this manner.

"Yes," said Lord Henry with cold courtesy, glancing at the kitten only for a moment, and then quickly resuming his conversation with his hostess.

Leonetta, swallowing something in her throat, skipped with a somewhat forced affectation of childish gaiety in the direction of the house. Lord Henry, Denis, and Vanessa, however, were the only three of the party who correctly interpreted her action, though they appeared to be engaged with other matters.

After dinner that day, when the cool of a midsummer evening had fallen on Brineweald Park, and Cleopatra had been despatched to her bed by her new spiritual adviser, Mrs. Delarayne, Sir Joseph, Miss Mallowcoid, and Gerald Tribe sat down to Bridge on the terrace, Lord Henry invited Agatha to show him over the grounds, and Mrs. Tribe and Stephen went to the billiard room. [261]

A moment before Lord Henry had descended the steps with his companion, he had seen Vanessa and Guy Tyrrell depart mysteriously in the direction of the woods, and Denis and Leonetta vanish just as mysteriously towards Headlinge.

For the purpose he had in view, he would have preferred Vanessa for his companion, more especially as he had noticed that she went reluctantly with Tyrrell, but he had missed securing her by a minute, thanks to Mrs. Delarayne's garrulousness.

He stood at the foot of the steps. It mattered not to him whither Vanessa and her companion were bound, and observing the direction Denis and Leonetta were taking, he walked slowly along the path to Headstone, which was exposed for the greater length of its course, and promised to keep him constantly in their view.

"This way, Lord Henry," said Agatha, starting in the direction of Headlinge.

"No, if you don't mind," he said, "I prefer this path. I like the sweep of the hill to the right. These vast stretches of grass at this hour always make me feel that I am walking on the edge of a carpet, on which the elves and the fairies are having their revels."

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The girl acquiesced. The two figures to the left, on the road to Headlinge, buried themselves in a wooded grove, and the girl glanced a little apprehensively in their direction, as she caught the last glimpse of them.

"Denis and Leonetta are on the road to Headlinge," she said simply.

"Oh, are they?" replied Lord Henry. "Can you see them then?"

"No," she answered. "They are somewhere behind those trees."

Two proposals of marriage were made that evening in Brineweald Park. One was flatly declined; the result of the other was doubtful. The love-sick swains were Denis Malster and Guy Tyrrell, and their respective companions we know.

Guy Tyrrell, who was of the breed who scarcely ever receive a spontaneous kindly look from women, without offering something very substantial in exchange, was feeling that romantic passion for the voluptuous Jewess, which the sun and the plentiful food at Brineweald, had no doubt done an immense deal to fan to a flame in his breast. He had recognised very early that with Malster about, he stood no chance with Leonetta, and he found that had it not been for Leonetta's occupying the central place, he would have stood just as bad a chance with Vanessa. For two days now, moreover, he had been observing Vanessa lavishing her attentions on Sir Joseph, and utterly harmless though the old baronet was, Guy had been conscious of certain intolerable pangs when he had seen the girl's shapely little brown hands in the City magnate's, and her strong nicely rounded forearm enlocked in his master's.

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Tremulously, therefore, but with studious persistency, he had that evening repeatedly whispered the request to her that she should walk out to the woods with him, and she, casting a longing glance first at Lord Henry, then at Denis Malster, had reluctantly acquiesced. Her curiosity was possibly awakened too; at all events she went, when she had no pressing need to go, and incidentally received the entertainment she deserved.

He was agitated, as all "clean-minded" young men are, whose amorous passions have for once got the better of their qualms, and he breathed very heavily,—rather like a draft-ox at the turn of the plough. He was gauche, timid, thoroughly unskilled in the art of wooing, not even up to the wiles of the most guileless male animal or bird; and Vanessa felt only a sensation of extreme discomfiture as he blurted out his longings to her.

"No, really not!" she exclaimed. "I'm sorry, but I had no idea you felt like that about me."

He caught her arms. His hand was very hot, and she felt it through the gauze of her sleeve.

She turned back quickly. "Come on," she said, "let's get back to the house. They'll wonder what on earth we're doing."

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He dropped his hand to hers, and pulled on it slightly.

"Listen," he pleaded. "Stop a minute and listen."

She screwed her hand deftly out of his, and drew aside.

"Oh, please leave me alone, Guy!" she cried. "It's no good. I couldn't dream of it. I'm never going to marry."

Still he persisted incoherently, unattractively, and with the increasing daring of swelling desire.

"No, I tell you," she ejaculated, laughing a little nervously. "Can't you take 'no' for an answer? You are not going to annoy me just because we happen to be alone, are you?"

He dropped his hands to his side, and was silent.

"Now, don't let's say any more about it," said Vanessa, feeling very much relieved. She had the sound instinct that informed her that this man's "clean-mindedness" was revolting, and breathed fast and irregularly at the thought of the danger she imagined she had been in. If he had kissed her with those uneloquent and untrained lips of his, impure in their purity, she would never have forgiven herself.

"Look at the moon," she said, as she strode rapidly back to the house. "It is beginning to wane. I wonder if the weather will change with it."

And so they reached the terrace,—she feeling that she wanted a wash; he feeling only that he had bungled it, because she was too worldly, too sophisticated to be natural.

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Meanwhile, however, in another part of the grounds, a very much more subtle, irresistible, and skilful proposal was being pronounced. True, it was being made by a man who desired at all

costs, and in good time, to secure his achieved success from threatened assault, and who was therefore a little desperate; but it was also the performance of a creature who knew his subject, who understood its difficulties, and who was not hindered by any of those scruples of ignorance and purity which temper ardour and paralyse daring.

For Malster was in the condition in which a man's desire may truly be said to have become a physical ache. A feeling of sick longing held his heart and entrails as in a vise, a sort of cramp of violent tension stiffened all his tissues. On Leonetta his eyes were fastened as if by some powerful magnet. The rest of the world, as also its inhabitants, was obliterated; they seemed nothing more than shadows passing and re-passing,—shadows which, if need be, could be pushed aside, offended, outraged. For what, after all, are shadows?

People are mistaken if they imagine that it requires any effort to sacrifice position, power, friends, parents,—aye, even home, nationality, and honour,—when a man is in this condition. For these things are as nothing, beside the all-devouring anguish of so great a desire. They are not sacrificed in such circumstances; they simply do not enter within his purview. [266]

If Leonetta had acted wilfully, deliberately, and with her object clearly conceived before she began, she could not have achieved any greater success; for Malster was her abject slave. Jealous of every look or word she vouchsafed to another, hating even the kitten that her rosy well-made fingers clasped, literally ill away from her presence, and thrilled almost painfully by the sound of her voice when she returned, the whole of Brineweald had become for him but a fantastic and hardly material background, to a scene in which his emotions beat out their gigantic throbs like Titans wrestling for freedom. He was not even in a fit state to use an ordinary foot-rule with accuracy.

To speak to such a man of morals, of ethical duty, of certain obligations to an elder sister, of responsibility to host or hostess, or to society, would have been little better than to try to teach table etiquette to a boa-constrictor. There was only one thing that could force him to become sober for one instant and to reflect, and that was the menace of successful rivalry. But even then his sober mood would last only as long as he was maturing panic schemes to overcome the difficulty.

Such a mood of sober reflection had, however, possessed him ever since the advent of Lord Henry, and although he had not the slightest reason either to suspect or to surmise that the young nobleman wished to defeat him in any field, such was the magnitude of his desire for Leonetta and the jealousy it provoked, that every minute that Lord Henry spoke, every minute that his voice held the flapper's ears in attentive subjection, were to him so many hours of agonising dread. [267]

A glance at Leonetta would convince him that she was listening; further observation would reveal the fact that she was also interested; and finally he would recognise that her eyes were upon the young nobleman, even when he was silent.

Denis Malster had perceived with female quickness the infernal charms of Lord Henry's personality; he had measured almost exactly, despite the natural tendency to exaggeration into which his jealousy led him, the precise effect of Lord Henry's persuasive and emphatic tongue upon the female ear. He had seen its effect on Mrs. Delarayne, on Vanessa, on Agatha, on Mrs. Tribe. Was it likely that Leonetta would long remain insensible to the difference between himself and the new arrival?

Already he had been obliged to abandon those daily contests on the subject of the Inner Light with the wretched Gerald Tribe, because Lord Henry promised to be too much for him. And yet they had been so valuable,—such a splendid opportunity for exhibiting his proudest achievements!

Things had come to such a pass that he literally did not dare to organise again those pleasant little assemblies, in which he could discuss anything and challenge all comers, with the perfect certainty of shining as he vanquished them. It is true that he could have continued them by carefully omitting Lord Henry from their midst; but he was by no means a fool, and did not underestimate the intelligence of those about him. Thus he realised the damaging effect it would be sure to have on his prestige, if he persistently manœuvred to leave Lord Henry out; and he knew well enough how quickly women notice such things,—they who are such past-masters at precisely this kind of manœuvring. [268]

Had Lord Henry not come upon the scene, Denis would have been content, as was his wont, to prolong the delicious agony of his love indefinitely, secure in the thought that at any moment he would be able by a word to secure Leonetta for ever to him.

Now, however, there could no longer be any question of prolonging the situation indefinitely. The only problem that occupied his mind was, when and how to say that word to Leonetta which was to bind her for ever to him, before she receded one hundredth of an inch from the summit of ecstasy to which he imagined she too must have climbed in the last few days.

Thus he had been moved by a thought similar to Guy Tyrrell's; but there, as we shall see, the likeness ceased.

A girl of seventeen or eighteen is nearly always in danger when a man of thirty pays attention to her,—in danger, that is to say, of acquiescing too soon, too early in life, too unreflectedly and [269]

ignorantly.

Leonetta had been intoxicated by Denis Malster's worship. It would perhaps be unscientific here, and therefore untrue, to overlook the fact that the conquest of her sister's beau, had been in itself a triumphant achievement, apart from any particular claims he might have to attraction. But is not human nature such that in any case it is always partially subdued by devotion? Does not even the love of an animal make an irresistible appeal to the most callous? Is not the common preference for dogs before cats in England, largely ascribable to the fact that the flattery residing in devotion and affection makes such an impelling appeal to all vain people, that the superior animal is discarded for the inferior? The dog is grossly and offensively obscene; he is dirty, he pollutes our streets; he is a coward, and has the pusillanimous spirit of a rather faint-hearted lackey. The cat, on the other hand, is decent, clean, consistently sanitary, brave, and possessed of the great-hearted self-reliant spirit of a born warrior. The cat, however, does not fawn, it does not flatter, it shows no devotion, it knows none of the sycophantic wiles of the dog; but since modern mankind in England is animated chiefly by vanity, the dog with all his objectionable characteristics and habits is preferred.

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Now women, though by no means alone in the possession of vanity, are perhaps a little more subject than men to its sway, and it is precisely their vanity which is their greatest danger. Like the modern Englishman, they all too frequently overlook the noble for the inferior animal, because the latter is a better worshipper, and, particularly when they are still in their teens, worship from the male, which is something so novel, so exquisitely strange, and so stimulating to their self-esteem, constitutes one of the greatest pitfalls they can encounter.

Why should it necessarily be a pitfall? Precisely because it may induce them to decide too soon in favour of an inferior man.

Leonetta was therefore in danger, and Lord Henry knew it.

Everything he had said and done in her presence since he had come to Brineweald, had been deliberate, premeditated, purposeful,—all with the intention of averting the danger she was in, or at least with the view of giving her time to collect her senses, and to obtain some breathing space before coming to the fatal decision.

Denis Malster was sufficiently sensitive to be vaguely aware of the element of an organised attack in the behaviour of the young nobleman, upright and above-board as it had been; hence his hurrying of his inestimable treasure,—the one creature that could give him peace,—along the road to Headlinge that evening; hence too the tactics he had resolved to adopt. For he felt instinctively, not only that Lord Henry was moving against him, but also that Mrs. Delarayne was fast becoming an open enemy.

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They entwined fingers discreetly as they walked along, and the moment they had plunged into the grove, he would raise her hand from time to time, as he spoke, and kiss it fervently. It was cool and firm, a beautiful symbol of her beautiful body, and he was racked with a wildness of longing by the side of which the language of Cupid sounds like the pipe of a bird in a hurricane.

It seemed to his resourceful mind that possibly the best way of securing this girl's attachment to him, would be by a vivid appeal to her senses. His prestige was at stake, and in this dilemma men have been known to go to even greater lengths than when driven by sensuality alone. He did not underestimate the vigour of her passions, and knew that in this direction there was hope of uncontested victory.

"How heavenly it is," he said, "to have you quite alone for once, with nothing but wild nature looking on! How I loathe that crowd when it keeps us apart even for a moment."

He halted for a second, and they kissed.

"Oh, Leo, my darling," he continued, as they again walked slowly towards Headlinge, "you don't know how I suffer to see you in your present environment. You who are so natural, so essentially a creature of the wilds, surrounded by things that are so artificial, so overheated, so stagey. I shudder every time I hear you call the Warrior 'Peachy.' It shows how grossly your true nature has been distorted to serve her artificial ends. The beautiful word 'mother' would give the lie to the deception she tries to practice daily upon all of us, with every means that her art can supply. Excuse my speaking like this of your mother; but I imagine you a wild creature of the woods, with flowing hair; your mother a natural parent, who resigns herself cheerfully and becomingly to age, whose face is coloured uniquely by the sun, despising as much as you yourself surely do those petty tricks of make-believe,—those cosmetics and hair-dyes, that don't even deceive the coarsest chauffeur on the road,—and realising the charm of her years as much as she admires the beauty of yours. It makes me boil to see you corrupted by this atmosphere!"

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He was careful at the end of each little speech to stop and fondle her, and to press her cool firm fingers to his lips in an ecstasy of devotion.

"You were not made to rear a town-street full of dandies, of Lord Henrys and his like, but to be the proud dam of a stalwart race of yeomen. It is in just such a wild setting as this that you, the Diana of a truly British country-side, could shine to greatest perfection. You are a child of freedom, a bird whose gorgeous wings they are trying to clip."

They sat down on a bank. The brilliance of the moon illuminated the country beyond. The chimneys of Sir Joseph's house were visible far away to the right.

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He had another passionate outburst, convincing because he was genuinely at his wit's end with longing. He smothered her with his embraces, rained kisses on a face that was seductively screened by roughly dishevelled hair, and which smiled back at him with a look of intoxication almost equal to his own. And then at last, concluding instinctively that the moment had come for complete forgetfulness, he even thought he might proceed to discount bills of intimacy before they had become due,—a practice not uncommon in England,—and he held her in a way that was at least novel to the eager flapper.

Half fearfully he waited for the effect of his daring action. She said nothing, but simply showed her magnificent white teeth in a smile that betokened the most complete satisfaction.

"Leo, fly away with me, will you? Don't let us wait to ask. Let us go. I have savings; besides, I am no fool. It would mean leaving Bullion's of course, but why need we mind that? You can trust me, can't you? Let us leave this hated place, with its people who do not understand us. We might go to Canada, where wild nature has taught people to be more natural than they are here. Oh, say you will come with me. It would be heavenly!"

"Do you mean at once?" she exclaimed, laughing now at the transport of devotion which had just made him kiss her feet. [274]

"Well, I suppose we could not go actually now, but at the latest to-morrow at this time. We might steal away while everybody's dressing for the dance."

She was lying back on the bank, her eyes were keen with thought, her mouth now closed in solemn reflection. Suddenly he recognised not fifty yards away, fully revealed in the moonlight, the figures of Lord Henry and Vanessa, walking slowly along the lower path which led to Headstone. As he had seen Lord Henry with Agatha on the same path about an hour before he could not at first believe his eyes. But the form of the stylish young Jewess was unmistakable. Lord Henry must have gone back to exchange companions. Where was Guy then? However, Leonetta had not seen them, so it did not matter.

"Quick, tell me—yes or no! because I must make all the arrangements for our flight immediately."

She made a movement to rise.

"No, don't get up," he said quickly. "You've no idea how beautiful you look there."

"But I must," cried the girl, "one of my slides is sticking into my head! If you *will* handle me so roughly," she added, smiling with the deepest contentment.

"Let me find it for you, don't get up!" he pleaded. [275]

But what Delaraynes want, God wants; and in an instant his obstructing hand was brushed aside and she was sitting up.

He looked into her eyes, hoping to fasten them on himself, and keep them off the hateful spectacle not fifty yards away. For a few seconds he was successful. He then proceeded to kiss her again in order to blot out the vision for yet a while longer.

"Denis!" she exclaimed, "for mercy's sake let me put my slide right, and then you can do what you like."

He desisted, shaken with overstimulated craving, and then all at once, his heart sank; for her keen eyes had seen what he hoped would have disappeared before she could notice it.

"Why, look!" she cried, "there's that little cat Vanessa walking alone with Lord Henry!"

"Yes," he rejoined, with as much indifference as he could summon.

"What on earth can they be doing?" she demanded craning her neck to see as much of them as possible.

"Oh, nothing—they're only walking. Slow enough in all conscience, I should think."

Leonetta was silent, her eyes fixed upon the couple slowly proceeding along the lower path. What could Lord Henry possibly see in that Jezebel! She recalled his hauteur and studious coldness towards herself, his air of deep understanding and mastery, his magic look of wizardly youth, his eloquence, his immense self-possession, his mysterious connection with Cleopatra's indisposition and recovery. What could it be that made him so indifferent to her? [276]

She rose.

"Oh, don't move!" said Denis irritably.

"I must see where that little cat is taking him," she muttered. And creeping to the nearest tree, she peered round it.

Meanwhile Denis ground his teeth, and flung himself back on the bank in a spasm of impotent loathing of Lord Henry. "They're holding hands!" whispered the girl in angry surprise.

Denis craned his neck. "Nonsense!" he exclaimed, "he's only explaining something to her. I suppose palmistry is another of his tricks or hers. Can't you see?" He felt the spell had been broken, and was savage. "Come and sit down, Leo!" he hissed. [276]

"Half a mo!" she cried; and then after a while she added: "Oh, I say, do look! He's got his arm round her waist!"

"She's only showing him the latest two-step!" said Denis. "Can't you see—there—see? They're only practising a step.

"So they are!" gasped the girl. She recognised her own tactics in this dancing tuition of Vanessa's, and was obviously annoyed. "Copy-cat!" she murmured under her breath.

"Come on!" she cried at last, "let's go home."

"Oh, not yet!" he implored her.

"Yes, I want to," she replied with impatience.

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"Oh, it's been such a gorgeous time!"

"Who would have thought!" she exclaimed, "that that young devil—!"

"Leo!" Denis remonstrated.

"Well, that's all she is!" snapped Leonetta, thrusting her arm roughly into his, and jerking him forward towards the house.

Denis was beside himself with fury. "Well, what about to-morrow?" he enquired lamely, feeling all the while that the effect had been missed.

"Oh, I'll tell you to-morrow," she replied. "Quick! I want to get home and to bed before they do. I wouldn't let her know that I'd seen her walking with Lord Henry for worlds!"

CHAPTER XV

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Lord Henry had made many friends at Brineweald, but neither was Denis Malster quite alone. Miss Mallowcoid had not taken kindly to the patronage Lord Henry had thought fit to extend to Mr. and Mrs. Tribe, and the latter's assurance and good spirits in Lord Henry's presence had succeeded in making the spinster take a very strong dislike to him. Before he had come on the scene Mrs. Tribe had been as becomingly meek and humble as she always was in London, but for some reason, which the spinster could hardly explain, Lord Henry's friendship had quite transformed her.

Miss Mallowcoid knew nothing of the deep gratitude that the unfortunate little woman felt towards him for having put a stop to the nightly baitings her husband had theretofore received from Denis Malster, nor did she know of the intense devotion that the Incandescent Gerald felt for the new guest. She could only recognise one fact,—a fact that considerably disturbed her feeling of well-being,—and that was, that since Lord Henry's arrival, Mrs. Tribe had behaved like an ordinary, cheerful, and independent human being.

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With her, against Lord Henry, Miss Mallowcoid knew that she could always count upon Sir Joseph, because his jealousy of the young nobleman made him scarcely rational. So that if we reckon Denis Malster as well, in the Mallowcoid camp, it is plain that there was no inconsiderable nucleus of hostility against Lord Henry at this time at Brineweald Park.

Alone with her sister and Sir Joseph, Miss Mallowcoid had already seized more than one opportunity of disparaging the nerve specialist of Ashbury, and on the evening of the two proposals just described, when the Incandescent Gerald had retired to bed, the three had an animated discussion about Leonetta, Denis, and Lord Henry.

Mrs. Delarayne had given her reasons for being irreconcilably opposed to Leonetta's match with Denis, and had declared that Lord Henry was in entire agreement with her. She had laid the blame of Cleopatra's sudden breakdown on Denis's shoulders, and had confessed to feeling a very strong instinctive dislike for him. She even reminded Sir Joseph of his promise to her earlier in the day, that he would dismiss Denis from his service.

"Oh, I think that would be most cruelly unfair!" exclaimed Miss Mallowcoid, when she heard the announcement.

"Why unfair?" snapped Mrs. Delarayne.

Miss Mallowcoid shook her head. "Well, Edith," she began, "of course you know best what to do with your girls, but personally I think it very honest and noble of Denis to have shown that he has changed his mind, if he really has done so. Besides, if you think he is prepared to marry Leonetta, why should you spoil her chances? Not that I think she deserves him, of course, but that's neither here nor there."

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"No, it certainly isn't," interjected Mrs. Delarayne.

"But, after all, what has it got to do with Lord Henry, I should like to know?" pursued the spinster, trying to catch Sir Joseph's eye. "He is here to cure Cleo, and not to meddle in all your affairs."

"He is here primarily as my friend," croaked the widow.

"I must say, my dear lady," said Sir Joseph, "I think there is something in what your sister says. You are always complaining about having two unmarried daughters on your hands. Denis is a good secretary to me. He has good prospects. So what does it matter if he does marry Leonetta?"

"Oh, Joseph," cried the harassed lady, "how little you can understand of the whole affair! And as for you, Bella, it seems to me you've got the whole thing topsy-turvy as usual."

"Oh, of course!" exclaimed Miss Mallowcoid, tetchily. "But I know one thing. Denis is an honourable and well set-up young man, and an excellent match, and it is madness to oppose him as you are doing. Lord Henry won't find a husband for Leonetta, I suppose!"

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"Bella, dear, if only you would for once speak of things you thoroughly grasp and understand, it would be so refreshing!" snapped Mrs. Delarayne angrily.

"I certainly think," said Sir Joseph, "that before we do anything we might ask Denis his intentions towards Leonetta."

"But I don't like Denis, I tell you!" declared the widow. "You can see what his intentions are without asking. Leonetta has driven him thoroughly mad."

Sir Joseph shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course, Edith, that is simply blind prejudice," Miss Mallowcoid averred, herself growing every minute more irate. "You don't see it, my dear, I know, but it is grossly unfair. A most cultivated, charming young man! Why, the way he spoke about poetry this morning,—nothing could have been more edifying. As for your Lord Henry,—he doesn't know what the word poetry means."

"I doubt that very much," said Mrs. Delarayne fidgeting unhappily with the cards.

"There can surely be no harm, dear lady," said Sir Joseph, "in asking Denis what his intentions are."

Mrs. Delarayne was still adamant. "I hate the insult to Cleo," she said, "and I don't like him. But if you both insist."

Sir Joseph repudiated the suggestion that he insisted.

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"Neither do I, of course," Miss Mallowcoid exclaimed with an ironic smile. "A lot of good I should do by insisting."

"Do you propose to speak to him?" Mrs. Delarayne enquired of the baronet.

"I will if you like."

"I think you might both do it," suggested Miss Mallowcoid. "At all events, there's no immediate hurry," said Sir Joseph.

At this moment Denis and Leonetta came up the steps and were greeted by the party at the card-table.

"Oh, my dear, how hot you look!" cried Mrs. Delarayne to her daughter.

"Yes, we've been stepping it out a bit, because I wanted to get home."

Mrs. Delarayne noticed that her child was badly dishevelled, and that there was an unusually fiery glint in her eyes.

"What have you young people been doing all this time?" Miss Mallowcoid enquired in her most roguish manner.

"As a matter of fact we tried to reach Headlinge, and failed," said Denis, looking a trifle pale in spite of his tanned skin.

"I should have thought you could have gone there and back again twice over in the time," said Mrs. Delarayne, scrutinising her daughter with care.

"Well, we didn't," said Leonetta decisively.

"Had too much to say to each other on the way," Miss Mallowcoid interjected with a coy smile.

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"Where's Agatha?" Denis demanded.

"She and Stephen have walked home; they were feeling tired."

"And Lord Henry?" Leonetta asked.

"He's gone off with my girl," said Sir Joseph with mock bitterness.

The following day broke colder and more overcast than any that the Brineweald party had had since they left London. The programme had therefore to be modified accordingly, and picnics and excursions declared out of the question.

In the morning the beach was visited as usual, and Lord Henry showed himself to be, among other things, an excellent swimmer. Cleopatra had joined the beach party though she had not bathed, but while everyone noticed that she was looking very much better, it was also observed that she had not her customary spirits. She no longer vied with Leonetta in leading the entertainment of the party, and was particularly and conspicuously subdued and laconic whenever Lord Henry addressed her.

At lunch, which was taken at "The Fastness," Lord Henry thoroughly exasperated Miss Mallowcoid by inviting the Tribes to join him on his journey to China, and roused considerable interest by describing the plan of his mission to that country. It was evident that he would require a party of helpers, and Mrs. Tribe was most eager to be of their number. The Incandescent Gerald, however, gravely shook his head. [284]

"Of course not,—how can you be so silly, Agnes!" Miss Mallowcoid exclaimed. "Gerald has his religious duties here."

Lord Henry saw that Mrs. Tribe did not dare to reply herself, so he replied for her.

"It only remains for me to convince Mr. Tribe, then," he said, "that in following me to China he would be performing a very lofty religious duty."

"I'd go like a shot!" cried Stephen.

"So would I!" echoed Guy Tyrrell.

In the afternoon Sir Joseph asked Denis to spend a moment with him over his correspondence, and seizing the opportunity as the others were playing tennis, Lord Henry invited Leonetta and her sister to go with him to Headstone to look at Sir Joseph's prize cattle there.

Lord Henry's invitation to Leonetta constituted the first real attention he had paid her since he had been down at Brineweald, and she stammered her acceptance with ill-concealed excitement. Even with Cleo as one of the party, her curiosity regarding him was too great for her to forego this opportunity. She therefore begged to be allowed a moment to put on her hat, and when she returned at the end of five minutes, it was obvious that she had taken unusual pains with her appearance.

The three turned at a leisurely pace up the road towards Headstone, and as Miss Mallowcoid saw their hats vanish on the other side of the hedge, she announced the fact of their departure to her sister. [285]

Mrs. Delarayne was well aware of what was happening, and was not too happy about it. Lord Henry seemed lost to her.

"Oh, leave me alone, can't you!" she snarled. "Can't you see I'm reading?" and the offensiveness of her manner seemed so unaccountable to Miss Mallowcoid, that this lady got up in a state of high perturbation, and deliberately stalked over to the marquee, where for a while she sat alone brooding over the indignity she had suffered.

The trio on their way to Headstone were finding it uphill work to discover some lasting and common subject of interest with which to entertain each other; many topics were started, but the conversation was always desultory, and Lord Henry, try how he might, failed to make it general. He felt as a mariner might feel who was trying to harmonise two compasses, one of which had an error to the west, and the other an error to the east. At last, when they were on their way home, having given up all hope of success, he decided that the only way was to talk himself, and this he proceeded to do with his customary enthusiasm. The subject was suggested by Leonetta, who asked how it was that though they had heard of him so frequently during the last five or six years, neither Cleopatra nor she herself had ever seen him. This introduced them to the subject of Mrs. Delarayne, which Lord Henry seized with alacrity. [286]

"You have no idea," he said, "how I admire the perfectly splendid way you girls deal with your mother."

Leonetta looked up and scrutinised his face. She thought he must be joking.

"You are so immensely sensible and sympathetic, when it would be so easy for you to be heartless."

"Heartless—what do you mean?" Cleopatra asked.

"Well, you see, the whole thing is so simple,—Heavens, it is almost too simple to explain!" He had that fiery way of speaking which gave to everything he said the magic impress of vital significance.

"You see," he pursued, "your mother is a really great-hearted woman, and you girls seem to have realised it and tried to live up to her. It is magnificent of you."

Both girls were deeply interested; but Cleopatra kept her eyes on the ground.

"She is clear-sighted and honest enough to see the truth about youth and age, and makes no bones about it. She doesn't pretend that there's any particular beauty in old age. God!—she's one in a thousand!"

"What truth about youth and age?" Leonetta asked, as she mentally commented on the singular coincidence that both Denis the night before, and Lord Henry now, should choose to speak about this particular aspect of her mother. [287]

"Why, it must have occurred to you," Lord Henry continued, "that youth makes a universal appeal; it is of interest to everybody. Its peculiar fascination makes it a possession to which none can be indifferent. Do you see that? Do you see how youth has the world's eye upon it,—how, not only in its own, but also in all older generations, it meets with the smile of welcome, of interest, of ready affection? All the world over this is so."

"Yes, yes,—I see," cried Leonetta.

"And now look on age! It has an interest indeed, but that interest is localised. It is limited to a circle, frequently to a domestic circle, sometimes only to one member in that circle. People say: Who is this poor old man? Who is this poor old woman? Have they any one who cares for them? And if it is known they have good relatives, then the interest ceases, and the rest of the world is only too glad that their responsibility ends in having made the enquiry. But no one asks: Who is this poor young man? or who is this poor flapper, has she any one that cares for her?"

Leonetta laughed.

"You feel," pursued Lord Henry, "that old people must have someone of their own to love them, because the rest of the world does not do so spontaneously. The old people and sentimentalists who speak of every age having its beauty, are humbugs. Now your mother is the very reverse of one of these humbugs. She knows well enough that old age has only a local, a limited interest, and rather than abandon the universal interest that youth can claim, she fights like a Trojan to retain her youthful beauty. The bravery with which she is now holding old age at arm's length, and defying it to embrace her is perfectly amazing. It shows her infinite good taste; it shows how deeply she has understood the difference between youth and age. It is one of the most thrilling things I have ever witnessed." [288]

Leonetta laughed ecstatically. "Yes, yes, I see!" she exclaimed. "You put it in a new light. Bravo, old Peachy!—you make me feel I want to run home and kiss her." And then she added, as if it were an afterthought: "Except that she hates being kissed."

Cleopatra was thoughtful. "Yes, I understand all that," she said after a while; "I have understood that for some time,—at least dimly. But then, this local interest which you say old age excites, this local or domestic appeal which it makes,—will not Edith ever feel that?"

"Ah, don't you see, Miss Delarayne," Lord Henry replied, "this local interest, this domestic interest on which old age depends, has to be very strong, very intense, very highly concentrated, to make any one as tasteful as your mother gladly relinquish the other interest."

"Very, very intense," Cleopatra repeated. "Do you mean that in Baby—I mean Leo—and myself it is not sufficiently intense?" [289]

Leonetta looked solemnly up into Lord Henry's face to catch every word of his reply, and in doing so even forgot to notice that there were young men on the road observing her.

"Don't misunderstand me," Lord Henry pleaded. "I do not wish to imply that you two girls do not love and cherish your mother. In fact, as I have just been saying, the zeal with which you help her in every way to achieve the end she wishes to achieve is most highly creditable. But, have you ever known, have you ever witnessed at close quarters, the worship of a devoted son for his mother? Have you ever been anywhere near two people, mother and son, who have been bound by that most unique and most passionate of affections, which has made the local interest of old age seem sufficiently vast and full to reconcile the mother to a happy relinquishment of that other interest,—the interest the world feels in youth?"

Still Leonetta gazed into Lord Henry's face, and still Cleopatra kept her eyes thoughtfully on the ground.

"Because, I remind you," Lord Henry concluded, "that this domestic interest, since it is so circumscribed and restricted, has to be proportionately more intense than the interest the whole world feels in youth. And that intensity a son is capable, I think, of giving his mother." [290]

"Have you ever witnessed that?" Leonetta enquired.

Lord Henry laughed in his irresistible and ironical way. But it was obvious that genuine mirth was not his mood.

"I happen to be one of those who have actually lived it," he said.

"Is your mother still living?" Cleopatra enquired.

Lord Henry bowed his head. "No," he replied, with that supreme calmness which only those feel who have discharged more than their appointed duty to a deceased relative, "she died three years ago."

For some moments the three walked on in silence; then at last Leonetta spoke.

"That does explain an awful lot about dear old Peachy, doesn't it, Cleo?" she exclaimed.

"It explains everything," Cleopatra replied serenely.

"Of course," Leonetta added, addressing Lord Henry, "we always knew you were Peachy's star turn,—you know what I mean! But we hadn't any idea you knew her so well. How lovely it must be to be understood so well, so deeply, by even one creature on earth!"

Lord Henry laughed.

"You girls could not be expected to understand your mother as clearly as I do," he said. "You were too close to her for that. I think you have both done wonders." [291]

They had now reached the terrace of Brineweald Park, and it wanted three quarters of an hour to tea. The two sisters were still under the peculiar spell of the conversation they had just had with the young nobleman, and they did not wish to leave him. At last Cleopatra said she would like to go in search of her mother, and Lord Henry and Leonetta were left alone.

"Do you read everybody as clearly as you've read brave old Peachy?" Leonetta asked him.

"I cannot say that," Lord Henry replied, perching himself on the stone balustrade of the terrace.

"Do you think you can read me?" she enquired.

He chuckled enigmatically.

"I cannot say that I'd get top marks with you," he said.

She laughed. "Do tell me," she cried, "what you read!"

At this moment Denis Malster, Guy Tyrrell, Agatha, and Vanessa appeared round the corner of the drive, and ran quickly up the steps. Each of the men bore a gun, and they strode eagerly towards Lord Henry and his companion.

"Come on, Leo!" Denis exclaimed as he drew near. "Excuse me interrupting you, but Guy and I are just going into the woods to try and get a couple of rabbits. Sir Joseph wants them to send to his head messenger at the office. You'll see some sport."

Lord Henry was silent, and covertly observed the girl at his side. [292]

"Oh, not now!" Leonetta replied, frowning ever so slightly. "Must you go now?"

"Yes, we must go now," Denis replied, "Sir Joseph wants them to be sent off to-night. You don't mind, do you, Lord Henry? Perhaps you'd like to come too?"

Leonetta turned to Lord Henry to see what he would say.

He swung round indolently from the view he had been contemplating, and faced Malster.

"No thanks, old chap," he said, "I'd rather not, thank you."

"Well, you don't mind Leonetta coming, do you?" Denis persisted, growing a trifle overanxious and heated.

"Not in the least, of course," the young nobleman replied and turned his head again in the direction of the landscape.

"Come on, Leo!" Denis repeated, with just a shade of command in his voice, while Vanessa, Agatha, and Guy looked on spellbound.

"No, I'd rather not, really Denis, thanks!" she said. "We were just on such an interesting subject. Can't you go after tea?"

"No, I'm afraid not," said Denis, his face flushing slightly with vexation.

"Well, then, leave me out of it, for once, will you?" Leonetta pleaded. "You know I should have loved to come. But I've got something I must finish with Lord Henry."

Denis Malster turned round, hot-eared and savage. "All right," he muttered. "I only thought you'd like it, that's all." And the four moved off in the direction of the woods, Denis walking with his head thrown more than usually back in the style that men commonly adopt when they are withdrawing from a humiliating interview. It is as if they were trying, like a drinking hen, to straighten their throats, in order the better to swallow the insult they have just received. [293]

"I'm afraid that young man will not forgive me," said Lord Henry, when the party were out of earshot.

"Oh, that's ridiculous," said Leonetta; "as if I'd never seen a bunny shot in my life before. But let me think, what were we saying? Oh, yes, I know. You were going to read me."

He laughed.

She looked coyly up at him. "You know, Lord Henry, you really are a little disconcerting. You are one of those people who make one feel one ought to have done better at school."

"I devoutly trust I don't," he protested.

She examined his fine intelligent hands, and perceived as so many had perceived before her, the

baffling mixture of deep thoughtfulness and youth in his eyes and brow.

"You do a little," she said, picking up a leaf and bending it about as she spoke. "And I do hate feeling stupid."

"You—stupid!" he ejaculated, and laughed.

"You must know what I mean," she added.

"You are beautiful, Leonetta," he said, "and that in itself is the greatest accomplishment, because [294] it cannot be acquired."

"I thought you hadn't noticed me at all," she observed, trying to conceal the rapture she felt.

"I don't know about that,—one can't help looking at people who are constantly about one."

He made an effort to give this remark the ring of indifference, and he succeeded.

"But that's exactly it!" she cried. "They say that beautiful people are always stupid. That's why I say—"

"Nobody who knows anything about it says that," he observed, as if he were stating an interesting axiomatic principle and without a trace of the leer of the adulator.

"Really?"

"Of course not," he pursued. "For a face to be beautiful, it must have certain proportions. It must have a certain length of nose, a certain length of chin, and above all a certain height of brow. Do you understand?"

"I think so," she replied.

"Well, then,—what is the obvious conclusion?"

"I'm afraid I don't see it," she said.

"I say a certain height of brow is essential to a well-proportioned face," he remarked with cool persuasiveness. "But what lies beneath the brow? Come, Leonetta, you know!"

"The brain?" she suggested.

"Of course," he exclaimed. "And what is more, beneath the brow lies the thinking part of the [295] brain. So that in order really to have a fair face we must have a fair proportion of brain."

She smiled and bowed her head.

"Peachy's clever, isn't she?" she demanded. "So I suppose we girls ought not to be so very dull."

"Don't believe those who tell you beautiful people are stupid. It is the ugly who say that to console themselves. Just as the fools of the world write books about geniuses being mad."

She laughed. "You do say funny things!" she cried.

"Funny?" he repeated.

"Well, true things then. I wish everybody talked as you do. One feels so much safer to know the truth about everything."

At this point, however, Cleopatra came towards them from the house.

"I've found Edith at last," she exclaimed. "She's with the others in the marquee near the rose garden. We're just going to have tea. Are you coming?"

Lord Henry jumped down from his perch, and Leonetta ran indoors.

"I'll follow you in a moment," she cried gleefully.

Lord Henry and Cleopatra sauntered towards the rose garden. "Have people been telling you how very much you've improved?" he demanded.

She bowed her head and flushed slightly.

"I don't say it because I wish to hear compliments," he pursued. [296]

"You've done wonders; you know it," she said, not daring to look at him in her agitation.

"It is you who have done wonders," he replied.

She smiled and looked away.

These two people could not talk to each other. It was impossible. All attempts hitherto had failed, except just that first attempt when Lord Henry had received the girl's stirring confession. It was as if both were trying their mightiest to abide strictly by conventionalities in order to keep within bounds. It was as if neither of them dared to give their tongues a free rein. Never had Lord Henry felt so utterly tongue-tied in a woman's presence; never had Cleopatra looked so serene while completely incapable of noisy cheerfulness.

"How splendid those two look side by side!" Sir Joseph exclaimed as they approached the marquee.

Mrs. Delarayne felt a twinge in her heart, and as she proceeded to pour out tea, her loathing for Denis Malster received such a sudden access of strength that she found it hard to be civil.

"I don't quite see," she snapped, "why they look more splendid side by side, as you put it, than one by one."

Miss Mallowcoid cast a glance full of reproach at her sister, and wondered what it was that induced Sir Joseph to submit as kindly as he did, day after day, to such monstrous treatment.

CHAPTER XVI

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There was a dance at Brineweald that evening, and everybody who was anybody in the neighbourhood had been invited. The Vicar's family, the doctor's children, the Swynnertons from Barbacan, the Blights from the Castle, and one or two people from Folkestone, were among the guests, while a band had been ordered down from Ashbury for the occasion.

Lord Henry was entirely satisfied with the arrangement. It was calculated to keep the two Brineweald households under his eye the whole evening, and to prevent those wanderings which, while they complicated his task, also made it difficult for him to follow developments.

To Denis Malster, on the other hand, the dance was a most unwelcome disturbance. Fearing from the turn events had taken that day that he had not gone far enough with Leonetta in order to be able to rely absolutely on her single-minded attachment, he foresaw that the dance that evening would offer few opportunities, if any, of repairing his omission, and he was accordingly not in the best of moods to enjoy it.

As the sufferer from some fatal disease is the last to be convinced that his condition is hopeless, so the ardent lover, for whom things are going none too smoothly, is the last to be persuaded that he is really losing ground.

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He will ascribe his rebuffs to a passing whim on the part of his beloved, to a momentary lapse in her customary humour, to her food, to a desire on her part to test him, to transitory evil influences from outside, to the thermometer, the barometer, the moon!—in fact to anything, except to the possibility that she could actually have cooled towards him; and the more overpowering his arrogance happens to be, the more complex and subtle will be the explanations which his imagination will furnish for the unpleasant change in his affairs.

That Denis was beginning to feel a deadly hatred for Lord Henry scarcely requires to be stated. In fact, this feeling in him was so irrepressible, so rapacious, that it grasped even at morsels of nourishment it could not obtain, in the desire to strengthen itself. Thus he had actually come to believe that Lord Henry was a charlatan; he was prepared to prove that he had immoral intentions against every girl in his immediate neighbourhood, and he was completely satisfied that, like Mrs. Delarayne, Lord Henry was decades older than he admitted.

Meanwhile, however, a thousand petty but significant trifles showed Denis that he no longer exercised that power over Leonetta, and could no longer claim that whole-hearted devotion from her, which had marked their relationship only a day or two previously. The girl no longer gave him her entire attention, neither did she appear to tax her brain to the same extent as theretofore in order to engross his every thought. From a solid union which defied all interference, and which therefore made all interested spectators feel uneasy, their relationship had relaxed into a harmless and hearty friendship. But it was Leonetta who was shaking herself loose, and the more tightly Denis clung to the strands of their former intimacy, the more tenuous these seemed to become,—just as if his hold on them were more frantic than their strength could bear.

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These signs were naturally not lost on Cleopatra. On the contrary, she registered them every one with the accuracy of a trained observer. And as surely as the cumulative evidence of all she saw began to point with ever greater precision in the direction of her sister's fickleness and mutability, the more her health improved, and the more cheerful she became. It is remarkable how the state of being overanxious spoils a creature's humour and mars the brightest sally. A week previously Cleopatra could say nothing, however bright, that did not fall flat, even beside a less brilliant outburst of her sister's.

Now, with her increasing serenity, with her restored sleep, and with her mind at rest about the issue, she recovered her lost spirits; her voice once more began to be heard at table as often as Leonetta's, and the traditional savour of Delarayne humour was maintained as faithfully by the elder as by the younger of the two daughters.

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Lord Henry watched this improvement in his patient with lively interest and amusement, but he quite well realised, notwithstanding, that the means he had used had been exceptional, and could scarcely have been recommended as practicable therapeutics to every practising physician in England. Nevertheless, he felt that he had not yet completely discharged his duty to Mrs. Delarayne, whom he loved sufficiently to serve with zeal; and as he walked down to Sir Joseph's ballroom that evening he was half aware that only the first stage in his campaign had been

successfully fought.

Meanwhile, in addition to the Tribes, Leonetta and her sister, he had made many friends at Brineweald. Stephen and his sister were devoted to him,—so in his way was Guy Tyrrell; while it was only Sir Joseph's constant dread of the young nobleman's mysterious power over Mrs. Delarayne that prevented him, too, from becoming one of Lord Henry's devoted adherents.

The dance was a great success. With scrupulous care Lord Henry divided his attentions equally between Mrs. Delarayne and her two daughters, and thus broke into Denis Malster's programme with Leonetta with devastating effect. This young man was bound to dance a few dances with Mrs. Delarayne and her elder daughter; he was also obliged, out of regard for Sir Joseph, to attend to some of the baronet's guests; and thus, when it came to his turn to claim Leonetta, he was scarcely in a mood to be fascinating. [301]

"What's the matter with you?" he whispered angrily to her, as they swept up the ballroom.

"Nothing—what do you mean?" she rejoined.

"You're not the same. Have I done anything to upset you?"

"No——"

"Well, tell me, Leo,—tell me what it is! You have been hateful to me the whole day."

"My dear boy, I haven't. What have I done? I'm just the same, if you are."

"Just the same?" Denis snorted. "Why, look how you treated me on the terrace!"

"Oh, that!"

"Yes,—besides, yesterday evening you said that you would tell me to-day whether you were prepared to do what I suggested. We might have been well away by now."

Leonetta, who was enjoying the dance far too much to regret not being "well away by now," tried to appear absent-minded.

"I didn't say to-day—did I?" she observed.

"Oh, well, if you don't remember."

"I may have done."

"Oh, Leo, you don't really love me. You say you do, but you don't."

Nothing on earth is more wearying than an injured and protesting lover. Better never to have been loved at all than to suffer such persecution. [302]

"My dear boy, what do you want me to do?" she sighed.

"Be as you were three days ago—before——"

"Before what?"

"Before that man came down," Denis ejaculated with the hoarseness of rage.

She smiled, and there was a suggestion of triumph in the glint of her large canines.

"He's cured Cleo, any way," she said.

"A nice cure! The heat becomes too intense for somebody, a quack is called down, the weather cools, as it did twenty-four hours afterwards, and the quack gets the credit."

In another part of the ballroom Lord Henry and Cleopatra were trying to entertain one another, and both of them were perspiring freely from the efforts they were making.

"I think I have at last succeeded in prevailing upon the Tribes to join me on my trip to China," said Lord Henry, hoping that this subject might supply more conversation than the previous one had done.

"What will they do?"

"I must have someone, some man who is conscientious, retiring, and willing to help me and follow my directions without pushing himself forward. And Tribe is exactly the sort,—unassuming, conscientious, and meek."

"But what will become of the Inner Light?" [303]

"I hope I shall have dealt that nonsense the severest blow it has ever received," Lord Henry exclaimed. "At any rate, Mrs. Tribe has done half the fighting for me. She is most anxious to come. Tribe is simply one of those people who have an itch to be doing some 'good work.' Give him the Inner Light or my business in China, he's just as happy. Stephen may come too."

Cleopatra purred, and looked down at her toe.

"This is a beautiful floor, isn't it?" said Lord Henry at last, when he found that the topic of the Tribes also fell completely flat.

"Quite as good as the best in town," Cleopatra replied, her lips quivering slightly. "Sir Joseph had it specially built when he bought the place."

"The band is quite good, too, for a provincial,—for a provincial sort of band," Lord Henry added.

Her eyes were still downcast. "Yes, we haven't had these before. Sir Joseph usually gets a band from Folkestone."

Meanwhile Mrs. Delarayne and Sir Joseph, who together had opened the dance, were having a somewhat acrimonious discussion.

"My dear Edith, I'll speak to him if you wish me to," reiterated the baronet for the third time, "but I think it is a little premature."

"I tell you, Joseph, that if you don't speak to him to-morrow, for certain, and ask him what his intentions are towards Leonetta, I shall pack up the girls' and my own traps, and off we'll go." [304]

This brought Sir Joseph to his senses. "Shall we both do it?" he suggested unctuously.

"Very well, if you prefer it. You see I can't ask Lord Henry to speak to him, otherwise I would."

Sir Joseph almost lost his temper. "Lord Henry, Lord Henry!—my dear Edith, of course not! What 'as it got to do with Lord 'Enry?"

"No, that's what I say; that's why I ask you."

"All right, you and I will have him in the study to-morrow, and we'll ask Leonetta up too, and get the whole thing settled."

"But mind!" said the widow gravely, "I am not at all in favour of it."

When at one A.M. on the following morning, "The Fastness" party had been driven home, Leonetta and Vanessa, much too excited to go to bed, lingered interminably over their undressing, and sat talking until nearly daybreak.

Vanessa was feeling very happy on the whole, because she had had more dances with Denis than she had expected. She was therefore quite prepared to be indulgent towards her school-friend, and to exchange notes without bitterness.

"You had a lovely time with Lord Henry, didn't you?" she said. "You are a flirt, Leo!"

"My dear, it was simply heavenly."

"And wasn't Denis wild!" Vanessa exclaimed, hoping to widen the breach between these two. [305]

"Was he?"

"He was wild enough this afternoon, but when he saw you dancing so often with Lord Henry—well!—"

"What did he say this afternoon,—do tell me!"

"He said you were too young to be always talking all sorts of deep things with a man of forty."

Leonetta laughed. "Well, I like that!" she cried. "I wasn't too young last night, was I?"

"Why, what happened last night?" Vanessa enquired, without revealing a trace of envy in her inscrutable Jewish eyes.

"Oh, well, never mind. I suppose I ought to say the night before last. But, anyhow, Lord Henry is not forty. I asked him. He's only thirty-three."

"Well, I'm only repeating what Denis said," Vanessa observed.

"I know one thing, Lord Henry's jolly clever. Do you know what it is to feel your skin creep all over while anybody's talking to you even about simple subjects?"

"Yes—rather!"

"Well, that's what Lord Henry makes me feel. And what's more, he has a ripping way of putting things scientifically to you. He never flatters you. He proves to you on scientific principles that you are one of the best,—do you understand?"

Vanessa was delighted, and, strange as it may seem, so was Leonetta; an unusual coincidence of sentiment in these two flappers—for Vanessa had not long ceased from being a flapper—which foreboded no good to any one. [306]

The following day broke dull and wet for the inhabitants of Brineweald, and for the first hour of the morning the rain was sufficiently heavy to keep the two households apart.

Lord Henry was therefore thrown on the company of Sir Joseph's party, and he entertained them, or perhaps disturbed them, as they digested their breakfast, by discussing various aspects of English matrimonial arrangements. He had ruminated overnight the principle that Mrs. Delarayne had laid down in regard to Leonetta,—“that she was much too good for Denis Malster,”—and he was beginning to see that it was entirely justified.

“It is a pity,” he declared, addressing Miss Mallowcoid, “that it is almost impossible in this country to arrange matches. I don't see why you can't, but you can't.”

Denis Malster, Guy, and the Tribes dropped their newspapers, and Sir Joseph doing likewise, regarded the young nobleman with a perplexed frown.

“Think of the terrible responsibility!” exclaimed Miss Mallowcoid.

“Yes, but that should not deter us,—surely!” Lord Henry rejoined. “Everything relating to parenthood is responsibility, why shirk that last duty of all?” [307]

“But they wouldn't let us,” Miss Mallowcoid objected.

“Because they don't trust you,” Lord Henry replied. “That must be the reason. They have learned not to trust the mature adult. British parents are either too indolent, or too incompetent to do the thing properly. And the consequence is young people have been trained by tradition to believe that, in the matter of choosing their mates, concerning which they know literally nothing, and are taught less, they must be left to their own silly romantic devices.”

“But look at the results!” said Miss Mallowcoid. “Surely the arrangement works.”

“Does it? That's precisely what I question,” Lord Henry cried.

“You don't mean to say, do you,” Denis Malster enquired, “that you would accept a wife chosen for you by your parents?”

“If they were equipped with the necessary knowledge and insight, most certainly,” Lord Henry retorted.

“So it comes to this,” said Mrs. Tribe, “that our matrimonial system in this country is based upon our parents' lack of the necessary knowledge and insight.”

“Precisely!” Lord Henry exclaimed. “Otherwise they would shoulder the responsibility cheerfully.” [308]

“Nonsense!” snapped Miss Mallowcoid.

“I agree with you,” added Denis, turning a smiling face to the old spinster.

“Why, it's our idea of liberty,—that's what it is!” Miss Mallowcoid averred.

“Yes; the liberty to do and think the wrong thing nine times out of ten,” was Lord Henry's comment.

Denis Malster rose and went to the window. “Well, I should like the weather to clear,” he said, “so that we could set about doing something a little more interesting than this.”

Miss Mallowcoid and Sir Joseph laughed. The open hostility that was growing between Lord Henry and the baronet's secretary enabled them to get many a thrust at the former without so much as grazing their knuckles.

Lord Henry chuckled. “It is curious,” he said quietly, “how doing something, nowadays, is always assumed to be more interesting than thinking something.”

“But you used to be so fond of arguing, Mr. Malster,” Mrs. Tribe suggested with a malicious smile.

Denis grew hot about the ears, and the Incandescent Gerald, who had a forgiving heart, frowned reprovingly at his wife.

“Yes, but one gets frightfully sick of hearing one's country and its institutions constantly run down,” said Denis, casting a malevolent glance at Lord Henry. “My country, right or wrong, is what I say.” [309]

“Hear, hear!” cried Miss Mallowcoid. “That's very true.”

“Yes, and very immoral,” Lord Henry murmured. “It is the motto of decadence. It means that the moment the Union Jack is unfurled, the voice of criticism, the intellect, and the first principles of justice and honest self-analysis, must be stifled.”

“Hullo! there's a streak of blue in the sky, and there's 'The Fastness' *en bloc!*” cried Denis, very much relieved at the sight of his master's car bearing all Mrs. Delarayne's household.

Everybody went on to the terrace to meet them, and one by one, the ladies, with Stephen in the rear, came up the steps in their mackintoshes.

Lord Henry noticed how amply Leonetta's frame filled her smart rain-coat, and yet how sylph-like she appeared by the side of the rather more heavy Jewess.

“Let's go for a walk!” she cried, as she greeted the men.

"Yes!" sang Cleopatra, Vanessa, Stephen, and Guy in chorus.

Denis, wishing the invitation had not been so general, endeavoured to get Leonetta to speak to him for a moment alone, but she sedulously thwarted his manœuvres.

"I'm dead!" exclaimed Mrs. Delarayne. "The dance was too much for me. If anybody killed me now they couldn't justly be charged with taking human life. Don't ask me to stir till lunch." [310]

The younger people, including the Tribes, therefore agreed to defy the weather and to walk to Sandlewood and back before luncheon, and, in a few minutes the whole party was ready: Lord Henry with Cleopatra, Agatha and Stephen in the van, Leonetta and Vanessa with Denis and Mr. Tribe next, and Mrs. Tribe and Guy Tyrrell in the rear.

Nothing of very great interest happened on the walk to Sandlewood, and common subjects of conversation sped backwards and forwards in snatches, from the front to the rear of the party, interrupted only by laughter and occasional barely audible comments, which were intended for the benefit of only one section.

As usual Cleopatra and Lord Henry found it extremely difficult to rise above the barest platitudes in their talk to each other, and Agatha was astonished at the emptiness of their conversation. It was partly owing to this fact that Lord Henry would occasionally start a subject, like a wave, rolling back over the heads of those behind him, so that the acute embarrassment that he and Cleopatra felt in each other's presence might be slightly relieved by the unconscious participation of the others in their *tête-à-tête*.

Cleopatra was perfectly well now, and appeared supremely happy. But she still kept her eyes on the ground, and responded almost with nervous agitation to Lord Henry's remarks. It was as if she felt their perfunctory nature, their conspicuous jejuneness, and nevertheless, like him, was utterly unable to broach the discussion of more serious things. [311]

Stephen, too, was a little disappointed with his hero, and wondered what could have come over him, that he should suddenly have grown as commonplace as Sir Joseph himself. He constantly looked back with curious longing, as the laughter from behind became more persistent, and it was only hope still undefeated that made him cling to Lord Henry's side.

When a man on a walk calls the attention of his companions to the condition of the hedges; when he notices that the road wants mending, or that the ditches are either clean or overgrown; when, moreover, he comments on the early discolouration of the leaves of certain distant trees, it can clearly be due only to one of two causes: either his conversation never rises above the level of such subjects, or else, some influence is active which has so severely shaken his composure as to leave him utterly destitute of thought.

If women divine, even half-consciously, that the latter is the reason, they are, however, patient and tolerant, where his temporary stupidity is concerned. But Stephen was not a woman, neither was Agatha half-consciously aware of the true cause of Lord Henry's transient dullness.

On the way home there was a general shuffling of the members of the party, and to Lord Henry's relief, Leonetta, Mrs. Tribe, and Guy Tyrrell sprang eagerly to his side, while Agatha, Cleopatra, and Stephen joined Denis, Vanessa, and the Incandescent Gerald in front. [312]

Cleopatra's persistent and yet unaffected affability to Denis had now become one of the added terrors of Brineweald to this unfortunate young man, and what struck him as particularly strange was that the more animated and hilarious became the conversation behind, between Lord Henry and Leonetta, the more perfectly natural and cheerful did Cleopatra appear to grow. He had done his utmost to convey to Leonetta on the walk out that he insisted on her returning with him at her side. He hoped that the girl had seen what he himself thought he perceived—that is to say, a growing intimacy between Lord Henry and her sister,—and that this would induce her to do as he desired. Leonetta, however, was at times unaccountably dense. She had escaped from him at Sandlewood, and, to his utter bewilderment, the sound of her voice now, in animated converse with Lord Henry, seemed to leave Cleopatra entirely unperturbed.

Had Cleopatra hopes?

Truth to tell, Cleopatra had more than hopes; she was partially convinced that these were confirmed. She could be affable to Denis, she could be kind to Leonetta,—aye, she could even have embraced her worst tormentor now, and with sincere friendship, because she was supremely and profoundly happy. Even if Lord Henry did not feel anything for her,—and his extraordinary behaviour rather invalidated that alternative,—she had at least encountered a man who rose to the standard of her girlhood's ideal, who made her feel that hitherto she had not been wrong in experiencing a faint feeling of dissatisfaction about the other men she had met, and who therefore consoled her for having waited. And, with this conviction in her heart, she was able at once to classify Denis Malster among the "impossibles." She saw now how much more her recent trouble had been the outcome of wounded vanity, than of thwarted passion, and she was able to treat her former admirer with a lavish good humour and friendliness that completely froze him. [313]

She too caught snatches of the conversation behind. She heard how animated and hilarious it was. And, comparing it with Lord Henry's attitude not thirty minutes previously, she felt convinced that it was she this time, and not her sister, who had conquered. As she came to this conclusion, a strange thrill, utterly new and inexperienced theretofore, pervaded her whole body,

until the titillation of her nerves became almost painful, and a fierce longing for the bewildering personality at her back suddenly possessed her as a conscious and uncontrollable desire.

When they were half-way out of the wood Leonetta suddenly announced that she had dropped a bangle. She and Lord Henry had been losing ground for some time, and having separated themselves from Mrs. Tribe and Guy Tyrrell, had fallen much to the rear. [314]

"Are you sure you had it with you?"

"Absolutely certain," she exclaimed.

"Let's go back then," said Lord Henry.

They turned and began to retrace their steps along the path that led back to Sandlewood village, keeping their eyes on the ground as they went.

Suddenly a cry from Guy made them stop.

"What are you two up to?" he shouted. "You'll be late for lunch."

"All right, you go back and tell them to start without us!" cried Lord Henry. "Leonetta's lost her bangle."

Guy nodded, and continued on his way homeward with Mrs. Tribe.

"That's a nice thing!" Lord Henry observed.

"Of course, they'll think I've done it on purpose!" Leonetta rejoined, smiling roguishly.

Lord Henry smiled too. She certainly seemed to understand that her character was not incompatible with such a conclusion.

They walked on thus for about five minutes, and then suddenly Lord Henry espied the ornament lying in the mud.

"Oh, I'm so thankful to you, Lord Henry,—you've no idea!" she cried. "I should never have found it myself."

Lord Henry was facing the homeward path, and she had her back turned to it. With great care he removed the offending particles of mud from the recovered treasure, and then fastened it on her arm. At the same moment, at a bow-shot from him, he saw Denis approaching at a rapid pace through the wood. Evidently he was coming in the hope of finding the bangle, and behind him followed Vanessa and the Incandescent Gerald. [315]

It seemed as if Fate itself had been active here, and had laid this unique opportunity in Lord Henry's hands. It was certainly too good to lose, and feeling perfectly certain that Denis could not know that his approach had been perceived, resolved immediately upon a drastic, but as he thought, conclusive measure.

It was unfortunate that the Incandescent Gerald, whose sole object in coming was probably his besetting desire to "do good work," as Lord Henry put it, was also in sight. But there are certain risks that a good strategist must run.

"Oh, you don't know how thankful I am!" Leonetta cried again.

Lord Henry smiled. There was no time to lose. "I think that almost deserves a kiss," he said, placing an arm round her waist.

She looked up; her expression spelt consent, and he held her for some seconds in his arms.

"Well!" she cried, releasing herself; "it seems to me I go from bad to worse."

He looked in the direction of home, and, as he feared, Vanessa, Denis, and the Incandescent Gerald had turned their backs, and were racing as hard as they could towards Brineweald Park.

CHAPTER XVII

"Are you sure it's quite clean?" asked Lord Henry, catching hold of her hand and examining the bangle closely, so as to retain her a few moments longer.

"What does it matter?" Leonetta cried. "Really, I'm sure it's all right."

He looked up. There was no sign of the three fugitives, and he allowed her to turn round.

"Now we must step it out, I'm afraid," he said.

Leonetta laughed gleefully. "What fun, isn't it?" she chirped. "I wonder how it fell off!"

"Simply one of those strange accidents which go to determine the course of our lives," he observed calmly. "By accidentally throwing a tennis ball further than he intended, Sir Sidney Smith was ultimately able to decide the fate of Napoleon's campaign in Syria; the British Throne

was once lost by just such an accident as this, and Kellermann's charge at Marengo was of the same order."

She looked up into his thoughtful face. His self-possession was one of the most wonderful features about him.

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed. "I hardly know whether you are serious or not."

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"Have you never heard," he pursued, "of the story of that priceless Arabian pearl, which, after it had been missing for months was ultimately returned to its owner by a bird? Meanwhile, however, the owner in question had been robbed of all he possessed, and the pearl itself would certainly have gone too, if it had not been accidentally hidden where only the bird could have found it. One day the bird was killed, the treasure was found in its nest, and the owner was restored to a state of affluence, of which, if the pearl had not originally been lost, he must have despaired till the end of his days.

"You are walking fast," said Leonetta breathlessly.

"Yes,—do you mind?"

"We shan't be so very late."

"I should prefer not to be late," said Lord Henry, "I know Sir Joseph studies punctuality."

Truth to tell, the young nobleman's imagination had for the last few minutes been busy with more vital matters than the framing of fresh contributions to the Arabian Nights' Entertainment, and he was feeling none too well at ease. It had occurred to him that his drastic action might have more disastrous effects than merely nipping Denis's passion in the bud, and he wished to rejoin the company at Brineweald at the earliest possible moment.

"I assure you, Lord Henry, that you can take it much more easily," cried Leonetta.

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"Let me give you my arm," he suggested. "That will help you."

She took his arm, and he proceeded to tell her how probably a chance unpleasant word dropped by Charles I. to Lady Carlisle had ultimately led to the Grand Rebellion.

Meanwhile, Denis Malster, panting more with fury than from the violent exercise he had taken, had reached the terrace of Brineweald Park, and was looking about him for someone to whom he could confide his incriminating intelligence against Lord Henry.

"All alone?" cried Mrs. Delarayne, coming towards him. "My word, how hot you look!"

"Vanessa and Tribe are close behind," he said; "they'll be here in a minute. Where are the others?"

"Cleopatra, Agatha, Agnes, and Guy have just come in," replied the widow. "But where's Leonetta?"

"She's somewhere," he said indifferently. "Lost her bangle or something." And he passed on, making towards the smoking-room, the door of which was open.

Evidently Mrs. Delarayne was not to be his confidante, and, as he vanished behind the glass doors, she wondered what his strange manner could signify.

There was no one in the smoking-room, and he moved on into the lounge.

Sir Joseph was there, sipping an *aperitif* with Guy, and sitting around them were Miss Mallowcoid and the first arrivals, still clad in their mackintoshes. They were all discussing the arrangement for some rabbit shooting in the afternoon. Sir Joseph wanted the rabbits for his men in Lombard Street.

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Cleopatra and everyone looked up as Denis entered.

"Well?" enquired Guy, "did you find the bangle?"

Denis braced himself for a great effort and, smiling with as much good humour as he could muster, helped himself to a glass of sherry.

"Yes, what about the bangle?" Stephen exclaimed.

"When I last saw them," Denis observed with creditable composure, "they were too busy kissing to be able to find any bangle."

As he pronounced these words he glanced furtively at Cleopatra, but although he noticed that she winced, he was not a little surprised to see how collected and serene she remained. Did she perhaps think he was lying?

"They were what?" cried Miss Mallowcoid.

"Too busy, kissing,—kissing," Sir Joseph repeated.

The spinster rose.

"Rubbish!" cried Stephen. "He's only joking, Miss Mallowcoid."

"Of course!" interjected Mrs. Tribe.

"Well, what of it?" Sir Joseph exclaimed, "even if they were."

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"But who, who were kissing?" the old spinster demanded, going up to Denis.

Denis laid his empty glass upon the tray and walked quietly out. Miss Mallowcoid evidently taking his departure as a hint, followed close behind.

In the smoking-room he turned and faced her.

"What is all this about?" she enquired.

"Well, I don't know what you think," said Denis with tremendous gravity; "but really, when a man close on forty, not only entertains a child with all kinds of unsuitable conversation, but also inveigles her into the woods alone in order to kiss her, it seems to me things have really gone far enough."

"You don't mean Lord Henry, do you?" ejaculated Miss Mallowcoid, clasping her hard white hands in horror.

"I'm sorry to say I do!" Denis rejoined just as Vanessa and the Incandescent Gerald, who had also returned home, came in through the smoking-room and vanished into the lounge.

"Oh, but this it monstrous!" cried Miss Mallowcoid. "Does her mother know?"

"No, I've said nothing," said Denis, as the gong went for lunch. "If I hadn't been pressed I shouldn't have said anything even now."

"Oh, but it was very noble of you to tell us," said Miss Mallowcoid, pondering a moment what she could do. "Very noble. Thank you, thank you, Denis!"

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Meanwhile Vanessa and the Incandescent Gerald had naturally been questioned by Sir Joseph, and Lord Henry's champion, Stephen; and it was not until the Incandescent Gerald had admitted very solemnly and reluctantly that he was afraid he did see Lord Henry embrace Leonetta, that Stephen was appeased, or rather silenced.

"Well, I'm surprised, that's all," said the youth, and as he said this, Cleopatra, very pale and a little unsteady on her feet, glided quietly out of the room.

She had disbelieved it until the end. It was only when the incorruptible Gerald Tribe had admitted it that she also had been convinced.

In a few minutes the whole party, except Cleopatra, was assembled round the luncheon table. Lord Henry and Leonetta had returned, and what with her joy over her recovered bangle, and her pride in Lord Henry's recently revealed affection, few could have looked more guiltless and more free from care than the heroine of the morning's adventure.

Miss Mallowcoid ate little. Her faith in the desirability of human life in general had been rudely shaken. She therefore kept her eyes fastened sadly on the immoral couple, and wondered how two such sinful beings could eat and talk so heartily.

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Lord Henry, however, was not quite as bright as his fellow sinner, for the dramatic absence of Cleopatra from the luncheon table made him feel somewhat apprehensive. From the way in which Mrs. Delarayne assured him that it was only a passing *migraine* that was keeping her daughter away, he was led to hope that it was truly only one of those curious accidents, or coincidences, concerning which he had been discoursing to Leonetta on the way home; but he was not devoid of sensitiveness, and something in the manner of all present, except Mrs. Delarayne, led him to fear the worst.

He was not at all alarmed by Denis's haggard and angry mask, for that he had expected. What he would like to have known was why Miss Mallowcoid and Sir Joseph regarded him so strangely, and why Stephen looked so sad.

Denis scarcely addressed a word to Leonetta, and whenever he was constrained to vouchsafe a laconic answer to any question from her, he glanced significantly at Miss Mallowcoid for her approval.

After lunch Lord Henry conveyed to Mrs. Delarayne that he would like to speak to her alone, and she followed him out on to the terrace.

"I want to see Cleopatra,—do you think I might?" he said.

"I'll go and ask her," replied the widow.

"By-the-bye," he added, "have you been told anything about Leonetta and myself in the wood this morning?"

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"No," she replied, with perfect honesty.

"Well, whatever you may hear," he said, "trust entirely to me."

She smiled approvingly, and went off in search of Cleopatra.

Lord Henry joined the others. He was certainly very much relieved to hear that Mrs. Delarayne had been told nothing. Did that mean that Cleopatra also had been told nothing? He noticed, however, that as soon as he came up to the group consisting of Miss Mallowcoid, Denis, Sir Joseph, and Guy, their conversation stopped.

"Who's going rabbit-shooting?" he demanded.

"We all are!" cried Mrs. Tribe, coming towards him from another part of the terrace; "isn't it fun?"

Mrs. Tribe was the only member of the party, besides Leonetta, who was still perfectly affable to him, but even in her eyes, he thought he saw the suggestion of strained good cheer.

"May I come?" he asked.

"Of course!" cried Leonetta.

"I shall want you for a minute or two, remember, Denis," Sir Joseph observed. "Mrs. Delarayne has told you, I think."

"Yes, sir," said Denis.

At this moment Mrs. Delarayne reappeared. She looked a trifle anxious and motioned to Lord Henry to join her.

"Well?" he enquired.

"I'm afraid she must have gone home," she said. "She can't be found."

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"Can't be found?" cried Lord Henry, with a note of deep alarm in his voice. Could she possibly have been among those who that morning had returned to help find the bangle, and he had not seen her, though she had seen him?

"Oh, I shouldn't worry," continued Mrs. Delarayne. "She's gone home, that's all. Don't look so dreadfully concerned!"

"Do you really think so?" he enquired. He felt uneasy notwithstanding. The coincidence, if it were a coincidence, was singular in the extreme. And yet he could not believe that Denis had told her, and Vanessa and Tribe had surely not had time to do so. He had seen them ascend the steps of the terrace. Besides,—why should they? Nevertheless, the predicament was an awkward one. He had counted on speaking to Cleopatra directly after lunch.

"Would you mind if I went to 'The Fastness'?" he asked.

"Certainly not. Go by all means," Mrs. Delarayne rejoined. "But is it as urgent as all that?"

"It's very urgent," said Lord Henry.

She scrutinised him for a moment in silence. She had always had a dark presentiment that her daughters would come between her and this man.

Lord Henry turned back into the house, fetched his hat and rain-coat, and in a moment was striding rapidly towards the Brineweald gate.

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The shooting party was to leave at three o'clock, and two of the under-keepers with the ferrets were to meet them at the edge of the wood at a quarter past. It was now half-past two. Sir Joseph was enjoying his afternoon nap. Mrs. Delarayne, closeted in the library, was listening to her sister's indictment of Lord Henry, and the others were chatting on the terrace.

Denis, who had a pretty shrewd suspicion of what his interview with Sir Joseph and Mrs. Delarayne portended, looked anxiously at his watch and rose. He signed to Leonetta that he would like her to join him, but as she made no effort to move, he went over to her, and leaning over the back of her chair, whispered that he would be glad if she would take a short stroll with him.

She rose laboriously, as if he were placing himself under a tremendous obligation to her, by making her go to so much trouble; and, after assuring the others that she would not be long, followed Denis with that jerky mutinous gait in which each footfall is an angry stamp;—it is characteristic of women all the world over, when they are induced to do something of which they disapprove. For she was wondering where Lord Henry could be, and feared lest, by leaving the terrace, she would miss him when he returned.

"You know we start off at three," she said to Denis, as she caught him up.

"Yes, I know," he replied gruffly.

"Well, we haven't much time, have we?"

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"You're not going far, are you?"

"Only to the rose-garden," he snapped. "Don't be alarmed! I shan't keep you longer than I can help."

He lighted a cigarette. Vaguely he felt that some such subsidiary occupation might prove helpful.

"In a moment of pardonable madness," he began, "the night before last, when I rather lost my head in my passion, I made a proposition to you which I should now like to recall."

"Oh," she said.

"I don't mean that it was not sincere," he pursued, "or that I was not moved by an unalterable feeling. I mean that it was not serious enough."

"Not serious enough?" she repeated.

"No, perhaps it was not quite the right thing, either," he said. "And I'm very sorry."

"Oh, that's all right," she rejoined cheerfully.

"Well, it isn't," he observed. "Because, Leo, I seriously wanted you, and I want you still. And I ought to have asked you to become engaged to me in the proper and ordinary way, instead of what I did say."

She was silent. Her head was bowed, and she kicked one or two stones along as she walked.

He caught hold of her hand. "I want you to forget what I said the night before last," he continued, "and to ascribe it all to the madness of my feelings. I want you to say, too, that I may consider,—that from now onwards I mean,—that we are properly engaged." [327]

Still she made no reply.

"Come, Leo, you're not hesitating, are you? Won't you marry me?"

She stopped, released her hand from his, and averted her gaze.

"Say you'll marry me, Leo! So that I can tell them in a minute or two that you have consented. Do!"

"Whatever made you think of this?" she exclaimed fretfully.

"I have been thinking of it for some time. I mean it truly," he stammered.

"But I thought you loved my sister!"

Denis retreated a step or two and regarded the girl for a moment in mystified silence.

He was staggered. This piece of brazen audacity on her part petrified him, and his face betrayed his speechless astonishment.

"I really did, Denis. I thought you loved Cleo."

"But then," he gasped, "what—what have you and I been doing all this time?"

"When?"

"Why, the day before yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that!—in fact ever since I came down here?"

"Oh, I thought you were simply having a good time," she protested, looking perfectly guileless and charming.

"Well!" he exclaimed, choking with mingled stupefaction and rage, "I've never heard anything ___" [328]

"I did really," she interrupted. "I thought you were only flirting."

"You let me go far enough to believe anything," he objected, this time with a savour of moral indignation.

"I thought it was too far to believe anything," was her retort.

"Haven't you any feeling for me, then?" he cried, utterly nonplussed.

She dug the toe of her shoe into the ground, and watched the operation thoughtfully. "Not in that way—no."

"What?—do you allow anybody to hug you then?"

"No, of course not!" she replied. "I did like you, and I like you still. But not in that way."

"What do you mean—not in that way?" he demanded a little angrily.

"Oh, I don't know," she replied, beginning to swing her arms with boredom; "I mean that I hadn't looked upon you as a possible husband, I suppose."

He flushed with vexation.

"Why not?" he enquired in scolding tones.

She glanced into his face for the first time during the interview. She saw the bloated look of mortified vanity in his eyes, and she was a trifle nauseated.

"Let's be getting back," she suggested.

He turned reluctantly in the direction of the house.

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"You have not spoken the truth, Leo," he remarked in the tense manner of one who is making a violent effort to moderate his fury.

"I'm certainly trying to," she said.

"Shall I tell you the truth?" he snarled.

"No—please don't!"

He was silent for a moment, swallowing down his wrath.

"It's that man!" he said at last. "That's who it is. If I had asked you three days ago you would—you would have consented. It's that man!"

She cast a glance askance at him. He was boiling with mortification now, and perhaps nothing makes even the noblest features look more mean than the smart of a rebuff.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're driving at," she said calmly.

He laughed bitterly. But his cheeks were pricking him, and the garden danced before his eyes.

"It's Lord Henry, of course," he sneered. "He has conquered your affections meanwhile."

"Don't be ridiculous!" she said.

"Well, shall I go and tell him for you this minute that you are perfectly indifferent to him?"

She made an effort to compose her features. "You can if you like," she replied.

"No, that wouldn't suit your little game, would it?"

"I have no little game," she snapped.

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"No, it's big game,—the son of a marquis!"

They were at the foot of the terrace. He had succeeded in infuriating her. Her eyes shot fire and she stamped her foot. "That's simply vulgar!" she cried, loud enough for those on the terrace to hear. "You're vulgar!"

He retreated hastily to the steps that led to the drawing-room, whence he regarded her with a malevolent scowl. He could have said so much more to her, so many more wounding things. It was intolerable to be called "vulgar," when one had controlled one's wrath as he had done.

Meanwhile she, bracing herself for a dignified entrée, walked slowly up the steps, and faced the others who were just about to move off to the woods.

"Why, I haven't a gun!" she exclaimed, as she joined them.

"Here you are!" said Stephen. "I've brought one for you."

She smiled gratefully at him. "That was thoughtful of you," she said.

And Stephen, feeling somehow that, since her affair with Lord Henry that morning, Leonetta had gone over at one step to that vast majority of worldly females who, in his boyish imagination, appeared to him mistresses of the great secrets of life, blushed slightly and turned his head away.

CHAPTER XVIII

[331]

Sir Joseph, having risen from his post-prandial snooze and found Mrs. Delarayne, had led that lady to the drawing-room, and was now engaged in trying to convince her of the general wisdom of all that she had been hearing from her sister.

"I tell you, my dear Edith," he said, "that I have considerable difficulty in believing that your Lord Henry is the great man you say he is."

"Of course you have," she cried. "It is always difficult to believe that a really great man could ever deign to cross our threshold, much less shake hands with us! We feel we are too mediocre for that!"

"I don't mean that!" he said, shaking his head helplessly, although he had not understood her real meaning.

"Joseph,"—Mrs. Delarayne began seriously,—"shall I tell you what it is? You are jealous."

He laughed uproariously. "Oh, Edith, it takes you to say a thing like that! Absurd! Absurd!" Then

he added seriously. "But really, I have heard things about Lord Henry that have compelled me to lose my respect for him."

"Who told you?"

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"Denis, for one."

"Denis is jealous too!" cried the widow.

"Now, my dear, do be reasonable! Are we all jealous of Lord Henry then?"

"I should think it most highly probable—yes."

"Well, anyway," Sir Joseph continued, frowning darkly, "Denis assured me on his oath,—on his oath, understand, that Lord Henry, this son of a noble marquis, this wonderful nerve specialist, this reformer of the world, this——"

"Yes, all right, Joseph. You don't shine at that sort of oratory. What has Lord Henry done?"

"He has not only constantly engaged Leonetta in unsuitable conversation, but to-day, he actually kissed her!"

Mrs. Delarayne laughed. "I told you Denis was jealous," she exclaimed. "Knights errant always are. I've always suspected that St. George was jealous of the dragon."

Nevertheless, while Sir Joseph's slow brain was working this out, she snatched a moment to ponder how her noble young friend could possibly have found it necessary to go to such unexpected extremes.

"Don't be unfair, Edith," Sir Joseph objected. "Denis was quite right to tell us. Lord Henry is much too old to kiss a child like Leonetta."

"You mean he is just old enough."

The baronet waved his hands in a mystified manner before him. "I cannot understand you," he replied. [333]

It was at this point that Denis burst in upon them.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "you wanted to discuss something with me, I believe," he added, addressing Sir Joseph.

"Yes, we did,—that is to say, Mrs. Delarayne," stammered the baronet. He was always a little uncomfortable when he felt constrained to be amiable to one of his staff.

"We both wished to speak to you, Denis," said Mrs. Delarayne. "Sit down, will you."

Denis sat down and folded his arms,—a position Mrs. Delarayne had never seen him assume before.

"It is about Leonetta," she added.

"Oh, yes," said Denis. He was completely dazed. He had just felt that "one touch of nature" which nowadays sets the whole world's teeth on edge,—Eve completely and cheerfully unscrupulous, Eve wild and untamed, cruel and heartless while her deepest passions are still unengaged,—and he felt like one bewitched.

"We wish to ask you," began Sir Joseph pompously.

"Please let me speak," interrupted the widow. "We have noticed,—nobody could have helped noticing,—that since you have been down here you have been paying my daughter Leo unusually marked attention."

"But surely you have also noticed—" Denis objected. [334]

"One moment!" cried Mrs. Delarayne. "I do not say that Leo isn't attractive. I know she's exceedingly attractive,—so attractive that, I understand, even Lord Henry appears to have fallen a victim to her charm."

"Yes, and perhaps you have also heard—" the young man muttered with some agitation.

"I have heard everything," said the widow. "All I suggest is, that since Leo is still a child, and has not perhaps the strength to bear a heavy heart strain as easily as a girl of Cleopatra's age, we should like any attitude you choose to adopt towards her to be made perfectly plain from the start. Do you understand, Denis? I don't wish to be unfriendly."

"I can assure you," protested Denis, who had been rendered none too comfortable by the sting in Mrs. Delarayne's last remarks, "that all along I have always been in deadly earnest, I have always ——"

"Hush!" cried the masterful matron. "I don't want to hear now what your sentiments are. All I want you to do is to be quite plain to my little daughter. Do you want to become engaged to her, or not?"

"I do most earnestly," said the young man, "but——"

"But what?" growled Sir Joseph sternly.

"She now says she has no feeling whatever for me," Denis explained.

The baronet turned upon his secretary, scowled, and then regarded Mrs. Delarayne in astonishment. "No feeling whatever?" he repeated. [335]

"Has she actually told you this?" Mrs. Delarayne demanded with tell-tale eagerness.

"Yes, this minute," Denis replied. "I can hardly believe it," he added with the usual ingenuousness of all vain people. "I can only think that a momentary infatuation for Lord Henry, who has spared no pains to——"

"Do you mean that you have asked her to marry you and she's refused?" Sir Joseph enquired, observing the young man's painful discomfiture.

"Yes, this very minute."

"Quite positively?" Mrs. Delarayne demanded.

"As far as I can make out—yes," Denis replied. He was so completely bewildered by the rebuff, that the incredulity of his two seniors made it seem all the more impossible to him.

"Pon my soul!" Sir Joseph exclaimed, utterly abashed.

He could get no further. The prospects of getting Mrs. Delarayne's daughters married appeared to grow gloomier and gloomier.

"Then that's settled, you see, Sir Joseph," Mrs. Delarayne remarked. She had been induced to have this interview with Denis against her will. Her sister and the baronet had prevailed over her better judgment, and now that she saw the issue of it was to be more satisfactory than she could possibly have hoped, she had difficulty in concealing her pleasure. [336]

At this point the report of a fire-arm made them all turn in the direction of Sandlewood.

"They seem to have got a rabbit before reaching the woods," Sir Joseph observed. "That sounded extraordinarily near."

Mrs. Delarayne was silent. She was obviously making an effort not to appear too highly gratified by the news she had heard, and was regarding Denis thoughtfully,—her eyebrows slightly raised, and her fingers drumming lightly on the arms of her chair.

"Well, then," she repeated, "I'm afraid that's settled,—isn't it, Sir Joseph?"

Another report was heard, and Sir Joseph rose.

"I wonder what the deuce they're doing!" he exclaimed going to the window.

"Probably got a stray rabbit, or a hare, on their way," suggested Denis.

Sir Joseph turned from the window to face his secretary.

"That's very odd. So she refused you?" he said.

"Absolutely."

"But you shouldn't despair over one refusal," he exclaimed, casting a glance full of meaning at Mrs. Delarayne. "A man doesn't lie down under one reverse of that sort."

He chuckled, and glanced backwards and forwards, first at his secretary and then at Mrs. Delarayne, hoping she would understand his profound implication. [337]

"You must 'ave more perseverance," he added.

Denis remembered the word "vulgar." He remembered the concentrated fury and contempt that the flapper had put into the expression, and he instinctively felt that it was hopeless.

"I think what I should like to do," he said, "is to leave here, if you will allow me to; finish my holiday elsewhere, and see whether, meanwhile, a change may not come over Leonetta. If it doesn't, then there's an end of it."

"You mean to leave here at once?" enquired the baronet.

"Yes," interposed Mrs. Delarayne; and then she proceeded to explain to Sir Joseph what Denis meant, and declared his scheme to be eminently dignified and proper. It met with her entire approval.

A discussion followed as to the best way of explaining to the others the reason of Denis's sudden departure, and various suggestions were made. Sir Joseph volunteered to be able to account for the young man's absence on the score of business. Denis himself inclined to the view that some family trouble would provide the best excuse. His mother might be ill. But Mrs. Delarayne, anxious above all to avoid the sort of explanation that might provoke dangerous sympathies for Denis in any female heart, agreed that a business excuse would be best.

It was therefore decided that Sir Joseph would receive a sudden summons from London, that Denis would be dispatched to attend to the business, and that what happened after that the rest [338]

of the party would not need to be told.

All at once a commotion on the terrace, in which the clamour of a score of different voices, all making different suggestions at the same time, mingled with the sound of heavy footfalls, caused the party in the drawing-room to repair to the scene of the disturbance.

"What on earth's the matter?" cried Mrs. Delarayne aghast, as she beheld the group advancing slowly from the top of the steps. "Anybody hurt?"

"Yes," said Agatha coming towards her, and looking very much agitated. "Stephen has been shot in the shoulder."

"Nothing serious!" shouted the injured youth, as he came forward on the arms of Guy and the Incandescent Gerald.

"Has a doctor been sent for?" Sir Joseph demanded.

"Yes, one of the under-keepers went to the garage, and a car left a moment ago," said Agatha.

"But how did it happen?" cried Mrs. Delarayne shrilly.

"Lord Henry did it," said Miss Mallowcoid, nodding her head resentfully, as if to imply to her sister that now there could no longer be any question as to who had been right all this time in regard to their estimate of the young nobleman.

"Lord Henry?" Mrs. Delarayne repeated, utterly confused.

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"Yes, he did it by accident," Mrs. Tribe explained.

"Lord Henry!" the baronet ejaculated under his breath. "Damn Lord Henry!" And Mrs. Delarayne, Miss Mallowcoid, and Denis regarded him each in their own peculiar way.

Stephen was laid on Mrs. Delarayne's *chaise-longue* on the terrace. Brandy was fetched and Mrs. Delarayne knelt down beside him. His shoulder was already neatly bandaged, but his torn shirt, his waistcoat, and his sleeve, were saturated with blood.

"Is it painful, dear lad?" Mrs. Delarayne enquired.

"No, not so very," he replied.

"He only says that, of course!" Miss Mallowcoid averred in a whisper to Sir Joseph. "But you can see he's in agony." The spinster was evidently desirous of making the case look as black as possible.

"Who bandaged him up like that?" Sir Joseph asked of Guy.

"Lord Henry."

Sir Joseph tossed his head. It seemed as if he must never hear the last of that name. "But where is he?" he enquired.

"I can't think," said Mrs. Tribe. "As soon as he had sent someone after a doctor and bandaged Stephen up, he ran away from us."

Sir Joseph repeated "ran away from you," with an air of complete mystification, and Miss Mallowcoid raised her brows more than ever, as if to imply that she, at least, expected nothing else.

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"Yes," added Leonetta, "he left us and went in the direction of 'The Fastness'."

"I wonder where that jackass has gone for a doctor?" exclaimed the baronet after a while. "Did you see the car go?"

"Yes," whispered Leonetta, "the car left long before we had brought Stephen here. We wanted it to drop him first, but he insisted on walking."

Then in the distance the sound of a familiar motor-horn was heard, and through the trees could be seen the glittering brass-work of a car. The baronet's head chauffeur in smart mufti was driving,—he had been caught just as he was setting out for an evening in Folkestone,—and the car darted along the drive, and gracefully took all the corners in a manner that gladdened the hearts of the anxious spectators on the terrace.

A grating of wheels on the ground, a spasmodic lunge forward, and the vehicle stopped dead at the foot of the steps.

An elderly gentleman descended from the car.

"Thank goodness!" cried Mrs. Delarayne, "it's Dr. Thackeray!"

It is now necessary to turn the clock back about three quarters of an hour, in order to follow the movements of Lord Henry from the moment when he left the terrace of Brineweald Park.

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It was a sure instinct that made him lose no time in trying to discover Cleopatra's whereabouts; for, from the very first, the coincidence of her sudden indisposition, following upon his behaviour with Leonetta in the wood that morning, had struck him as a little too strange to be accepted without suspicion. She had looked so well the whole morning, and had appeared to be enjoying the walk quite as much as any of the others. Knowing, moreover, the passionate girl she was, he could only fear the worst if she had been told anything; and, since any disaster that might follow would be due to a miscalculation on his part, he felt it incumbent upon him to do everything in his power to repair the mistake he had made.

In that brief moment in the woods with Leonetta, he had wished to achieve but one object,—to show Denis plainly and finally that Leonetta could not be his. He wished so unmistakably to register this fact upon Denis's mind, that he felt it would simplify matters enormously if that young man could, with his own eyes, see something which, while it would abate his ardour, would also show him how easy and how devoid of dignity had been the game he had been playing for the last fortnight at Brineweald.

The sudden return of Denis to help to find the bangle had been the opportunity. Unfortunately, Lord Henry felt that he had not reckoned sufficiently with two possibilities, each of which, in itself, was serious enough: on the one hand, Denis's return to Brineweald long before himself, and on the other, the confirmation that Vanessa and Tribe might offer to Denis's report, if Denis chose to tell. First of all, in the few seconds he had had to consider the matter, it had struck him as extremely improbable that Denis would either have the time or the inclination to tell Cleopatra direct, before he himself had had a chance of speaking to her; and, secondly, he had doubted whether Vanessa and Tribe could actually have seen him embracing Leonetta.

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In these circumstances he had taken the risk which he felt he was entitled to take in war; but apparently,—at least so he feared,—he had miscalculated. He had failed to take into account Denis's mad fury, and the extremes to which this might possibly drive him.

He had not once been mistaken in his estimate of the kind of human life with which he was experimenting; for he had correctly anticipated the probable effects that the knowledge of his action would have upon Cleopatra. He had, however, certainly staked upon luck, and, this time, it appeared to have turned against him.

Thus he was tormented by the gravest qualms as he made his way to "The Fastness," and when Wilmott informed him that Miss Cleopatra had not been seen since she had gone with the rest of Mrs. Delarayne's party in Sir Joseph's car, early that morning, his worst fears were confirmed.

"Would you mind looking all over the house?" he said. "It is just possible she may have come in without your noticing."

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The girl obeyed and even invited him to join in the search. Their efforts, however, revealed no trace of Cleopatra.

Lord Henry was at his wits' end. He began to be filled by a secret feeling of guilt, a feeling that he had gone too far. He had been foolhardy; he had exceeded his duty. Nothing remained to fortify him, in his present tragic dilemma, but the conviction that he had acted all along as if the affair, far from being a matter simply for Cleopatra's family, had been his personal business, his intimate concern.

He thought of the beach. It did not strike him as probable that the girl would have gone thither in her solitary despair. However, he wished to allow for every possible chance. He therefore went to the grocer's at Brineweald and telephoned to Stonechurch, to the establishment that provided hot sea-baths on the front. Had they heard of any disaster among the bathers on the beach during the last two hours? Had any disaster been reported from the lonely portions of the shore? Would someone please go out to enquire? In a few minutes he received a reassuring reply, and he left the shop. In his present state of mind, however, even if he had been told that she had attempted suicide in the waves and been rescued, at least this intelligence would have provided something definite to which to cling, and he would have felt almost grateful.

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He enquired of one or two cottagers whether they had seen the elder Miss Delarayne at all that day; but again his efforts were entirely fruitless.

Her rescue might be a matter of minutes, perhaps of seconds, and yet it seemed as if he could do nothing. Never had he gazed upon a peaceful village street with feelings of such tumultuous woe. Helplessness and impotence are intolerable at any time, but they are the cruellest torture when a dear human life seems to be at stake.

It occurred to him that she might have gone to Sandlewood, which was the nearest station, and where the stationmaster would be sure to have seen her. She might already have taken the train in the London direction, or to Shorncliffe or Folkestone. In any case he was so deeply convinced that her disappearance portended tragedy, that he began to wonder whether he ought not at once to inform the police.

Had he been less involved in the affair, himself, he would have done so immediately; but his hopes of finding some trace of her at Sandlewood station induced him to wait. If he failed again, he would inform the authorities.

Thus resolved, he returned as quickly as possible to Brineweald Park, in order to take advantage of the shortest cut to Sandlewood, and it was just as he was on the point of crossing the fringe of

the wood, that he saw about a hundred and fifty yards to his left, the whole of the shooting party pick up the under-keepers, and proceed in the same direction as himself.

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There was not a sound among the trees. The air was still. The ground was moist with the recent rain, and as he strode silently along one of the narrow footpaths, he could not help from time to time glancing half-shamefully at the sublimely careless party in the distance, on whom he feared, through his high-handed action of the morning, some grief or disgrace was almost bound to descend before nightfall.

He noticed that Leonetta, with her customary eagerness and high spirits, kept a few paces ahead of the rest, and that she constantly looked about in all directions, as if in search of something or somebody. He half feared that she would catch sight of him, and he therefore repeatedly stooped, or halted behind any opportune screen of brambles, until she turned her head in another direction. These manœuvres unfortunately materially delayed his progress; while, owing to the fact that he was compelled to keep his eye constantly on the other party, he could not pick his way as nicely as he would have liked.

Then, all at once, just as he saw Stephen, who was apparently trying to catch Leonetta up, dart ahead, there was a loud report, and the youth fell forward as if killed.

Horried, Lord Henry halted like one suddenly frozen to the ground. He saw Leonetta rush forward and lean over the fallen youth. He then observed her rise again just as the others came up.

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Then another shot was fired, and this time, although apparently the shooter had missed his aim, Lord Henry quickly seized the whole tragic meaning of what had occurred.

He was nothing if not a quick thinker. It was clear to him now, particularly in view of all he knew, that whoever had fired that first shot had meant to hit Leonetta. It was also abundantly clear that the second shot was a second attempt because the first had failed, and concluding from the sound that the assailant would be somewhere between him and the shooting party, he swerved without any further hesitation, sharply to the left, and ran as hard as he could in the direction of the group that had now gathered round Stephen. He dodged the trees and undergrowth as well as he could, and tried as he proceeded to scan all the intervening ground.

He knew Cleopatra was reported to be a good shot; he had little doubt, therefore, as to who the assailant was; but as he tore through the undergrowth he was too much appalled by the thought of the tragic development he had just witnessed, to think with anything but consternation on behalf of the creature who, during the past week, had become so dear to him.

He was not a bow-shot from the shooting party, however, when all of a sudden, at a distance of a couple of yards from him, crouching behind a tangle of bushes, her face deathly white, and her hands struggling to adjust the fire-arm she held in such a position as to do herself some mortal injury, he espied Cleopatra,—Cleopatra now a dangerous murderess.

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He dashed madly towards her, stooped to snatch her weapon, a rook-rifle, from her, and swinging it high in the air, flung it back among the bushes and bracken he had just crossed.

"Are you mad!" he cried.

But there was no response. The girl had fallen back in a swoon, and a twitching of her fingers showed that even now her half-conscious mind was busy trying to find the trigger of the deadly rook-rifle.

A rapid examination revealed the fact that she was quite uninjured, and concluding that she could be safely left where she was for a few minutes, he ran off again in the direction of the wounded or murdered man.

As to what happened after that, the reader has already been informed.

Lord Henry, feeling too deeply relieved by the sight of Stephen's slight wound, to be able altogether to conceal his triumphant joy, declared that the whole thing had been an accident caused by his unpardonable ignorance of a rook-rifle; and fortunately, owing to the excitement occasioned by Stephen's wound and the dressing of it, the other members of the party were not too critical in their acceptance of his story.

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He dressed the wound with frantic speed, glancing constantly into the woods to his left as he did so; muttered a few comforting words and prayers for forgiveness to the boy on whose friendship he thought he could count, and after having been assured that one of the keepers had gone to the garage to order a car to be sent for the doctor, to the complete astonishment of all present, he apologised and ran back into the woods again.

Lord Henry could have flown amid the foliage of the trees, he could have leaped from branch to branch,—aye, he could have pranced from the tip of each leaf of bracken on his way,—so elated did he feel that now, at least, the worst was over, the worst was known, and what remained to be done was within the compass of his own powers, and free from any treacherous element of luck or accident.

But his joy at the comparatively harmless outcome of Cleopatra's action was nothing compared to his delight at that action itself, and even the knowledge that he had read her character aright did not gratify him as completely as the positive realisation that such characters as hers still existed. It was chiefly this fact that dazzled him, and almost choked him with a sensation of all too abundant ecstasy.

"One touch of Nature!" Yes, indeed; and in England of the twentieth century it was terrifying in its intensity. Those tame people who talked glibly of "Nature" and of "a return to Nature," as if this were something they could contemplate with blissful equanimity, imagined belike that Nature was all humming bees, smiling meadows, nodding blooms and sporting butterflies, the Nature of the most successful Victorian poets. It was their back-parlour misinterpretation and belittlement of Nature that made these modern Philistines worship her. Even the most sanguine could hardly suspect them of having the courage, the good blood and the taste, to worship Nature as she really was,—Nature with all her intoxicating joys, staggering immorality and tragic passions.

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Thus did Lord Henry meditate as he picked his way eagerly back to the spot where Cleopatra lay, and for the first moment that day he began to feel proud of his work at Brineweald.

When he reached the girl again she was just recovering consciousness, and, as her frightened eyes began to take in the scene about her, and recognised him, he noticed that she shuddered.

He knelt down and took her hand, but she shrank from him with a look of such concentrated terror that he allowed her fingers to slip slowly away.

"My poor dear girl!" he murmured, wiping the beads of perspiration from her brow. "My poor brave Cleo!"

Her teeth chattered a little, and again the frightened look entered her tired eyes, and she appeared to swoon once more.

He threw off his rain-coat and laid it on her, supported her head on his knee, and waited thus for some time.

After a little while, however, it occurred to him that someone might come across them if they remained so close to the house, and picking up his charge, he penetrated further into the wood in the direction of the morning's walk.

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The movement seemed to restore Cleopatra a little, and laying her down on a gentle slope, he succeeded in making her sip a little brandy from his flask.

"You are breathing too quickly," he said. "You have just had a most terrific shaking and your head is agitated. Try breathing more slowly and deeply, as if nothing had happened; and soon your body will be persuaded that nothing has happened."

He spoke sternly, but with just that modicum of tenderness which made his words at once a command and an entreaty.

"Try it," he said again. "Breathe as if nothing had happened." He held her hand, and gazed sympathetically into her face. "As a matter of fact," he added, "so little has happened that it's not worth while being agitated about it."

She looked about as if in search of someone.

"It's all right," he said, "no one can find us here. We are a long way from where I first came across you."

She closed her eyes, and seemed to be trying to do as he directed, for her nostrils dilated as if in an effort to breathe deeply. He wished she would speak. He dreaded that her mind might be unhinged.

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"When you are well enough to walk," he said, "we shall go to Sandlewood. We'll have some tea or dinner there, and then you can get back to 'The Fastness' after dark and go straight to bed. That will be excellent, and nobody will be any the wiser."

Patiently he waited while her breathing became by degrees more normal, and faint traces of returning colour began to fleck her cheeks. He still held her hand, and now and again he would press it gently as an earnest of his sympathy. It seemed a long and anxious wait, and as his will and desire for her return to strength grew more intense, he hoped that she was profiting from his silent co-operation with her struggle for recovery.

Suddenly her eyes opened, and she looked anxiously round.

"It's all right," he repeated, "you are not where you were when I first found you. We have moved since then."

"Where are the others?" she gasped, the terrified look returning to her eyes.

"They went back to the house over an hour ago," he replied.

"Is he dead? Did I kill him?" she demanded defiantly.

"Dead? No! He's not even badly wounded," he answered.

"Where was he wounded?"

"In the shoulder,—a slight flesh wound."

Her face became slightly flushed, and he rose and faced her.

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"Don't move unless you want to," he muttered. "But I should prefer to go a little further away. I think it would be a good thing."

"Move away?—is any one after us?" she cried frantically.

"No, no. No one is after us. But I think you would be better alone with me for a while anyway, and if we can walk a little further on, we shall be off everybody's track."

She made an effort to rise. He assisted her, and leaning heavily on his arm she walked with him slowly towards Sandlewood. It was after six. Neither spoke until the village was in sight, and then he asked if she knew of any place in it where they could dine. "Not that it really matters," he added, "because we don't want anything very substantial."

She said that she supposed the inn would be the best place.

To the inn they therefore went, and while the innkeeper's wife prepared tea for them and boiled a few eggs, they walked over to the village church.

"Stephen has a flesh wound, no more, in the shoulder. Nobody else is hurt," he said as they sauntered along. "I have dressed the wound, and a doctor has been fetched. He was actually able to walk to the house. I told them it was an accident, that I was not skilled in the use of rook-rifles. Of course they believed me. Why shouldn't they? I want you to promise not to show me up. It was all my fault, and I may surely be allowed to come out of it with only an accident against my name?"

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"I don't care who knows. I don't care what happens!" Cleopatra exclaimed hoarsely. "You needn't imagine I want you to shield me. I did it on purpose, and they must know I did it on purpose."

Lord Henry frowned. "Yes, quite so," he continued. "You have suffered so much of late that you disbelieve in anything but unhappiness. You feel it must be interminable. It was all my fault. You fancy that you are alone, with a bitter hostile world arrayed against you. And since the world is your enemy, what do you care what the enemy thinks of you? Very natural too! That is what you feel. If only, if only, Leonetta had not been so slow in walking home this morning! It was hard luck on me that you should have been driven to this, because I was aiming at something so very different. However, it seems even harder luck that you should imagine that you were driven to it by me. But fancy! only a flesh wound in the shoulder, and it's all over! God! how thankful I am. And they must believe it was my accident. For did I not come to do you good, and had I not succeeded?"

"Better have left me alone," exclaimed the girl with a bitter smile. "I wish I could go away. I want to leave this hateful place!"

"Wherever you go, whatever you do, understand," said Lord Henry, "I am going to stick close to you. So don't imagine you can drive me away."

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She stopped a moment. They had reached the churchyard, and she extended an arm to the nearest tree to steady herself.

"Why don't you leave me?" she demanded. "Can't you see that I have been tormented enough? I hate everything and everybody! I want to forget; I want to be alone."

Lord Henry was silent and led the way back to the inn.

"You are doing what hundreds have done before you," he observed after a while, "and always with disastrous results. You are condemning a man unheard. Until this morning I was your friend, your most useful ally here. You knew it, you felt it. I did everything in my power to bring about a change in the balance of advantages, which was all in your favour. You saw the proof of this. You drew strength from the very change I created. You know you did; you cannot deny it. I worked with zeal and with effect. God! if I worked with the same zeal for all my patients I should be dead in a fortnight."

"Well?" she cried.

"Then you were told something by third parties,—something that seemed to destroy in an instant all the careful work of my three days here. You believed that there was only one interpretation of this thing, and that was that my purpose all along had been so hazy and my nature so capricious and irresponsible that I had suddenly resolved to reverse the whole of the elaborate machinery which I had set in motion to re-establish your health and spirits;—and what for?—in order, if you please, to win the flattering smile of a mere child! Do you imagine that even my love for your

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wonderful mother would ever have allowed me to right-about-wheel all of a sudden in that ridiculous fashion? Come, Cleopatra, be reasonable."

She averted her gaze, and her eyes began to well with tears.

"No, you have known the thing to happen before, and therefore you were the more readily convinced that it had happened again. You had no faith because your faith had been cruelly broken. But, believe me, although I did this action this morning chiefly on your account and Leonetta's, and partly also on account of a great friend of mine whom you do not yet know, I swear I should never have undertaken it if I had dreamt for an instant that it was going to cost you as much as a single tear."

The girl put her handkerchief to her eyes. "I'm afraid I don't understand," she said. "It all seems so mysterious. I only know that, one after another, you all seem to go the same way."

Lord Henry sighed. "Come," he said, offering her his arm again; "let me make myself clear to you."

But she was too convulsed with sobs to move. The situation was certainly difficult.

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He waited, and looked for a while away from her.

"Besides," she cried at last, "you don't really know what I wanted to do, otherwise—otherwise—Oh! it's too dreadful!"

He swung round. "I know everything," he rejoined.

"You can't really want to keep me beside you then."

He smiled sadly. "And why not, in all conscience!"

She wiped her eyes quickly and frowned darkly at him.

"Lord Henry, are you fooling me?" she ejaculated. "Don't you know that a moment ago I was intent only on one thing, and that was——"

She choked and could go no further.

He walked up to her and laid a hand on her arm. "I tell you I know everything," he repeated.

"You pretend that you know," she sneered.

He smiled and bowed his head. "If you mean," he suggested, "that two hours ago you were firing from that ambush with the definite intention of doing Leonetta some mortal injury, I need hardly say——"

"Yes," she said fiercely, "I do mean that."

"Of course I knew that," he observed. "Don't imagine I had any doubt about that. When I first came up to you I was convinced of it. What else could you have been doing?"

She scrutinised him intently. "Well, then?" she stammered.

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"If only you will be good enough to walk back to the inn with me," he said, again offering her his arm, "I'll explain everything to you."

"All right, walk on!" she said, declining his proffered assistance.

And then, as they walked, he began to unfold to her his reasons for his behaviour with Leonetta in the woods that morning. He explained how he had reckoned that he would be back in time to tell her first, and that had it not been for the fury of Denis's indignation, he would certainly have succeeded.

They reached the inn and repaired to the bar parlour, and over the frugal meal he continued his explanation. She listened intently, raised an objection from time to time, which he deftly parried, and thus gradually the whole story was made plain to her. She revived visibly under the effects of the refreshment, and the precise and convincing manner of his narrative; and when at last the complete chain of consequence had been revealed to her, he left her very much recovered while he went in search of some vehicle to convey them back to "The Fastness."

In about twenty minutes he returned with a broken-down old brougham—the only vehicle the village possessed,—and in a moment they were rattling away slowly in the direction of Brineweald.

"Then what made you look for me with such anxiety?" she enquired, once they were well on their way. "Why did you guess so positively that something tragic would happen? Why didn't you simply assume that my fainting fits had returned?"

[359]

He caught her hand in his.

"My dear Cleo," he replied, "perhaps I am disgustingly arrogant, perhaps I am quite unfit for decent society, but it occurred to me that your fainting fits had been, not the outcome of thwarted passion, but the result of mortified vanity. You never loved Denis. I felt somehow that in this instance, not your vanity alone, but your deepest passions were involved, and that when you would act from thwarted passion, either against yourself, against me, or against Leonetta, you

would proceed to violence. Was I wrong? Was I hopelessly vain and foolish to imagine that in this instance, because I was concerned and not Denis, therefore something more tragic was to be expected?"

She looked away and a smile began to dawn on her tortured features.

"What about Baby?" she demanded after a while. "Did you consider her feelings?"

"Did I consider her feelings? How can you ask me that, seeing that I was leaving no stone unturned to save her from the toils of an arch-flappist?"

She almost laughed.

"But didn't you go unnecessarily far with the poor kid?"

"Only as far as I was obliged to go to effect my purpose. But do you suppose I am only the second man with whom she has flirted heavily? Do you suppose I am even the sixth? I took care that she should realise that it was only a rag. She is deep and she is passionate. She knows what a good rag is. And she will behave very differently, I can assure you, when she meets the man with whom she feels she cannot play without burning her pretty fingers. She won't accept his first overtures so readily, believe me. She will be too terrified, as all decent women are when they are truly and deeply moved. She won't even yield so very quickly to his repeated overtures. She will realise that the affair is too deep, too committing, too final for that." [360]

"But didn't you kiss her?" Cleopatra enquired.

"Of course I did," replied Lord Henry, chuckling quite heartily now. "But is not a man entitled to kiss his future sister-in-law?"

Two tears rolled slowly down her face, and she fumbled hurriedly for her handkerchief.

"Come, come, my beloved Cleo," he exclaimed, taking her into his arms, "allow me to say that. Allow me to regard that kiss in that light. It makes it so perfectly innocent. Didn't you feel that that is what I was driving at? Oh, how easily I could have prevented all this if only Leonetta hadn't dragged so on the way home!"

And then, as they approached the outskirts of Brineweald, they quickly decided on their plan of action. It was settled that only Mrs. Delarayne, Leonetta, and Stephen should ever know the truth about the accident, and that, even so, Leonetta should not be told until she was sensible enough to see how inevitable and how "natural" it was. Meanwhile, everyone was to believe that Lord Henry had made a fool of himself,—a fact which, as both he and Cleopatra knew, would afford infinite satisfaction to Miss Mallowcoid, Denis, and the baronet. [361]

Two months later, at about half-past eleven on a drizzly October morning, there was a small and fashionable-looking crowd assembled near the edge of one of the quays at the East India docks, and as the huge Oriental liner moved slowly out into the Thames, five people on its upper deck waved frantically towards this group. They were Cleopatra, Lord Henry, the Tribes, and young Stephen Fearwell.

Again and again Lord Henry waved his hat, and again and again, in the interval of putting it to her eyes, Mrs. Delarayne waved her tiny lace handkerchief back at him.

He noticed that the brave woman was surviving wonderfully the strain of losing for a while the beloved son that she had at last found; but as he turned to call Cleopatra's attention to this, he found that he was obliged to suppress the intended remark for fear of making an ass of himself.

The gigantic steamer grew smaller and smaller, the group on the quay still waved and waved, and then, at last, nothing more could be seen of the travellers. [362]

"Is it a trying journey to China?" Leonetta asked of Aubrey St. Maur, jerking her arm which was enlocked in his, as they turned away from the sight of the oily harbour water.

"Hush!" said St. Maur, glancing ominously at Mrs. Delarayne, who was staggering along between Sir Joseph and Agatha Fearwell's father. "Poor Peachy seems very much upset, doesn't she?"

"Yes, you see," Leonetta replied, "Henry always was her star turn."

VISITORS BY NIGHT^[2]

*At that deep hour 'twixt midnight and the dawn,
When silence and the darkness strive in vain
For mastery, and Morpheus hath withdrawn
His friendly ward, not to return again;
Lo! Fancy's two-winged doorway wide doth yawn
And uninvited guests arrive amain.*

[363]

*A fateful suite they hover into sight—
They are the soul's dread visitors by night.*

*First come brave Resolutions unfulfilled;
With each his spouse, Ambition unattained.
They have the furtive look of conscience skilled
In palliating failures unexplained.
Their lips are meek with pride that hath been killed
And confidence that hath in sickness waned.
Oh, steel thy heart, thou hapless, sleepless wight,
Against these cheerless visitors by night.*

*Then come thy throng of petty sins and great,
Their sordid secrets branded on their brow.
Still apprehensive of their darksome fate
And craving safe concealment as they bow.
What faithfulness they have to come so late
When thou hadst half-forgotten them by now.
Oh, for a virtue great enough to affright
This ugly brood of visitors by night.*

*But these are not the worst; there cometh last
A green-clad lady, viperish and ill.
Her bitter lips she biteth and right fast
She grappleth with what spirit thou hast still.
Her poisoned words transfix thee till aghast
Thou marvellest such aching doth not kill.
Her name is Jealousy, thou wretched wight;
The cruellest of visitors by night.*

*Then Fancy's two-winged doorway slow doth close.
The birds begin to twitter and to sing.
All nature waketh and on pointed toes
Young truant Morpheus stealeth gently in.
Oh, happiness of reinstalled repose,
And balsam for thy cold and sweated skin!
'Twas worse than all the nightmares, blessed wight;
This vigil with these visitors by night.*

[2] First published in *The New Age*, October 23, 1919.

[364]

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